

Capt. Kenneth Arthur Bryant  
Reg. No. 34376  
C.Eng.A.M. Mech.E. M.I.P.E.N.Z.  
12<sup>th</sup> Railway Survey Company, N.Z.E. 21<sup>st</sup> Mechanical Equipment Company, 2.N.Z.E.F.  
6<sup>th</sup> N.Z. divisional workshop, N.Z.E.M.E.

### Middle East

Ken Bryant, Mechanical Engineer, age 23 years enlisted voluntarily on 25<sup>th</sup> June 1940, was selected for officer cadet training at Trentham, and graduated top cadet. He was commissioned for active service in the Middle East, embarked 1<sup>st</sup> February 1941 at Wellington, and arrived Egypt 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1941. He was engaged in infrastructure construction, design and manufacture of equipment, construction machinery operation and maintenance.

Soon after arriving in Egypt, he described "a few weeks' later in April 1941 he, and his small band of N.Z. Sappers, together with a British Transport Section, was besieged in fortress Tobruk by the German Africa Korps, which had commenced its offensive on 24<sup>th</sup> March 1941. Two attempts were made to leave Tobruk and the New Zealand detachment was fortunate the second time to leave the battered fortress by sea, harassed by persistent air attack from the German Air Force whose mission was to deny passage to the port of Alexandria". By August 1941 photos show Bryant in the Western Desert rock blasting and bull dozing and then at the Camouflage Unit at Suez, School of Military Engineering, and Ismailia. "It was not until 27<sup>th</sup> November 1941 that the besieged Tobruk garrison linked up with the New Zealand and the British 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Divisions. By 5<sup>th</sup> December 1941, the German Africa Korps began to retire to the Gazala line and El Agheila and this was the outcome of 1941 'Operation Crusader'."

At the Delta Barrage Engineering Workshops near Cairo Ken Bryant designed, and the workshop manufactured, a "Planer" to be used for levelling sand in the desert for runway construction. In December 1941 photos show the transportation of the Planer through Haifa, Palestine, Tiberias (Sea of Gallilee), to the Iraq Desert for several months' work, and then to Beirut. On 1<sup>st</sup> February 1942, Bryant was promoted to Lieutenant. "Early in 1942 he was told to take a grader, tractors and truck and go build an airfield at El Tor, 100 miles down the Red Sea from Suez on the Sinai Peninsula. They did a good job of that. Afterwards when they were in the Arab town he met the Sheik who invited him to have a drink and suggested, as it was Sunday and they had the day off, they should take a drive into the desert, with brief instructions straight ahead and turn left. Four of them from the Sappling Unit took a pick up truck with sand tyres. They drove some hours through storm cut waddies, desert, dust, and sand tracks, until they broke through an escarpment to see in the distance a massive walled building. When they approached, a little man dressed in black peered down from a small window and, in a language foreign to them, indicated they were welcome to the Monastery of St. Catherine. It was almost dark as the doors were opened to allow the army truck to enter. They shared a meal that evening with the Monks and were blessed before they departed the next day".

April to May 1942 were spent in Maadi and Cairo. "By June 1942 the German forces were within 60 miles of Alexandria mounting attacks for their break through to Cairo (prevented by the Allied Forces victory against the Axis Armies at El Alamein in October 1942).

The 21<sup>st</sup> N.Z. Mechanical Equipment Company, with Commanding Officer Major John H. Tiffen, was a desert wise experienced engineering construction force currently engaged in building the vital Adabiya Bay harbour installation, at Suez. This was an essential harbour for securing supplies to support the desert army. Major Gordon Nelson, a specialist in design, was seconded to British General Headquarters B.T.E. (British Troops in Egypt). In July 1942 further New Zealand representation was requested to provide technical support in the specialised field of construction machinery operation and maintenance. The army needed to know where its vital machinery resources were and how to maintain them. Remember the crawler tractor supported left hooks of the New Zealand Division, which out flanked the Africa Corps at Sirte towards Tripoli. Capt. Ken Bryant was seconded to GHQ newly established Machinery Branch, later to become R.E.M.E (Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers Corps). British General Headquarters was located in the Semiramis Hotel, alongside the River Nile, with a view west to the Pyramids and the setting sun. In mid 1943 Bryant returned to Tobruk for urgent reconstruction of infrastructure and then to Cyrene, Cyrenaica, west along the coast from Tobruk, attached to a unit constructing fighter aircraft runway strips.

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### Italy

November 1943 Ken Bryant was in Italy inland from the East Coast at the River Sangro. In 1944 the N.Z. Division moved to the Cassino front, and to the mud of Route Six. In the 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade Workshop he designed, and the workshop fabricated, urgently required tank recovery truck cranes, modelling them on the American design, 'Le Ward France Concept'. In 1944 after the bombing of the Cassino Monastery and eventual move through Liri Valley, he returned via Malta to Cairo”è

### The Cairo Wedding

In 1942/43, when seconded to British GHQ, Ken Bryant met H el ene Assabgui of Cairo, fluent in five languages, English, French, Arabic, Italian, and Greek, and employed in a civilian secretarial capacity at GHQ Machinery Branch. (R.E.M.E.) With Army authorisation, they were married 5<sup>th</sup> March 1943 at All Saints Cathedral, Kasr-el-Nil. Capt. Rev. David Thorpe of 2NZEF officiated, Major Gordon Nelson was Best Man. Staff from GHQ, Assabgui family and friends attended. Capt. Rev. Thorpe was also an amateur photographer and movie was taken on Army Kodak 16mm film. A Scottish Piper heralded their departure at Cairo Railway Station for a honeymoon to Luxor.

### Return to New Zealand

At the end of 1944, they were returned to New Zealand by P & O Line “SS Ranchi” from Suez to Bombay, and from Bombay to NZ by hot bed troopship, The USN “General John Pope”, destined for USA, via Melbourne, and Wellington. There were two meals per day and three sleep shifts over 24 hours. On board were 4,500 returning New Zealanders, another 1,000 who had been NZ Prisoners of War, 500 Australians, a few Canadians and Americans, and others, including crew; a total of 6,000 people. Colonel Donald E. Harper, was OCT (Officer in Command of Troops) from Bombay to Wellington. The ship had to be guided safely through mined waters. In Melbourne, 200 broke ship and many were left behind when it sailed without them. They arrived in Wellington 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1945. Capt. Bryant was posted to Reserve of Officers at Trentham on 9<sup>th</sup> April 1945.

### Ministry of Works and Development, Wellington

Ken Bryant’s mechanical engineering continued post war with the Public Works Department, which became the Ministry of Works and Development, involved in New Zealand infrastructure requirements for tunnelling, airports, roads, Hydro Electric power schemes, purchase and maintenance of heavy construction machinery and mechanical equipment. He had visits to the Australian Snowy Mountain Hydro Electric Power Schemes, and to Thailand for New Zealand’s contribution, assisting with road construction, under “The Columbo Plan” agreement. In 1976, as Chief Engineer Mechanical, after 40 years’ government service, he was required to take compulsory retirement. Subsequent appointments were at the Industrial Relations Centre of Victoria University, and Construction Safety Engineer for the Department of Labour. In 1982 after retiring for the second time, Ken purchased an electronic organ and became a member of the Wellington Electronic Music Society. In 1995-96 in his late 70’s he designed and project managed the construction of a new build residence in central Lower Hutt. Ken attended, with his family, all civic ANZAC services. On Saturdays his returned service colleagues met at the Lower Hutt RSA.

### Ken’s 1929 Dodge Roadster

Ken’s interest in mechanical engineering had started early. When in his 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> year of an apprenticeship with NZ Railways, and studying for a Mechanical Engineering qualification, he had bought a 1929 Dodge for a few pounds because the engine needed reconditioning. In a neighbour’s garage, with younger brother Alan helping, he put in a hoist and removed the engine for a rebore. He had some work experience remodelling worn out bearings and soon his Mother’s gas ring in the kitchen provided the heat source for casting new main bearings which he carefully fitted over a couple of months. When the time for the first start came, the engine was so stiff it could not be turned over and to their Mother’s horror the neighbour’s car was used to tow the Dodge around the block 20 times in gear. Then it started. What a day! Ken gained his licence and was soon off to Wanganui for a trip. The Dodge was sold while he was overseas with the Army.

Ken’s brother, Alan Frank Bryant (466006) also served in WWII. Their father, Frank Albert Bryant, (3/2648) 1<sup>st</sup> NZEF WWI, served on the hospital ship Maheno.

Theatres of Operations: Egypt, Western Desert, Libya, Cyrenaica, Palestine, Iraq, Italy

WWII Service 25<sup>th</sup> June 1940 – 9<sup>th</sup> April 1945

Prepared 21<sup>st</sup> January 2018 by Lesley H. Cooper (n e Bryant) Daughter

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Personal Profile prepared by Ken 18<sup>th</sup> February 1993

Education

Primary:                    Petone Central, Jackson Street, Petone

Secondary:                Wellington Technical College  
Awarded the Callendar Scholarship in 1932 for excellent work.

Vocational Training:    New Zealand Railways, Lower Hutt, Trade and Design 1933-1939

Professional:            Graduate and Associate Member of the Institution of Mechanical Engineers, London, 1936-1947

Victoria University of Wellington extension 1970-1975

C. Eng. A.M. Mech. E. M.I.P.E.N.Z.  
Registered Engineer 7<sup>th</sup> October 1946 (1401)

Vocational Experience

New Zealand Army      Voluntary Enlistment 25<sup>th</sup> June 1941, age 23 years.  
(34376)

12/11/1940	2/Lieutenant
1/2/1941	Embarkation
1/2/1942	Promoted Lieutenant
7/1942	Promoted Captain
9/4/1945	Posted to Reserve of Officers

Units

12 Railway Survey Company, NZE  
21<sup>st</sup> Mechanical Equipment Company, N.Z.E.  
6<sup>th</sup> N.Z. Divisional Workshop, N.Z.E.M.E.

Term of Service

26/6/1940 – 9/4/1945

Theatre of Operations

Egypt, Western Desert, Libya, Cyrenaica, Palestine, Iraq, Italy

Medals

1939-1945 Star  
Africa Star  
Italy Star  
Defence Medal 1939-1945  
War Medal 1939-1945  
N.Z. War Service Medal 1939-1935

N.Z. Public Works Department, which later became Ministry of Works and Development

1938	Mechanical Draughtsman
1945	Zone Mechanical Engineer
1951	District Mechanical Engineer
1958	Chief Engineer Mechanical Equipment
1976	Compulsory retirement from Ministry of Works
1977	Industrial Relations Centre, Victoria University
1978	Construction Safety Engineer, Department of Labour
1982	Retired
1996	Deceased (27 June 1996)

Theatres of Operations: Egypt, Western Desert, Libya, Cyrenaica, Palestine, Iraq, Italy  
WWII Service 25<sup>th</sup> June 1940 – 9<sup>th</sup> April 1945  
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**We Shall Remember Them**

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**Ken and Hélène 50<sup>th</sup> Wedding Anniversary**

5<sup>th</sup> March 1943 - 1993

Fifty years later Ken and Hélène remembered their good friends from the War Years. "And now lets give a thought to all those soldiers whose lives were taken and whose sacrifice made it possible for 'we two' and others, to live in peace and freedom to reach old age. We shall remember them". Here they are as Ken wrote it:

**Capt F.E.N. Tuck (Frank)** was a graduate of Canterbury University and joined the PWD as a Mechanical Engineer in 1939/40. He served with the 18<sup>th</sup> Army Troop Company N.Z.E. in the Western Desert and in command of an L.A.D. (Light Aid Depot) N.Z.E.M.E., in Italy.

**Capt. A.N.G. Bray (Mick)** Former Public Works Department Engineer and Officer in the 21<sup>st</sup> Mechanical Equipment Company with Ken and later with the tank recovery unit N.Z.E.M.E. in Italy. Mick Bray later lived in Canberra and worked with the Snowy Mountains Hydro Electric Authority. Hélène first met these two on the "USN General John Pope" and together they spent many convivial hours playing Bridge to pass the time and help her forget her sorrow at leaving family and home.

**Capt. L.G. Bell, (Lindsay)** Also of the Mechanical Branch, PWD (Public Works Department) specialising in electrical engineering. Lin Bell was also in the 21<sup>st</sup> Mechanical Equipment Company and spent many hours on leave with the Assabgui family in Cairo. His army service was diverted from Italy to India in 1944 so regrettably he did not return to New Zealand with the other Bridge players.

**Capt. Ginger Thomas.** A former Mechanical Inspector of the old Public Works Department of 1939. Ginger Thomas was detailed to supervise the assembly of the newly arrived construction machinery at Suez, for the British Headquarters and consequently had to liaise closely with Hélène in her administrative work. He is the tall officer with the big laughing face in the wedding film. A year or so after the wedding, Ginger Thomas was posted to duties in India and died shortly after from heat exhaustion.

**Capt. Frank Askin** Officer in Charge of a section to which Ken was attached, constructing fighter aircraft runway strips at Cyrene, Cyrenaica in 1943. He later became Commissioner of Works, Ministry of Works and Development, Wellington.

**Capt. C.J. Tustin** directed the resealing of runways at El Adem airfield near Tobruk in 1943. Charles (Joe) Tustin resident of Lower Hutt met Ken and Hélène in 1945 on arrival in New Zealand and proudly showed them the spectacular new government sponsored housing development in Lower Hutt. He became District Commissioner of Works and a leading figure in the Returned Services Association, receiving the Gold Star for distinguished service to the R.S.A.

**Capt. A.F. Allen** from Gisborne, Section Commander, was a very close comrade and friend to both Ken and Hélène. He died at Cassino 1944.

New Zealand 1945/1946

The returning engineers were eagerly awaited by the then Chief Mechanical Engineer PWD (Public Works Department), Mr Dave R. Newson, having succeeded to his position on the retirement of N.J. McLeod, father of Colin McLeod, a sapper officer 2.N.Z.E.F. in Italy and a subsequent Commissioner of Works. Helene received a warm welcome and life long friendship from Dave and Mavis Newson. Of the four surviving Public Works Department Mechanical and Electrical Engineers, Bell, Bray, Bryant and Tuck, only Ken Bryant resumed work with the Public Works Department.

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Spouse Information Hélène Bryant (née Assabgui)

Hélène Assabgui b. 5<sup>th</sup> January 1921 Cairo, Egypt, d. 29<sup>th</sup> April 2008, Lower Hutt  
3<sup>rd</sup> of 10 children

Married: 5<sup>th</sup> March 1943 at All Saints Cathedral, Kasr-el-Nil, Cairo, Egypt

Occupation: Secretarial and Community Service Worker

Religion: Coptic Orthodox Catholic Anglican

Her Father: Farid Habib Boutros Assabgui (Farid known as Alfred in English)  
b. 1896 Cairo, d. 17<sup>th</sup> September 1946 Cairo  
Chief Accountant at Barclays Bank, translator, and 1943 News  
Anchor for Mediterranean BBC Radio.

Her Mother: Espérance Assabgui, (née Eliathou Eliades)  
b. 17<sup>th</sup> March 1891 Alexandria, d. 1970 Cairo  
(Known as Hope in English). (Her family was from Cyprus)

Education:  
c.1929-1939 Nôtre Dame des Apôtres, Cairo.  
(Elementary French Boarding School)

Immaculate Conception Convent, Cairo.  
(Secondary French Boarding School)

Languages French, English, Arabic, Latin. Italian and Greek spoken at home.

Vocational Training: English Boarding Finishing School, Cairo.  
Commercial secretarial and office practice

1940 English teacher in French Boarding School.

1941 British Army in Abyssia, typing and clerical. Abyssia is about one  
hour from Cairo. Lived in Heliopolis at the time.

1941/1942 British Troops in Egypt Headquarters, Semiramis Hotel, Cairo. The  
family moved to Malaka Farida in central Cairo and Hélène  
obtained a transfer to British GHQ in the Machinery Branch, later  
to be the Royal Mechanical and Electrical Corps. (R.E.M.E.).

1943-1944 Hélène Bryant became a British subject through marriage and was  
transferred to the newly established Civilian Affairs Department  
for secretarial, and supervision of the typing service. The duty of  
this department was to oversee the rehabilitation of the liberated  
lands of North Africa and French Syria. Later she worked in the  
office of Lord Moyne, which was involved with British jurisdiction  
in Palestine.

3/1/1945 Arrived in Wellington with husband on Troop ship "USN "General  
John Pope".

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- 1945                                      Manpowered to work for the Hydro Electric, located where The Beehive is today in Wellington. Philip Blakeley was Engineer in Charge.
  
- 1946-1949                                Had two children, daughter and son, Lesley and Paul.
  
- 1954-1963                                Employed by C & A Odlin & Co., Petone.  
 Was responsible for vehicle fleet. Worked for Lance Pointon and Harry Marsh.
  
- 1960                                        Visit to families in USA and Egypt, alone.
  
- 1964-1972                                Receptionist, Wellington City Mission.  
 Canon Walter Arnold                      City Missioner  
 Rev. Keith Elliot VC, WWII              Assistant City Missioner
  
- 1973                                        Visit daughter in Houston before 1<sup>st</sup> grandchild, and sisters in Boston, with Ken.
  
- 1973-1974                                Supervised the establishment of the City Mission Social Welfare Centre in Central Lower Hutt, and two more centres in Waterloo and NaeNae. Elected to the Social Welfare Council on the Lower Hutt Community Advisory Committee, which was responsible for the implementation of the Social Welfare programme.
  
- 1975                                        Enrolled Victoria University for Community Studies, Sociology of the Family, Women's Studies. Achieved A and B passes.
  
- 1976                                        Visit, with Ken, to daughter in Paris, France for 2<sup>nd</sup> grandchild, relocated with them to The Hague, visited family in Greece and Egypt.
  
- 1976-1978                                Office of Australian Senior Trade Commissioner in Wellington, Receptionist.
  
- 1979-1981                                Aged care assistance.
  
- 1983                                        Visit daughter in Dallas for 4<sup>th</sup> grandchild, with Ken: To Greece and Egypt with sister from Miami, Florida.
  
- 1996                                        Widowed after 54 years.
  
- 2000                                        Visit sisters in Florida, USA accompanied by granddaughter Andrea.
  
- 1945-2006                                RSA Membership
  
- 2008                                        Deceased, 29 April 2008, age 87 years.  
 RSA Soldiers Ash Wall, Block 12, Row E, Plot 25.  
 With Capt. Kenneth Arthur Bryant, (34376)