

Kiwi soldier found love in deprivations of Crete

Ian William John Begg, soldier. B Dunedin. August 31, 1919; d Christchurch, April 25, 2006.

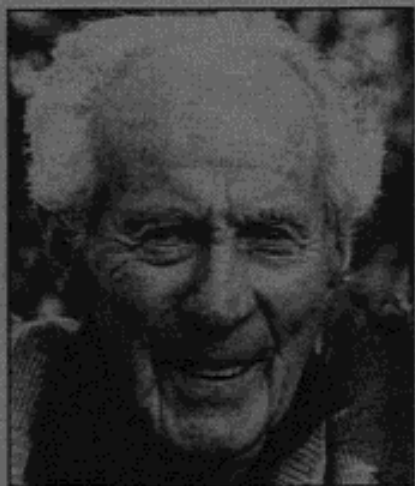
WHEN Ian Begg, 86, revisited the battlefields of Crete in 1975, he recalled the privation and suffering he had met there in World War II. But the stark images faded against a backdrop of the enduring love he had found on this Mediterranean island.

His love story lives on through his wife of 60 years, Marika, the Cretan village girl who brought him food when he was on the run from the Germans.

Born and raised in Dunedin, Mr Begg joined the army at the outbreak of war, trained at Burnham and fought in the Greek campaign. Evacuated from there, he took part in the Battle of Crete.

The Allied forces were overwhelmed by the Germans' greater numbers and control of the air. Mr Begg joined the survivors who straggled over steep mountains to the south coast for evacuation by British warships.

He was then among hundreds who had to be left behind and make the long haul back over the mountains to internment in a prison camp. Heat, thirst, hunger, dysentery and fatigue plagued the men. Mr Begg was grateful the prison camp was on a beach, with a fenced section where the prisoners could bathe in sea water.



POW: Ian Begg, caught in Crete.

"He had an immense capability for taking things in his stride," his wife, Marika, said.

Mr Begg escaped from the camp, though grazed by a rifle shot from a guard. Hiding by day, he made his way up the mountains to the village of Samonas, where a family sheltered him. The Germans seldom came to this high place, as no road led there and foot patrols risked ambush by the anti-German villagers.

Described by his wife as a dare-devil, Mr Begg dressed in Cretan clothes and moved about the countryside. He learned sufficient Greek to convince a German soldier who stopped him that he was a local. Once he rounded a corner in the track to find a battalion of Germans sitting in two rows resting from their march. To turn back would have looked suspicious so he walked on, for more than 100 metres, between the rows.

A rumour was passing among the few New Zealand and Australian escapers he met that a submarine would pick up fugitives at the coast. He made regular but fruitless treks there.

Samonas was a poor village so valley people collected food for those in hiding. When Mr Begg fell ill, a group of young people arrived with food for him. One of them feared the crush of people in the room would be too much for him. She waited, then went in alone.

It was almost love at first sight for the 21-year-old Kiwi and 14-year-old Marika. Mr Begg visited her family home but Germans had commandeered the upper floor and, after a meal, he was moved on. He then sheltered in caves, while Marika and others brought him food.

Once, a drunken German held a pistol to the head of Marika's nine-year-old brother. Another German soldier, who res-

cued the boy, became a family friend. He joined Mr Begg when they revisited the family home 35 years later.

Almost inevitably, Mr Begg was recaptured. He was sent to a prisoner of war camp in Poland, where he was forced to work long hours in a coal mine and was brutally beaten.

Some prisoners got comrades to chop their fingers off, so they could be spared the work and beatings. Mr Begg instead paid a dentist prisoner (in goods from Red Cross parcels) to extract one tooth weekly with no anaesthetic. Being unable to eat, he was discharged from the work squad.

Later, the Germans fitted him with dentures.

As the war neared its end, Mr Begg was forced to march, with thousands of others, to a camp in Germany. The long, mid-winter march took a heavy toll. Each night, he tucked his boots against his chest to prevent them freezing — or being stolen.

After the Americans liberated the camp, Mr Begg was flown to England. Stepping down from the plane, he wondered why women were weeping. One look in the mirror at the hospital he was taken to explained it. He was a walking skeleton.

Mr Begg later heard the Germans had executed everyone in Marika's village and razed it in reprisal for helping escapers. He believed Marika was dead. At home in

Christchurch, though, he kept wondering. Then he wrote to her.

The letter took 3½ months to reach her. The address made no sense at all, Marika said. The only thing correct was her name.

Marika wrote back. Excited, Mr Begg sent a reply-paid telegram asking her to come to New Zealand and marry him.

Marika's parents raised no objection. Crete was in political turmoil. Most people said Marika was lucky and should go.

Though she had never been more than 40km from home, she joined a group of war brides in Egypt and sailed for Wellington. Mr Begg was waiting on the wharf. He was thinner and dressed in an overcoat and hat — she was an adult woman — but they recognised each other instantly. They married 14 days later and settled in St Albans.

Marika found Christchurch people welcoming, just as Mr Begg had found Cretans hospitable. They had a happy marriage and raised three children.

Mr Begg completed his electrician's apprenticeship and worked for the Municipal Electricity Department till establishing his own business. Apart from tramping, he devoted himself to family and garden and enjoyed classical music.

He is survived by his wife, two daughters, a son, five grandchildren and five great-grandchildren. — *By Mike Crean*