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Finding Ways to Survive: 24 (Auckland) Battalion and the
Experiential Learning Curve

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Contents

Chapter One: Introduction.....	5
Chapter Two: The Soldiers from the Land of Waitemata Beer.....	10
Chapter Three: Luck is not a Method.....	30
Chapter Four: Rebirth and Resurrection	56
Chapter Five: Dysfunction.....	81
Chapter Six: When Plan “A” Fails.....	111
Chapter Seven: A Tale of Two Battles.....	136
Chapter Eight: Conclusion.....	151
Bibliography.....	156

List of Maps

Delaying Action South of Ellasson..... 35

Sixth Brigade Position 21 -24 April 1941.....46

The 6 NZ Infantry Brigade Attack on Cassino
15-24 March 1944.....116

Introduction

For many years New Zealand's military historiography has been dogged by the myth New Zealanders were natural soldiers. James Belich believes that this myth had its origins in the Boer War, where Social Darwinism, attempts in New Zealand to forge a national identity, as well as the British moral panic about the declining physical attributes of their fighting men, all collided and placed the New Zealand soldier up on a pedestal as an example of the moral fitness of New Zealand, and a validation of the notion that New Zealand was a 'Better Britain'.¹ Despite the trauma experienced by thousands of New Zealanders who witnessed combat during the First and Second World Wars, the public refutation of this myth by high profile soldiers such as Major-General Howard Kippenberger, and attempts by historians to try and dispel this myth, it continues to be repeated and as recent as 2004 the television documentary programme, *The Khaki All Blacks*, was expounding this argument, whilst John Thomson's 2004 book *Warrior Nation*, promotes such a myth in a subtle form.²

This thesis will address this myth by examining 24 (Auckland) Battalion's experiential learning curve: That is, how did 24 Battalion acquire military experience and knowledge, both from internal Battalion sources, as well as from external agencies and then disseminate that knowledge and experience to prepare for military operations? While it is difficult to quantify an intangible value such as 'experience', enough information can be derived from a number of sources that can give an overall picture of the patterns of experience and the changes of experience levels during three

¹ James Belich, *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders from the 1880s to the Year 2000*, Auckland, Allen Lane Penguin Books, 2001, pp.97-98, 104-105.

² David Crerar and Steven Orsborn, *Khaki All Blacks*, Auckland, Oxygen Television, 2004; John Thomson, *Warrior Nation: New Zealanders at the Front 1900-2000*, Christchurch, Hazard Press, 2000.

periods of 24 Battalion's life. These three case studies are the lead up to the Greek Campaign (February 1940 to February 1941), the Second Battle of El Alamein (September and October 1942) and finally, the Third Battle of Cassino (January and February 1944). These three periods assess how prepared the personnel of 24 Battalion were for upcoming operations and what preparations, both through formal process such as training, and informal processes like a buddy system, were utilised to overcome perceived deficiencies. Finally 24 Battalion's actions in the three subsequent periods of operations are then studied in detail so the question can be asked, what impact did experience and the acquisition of military knowledge have on 24 Battalion's primary infantry role?

The three periods chosen represent the full spectrum of experience levels that existed in 24 Battalion during its life cycle. As with all New Zealand infantry battalion's in the New Zealand Division (or 2 (NZ) Division as it was known from 8 July 1942) 24 Battalion was created from scratch and because most of the personnel posted to 24 Battalion had no prior military experience, the sum total of military knowledge in the Battalion rested in the hands of a small number of First World War veterans, New Zealand Permanent Staff (NZPS) and pre-war Territorial Force personnel. By El Alamein, because of two significant battlefield reversals, Sidi Rezegh and El Mreir, 24 Battalion became a collection of experienced and inexperienced personnel, whilst by Cassino, experience levels had reached new heights with up to three-quarters of personnel within the Battalion having extensive combat experience.

This thesis will argue however, this predominance of experience did not necessarily result in improved combat performance. An important determinant is not how much experience there was in 24 Battalion at a given time, but who the

experienced, or inexperienced, personnel were in the battalion structure. In particular, this thesis will argue that company and battalion commanders, because of their disproportionate influence on events and the responsibility they held, needed experience to fully comprehend and deal with the situations that they were faced with. In all three case studies inexperience, or inexperience working as a team, at battalion and company level impacted negatively on 24 Battalion's combat effectiveness. Furthermore, as the Cassino case study (Chapters 6 and 7) will show, the binary division of inexperience/experience is inadequate. While individuals can be experienced at their roles, unusual circumstances such as fighting in urban terrain presents fresh tactical problems that challenge individuals to change their battlefield methods and as will be seen, even relatively experienced soldiers found this challenge difficult.

While this thesis stresses the importance of senior officers having experience, this is not to deny that experience at other levels of the Battalion hierarchy was important. Rather this study argues that deficiencies in experience at the lower levels of the battalion structure could, in part at least, be overcome by training. Whilst training is often seen a way of developing skills, this was only one aspect of training and of equal importance, as we will see, was the development of self-confidence. A soldier confident in his skills, no matter how misplaced that confidence may or may not be, is a willing soldier and an astutely judged training period such as 24 Battalion underwent at El Alamein (Chapter 4), or a lengthy period of training that was the build-up to the Greek Campaign (Chapter 2 and 3), helped overcome the limitations of that lack of experience may have imposed limits on Battalion operations.

Despite the benefits of training and the transference of information that resulted from it, training in rest periods remained the only standard method of information

transference for most of the war and this, it will be argued, was a missed opportunity. A number of methods, both official and unofficial, could have been utilised and while some unofficial methods were used at times, these were the exception to the rule and often those posted to 24 Battalion did not receive any assistance in adapting to an active service life. This in itself caused problems as knowledge was lost for a multitude of reasons as longer serving personnel left the Battalion, whilst many reinforcements arrived, at least during the Italian Campaign, feeling under trained.

Whether or not this feeling of under training extended back before the Italian Campaign, while suspected, was not established due to the disparity in the depth of sources for the various case studies. This thesis is in part captive to the march of time. Much of the primary source material relating to the training of men in New Zealand, Maadi and their time in Italian Campaign was obtained from interviews from some of the 350 men who remain from the estimated 3500 men who served with 24 Battalion during its existence.³ Unfortunately because these veterans are at least in their eighties, many of the older generations of 24 Battalion men, those who served in the early years of 24 Battalion's life, have all but passed away and as a consequence the bulk of the interviews were with those who served in the Italian Campaign with a few from the later stages of the fighting in North Africa. Thus the story of the earlier years of the Battalion are less developed.

Furthermore, other primary source material varies in detail and availability. Administrative changes appear primarily behind the level of detail that appears in 24 Battalion's War Diaries. Whilst the Battalion War Diary for Cassino gives a high level of detail, in contrast during the Greek Campaign nine and half hours of

³ Interview, Alan Mason, 26 December 2005.

observations relating to German movements on the Elasson plain, as well as the subsequent attack on 24 Battalion's position, was condensed into 146 words.

Similarly, the presentation of Absent Without Leave (AWL) statistics during the formation of 24 Battalion could not be replicated throughout the rest of the war because the information of who was charged with what no longer appeared in 24 Battalion's Routine Orders after the Greek Campaign. Additionally some documents, such as the various 24 Battalion company War Diaries and many eye witness accounts used by R. M. Burdon, 24 Battalion's official historian, appear to have disappeared somewhere into the ether and have not been found.

Despite these not unexpected difficulties, the primary sources for this study have been supplemented by a number of excellent secondary sources written by 24 Battalion veterans. Chief amongst these is Roger Smith's excellent fictionalised account of his service in A Company, *Up the Blue*, which gives a thought provoking, and sometimes harrowing view, of life as an infantry soldier.⁴ This work is well supplemented by the informative text in F. L. Phillips and H. R. Phillips *The Twentyfourth New Zealand Infantry Battalion: A Pictorial History*, Jim Hunt's numerous writings and poetry, as well as *Memories of an Old Soldier* by W. J. Woodhouse.⁵ These works, along with interviews, have combined well with the primary documents and the works of the official histories to hopefully give the reader a more human face on the inner-workings of 24 (Auckland) Battalion. This will in turn help in removing the pedestal that some insist on placing the New Zealand soldier on: He should be remembered as the rest of us are, human and frail, but as

⁴ Roger Smith, *Up the Blue*, Wellington, Ngaio Press, 2000.

⁵ Jim Hunt, *Poems for Kiwis*, Privately Published, 1992; Jim Hunt, *Episodes*, Privately Published, 1999; F L Phillips and H R Gilmour, *The Twentyfourth New Zealand Infantry Battalion: A Pictorial History*, Auckland, Richards Publishing and Phillips and Gilmour, 1980; Captain W J Woodhouse, *Memories of an Old Soldier*, Kenmore Hills, Privately Published, 2005.

someone who used his character, comradeship and experience to fight his inner-most fears, and in most cases succeeded.