

My War Story – John (Jack) Alan McBeth

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Last year a 12 year old girl Kaels Matthews and her mother rang to ask if I would be prepared to give her an interview on my life in the Mangakahia Valley, I thought she did very well with the project, she got a merit award. Now I thought I should give a short resume leading up to then.

Born in Dannevirke 22nd Sept 1914 to a family of 6 sisters and 4 brothers. Although I was too young to remember the 1st war. I can well remember 2 soldiers getting off a stagecoach and a lot of people, whether that was my 2 uncles arriving home or not I am not clear, my mother came to the village as a 2yr old and started school as a 7yr old when the 1st school was built 1894. My Father came to Weber as a shearer in 1901 and returned each year till he married in 1908 and became a Carrier with Horses and also formed a lot of roads. I along with all the older members went to the school and straight to work at 14 or 15. I was considered lucky to get a job in the local post office in 1930. this was the ^P^5510^ ^starting off at \$2 a week and by the end of 5 yr. getting \$1.80. I had't ever spoken on a phone before getting the job so I was-grateful to my 1st Postmaster for his patience as the exchange was the job even though I was designated a message boy, My Father insisted that I should stay put, although all my mates worked on farms and were not getting much more money they were being fed and housed where I had to pay board, as much as I could but his argument was, it is security.

So that went on for 8 years, my salary started to rise from 1935 when we had a change of Government and there was this talk of a fellow HITLER of Germany and the unrest mentioned in the papers.

In 1938 I went to Ekatahuna as an exchange Clerk and 3month^ .later moved on to Wellington as a clerk, enjoyed that city, played Rugby for Hutt 2nd grade. 1939 saw much activity with everything reading, building recruiting and within a month of WAR being declared I along with most. of my fellow workers in the Army, being a Morse operator was posted in the SIGNALS. 3 months training and on final leave got engaged to Molly whom I had met 18 months before, this engagement was to last 6 yr.

Egypt with the 1st Echelon. Brother Roly (David Arthur Roland) was also there with the 19th battalion and eventually repatriated after Crete I was lucky but at the time disappointed that I missed that as was in hospital with an abscess on the tailbone and was still there when the boys got back, no penicillin then.

Rejoined my unit and was once again attached to the 20th Battalion with the wireless truck. These sets were cumbersome things and the batteries had to be charged whenever we could stop, we had to keep up with Col. Kippenberger, always moving at night without lights. The road was eventually cut at SIDI RESIGH with heavy losses, practically all the officers were killed or wounded including the Colonel, anyway we had opened the road to TOBRUK which was the objective but we were left there for two or three days until tanks

came in with a fog early morning. My truck went up flames and we soon realized that they were not friendly, rifles against tanks is a bit one sided

The German Tanks had captured us and had also captured many more. The night before, I well remember that moment and a comment my old mate of Crete saying never loose your greatcoat. I reached down into my shallow slit trench and picked it up while a tank pulled up with a Jerry waved a lugar at me. I was spared and that greatcoat was I believe my lifeline, was a cool morning on that 1st of December morning, as the day warmed up and we were handed over to the Italians different fellows started throwing there coats away. how they lived to regret that. the humiliation of being in this situation is hard to describe, the guards were jittery. I guess they didn't know if there would be a counter attack, as we hoped there would be, we tried to find out how far we had to go as we were helping wounded too and was sad to have to leave some behind, long after dark we were herded into a barb wired compound overlooking the Mediterranean and in the northern hemisphere is the opposite to ours, there were some flat rocks lying around and we tried to make some sort of a shelter but there wasn't enough for the 2 to 3 thousand of us.

We stayed there for several days, they brought us some water In 44 gal diesel drums which I am sure hadn't been washed out, we Had difficulty drinking it', I cannot recall getting anything to Eat, we were then taken to Benghazi where we were put in large sheds with concrete floors, we dossed down wherever we could, 5 of us pulled together with 2 overcoats, changed over each night and is surprising how quickly your turn came to be on the outside. I was standing near the gate as some of our Medical Team was being repatriated, some of them had 5 blankets, obviously some of the guards where humane as the took them and tossed them over the fence and being on the spot I got one, that meant 2 coats and a blanket for the 5 of us, some food started to come in, in the way of soup, problem was we had no utensils to gather it in until we found a tin, I recall finding a stick which I hollowed out with a pocket knife that I had kept concealed in case of being searched, which by the way not many of us were. By this time more and more were going down with dysentery, the long trenches were soon filled and no paper made things very difficult, one of my friends WALLY SMITH was in a bad way when we pulled out of this place he was left behind along with others and they were caught up with our own troops and in many cases got a homer out of it.

We were taken away from Benghazi to Derna and put on a ship the ANKARA, we really had the wind up then, we well knew our SUBS were very active and had the motto of firing first and asking questions after, we were down in the holes and didn't know what was going on, they threw some small loaves down but only the lucky ones got them, someone got through a partition and found flour and we thought that was good until we discovered that dry flour without water was impossible to swallow.

2 days and nights found us at TRIPOLI where we disembarked and' put on to railway wagons where we spent another night packed in changing on the hour sitting and standing as there was no room for everyone to sit at once. We went as far south as the railway went, here we looked up the biggest hill we had seen and told we had to walk up it, this was the 24th December, over three weeks and pretty weak, a lot fell out on that hill, Garian was the name of the place where we spent XMAS day where I managed to scrounge a raw onion.

The hill was much easier to handle on the way back on New Year's eve. What is in store for us?, we were put back on the same ship ANKARA which had been bombed from the air and had a whopping big hole in it by the mast, the night trip was uneventful and we found ourselves at NAPLES, ITALY and I guess we were used to show the population that they had a victorious army.

New Year's day 1942, we were a sad looking lot, 1st we had to be Deloused, this meant all our cloths had to go through big steamers while we had hot showers, this was the first wash we had had for the best part of 6 weeks, bearing in mind we had been in action for at least 2 weeks before being taken prisoners.

Back on the rail again and off to CAPUA, we had a birds eye view of Vesuvius. it was very active and kept the camp lit up while we were there, just as well as we used to have to go to the latrines along duck-walks, of course this was the middle of winter and we were now getting rain so mud was new to us, we were in ten to a tent and pretty cold, 2 little Tommy soldiers were in the tent with us and had been caught before us, they started scratching and we were all soon doing the same, we came to the conclusion that the delousing had speeded up the hatching of the eggs, we were pretty low in condition at this point in time. The mud and rain was sickening and after a month we were moved on to a permanent camp. new CAMPO 52 up near GENOVA-, here we had palliasses which we had to fill ourselves but that was no problem and we got 2 blankets, guess anything in the way of improvement was appreciated, there were no paths but we soon fixed that by chain gangs passing stones from a nearby river, you had to be quick if you didn't want one on your toe, another way was tried before by 2 chaps with a pan carrying them, guess we would still be doing that if the war was still going. We started to get a bit of order, Red Cross parcels started to arrive spasmodically and after a time we got some mail, really good to find that they knew that we were alive, parcels started to arrive with clothing, particularly underwear and sox, maybe you can't imagine how we had! managed all this time with what we were caught in, cotton toe rags about 16 inches square were given to us in place of our old socks, they were better than nothing. I along with 3 others were, appointed as barbers with 250 heads to cut, I had my clippers with scissors in my greatcoat when caught, we got an extra bun every other day, this was a big help. I shared that with Gus Procter, whom I linked up with at CAPUA, turned out that Molly and His wife, Joey were friends in Whangarei, neither of us were aware of that, the Italians wouldn't let him work as he was a Baritone singer at the concerts. One song "The Floral Dance", he sang that at our wedding on the 25th October 1945 a promise which he had made while in the bag.

We had become well organized in this camp, after getting rid of the lice which we had concentrated on as the warmer weather came, everyone could be seen outside their huts with the shirts off going up the seams looking for eggs, water was plentiful but cold so we were able to keep ourselves clean, I well remember walking down to the taps to put the feet under to wash and get them warm so you could go to sleep, there were plenty of others doing the same thing, the Compound was always well lit up.

Just before Xmas 1942 we packed up and were taken by train to the other side of Italy and up near Trieste to a place called UDINE Campo 57, this was a huge camp with 5

compounds, it was very cold on this flat land, I recall taking Communion standing outside in the snow, our second Xmas in the bag. We never really settled down here so on the 23rd Jan, we went to a working camp 107 at our request, 1000 New Zealanders cutting cane and digging drains on the Viennese Plains, one note I have says 10 degrees below. As this was a working camp the rations were doubled and they saw to it that the red cross parcels came regularly so we put on weight and I was lucky that I could finish my allotted bit and help the ones that had problems with theirs, the camaraderie was terrific in this camp. ITALY pulled out of the war while we were here and we were free, some of the POWs took off and many managed to escape back to the British lines which was several 100 miles away, some through into YUGO SLAVIA and join up with their troops. We, Snowy Roberts, my wireless mate and I, along with a dozen others were convinced that we would be released by our own troops and a friendly Italian suggested that he would take us to a safe place in the hills where we could sit it out until they came, well the safe place was a German Mule Camp, that was the end of our short freedom.

Now we were German POWs again and we soon realized that there was no mucking around as with the Ities, into rail trucks again through the Bremner Pass into Austria to MARKT POUNGA and then to Spittal, we were taken to a building for a shower, I wasn't too happy going into that, I felt that we could be gassed, it was a strange feeling and one that has been with me ever since, we had no knowledge that that was happening to the Jews. What was our destination to be? Each day groups were assembled to go off somewhere and I suggested to our group. Lets apply to go to the next job and that is what we did and we really never regretted that as we were only a 100 strong on a railway at BRUK ON MUR a junction between Vienna and GRAZ, our job was to repair the lines and sweep the points to allow them shift as they froze and blow lamps had to be used, it was very cold on that job which would be all night. I was lucky as I had a part time job with my barbering and boot repairing, ½ soles came from the RED CROSS. We had 1943 & 1944. Christmases in that camp. Of the 17 New Zealanders there, only Johnny Hurren & myself are alive today 2001.

In March 1945 we were told that we were to move away from the Russians. I obtained 2 wheels and an axle during my stay there so I turned that into a cart of sorts and loaded a small bit of gear and all the parcels on to it, guess we were a bit greedy as it broke down but we assured the guard (one we had known all the time we were there, and a first WW1 soldier) that we could fix it so he said we could have ½ hr, that chariot held together for the next 250 miles back to Markt Ponga. This was the first camp we went to in Germany and now we are here again. the dogs were turned on us then but nothing like that now, the war ended while we were here and in a few days the Americans took us to SALZBURG where we waited to be flown back to England in a DC3. thus ending an experience I could well have done without.