



26459 4th Reinforcement

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21 BN

After three weeks in camp at Papakura our B.N. was shipped off to Fiji where we were stationed just outside Suva for three months. This was only a guard duty exercise. At that time I was a Corporal (two stripes) and overall my time was spent on guard duty at various places around Suva. On returning to Auckland there was a mistake in the date on our leave passes, so for the first 3 days back home we were not allowed off the ship the "Rangitiki". Once off, back home to Te Awamutu, and like about 70% at least, I did not report back to Papakura until I had a full 3 weeks of leave. By the time we arrived back in Auckland and returned to camp, I and plenty of others were marched into the C.O. Camp Commander and lost one stripe. All those who were privates got "pack drill" for a week. Later I got my stripe back. After something like 30 days we were sent by train to Wellington and boarded a ship called the Aquatania and left for the middle east as it was called then (Egypt). While in Fiji, I did a little boxing, so on the way to Egypt I was one of a group who looked after sports on board. Never entered the ring though, as I considered I had done enough. (By the way, I was never beaten with the gloves on). Our trip to Egypt was without incident, had a destroyer in attendance all the way. We arrived at Suez and left the ship and found we had to march about three miles to a camp which consisted of tents with no sides. This was a bit of a slog with our packs.

Something we soon learnt, Egypt was a hot as hell during the day but at night as cold as winter in N.Z. Next morning off to Mardi Camp - took nearly all day to get there. As usual there was a big parade when we arrived. However I felt so ill I asked a Sgt. if I could go to the R.A.P. (The name given to the camp sick bay). He said, wait until next morning, which was the correct time. However I met another chap who took me over to the R.A.P. where I asked for my "Temp" to be taken. Someone did and I was told to lie on a stretcher nearby. A doctor came to see me and next thing I was on my way to Hospital (I had Pneumonia!) I spent some 3 weeks in hospital and was then sent to a Health Camp on the Suez Canal where I stayed for close on 6 weeks. While there we had air raids - 22 in 21 nights. This was a lovely place in spite of the raids and I enjoyed my stay there. Then back to Maadi and found no one had been sent to the line at that time. I asked to join the 21st Battalion as my brother was a member of the 21st. This request was granted as it was policy to send close relatives to join each other. I handed in my stripes as I considered I had no real knowledge of real warfare. After joining the B.N. I was asked to take two stripes, but refused. I joined the B.N. in the desert and spent day after day at Bayonet practice, plus a lot of routes marching, up to 10 miles a day. By the way, when I joined the 21st B.N. I asked around for Leo. Different chaps just looked at me but said nothing. I was told nothing I found out later, for it was thought he was killed in a battle at Ruweisat Ridge a few days earlier, where the Huns repulsed the British who lost with heavy casualties. the Hun had taken a lot of prisoners and the 18 B.N. was so short of men that the 18th B.N. joined together with the 21st to make one B.N. After a couple of days rest and regrouping, we attacked again and this battle we won. It was the Huns turn to retreat. This was when we over ran the Field Hospital in which Leo and a lot of other wounded prisoners were. Leo had his left leg shattered and twice he was sent back to Cairo Hospital where it was thought he would not live. He lived on and was sent home on a Hospital Ship, lived a few years but later died from the wound. By the way, while in hospital in the Desert held by the Hun "Rommel" visited them. He spoke to each one in person. One thing he could not understand as to why they came from N.Z., a small country, just to help Great Britain. On asking how they were treated by the Italian staff there, they all said words to the effect "very poorly". Rommel said he would fix that and by next day all Italian were removed and replaced by German Hospital orderlies, which as the N.Z.'s said "They were very good chaps". This was the beginning of the German Retreat. The first time we chased them back to Hell Fire Pass somewhere, before the attack on

Sidi Rezegh. I was given "Sgt. Stripes", up from being a private. I had to take charge of the 2 pounder anti-tank guns. These had been given to the B.N.'s after the "Anti-tank" Regiment got heavier weapons. I was sent to a "Pommie" training school not far away for a course on anti-tank. I came out with top marks so it was worthwhile. The attack on the ridge was a success and the Hun pulled back, but every so often they would send plenty of big gunfire in our direction. Eventually we got to "Hell Fire Pass" which was near the sea. A bit of a change from mile upon mile of desert. Shortly after our arrival the N.Z. Division was taken out of battle and the "Poms" took over. After a short spell the N.Z. Army went to Palestine, now called Israel. We crossed the Canal at Port Said, got on a couple of trains. The country was so steep there was a third rail in the centre which was a big cog. Right up to the top of the mountain we went over. The train was so slow we could get out and walk faster! The same process down the other side. We stayed a couple of days in "Palestine" (now called Israel), then moved off to "Lebanon", a beautiful place, then on to "Syria". These places had been held by the "Free French" but now we took over. The Huns used to raid quite often but it was the port they raided so that wasn't so bad. In Syria our company was sent to different spots. I went out to Aziz, a small town on the Turkish Border. The Turks were on guard on their side of the line, boy they were very touchy and rattled their rifle bolts loudly if we looked like crossing a line marked out between us. All this time the weather was very hot and sticky. After a couple of months we were on the move again, this time to the border of "Jordan". We camped on the edge of the "Euphrates" river for a few days. It was very shallow and also very lovely. Then we moved on back to "Cairo". At night we slept on the open Desert which was swarming with scorpions. I, luckily, never got a bite although I found them in my blankets each morning. Boy, it was very cold at night. Quite a number of chaps were bitten and the R.A.P. was busy each morning treating them. Eventually we arrived at Alexandria and moved up to the line. On the way up we met Pommies by the truck load coming back. They laughed at us and said "we would be better to follow them". Short of "Bardia" we met up with the Hun and pushed them back a bit. During one battle the Hun had us surrounded but with the Maoris leading with a Bayonet charge we broke out. Unfortunately a large number of New Zealander's were killed at this time. After this, we had a short spell and "Monty" came to visit us. We had a parade and Monty praised the fighting ability of the N.Z. Division. "Great fighters in the Desert" he said. During this, the planning of the Great Battle of Alemein was taking place. Later on

we moved forward to Alemein, all of which took place at night. "No lights anywhere" was the signal, complete surprise was the aim of "Monty". When we duly arrived, everything had to be camouflaged and no one was to move about in daylight. It is said some 908 guns were lined up there and when the time came to attack they all fired at once (a terrible noise I would not like to put up with again). The sky was red all the time with gun flashes. At a given time we went in, with the guns lifting their range at given times to avoid hitting our Troops. Just before daylight, we made our objective and dug in. The ground was so hard and stoney we had to dig down so far and build up around our dugouts with rock of which there was plenty. Thank goodness Jerry had to do the same thing. One of the strict requirements in action was, no one was to light a cigarette or give away positions by any light. All was done in darkness, for that was what the enemy looked for. We had a bit of trouble getting one gun in position, one leg was too tight. Well, of all things. while we struggled with getting the gun in place, one of the "Troop" as they were called, tried to light a cig. This was a chap who was in the line first time. I made him put the cig. out and get to work. However, later on there was a loud bang and of all things he was the one hit, got it above the knee. Evidently, his first offence of lighting a cig. and caught the Huns attention and they kept a watch and must have seen a dark blob of us working, fired the blob and that was it. We had to send this chap back - I believe he was sent home. We stayed in the line for some days facing the Huns who were about two lengths of a football field away. At last Rommel pulled them back, which was a welcome relief for the slightest move drew gun fire. We followed the Hun as fast as we could and at various places he put up a strong defence, but it was only a matter of time. Enfidaville, Mersa Matrugh and To bruk being good battles but to the Hun there was no success. We at times met free French, but one wonders if they were just there for policy. They would fire on us every now and then. When we got to Tripoli we had a spell, although there were plenty of planes flying about so one had to watch out. The "Poms" used to bring supplies by boat - there were just motorised barges. These were Naval chaps and in the main they were good chaps. When they were cleared to go, they would ask me, because I was in charge of unloading. If I would go below for a drink of Rum, I used to take Sandy Grant, a sgt. We had a good time for about an hour. Their Rum was 'neat' and boy it was strong! Then it was again on the move to Tobruk. We had a few skirmishes on the way and eventually arrived. We were stationed behind a hill as our BN was, fortunately, the reserve BN for this show. Tobruks big hill could easily be seen from our

positions and we were well within range of the Hun guns. We were as usual, dug in and the first day there I was talking to an officer by the name of 'stranger' when machine gun fire came from our rear. Boy, the officer and I hit the trench quickly. Their fire splattered all around us. Who should it be, but our own gunners, who claimed they thought we were Huns.

Headquarters got in touch with them and sorted them out. When Tobruk fell, it was back to Maadi and get ready for Italy. On arrival in Italy our group had to go to a spot on a map, well up the coast from 'Bari' and prepare camp for the BN. When the BN duly arrived it wasn't long before the attack on the 'Sangro' took place. At this time, I was W.O. at 'headquarters' and had to make sure there was plenty of ammunition on hand for the troops.

We attacked across the Sangro River and it was in flood. The water was up and in some places it was over our shoulders. This was winter time and there was snow on all high spots - this was the cause of the flooding. While this was a bloody battle, a lot of the enemy were Ities, we pushed them back quite a long way to a Monastery situated on a hill. It took some days to dislodge this group who were Huns, but eventually we did and after a short break I was re-armed and headed for 'Cassino' which was across the steep range running up the eastern side. Eventually, we arrived close to

'Cassino' and it was during this time that General Kippenburger lost both feet on a land mine. There is a very large cemetery just this side of Cassino for it was a very large 'hill' and the big Hun guns were very good at ploughing among the advance columns. For a while we were stationed in the ruined town of Cassino which was at the foot of the Monastery Hill. A couple of months prior to the Battle of Cassino, I was appointed RSM of the 21st Battalion. The rank was 'acting' as one had to hold any rank for three months before being made "substantive". We had about a week before the attack on the "Monastery" and during that time our BN was stationed in the ruins of "Cassino" at the foot of the mountain on which the "Monastery" stood. Some Huns were still in part of Cassino. During the night time I had to go around the companies in various places in the completely ruined town. One night I thought I saw a Hun helmet moving over a wall. I had my 45 at the ready as I went along, then out of a hole in the wall jumped a large black cat. Boy, I got a fright! We were stationed in the ruins of Cassino for about a week, then withdrew to get ready for the attack on the "Monastery". This you may have seen on film - it was on top of a large mountain and the access side we were on was just about as steep as a cliff. The roads were used by tanks etc. A couple of days later we were ready for the attack again, there were hundreds of bombers in the air attack. It was a wonder there was as

much of the Monastery left for us to attack - the noise was terrific! Again about 2a.m. we started our climb. The Polish regiment went up the direct face. Very good, brave chaps, the poles. Eventually we made the top and our objective. We then all holed up in a big "Casa" or two storey stone building, and got ready for the attack on our side of the Monastery, or what was left of it. By the way, the Germans were very brave and fought long and hard to hold their positions. These were some of the Germans best troops. Later on our Bren Carriers followed by a "Scottish" Tank Regiment attacked to the N.Z.'s had gone up a road towards the Monastery and found it blocked, so had to return back. On coming back one of our Bren Carriers shed a track and while our BN sheltered in a Casa (a big house) I decided to go and help the two chaps working to replace the track. During this time a Hun "88", one of their best guns, started firing at us. "This carrier was holding up the tanks". However, the shells were going over the top of a bank on the other side of the road. We continued with the job of getting the track back on. However, the Huns were pretty good at their job and I just had time to say "This one's closer", and the shell landed in the carrier. The fact we were crouched down trying to replace the track saved us from being killed. We were all hit with shrapnel and had to go to hospital miles away. A couple of days later Colonel MacIlory came to see us and said we were very lucky. The Bren carrier had taken the main hit and it looked like a sewing machine. They just pushed it over the bank, he said. By the way, although bleeding like hell, nothing was broken, my head, part of my face and neck was full of shrapnel. The sister who came to get me ready for an operation said (I remember this!) what a lovely head of hair, then proceeded to shave from the right eye side at an angle to behind the left ear. I looked like "Friar Tuck"! By the way, after I came home, for quite a long time I would get pieces of shrapnel out of neck when shaving. I asked to be sent back to the BN, not to a convalescent camp, which was agreed to and I still made the boat for Maadi. While we were at the top by the Monastery the Adjutant came and asked me to name a WO to go back to Maadi as WO infantry training. So I said "What about me, I have never been out for a spell since I joined the BN". He told the Colonel who came to see me after a short talk he agreed that I would go back to Maadi, The next day was the day I was hit.

"Things that happened during my stay in the Battalion"

By the way we never actually saw any Italians after the breakthrough at Elemeine although they were still used by the Hun in places.

We saw "Free French" but never trusted them for they fired at anything that moved.

After Badia, we moved inland for some time, and it was miles upon miles of sand so we had a hard time in some places getting the truck through. There were plenty of "Petrol dumps" on the way. These had been set up by the British and N.Z. and although large they were well covered and camouflaged so the Hun found very few.

I saw my first snake in Jordan. It was lying on the road killed by a truck running over it. Was about 15 feet long and quite a bright red.

The desert was not all sand - there was a lot of scrub in some parts, wild geese and foxes, plenty of them in parts.

At Maardi camp I was WO in charge of the infantry. These were reinforcements which were arriving at intervals. At Maardi, for the most part, I played rugby and soccer. I had played for the BN while I was in it and somehow the word came with me for even Pommy units not with us used to ask if I could play for them.

Most of my time was taken up with practise on the Rifle Range with the recruits, some route marching about twice a week, also took some time on parades. After about 3 months, I was ready to come back home. The war was nearing an end and it was the turn for the 4th reinforcements to go back to N.Z. When the large group of our unit came together we sailed on a smaller ship this time and there was no chance of a German Battleship putting us down. It was a good trip home and by the way, myself and a Maori chap, whose name I've since forgotten, held the quoits title all the way home. We had a great time, played nurses, officers, ship's crew and anyone who wanted to play. We duly arrived in Wellington and came home. At all stops, we got out of the train and women of all ages made a great fuss of everyone, kisses and hugs from complete strangers. It was great to return, but one felt for those who did not make it.