Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.
“A damned dangerous act”: New Zealand prisoners of war on the run in Europe during the Second World War

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Masters
in
History

at Massey University, Albany,
New Zealand

Alisha Tilbury

2016
Abstract

During the Second World War thousands of New Zealand servicemen found themselves behind barbed wire as prisoners of war. The vast majority of them were taken captive in failed campaigns in Greece, Crete and North Africa. This thesis will analyse the journey taken by those who dared to escape in the European theatre of war. It will begin by analysing the impact that the unsuccessful campaigns in the Mediterranean and North Africa had on motivating servicemen to escape. From there it will begin to analyse the many different ways in which men attempted escape; starting with those who slipped away in the heat of battle, to those who jumped from moving trains en route to prison camps, to those who planned elaborate get-aways under the noses of prison guards in Italy and Germany. The final section of this thesis will examine what it was like for escaped prisoners on the run in enemy occupied territory, including those who could not get back to their own lines and ended up fighting with partisan groups in Greece, Yugoslavia and Italy.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the staff at National Archives New Zealand and the Alexander Turnbull Library. Particular thanks goes to Michael Wynd at the Royal New Zealand Navy Museum, as well as Dolores Ho at the National Army Museum. Thank you to Jo Brooks for helping sort through archives. I would also like to give a very warm thank you to Dr. Adam Claasen for his encouragement and support throughout the writing of this thesis.

Alisha Tilbury
Auckland
February 2016
Contents

LIST OF TABLES, FIGURES AND MAPS ......................................................... v
INTRODUCTION ...............................................................................................1
CHAPTER 1 - “FOR YOU THE WAR IS OVER” ...............................................9
CHAPTER 2 - THE LONG MARCH TO CAPTIVITY .........................................31
CHAPTER 3 - LIFE IN A POW CAMP: PLANNING ESCAPE .........................47
CHAPTER 4 - ON THE RUN: BEHIND ENEMY LINES .................................70
CHAPTER 5 – REBELS AND RESISTANCE .................................................92
CONCLUSION ................................................................................................107
APPENDIX A .................................................................................................111
BIBLIOGRAPHY ............................................................................................112
List of maps, images and tables

Maps
1.1 Map of the Western Desert 1941-42

Images
1.1 2nd NZEF troops on retreat in Greece
1.2 German poster urging British troops on Crete to surrender
2.1 Image of Allied POWs marching with hands raised
2.2 POW transit camp 116, Benghazi, Libya
2.3 New Zealand POWs in cattle truck en route to Germany.
3.1 The Heath-Robinson Scheme
3.2 New Zealand and Australian POWS in Italian Camp 57
4.1 Escapees from a prisoner of war camp, Switzerland
5.1 NZ tank crew talk with some of Marshall Tito’s men, 1945
5.2 Greek partisans passing through hill country near Athens

Tables
1.1 Prisoner of war losses (Middle East and Mediterranean) 1941-42
1.2 RNZAF attached to RAF – casualties
4.1 The return of Escapers and Evaders up to 30 June 1945