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

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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.

The Soldiers from the Land of Waitemata Beer

On the 26th August 1940, a troop train pulled out of Papakura Station and began a slow journey to the wharves of Wellington and a rendezvous with the troopship *Empress of Japan*. The men aboard the train were the officers and men of 24 (Auckland) Battalion and they were typical products of both New Zealand's society and its army at the beginning of the Second World War. Whilst Auckland newspapers followed the training of the battalion eagerly and lauded them in language reminiscent of the myths that surrounded previous generations of New Zealand soldiers, the reality was far less impressive.

The first field exercise of 24 Battalion's training cadre, those men intended to become instructors for the main body of the Battalion, ably demonstrates the poor state of training of those from the pre-war territorial force. The officers held a defensive position whilst the Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) were given the task of attacking the officer's position. As the NCOs approached the officers defences, 'peculiar noises, a few accidental [sic] fired blanks, some muttered curses and a torch or two warned the Officers of the approach of the [NCOs], while on the other hand one or two Verey [sic] lights fired by a lost staff officer adequately revealed the defence post'.⁶ Unfortunately, in terms of military experience, this was the most experienced element of 24 Battalion's personnel and with the overwhelming majority of battalion personnel coming straight from civilian occupations, the ten months between the arrival of the main body of troops in 24 Battalion, and the Greek

⁶ 24 (Auckland) Battalion, *Bal el Look*, Maadi, Privately Published, 1941 p.2.

Campaign, was a struggle for instructors to impart knowledge whilst at the same time develop their own skills.⁷

The outbreak of war in September 1939 saw the New Zealand Government first authorise the formation of a brigade sized formation (known as the Special Force) and then move to forming an expeditionary force that was raised in three echelons. 24 (Auckland) Battalion was formed as part of the third echelon and developed its own autonomous identity on 4 March 1940 when Lieutenant-Colonel Shuttleworth began to issue routine orders for the Battalion.⁸ The training of Battalion personnel had started earlier however with some personnel, as was the practice during mobilisation of the expeditionary force, training with earlier echelons to gain additional experience. This culminated in the formation of a training cadre at Narrow Neck Camp on 1 February 1940 with the battalion officers and 124 'prospective' NCOs training under the direction of Shuttleworth and a number of sergeants from the NZPS.⁹ From the beginning of February to the 15 May, when the main body of the battalion arrived, this cadre underwent training that was designed to allow them to become instructors to the main body of men.¹⁰ But because of a lack of military experience in the cadre personnel, the training programme focused on the basics of soldiering and included such elements as squad drill, small arms training, extended order drill, night operations and field engineering.¹¹

The lack of experience in the cadre was a direct result of neglect of the defence forces throughout the 1930s. The New Zealand Army entered a new era in 1930

⁷ Interview Don Brash, 4 March 2006: Interview, Jack Ryan and Doug Lloyd, 8 March 2006.

⁸ R M Burdon, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45: 24 Battalion*, Wellington, War History Branch, Internal Affairs, 1953, p.2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

when the 'Great Depression' forced the United Government to cut public spending in all areas including the defence vote. The response from the New Zealand Army to its share of the 'drastic' funding cuts was to discharge the bulk of personnel, retaining within each unit only 'sufficient officers and NCOs to form a framework (or "Cadre") on which expansion could be made when possible'.¹² These measures resulted in the army's territorial strength falling from almost 17,000 personnel in 1930, to only 3655 in 1931 and as a consequence morale and effectiveness plummeted.¹³ Additionally the corner-stone of Territorial Force training, the annual training camps, were stopped as a cost cutting measure.¹⁴

Whilst the numbers of the Territorial Forces rebounded to around 7,000 personnel in 1932 under voluntary recruitment, and annual camps were restored, the army continued to suffer from a lack of funding and prestige right throughout the 1930s and as a consequence effective training suffered.¹⁵ The annual reports of the Chief of General Staff (CGS) to the government in the early 1930s describe a volunteer organisation forced to accept low levels of efficiency amongst those enlisted due to poor economic conditions. Essentially 'in some cases employers cannot afford to release their employees, and in others the employee cannot risk his further employment by asking for leave'.¹⁶ Perversely the return of economic prosperity in the second half of the decade did little to help as employers found themselves in a labour shortage and again unwilling to release employees.¹⁷

Thus while the Territorial Force had enough personnel to staff the structure at what the CGS considered to be the 'minimum strength for efficient training', the lack of

¹² *Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives*, (hereafter *AJHR*) 1931, H-19, p.4..

¹³ *AJHR*, 1930, H-19, p.6: *AJHR*, 1931, H-19, p.6.

¹⁴ *AJHR*, 1931, H-19, p.4.

¹⁵ *AJHR*, H-19, p.7.

¹⁶ *AJHR*, 1933, H-19, p.5.

¹⁷ *AJHR*, 1936, H-19, p.5.

personnel able to attend camp (on average only 42 per cent reached the efficiency target between 1932 and 1937¹⁸) meant that the Territorial Force fell quickly below that standard with 'training of all units [being] greatly hampered' and only low level formation training was conducted.¹⁹ Leadership training was also hindered with courses of instruction for officers and NCOs being held without pay, entailing 'considerable sacrifice by those who attended' and when those men returned to their units they often lacked a body of men to practice their skills on.²⁰ Thus as units were mobilised for the 2 NZEF most men were under equipped for the responsibility they were about to acquire.

All indications suggest that officers that were inducted into 24 Battalion in this training process had some degree of prior military service. John McLeod in his book *Myth and Reality* asserts that previous military training, whether it be in the territorials or at the very minimum school cadets, was a 'prerequisite' for a commission in the first three echelons and there is no tangible evidence to suggest the experience of 24 Battalion departs in any great manner from McLeod's analysis.²¹ The Battalion official history notes that the 'majority had served in the Territorials and others had been chosen from the First, Second, and Third Echelons.'²² Additionally Jack Conolly, a pre-war Territorial officer from the Hauraki Regiment, states that a number of individuals had served in the First World War and these veterans occupied 'a lot' of the senior positions in the Battalion.²³

¹⁸ K C Hooper, *The Rise of the New Zealand*, MA: Thesis, Massey University Palmerston North, 1979, p.127

¹⁹ *AJHR*, 1933, H-19, p.5: *Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives*, 1936, H-19, p.5.

²⁰ *AJHR*, 1937, H-19, p.3.

²¹ John McLeod, *Myth and Reality*, Auckland, Reed Methuen Publishers, 1986, p.157, 159.

²² Burdon, p.1.

²³ Burdon, p.1: 'Interview with Brigadier Jack Conolly', in *Freyberg Interviews Vol I*, Wellington, TVNZ, [1986?], p.1.

Not unexpectedly, where an element of inexperience did occur in 24 Battalion's officer ranks, was in those who held the rank of second lieutenant. The expansion of the New Zealand Army during mobilisation meant that a majority of officers with territorial experience were required to fill the establishments of higher ranks and this did not leave enough trained personnel to provide the full establishment of second lieutenants as units were formed. Expedient measures were taken to make up this shortfall and the ranks of each echelon were combed for suitable officer material. Those who were considered suitable by their commanding officers were sent on a seven week commissioning course at Trentham Army Camp. In the case of 24 Battalion these men appear to have come from the warrant officer and other senior NCO ranks before the arrival of the main body and robbed the Battalion of some of its most experienced NCOs when experience was at its lowest ebb.²⁴ Conversely this meant that while second lieutenants were often inexperienced officers, they were often relatively experienced soldiers and they required a change in mindset for their new roles as opposed to developing an entirely new skill set.

It is harder however, to discern the experience that the majority of the NCOs had. Whilst neither Burton nor the Battalion diary leaves any significant clue of the experience of the NCO cadre, the wider body of literature within the New Zealand Official Histories does however give indications of the backgrounds of NCOs within 2NZEF infantry units. NCOs in 2NZEF varied vastly in military service and knowledge, from First World War veterans to 'partly trained Territorial Force soldiers' and to those who were 'entirely new to the Army' but considered suitable NCO material.²⁵ In essence promotion was based on aptitude of the individual to fill

²⁴ Noel Gardiner, *Freyberg's Circus: Reminiscences of a Kiwi Soldier in the North African Campaign of World War II*, Auckland, Ray Richards Publishers, 1981, p.38, 41.

²⁵ Joseph F Cody, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45: 21 Battalion*, Wellington, War History Branch, Internal Affairs, 1954, p.1: William Denham Dawson, *Official*

the role and Charles Upham and Jack Hinton are two of the more famous examples in the New Zealand Division of those who quickly became NCOs with no pre-war military experience. Additionally there were a small number of 24 Battalion NCOs from the NZPS including Les Pearce, who was later to rise to the rank of Major-General and head the New Zealand Army in the post-war period.²⁶

The appointment process that allowed NCO appointments to be made on the basis of aptitude, rather than military experience, was due to the highly flexible system that 2 NZEF employed for the appointment of ranks up to, and including, sergeant. The power of appointment was vested in the battalion's commanding officer and the machinery for a centralised system of promotion across the various units of the 2 NZEF did not exist.²⁷ This combined with the ability to make the appointment of rank on a temporary basis meant that battalion leadership could identify individuals and test them within the battalion environment to establish whether or not they could handle the additional responsibility. The success of such a system of promotion relies very heavily on the leadership, and in particular the abilities of the battalion commanding officer, to be successful and get the 'right man' for the job.

Despite the ad hoc nature of the appointment process, within 24 Battalion context it was, by in large, successful due to the leadership that Lieutenant-Colonel Shuttleworth displayed, and the systems he utilised. The 124 prospective NCOs who entered into camp with the officers in February, did so holding the rank of acting corporal.²⁸ Whilst this flat NCO rank structure only lasted a month, it allowed time

History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45: 18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment, Wellington, War History Branch, Internal Affairs, 1961, p.2: Edward Puttick, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45: 25 Battalion*, Wellington, War History Branch, Internal Affairs, 1960, p.2: D W Sinclair, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45: 19 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, Wellington, War History Branch, Internal Affairs, 1954, p.2.

²⁶ Burdon, p.1.

²⁷ Major-General William George Stevens, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45: Problems of 2 NZEF*, Wellington, War History Branch, Internal Affairs, 1958, p.205.

²⁸ Burdon, p.1.

for Shuttleworth and other battalion officers to see how individuals responded to pressure within the Battalion environment and whether they appeared capable of accepting the responsibility of being a sergeant or corporal.²⁹ A similar approach was undertaken with the warrant officer ranks remaining vacant initially because many of the most experienced NCOs left for officer training and these senior NCO ranks were later filled by well performing sergeants.³⁰

Furthermore Shuttleworth was able to manipulate this process to the fullest extent as the number of prospective NCOs posted to the Battalion cadre outnumbered the number of senior NCO ranks within the Battalion's establishment and Shuttleworth was able to 'pick and choose' to an extent his NCO appointments. Nor did Shuttleworth feel compelled to promote a prospective NCO to any rank above private. Approximately ten per cent of prospective NCOs inducted into the cadre still held the rank of private by the time of departure of the battalion for the Middle East.³¹

Even with the establishment of a more formal NCO structure after the initial round of promotions, Shuttleworth was still able to 'weed out' any NCOs that did not live up to expectation, although this rarely occurred. With the changing of the Battalion structure from training squads to a battalion structure, Shuttleworth appointed 40 sergeants and 57 corporals.³² None of these men held their rank on a substantive basis but were appointed on a temporary basis so that Shuttleworth maintained the ability to demote individuals if he felt it necessary.³³

Despite this caution, Shuttleworth only found the need to reduce a small number of men in rank because they did not meet his standards. Ten men were reduced in rank

²⁹ 'Routine Order No.1, 4 March 1940', 24 Battalion Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/A: Burdon, p.1.

³⁰ Interview Don Brash, 4 March 2006: Gardiner, p.39.

³¹ 'Routine Order No.1, 4 March 1940', 24 Battalion Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/A: 'Nominal Roll, 24 Auck, 2 N.Z.E.F' in Lieutenant E H Halstead (ed.), *Serial Waves Souvenir Number*, Transport No.12, 1940, pp.28-31.

³² 'Routine Order No.1, 4 March 1940', 24 Battalion Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/A.

³³ Ibid.

during May 1940 to 'reflect establishment'.³⁴ Two of these demotions however, fell more than one rank step (one from temporary sergeant to temporary lance-corporal before being subsequently demoted to private, and the other from temporary corporal to private) whilst the others were only the single rank step from temporary sergeant to temporary corporal.³⁵ At the same time that these sergeants lost their rank, three temporary corporals were promoted to temporary sergeant.³⁶ As all these promotions and demotions were in the infantry companies, those demoted were clearly seen as either less suitable than others, or not at all suitable for the rank they had initially achieved. Still with one of those men demoted gaining promotion to lance-sergeant before the Battalion's departure from New Zealand, others retained their rank of corporal and only two being returned to the ranks out of an establishment of almost 100 NCOs, the system while not perfect, worked well.³⁷

Those who did receive promotion into the NCO ranks, on the whole, accepted the responsibility well. By the time of deployment to Greece, the Battalion records show only five NCOs appearing before Lieutenant-Colonel Shuttleworth and being found guilty of a disciplinary offence and these offences only amounted to approximately three per cent of all offences.³⁸ All of these offences were for being Absent Without Leave (AWL), an offence that was common amongst 24 Battalion personnel in this period.³⁹ Additionally these offences were almost exclusively concentrated in the lower NCO ranks with four of the five offences being committed by lance-corporals and the other offence committed by a corporal.

³⁴ 'Routine Order No.32, 13 May 1940', 24 Battalion Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/A.

³⁵ 'Routine Order No.37, 18 May 1940', 24 Battalion Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/A.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ 'Nominal Roll, 24 Auck, 2 N.Z.E.F' *Serial Waves Souvenir Number*, pp.30-31.

³⁸ 'Analysis of Routine Order No.1 4 March 1940 to Routine Order No.241 29 January 1941' in 24 Battalion Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/A, 24 Battalion War Diary August 1940 to January 1941, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/1-6.

³⁹ Ibid.

These offences can in part be attributed to the half-way situation that lance-corporals found themselves in. Whilst Jack Riddell notes that there is nothing to being [a lance-corporal], they do have responsibilities within the hierarchy, whilst at the same time remaining closely associated with the ranks.⁴⁰ Such was the pressure of this situation, five lance-corporals voluntary returned to the ranks as they did not like the changed relationship that they found with the ranks and their mates.⁴¹ Thus 24 Battalion NCOs can be characterised as willing, but not overly experienced soldiers.

The majority of the battalion personnel, those who held the rank of private, were as would be expected due to their large number, were a mixed bunch and invoked a range of comment. Burdon's history of the Battalion at times painted a less than complimentary picture and noted on the arrival of the main body that,

A few officers, eager to know what manner of men they were to command, went down to the railway station and saw emerging from the trains a strangely diverse collection of human beings in all conditions ranging from complete sobriety to advanced intoxication.... Apart from all else, their appearance was noticeably shabby—in some cases positively eccentric. Under the mistaken impression that their clothes would be taken away and not restored, they had been at some pains to arrive in garments they could well afford to lose. In the rough they were not impressive, and the watching officers must have suffered vague misgivings as to how such a rabble could possibly be transformed into soldiers.⁴²

Ba Bel Look, a 'periodical' published by 24 Battalion personnel also recalled the arrival of the main body, although with an element of flippancy,

They all came to do a job and there was something purposeful about these men – apart from the alcoholic ones. The day had its bright moments – a drunken fight between two Irishmen will not be forgotten. One of them has deserted and the other is still fighting his way around Egypt.⁴³

Shuttleworth noted in the Battalion Diary upon the arrival of his recruits that they were 'a likely lot of chaps...', a view that he reinforced three days later with the comment 'it is very notable even at this juncture that the new arrivals intend making

⁴⁰ 'Interview of Jack Riddell 2005 by Sergeant Beech, 10 February 2005', New Zealand Army Museum Waiouru.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Burdon, pp.2-3

⁴³ 24 (Auckland) Battalion, *Bal el Look*, p.2.

the 24th Bn [Battalion] the best Bn.'⁴⁴ In contrast Noel Gardiner, a Lance-Sergeant in 24 Battalion during its formation, took an opposite view to Shuttleworth when he stated 'when most recruits first entered camp they came in with their home grown habits, and some of them were pretty poor; bloody awful would perhaps be a better expression'.⁴⁵

These differing views all hold an element of truth within them as the disciplinary offences and discharges from the Battalion reveal. Disciplinary offences, while not obviously giving a full picture of Battalion life, reveal patterns of offending and give an indication of the mood and willingness of the ranks to accept authority within the Battalion. The main indicator in this period is the AWL statistics as it was a common offence amongst the ranks and an offence that essentially involves individuals taking a temporary break from army life. Whilst the taking of this break could be for a multitude of reasons including those not related to battalion life, the patterns of offences can reveal poor leadership and morale within a unit.

Transgressors of the military discipline within 24 Battalion fell into two broad groups. The overwhelming majority of the battalion personnel either failed to trouble the disciplinary system, or did so on infrequent occasions. The majority of AWL offences for example, were caused by a small group of 22 repeat offenders who accumulated approximately 30 per cent of the punishments handed down for this offence.⁴⁶ Some of these men spent so much of their time in defiance of military authority it is difficult to understand why they had volunteered for military service in the first place. Private A J McQuinlan epitomised this group. After being convicted

⁴⁴ '24 Battalion Diary Entry, 15/5/40', 24 Battalion Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/A: '24 Battalion Diary Entry, 18/5/40' 24 Battalion Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/A.

⁴⁵ Gardiner, p.40.

⁴⁶ 'Analysis of Routine Order No.1 4 March 1940 to Routine Order No.241 29 January 1941' in 24 Battalion Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/A and 24 Battalion War Diary August 1940 to January 1941, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/1-6.

of being AWL and another unspecified charge, McQuinlan was sentenced to fourteen days detention.⁴⁷ After serving his sentence, McQuinlan was marched back in to 24 Battalion lines at 1000 hours and was once again posted AWL at 2145 hours that evening as he absconded for another six days.⁴⁸

Nor was McQuinlan an isolated case. Private P. J. Ryan spent so much time AWL that he developed a reputation and *Serial Waves*, a magazine put out by 24 Battalion personnel of the *Empress of Japan*, mocked Ryan by 'promoting' him to Provost Sergeant.⁴⁹ Five 24 Battalion personnel were also posted as deserters before 24 Battalion had left New Zealand. It must be said however that of the four apprehended before 24 Battalion's departure from New Zealand, all were convicted of being AWL instead of desertion.⁵⁰ Whilst these are the most extreme cases, the high number of AWL convictions amongst this small group of personnel clearly demonstrates that a small core of the Battalion personnel had difficulty in adjusting to the demands of military life.

Nor was Shuttleworth prepared to accept without question those who were incapable of effective soldiering and he took steps to remove them from the Battalion. Before departure from New Zealand, 22 personnel were discharged from 24 Battalion with the majority being medically unfit (65 per cent), followed by those who were 'unlikely to become an efficient soldier' (30 per cent) and finally those who were discharged for 'domestic reasons' (15 per cent).⁵¹

⁴⁷ 'Routine Order No.63 18 June 1940', 24 Battalion Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/A.

⁴⁸ 'Routine Order No.69 25 June 1940', 24 Battalion Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/A.

⁴⁹ 'Routine Order No.1234 35 [sic] September 1940', *Serial Waves*, Vol.2 No.4, 24 September 1940.

⁵⁰ 'Routine Order No.55 8 June 1940', 24 Battalion Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/A: 'Routine Order No.60 14 June 1940', 24 Battalion Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/A: 'Routine Order No.76 3 July 1940', 24 Battalion Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/A. 'Routine Order No.88 17 July 1940', 24 Battalion Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/A.

⁵¹ 'Analysis of Routine Order No.1 4 March 1940 to Routine Order No.241 29 January 1941' in 24 Battalion Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/A, 24 Battalion War Diary August 1940 to January 1941, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/1-6.

The medically unfit and the ill-disciplined were however a minority within the Battalion and whilst a significant number of individuals did at some point face an AWL charge, on the whole the discipline record shows a willingness of Battalion personnel to accept military discipline and their place within the Battalion. The average time spent AWL by these men was two days, with offences typically ranging from 45 minutes to four days.⁵² Such time periods and the infrequency that individuals went AWL indicate that rather than some systemic problems within the Battalion, it was either a case of individuals missing the last train from Cairo to Maadi, or individuals going on a bender, a common tradition in New Zealand male society. Whilst the former is relatively inconsequential, the latter, while not ideal, was not an unexpected feature on the New Zealand soldiering landscape with it being a relative common occurrence in New Zealand soldiers when they were in rear-areas. It was certainly, based on the comments in the Battalion Diary, not a situation that Lieutenant-Colonel Shuttleworth found unexpected.⁵³

On two occasions however, significant numbers of men decided to take matters into their own hands when officially sanctioned leave was not forthcoming. In mid-June 1940 weekend leave was cancelled for battalion personnel on the recommendation of health authorities due to an outbreak of influenza within Papakura Camp.⁵⁴ This restriction left the rank and file 'unsettled' in the opinion of Lieutenant-Colonel Shuttleworth and ultimately 55 personnel went AWL in an action that should be seen as a deliberate challenge to military authority.⁵⁵ In this case the protest was

⁵² 'Analysis of Routine Order No.1 4 March 1940 to Routine Order No.241 29 January 1941' in 24 Battalion Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/A, 24 Battalion War Diary August 1940 to January 1941, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/1-6.

⁵³ '24 Battalion Diary Entry, 16/6/40', 24 Battalion Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/A.

⁵⁴ '24 Battalion Diary Entry, 15/6/40', 24 Battalion Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/A.

⁵⁵ '24 Battalion Diary Entry, 16/6/40', 24 Battalion Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/A: 'Routine Order No.63 18 June 1940', 24 Battalion Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/A: 'Routine Order No.64 19 June 1940', 24 Battalion Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/A: 'Routine Order No.65 20 June 1940', 24 Battalion Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/A.

relatively ineffectual as Shuttleworth felt that considering the circumstances, the majority of the men had stuck to duty well and he had a degree of pride that more did not go AWL.⁵⁶

Nor was this form of protest a one off event. When the *Empress of Japan*, docked at Bombay, the denial of immediate leave and the frustration at having to live in cramped conditions aboard the *Empress* led to 106 men going AWL.⁵⁷ Just as citizen soldiers in other New Zealand battalions protested various events through protest meetings and the sending of telegrams to the Minister of Defence, 24 Battalion personnel also attempted to use action to protest against what they believed to be unreasonable decisions by superiors.⁵⁸

The poorest aspect of the Battalion's period in New Zealand was the level of training received even though it must be recognised that the course of training was not intended to provide fully trained soldiers.⁵⁹ While 24 Battalion's training primarily emphasised the basics of soldiering such as marching and small-arms training in a course is appropriate for those being inducted into the army, a range of external factors made the implementation of this elementary training course within 24 Battalion a shambles. Poor weather and an influenza outbreak of 'alarming proportions' in June, as well as there being no time allowed for inoculation, dental treatment, special leave and the making of wills, meant that the time available to the Battalion, which was barely sufficient to fit in the full course of instruction, was further restricted.⁶⁰ This meant that basic skills were less developed than they should have been and advanced skills such as tank-hunting and tank protection barely

⁵⁶ '24 Battalion Diary Entry, 16/6/40', 24 Battalion Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/A.

⁵⁷ 'Routine Order No.133 18 September 1940', 24 Battalion War Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/2.

⁵⁸ Major-General Sir Howard Kippenberger, *Infantry Brigadier*, London, Oxford University Press, 1949, p.5.

⁵⁹ Stevens, p.198.

⁶⁰ 24 (Auckland) Battalion, *Bal el Look*, p.3: Burdon, p.5, 4, 12.

received any attention before the departure from New Zealand and were primarily covered by training films.⁶¹

A lack of equipment available for training also hindered the development of skills. The arrival of the first Bren gun, the section level light machine-gun, at 24 Battalion caused such a stir that men crowded around to view it.⁶² The number of Bren guns allocated to the Battalion while in New Zealand peaked at four and as a consequence the Bren guns had to be shared around the various sub-units of the Battalion on a rostered basis so that men could develop some degree of familiarity with this important weapon in the Battalion's armoury. The obsolescent Lewis gun was substituted for the Bren gun, but conducting drill on a different weapon is of doubtful utility.⁶³ Additionally while rifles were in more plentiful supply, the lack of availability of armourers meant that faulty weapons could not be easily rectified and this, along with poor weather and the influenza outbreak, inhibited range firing to the point that it had to be completed once 24 Battalion had arrived in the Middle East.⁶⁴

Specialist platoons within the Battalion were in an even worse state of training. The carrier, mortar and administrative personnel should have undertaken, under normal circumstances, the basic recruit course alongside the infantry personnel. But due to time restrictions they were hurried through this training so that they could be given training in their specialist roles leaving them with 'insufficient grounding' in the basics of army life.⁶⁵ Specialist training also suffered from a lack of equipment with the carrier platoon training on two aging trucks that were in need of a overhaul, instead of training on a tracked vehicle like the Bren Carrier.⁶⁶ The mortar platoon

⁶¹ Burdon, p.1.

⁶² Interview Jim Hunt, 14 June 2006: Burdon, p.4.

⁶³ Interview Jim Hunt, 14 June 2006.

⁶⁴ Burdon, p.12.

⁶⁵ Burdon, p.4.

⁶⁶ Burdon, p.4.

suffered from a lack of mortars, while the anti-aircraft platoon suffered alongside the infantry over the lack of Bren guns.⁶⁷ Thus the specialist troops in the Battalion got the worst of both worlds, incomplete training in the basics of army life and insufficient training in their primary roles.

Thus 24 Battalion arrived in the Middle East incapable of conducting military operations and the four month period spent in the Middle East before embarking to Greece, continued to be plagued with equipment shortages.⁶⁸ Whilst the lack of equipment continued to make full training difficult, it also caused morale problems and Shuttleworth was forced to remind his Battalion that 'the attitude that duties cannot be carried out because the full scale of equipment has not been provided is a defeatist one'.⁶⁹

Despite the difficulties that continued to be encountered, progress was made with a continuation and consolidation of the marching, small arms skills and tactics that had been introduced in New Zealand, as well as the development of new skills such as working with artillery, live-firing exercises, simple field engineering tasks and practical instruction of anti-tank tactics.⁷⁰ A fuller range of field exercises were conducted and training schemes for all levels up to, and including brigade level, were carried out.⁷¹ Particular emphasis was placed on ensuring that all personnel were familiar with all the weapons that infantry might be called upon to use so that heavy casualties would not render the specialist weapon systems such as Brens and anti-tank rifles ineffective, whilst 6 Brigade Headquarters also ensured subordinate units undertook a substantial course of route marches to ensure that all personnel were both

⁶⁷ Burdon, p.4.

⁶⁸ Burdon, pp.11-12.

⁶⁹ '24 Battalion Training Directive 17 October 1940' 24 Battalion War Diary October 1940, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/3.

⁷⁰ Burdon, p.12.

⁷¹ Burdon, pp.13-14.

fit and that their feet were hardened.⁷² While the intent was there to provide a good base of military knowledge, the training at times lacked depth and tank hunting operations, for example, appear to have only been carried out on one occasion when the vehicles of the Divisional Cavalry were arranged to provide a 'hostile force' during a 6 Brigade exercise. While this was better than nothing, it hardly qualifies as in-depth training.⁷³

Whilst attempts to drum practical military skills into the men of 24 Battalion progressed, Lieutenant-Colonel Shuttleworth was also careful from the earliest possible opportunity to develop *esprit de corps* within the Battalion environment. Shuttleworth viewed the development of *esprit de corps* as 'perhaps the most important phase of the training of a new unit' and he used multiple approaches to achieve this aim.⁷⁴ Whilst one off events such as family day at Papakura Camp and the traditional military tool of parades were used, these were reinforced by alcohol and sports events.

Sporting occasions and achievements are ideal for building group identity and solidarity, and Shuttleworth was quick to ensure that sport was a feature of battalion life. Even before the arrival of the main body, the Battalion had a rugby team that was involved in at least one match against an Auckland club team.⁷⁵ The playing of rugby and a range of other sports such as association football and hockey continued after the arrival of the main body and were a staple of life in Egypt. Wednesday afternoons were, exercises permitting, reserved for intra-battalion sport, whilst

⁷² Burdon, p.12; Phillips and Gilmour, p.39.

⁷³ Burdon, p.13.

⁷⁴ 24 (Auckland) Battalion, *Ba Bel Look*, pp.12-13.

⁷⁵ For the record, the 24 Battalion team lost 9-6. '24 Battalion Diary Note 26/4/40', 24 Battalion Dairy, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/A.

weekends invariably saw 24 Battalion representative teams locked in battle with their counterparts from other 2 NZEF units.⁷⁶

With both official sanction and a cultural background that emphasised sporting events, sport became intertwined with identity within the Battalion as two pieces in *Ba Bel Look* demonstrate. A Company introductory piece in this magazine focused almost solely on those members of the company that had played representative sport to demonstrate what a 'first class body of men' the company was.⁷⁷ Similarly B Company's introduction 'illustrated [their] undoubted class' by reciting the companies sporting achievements against other units and lauding those who 'uphold the name of the Coy [through sport].'⁷⁸

Alcohol also had its function in building *esprit de corps*. Whilst alcohol had the potential to undermine discipline, in a controlled environment it was a social lubricant and like sport, alcohol as a community building mechanism made its appearance early. The training cadres first field exercise was notable in Battalion folk lore for the 'strenuous march' that made 'the sweat flow that day, Waitemata [beer] oozed out of every pore'.⁷⁹ The strain of the cadre's march was soon put behind them 'thanks to the foresight of the [Narrow Neck] School Adjutant...[we were] amply supplied with ale to wash down our first dinner in the field'.⁸⁰ Nor was this the only time that alcohol featured on exercise with one field exercise ending in the Silverdale Hotel where 'several noggins had been nugged' while waiting for transport.⁸¹ The last evening at Narrow Neck Camp saw the men 'press-ganging' the officers and bringing

⁷⁶ 'Routine Order No.198 6 December 1940', 24 Battalion War Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/5:
'Routine Order No.210 20 December 1940', 24 Battalion War Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/5:
'Routine Order No.244 4 February 1941', 24 Battalion War Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/7.

⁷⁷ 24 (Auckland) Battalion, *Ba Bel Look*, p.15.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid, p.1.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

them to the men's canteen where they were greeted with 'sing or shout'.⁸² Such a function was not without its internal discipline and despite an offer from the Camp Commandant for the party to go all night, it ended promptly at 2300 hours, lights out time.⁸³

Whilst the arrival of the main body of the Battalion increased the Battalion's size and made such events problematical, alcohol continued to make its presence felt on a more unofficial level. The journey of the Battalion by train from Auckland to Wellington for embarkation on the *Empress of Japan*, was 'a gauntlet...where crowds waited to fill the troops with beer' and 'temptation' was succumbed to by troops who started 'smuggling' liquor on to the train.⁸⁴ *Serial Waves*, is also littered with comments such as 'Beer or Bibles? – Last Sunday evening's problem', and hinting about embarrassing moments suffered by Battalion officers and men while under the influence of alcohol.⁸⁵ Similarly 24 Battalion's 'official' song that was published in *Serial Waves*, gives an alcoholic reward to the man who rips the medals off the highest ranking Nazi to appear in the ditty, Hermann Goering.⁸⁶

Such discourses within the Battalion gave personnel common ground on which to base social interaction. By providing a public discourse that portrayed alcohol as an important part of life to both officers and ranks, an appearance of common ground was established between officers and men and this helped build bridges between the two groups despite the diverse backgrounds and the hierarchical organisation of the army.

⁸² Burdon, p.2.

⁸³ 24 (Auckland) Battalion, *Ba Bel Look*, p.1.

⁸⁴ Burdon, p.6.

⁸⁵ *Serial Waves*, Vol.1, No.5, 7 September 1940, p.2.

⁸⁶ *Serial Waves*, Vol.1, No.4, 2 September, 1940, p.2.

By the time 24 Battalion's training was concluded prior to going to Greece, the Battalion was as well prepared for operations as it was ever going to be. This however is not a statement of unreserved admiration for the quality of the training 24 Battalion's received, but rather a realistic view of the limits that the Battalion faced during this training period. Equipment was always short until it was decided that New Zealand Division should be deployed to Greece and while improvisation will suffice up until a point, there was clear frustration within Battalion personnel at this situation, a frustration which would have affected attitudes towards training. Thus a continuation of training without the influx of equipment into 24 Battalion would have taken place in an environment of increasingly poor attitudes amongst Battalion personnel. This would have in turn made training relatively ineffective and possibly even detrimental to 24 Battalion's efficiency. Additionally skills such as tank hunting were still underdeveloped and while 24 Battalion was relatively well trained in basic infantry tasks, there were definite limits to their knowledge but with training opportunities lacking, 24 Battalion had to move beyond training and enter active operations to continue their development.

These deficiencies were to a degree mitigated by Shuttleworth's drive to build up *esprit de corps*. This was one area where 24 Battalion did excel and through the means of alcohol, sport and training, as well as a desire by most personnel to be soldiers, a strong identity was built up in the Battalion. This identity, as we will see in the next chapter, was the key element in 24 Battalion's successes during the Greek Campaign because while deficiencies in military knowledge were exposed, personnel remained willingly to accept the dangers they found themselves in and this in turn mitigated the severity of the problems 24 Battalion found themselves in to a degree.

Luck is not a method.

The story of 24 Battalion's campaign in Greece is one of near disaster and luck. The Battalion fought two significant engagements during the Campaign, the first at Elasson, and the other at Molos. Because the Greek Campaign was hopelessly under-resourced, the Campaign quickly turned into a series of rear-guard actions and withdrawals for Commonwealth forces. 24 Battalion operations followed this pattern and both engagements fought by the Battalion were rear-guard actions where 24 Battalion, along with the rest of 6 Brigade, were ordered to hold their position until a certain time and thereby allow other Commonwealth units the time to escape to the south.

24 Battalion arrived at the Greek port of Piraeus on 18 March, and by 28 March the Battalion had moved to their position on the Aliakmon Line, a position that was at the very right of the New Zealand Division line.⁸⁷ Here as part of the divisional defensive arrangements, the Battalion spent two weeks preparing a defensive position that included entrenchments, wire and mines, behind an anti-tank ditch.⁸⁸ But with the Germans threatening to outflank the Aliakmon Line, the position had to be abandoned on 10 March without it being utilised.⁸⁹

24 Battalion's first withdrawal of the Greek Campaign saw the Battalion move back to a reserve position behind the Mount Olympus position. The move itself was

⁸⁷ '24 Battalion War Diary Entry, 28 March 1941' 24 Battalion War Diary March 1941, WAI Series 1, 60/1/8.

⁸⁸ '24 Battalion War Diary Entries, 2-5 April', 24 Battalion War Diary April 1941, WAI Series 1, 60/1/9.

⁸⁹ '24 Battalion War Diary Entry, 10 April', 24 Battalion War Diary April 1941, WAI Series 1, 60/1/9.

difficult for 24 Battalion because it required a fifteen mile march in heavy rain and with no food along the way before they reached the trucks that were to take them to their new position.⁹⁰ The route marching conducted in Egypt stood the Battalion in good stead and the march was completed without too much difficulty, even if it was miserable. After a period of two days sitting in heavy rain and snow while in reserve, 24 Battalion spent 13 April undertaking road repairs near Livadhion before being ordered to a position near Skotina between 28 Maori Battalion and the 16 Australian Brigade.⁹¹ This movement order was however rescinded before the final destination was reached, and instead 24 Battalion moved to a position just south of Elasson with 25 Battalion for its first engagement with German troops.⁹²

The ground around Elasson rose to prominence on the night of 13/14 April due to the limited nature of the road network in Greece. It had been decided that due to the imminent collapse of the Greek Army, Commonwealth forces should withdraw to the Thermopylae Line in southern Greece as this position was the narrowest point on the Greek Peninsula and therefore provided the best possibility for the limited Commonwealth forces to mount a solid defence.⁹³ As the first step in the withdrawal to the Thermopylae Line, 24 and 25 Battalions were ordered to a position approximately three miles south of Elasson to 'hold the high ground' and provide a rear-guard until dark on 18 April.⁹⁴ This enabled the majority of units in ANZAC Corps time to withdraw from their positions around Mount Olympus, through the road

⁹⁰ Burdon, p.24; Phillips and Gilmour, p.68.

⁹¹ '24 Battalion War Diary Entry, 10 April', 24 Battalion War Diary April 1941, WAI Series 1, 60/1/9; Burdon, pp.24-25; McClymont, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45: To Greece*, Wellington, War History Branch, 1959, p.223.

⁹² Burdon, pp.25-26.

⁹³ W G McClymont, p.217.

⁹⁴ 'Appendix 10: Narrative, Tuesday 15 April', 6 NZ Infantry Brigade War Diary April 1941, WAI Series 1 DA 58/1/7.

junction immediately north of Elasson, past 6 Brigade's positions and then to the south.⁹⁵

The crucial terrain feature, as it usually is with rear guard positions, was the road network. After passing through Elasson the road split and diverged on the plain, then into the 'precipitous and high country' that bordered the southern edge of the plain.⁹⁶ Despite the diverging nature of the road network at Elasson, either route could be taken to reach Tirnavos, some 19 kilometres south, and then subsequently on to the town of Larissa, another important converging road junction for the withdrawal of the Commonwealth forces.⁹⁷

With the focus being on holding the Elasson position for a limited time frame, Brigadier Harold Barrowclough, the 6 Brigade C.O., focused his resources on the two roads. 24 Battalion, less one infantry company, was deployed on the eastern road that led over the Menexes High Pass, whilst 25 Battalion and the detached 24 Battalion infantry company covered the western road.⁹⁸ This left a gap of some five kilometres between the right flank of 25 Battalion and the left flank of 24 Battalion. But the nature of the ground, a series of rugged peaks rising from 738 metres to 876 metres, made the ground 'virtually tank proof', and with elements of 27 (MG) Battalion covering the gap by fire, it was believed that no significant German force could traverse it before 6 Brigade had completed the rear-guard action and withdrawn.⁹⁹

The other significant terrain factor at play was the relative natural strengths of the positions that 24 and 25 Battalions held. The road that 24 Battalion had to defend had

⁹⁵ '6 Brigade Operational Order 2, 16 April 1941', 6 NZ Infantry Brigade War Diary April 1941, 58/1/7: 'Appendix 10: Narrative, Tuesday 15 April', 6 NZ Infantry Brigade War Diary April 1941, WAI Series 1 DA 58/1/7.

⁹⁶ 'Appendix 10: Narrative, Tuesday 15 April', 6 NZ Infantry Brigade War Diary April 1941, WAI Series 1 DA 58/1/7.

⁹⁷ Puttick, p.45.

⁹⁸ Burdon, pp.27-28.

⁹⁹ 'Appendix 10: Narrative, Tuesday 15 April', 6 NZ Infantry Brigade War Diary April 1941, WAI Series 1 DA 58/1/7.

a steep gradient and it wound its way up the slope to 24 Battalion's position through a number of hairpin turns.¹⁰⁰ Additionally vehicles could not leave the road as they neared 24 Battalion's position due to the nature of the terrain and therefore the avenues of approach for any armoured attacks were limited. In contrast 25 Battalion was considered more exposed to armoured attack as it was stretched out over a frontage of approximately 6000 metres on a series of low rounded crests, and was therefore defending terrain with no 'effective anti-tank obstacle' and a road that was 'easier [in] grade and [had] less acute curves' than the eastern route.¹⁰¹

Since it was expected that any attack on the 6 Brigade positions would include armoured vehicles, support units were primarily directed to 25 Battalion position. Whilst B Company, 24 Battalion was attached to 25 Battalion so it could have four infantry company's forward and one reserve, 25 Battalion was also allocated twelve 2-pounder guns for anti-tank defence, two of the three machine-gun platoons available to 6 Brigade, and the artillery was deployed with the intent of primarily covering the ground in front of 25 Battalion.¹⁰² 24 Battalion in contrast had two 2-pounder anti-tank guns allocated to it, but on 16 April these guns were detached and sent to a composite unit, Allen force.¹⁰³ 24 Battalion thereafter had to rely on the Boys anti-tank rifle, the only organic anti-tank defence in the New Zealand infantry battalion's establishment in early 1941.

Despite resources being focused on 25 Battalion, 24 Battalion's defensive position looked as if a sufficiently solid defence could be established to complete its task. The terrain meant that 24 Battalion could focus its dispositions on a relatively narrow frontage that concentrated on the road and the left flank. To that end C Company was

¹⁰⁰ Burdon, p.28.

¹⁰¹ 'Intelligence Log Entry 18 April 1941', 6 NZ Infantry Brigade War Diary, April 1941, WAI Series 1, DA 58/1/7McClymont, Wellington 1959, p.293; Puttick, pp.45-46.

¹⁰² McClymont, p.293, 293ff, 294.

¹⁰³ Burdon, p.28.

placed on the summit of a ridge, known as Stony Ridge, to the east of the road, whilst D Company was deployed adjacent to the summit of the hill on the western side of the road and the south-west flank of C Company.¹⁰⁴ The final infantry company, A Company, was placed further back on a ridge overlooking the terrain to the north-west so as to guard against any infantry attack that may eventuate from that direction and attempt to move on to the road behind C and D Companies.¹⁰⁵ Additionally, while most of 24 Battalion's carrier platoon was utilised as a screening force for 6 Brigade's left flank, the section of Bren carriers that the Battalion maintained under its control was deployed down on the Elasson Plain and carried out patrols up to a distance of eight miles from Battalion positions.¹⁰⁶ Finally Battalion Headquarters was in a farmhouse on the reverse side of the ridge approximately three kilometres to the rear.¹⁰⁷

The rugged terrain was both an advantage and a disadvantage for the defenders. As the only line of approach for vehicles to 24 Battalion's position was along the road, this meant that the location was ideal for one of the engineers' favourite pastimes in Greece, the preparation of demolitions to block the road. Engineers prepared charges on the road between the C and D Company positions and another to the rear of the 24 Battalion position near Battalion Headquarters.¹⁰⁸ The forward position it was hoped, along with artillery fire would provide sufficient protection for 24 Battalion from armoured attack.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ Burdon, p.28.

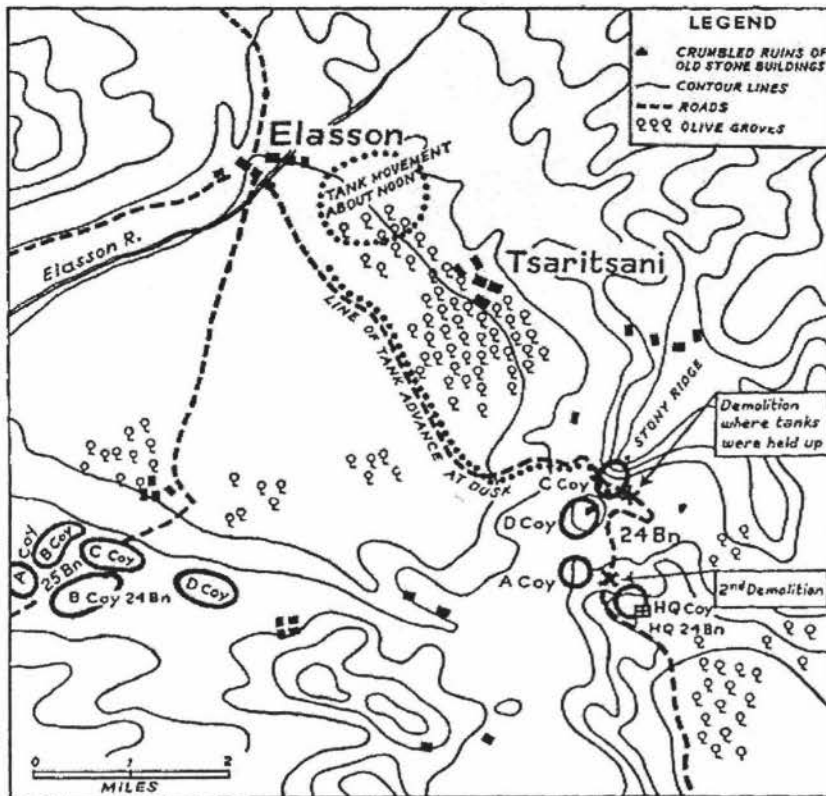
¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Burdon, p.29; Phillips and Gilmour, p.70.

¹⁰⁷ Burdon, p.28.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ McClymont, p.295.



DELAYING ACTION SOUTH OF ELASSON

Source: Burdon, p.27.

The terrain was however, and as the name of C Company's position suggests, rocky to the point it was 'impossible to dig trenches' and instead the infantry companies had to rely on sangers (rock walls) for protection.¹¹⁰ This, in the opinion of Major Dill, meant that he did not 'think anyone was very happy about having to fight here as the splinter effect from bombs and shell fire would have been great.'¹¹¹ Thus the forward infantry companies of 24 Battalion had an uneasy wait for the arrival of the Germans and their baptism of fire.

By the morning of 18 April the last unit in front of 6 Brigade, the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry, had withdrawn through 6 Brigade and the men of 6 Brigade waited to see if the Germans would clear the demolitions to the north of Ellasson and arrive before nightfall when 6 Brigade was due to withdraw. To hinder German

¹¹⁰ 'Letter, Major Dill', cited in Burdon, p.28.

¹¹¹ 'Letter, Major Dill', cited in Burdon, p.28.

progress south the last demolition blocking the road just north of Elasson was kept under fire by 25-pounders and is believed to have caused considerable casualties amongst the German engineers.¹¹² But through the use of engineering equipment German forces were able to create a deviation around the demolition for tracked vehicles and by 1120 hours German tanks were observed and engaged by medium artillery just north of Elasson.¹¹³ By midday German vehicles could be observed from 24 Battalion's position with approximately 40 'AFVs [Armoured Fighting Vehicles] appear[ing] on the spur road' about five kilometres in front of the Battalion Forward Defence Locations (FDLs).¹¹⁴

At 1215 hours Lieutenant-Colonel Shuttleworth started to issue orders in preparation for a German attack. His first action was to recall the carrier section that was patrolling on the plain so that the first demolition could be blown and an obstacle could be established.¹¹⁵ The carrier section, which had paused at the bottom of the slope below C Company, received a hurry-up when it drew fire from both German artillery and the 25-pounders from 2/3 Australian Field Regiment.¹¹⁶ Fortunately the less than ideal withdrawal resulted only in a fright for the carrier personnel and they withdrew without casualties behind the location of the first demolition site.¹¹⁷

This allowed Shuttleworth to order the first demolition to be blown at 1245 hours, although the explosive did not have the desired effect.¹¹⁸ An inspection of the crater

¹¹² Brigadier George Clifton, *The Happy Hunted*, London, Cassell and Company, 1952, p.85.

¹¹³ 'Intelligence Log Entry 18 April 1941', 6 NZ Infantry Brigade War Diary, April 1941, WAI Series 1, DA 58/1/7: Clifton, p.85.

¹¹⁴ '24 Battalion War Diary Entry 18 April 1941', 24 Battalion War Diary, April 1941, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/9.

¹¹⁵ '24 Battalion War Diary Entry, 18 April 1941', 24 Battalion War Diary, April 1941, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/9.

¹¹⁶ 'Intelligence Log Entry 18 April 1941', 6 NZ Infantry Brigade War Diary, April 1941, WAI Series 1, DA 58/1/7: '24 Battalion War Diary Entry, 18 April 1941', 24 Battalion War Diary, April 1941, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/9: Burdon, pp.29-30.

¹¹⁷ Burdon, p.30.

¹¹⁸ '24 Battalion War Diary Entry, 18 April 1941', 24 Battalion War Diary, April 1941, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/9.

revealed that it could be crossed by a Bren carrier, and that approximately 30 minutes work would make the road passable to all traffic.¹¹⁹ Without time to bring up additional explosive, 24 Battalion had to face the prospect of an armoured attack without the obstacle originally planned, nor any significant anti-tank weaponry.

For the remainder of the afternoon both sides exchanged shellfire and the various elements of 6 Brigade watched enemy movements as the Germans brought up additional forces and conducted reconnaissance. Whilst some tanks that were apparently conducting reconnaissance ventured out towards 24 Battalion's lines at 1400 hours, they soon retired back towards Elasson.¹²⁰ The lack of a German attack throughout the afternoon appears to have been primarily due to difficulties in getting vehicles across the river to the north of Elasson and heavy shelling of German troop concentrations had 'a strong deterrent effect on enemy tanks and many tank movements were stopped and dispersed [by shellfire].'¹²¹

By late afternoon it became apparent that any German attack on 6 Brigade's position would fall upon 24 Battalion rather than through the anticipated western road route. By 1730 hours a German force began to assemble approximately four kilometres from 24 Battalion's position where a number of tracks ran up to the road below 24 Battalion's position.¹²² At the same time heavy shelling of C and D Companies started and by at 1800 hours 24 Battalion reported to 6 Brigade Headquarters that an 'estimated 30 enemy AFVs [Armoured Fighting Vehicles] had concentrated there and had gone to ground under shellfire'.¹²³

¹¹⁹ Burdon, p.30.

¹²⁰ Burdon, p.30.

¹²¹ Gavin Long, *Greece, Crete and Syria*, Canberra, Australian War Memorial, 1953, p.123: '6 Brigade Report' cited in McClymont, p.304.

¹²² McClymont, p.305.

¹²³ Intelligence Log Entry 18 April 1941', 6 NZ Infantry Brigade War Diary, April 1941, WAI Series 1, DA 58/1/7.

Despite the preparations made by the Germans, the expected blow failed to eventuate immediately. By 1830 hours Lieutenant-Colonel Shuttleworth ordered the carrier and mortar platoons to withdraw back behind the second demolition so that it could be blown at any time without fear of trapping and abandoning any of the Battalion's heavy equipment. With the attack still delayed, Shuttleworth issued the order at 1940 hours for A and C companies to start the withdrawal of the infantry companies through the slow thinning out the ranks.¹²⁴ Twenty minutes after the thinning out process had started, the expected attack suddenly materialised. At 1950 hours a further twenty AFVs were seen moving down the road from Elasson and ten minutes later an estimated 48 tanks and AFVs started to move across the flat below C Company and towards the Battalion position.¹²⁵

At this point the defence almost turned to disaster as a number of different elements conspired against the defenders. Communications to Battalion Headquarters had been effectively broken when telephone communications were knocked out by the shelling and the only means of communication became runners, a relatively ineffectual method over a distance of three kilometres of rough terrain in fading light.¹²⁶ Thus at the hour of their most need, C and D companies were essentially left to manage a break from contact with enemy armoured forces as best they could within the context of previously issued orders that had set out the timings for withdrawal. Additionally the artillery support was only able to disperse the infantry element of the

¹²⁴ '24 Battalion War Diary Entry, 18 April 1941', 24 Battalion War Diary, April 1941, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/9.

'24 Battalion War Diary Entry, 18 April 1941', 24 Battalion War Diary, April 1941, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/9.

¹²⁵ '24 Battalion War Diary Entry, 18 April 1941', 24 Battalion War Diary, April 1941, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/9.

¹²⁶ Intelligence Log Entry 18 April 1941', 6 NZ Infantry Brigade War Diary, April 1941, WAI Series 1, DA 58/1/7.

attack and the armoured element was left unscathed as the artillery could no longer engage them due to the failing light.¹²⁷

This meant there was little to stop the attack reaching 24 Battalion's position. The armoured attack was able to drive past the most forward section of 15 Platoon (C Company) without interference. This left 13 and 15 platoons, the two platoons left on Stony Ridge, with their most direct line of withdrawal along the road being cut off, and they were forced to withdraw immediately due to the circuitous and time consuming route they had to take over the ridgelines to reach the waiting trucks.¹²⁸

This left only 17 Platoon, at the right end of D Company's line, with a direct line of sight to the tanks. Second-Lieutenant J. W. Reynolds, 17 Platoon's C. O., had placed himself with the platoon's right-hand section as they had an anti-tank rifle and he wanted to ensure the section would hold its fire until the lead tank had reached the nearest and last section of the road that the tanks could be seen on, a range that Reynolds had previously verified as 350 yards.¹²⁹ At this point the man on the anti-tank rifle, Private Frank Turner, opened fire on the lead tank and stopped it after firing four rounds.¹³⁰

At this juncture, two men also abandoned the second tank and after one had been killed by the Bren gunner in 17 Platoon's left section, 'the trouble started' in Reynolds words.¹³¹ The German tanks in their advance had reached the site of the first demolition on the road and halted. Whilst the damage was easily traversed by a tracked vehicle, it is believed that the restricted view from the tanks and the failing light made the demolition look more significant than it really was, and as a

¹²⁷ 'Appendix 10: Narrative, Friday 18 April', 6 NZ Infantry Brigade War Diary April 1941, WAI Series 1 DA 58/1/7.

¹²⁸ McClymont, p.306

¹²⁹ 'Letter, Major Reynolds, 11 January 1949', cited in Burdon, p.31.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

consequence the German armour felt they could not continue.¹³² As the tanks were unable to move off the road and so they believed, move forward, they ‘opened fire with everything they had – tanks guns and small arms – using tracer entirely’.¹³³ This fire, combined with mortar fire, was able to knock out 17 Platoon’s anti-tank rifle by injuring Turner and then subsequently injuring the man who replaced him. Additionally, a German mortar round jammed the bolt on the anti-tank rifle.¹³⁴ Fortunately, apart from this incident, the German fire was not overly effective and 17 Platoon, now without any means of effectively engaging the halted tanks, chose to withhold their fire whilst maintaining their position as they waited for their turn to withdraw.¹³⁵ This *status quo* prevailed until about 2110 hours, when D Company, the last company to withdraw, moved back towards their waiting transport.¹³⁶

The plan that 24 Battalion executed was flawed and was a result of inexperience in Battalion command. At Battalion level insufficient thought was given to the line of retreat of C Company as any movement of German forces up the road easily cut off their intended line of withdrawal. Whilst it is possible that there were verbal orders that provided a contingency, if the situation had deteriorated rapidly, C Company would have been left stranded as it would not have been able to move fast enough to reach the transport. Nor was the forward demolition, 24 Battalion’s primary anti-tank defence, defended well enough by fire. Only 17 Platoon were able to see it and then they were too distant and lacked the firepower to defend it adequately and therefore its potential as an obstacle was undermined.

¹³² ‘Letter Captain D G Morrison’, cited in Burdon, p.30.

¹³³ ‘Letter, Major Reynolds, 11 January 1949’, cited in Burdon, p.31.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Burdon, p.32.

¹³⁶ ‘24 Battalion War Diary Entry, 18 April 1941’, 24 Battalion War Diary, April 1941, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/9.

These problems were compounded at brigade level where there existed unrealistic expectations about the abilities of infantry to conduct anti-tank defence. The New Zealand Division organisation was based upon British pre-war organisation that concentrated the anti-tank guns into an artillery regiment, leaving the infantry battalions with no organic anti-tank guns, only anti-tank rifles. This meant anti-tank guns were allocated to infantry battalions from higher headquarters based upon perceived need, a system that had already been recognised as somewhat deficient from the experience of the British Expeditionary Force in France.¹³⁷ In the Elasson case, such was the fear of attack on the western road, that when the two guns that had been allocated to 24 Battalion were withdrawn for another position, no redistribution of the anti-tanks guns was attempted. Indeed prior to the departure of the 2-pounder guns from 24 Battalion, Barrowclough had considered using these two guns to reinforce 25 Battalion's position if no other anti-guns became available.¹³⁸

Barrowclough appears to have fallen into a trap that many New Zealand commanders did in Greece and underestimated the abilities of AFVs and the willingness of German commanders to take difficult, yet effective lines of advance. The western branch of the road network that 25 Battalion defended, while initially the more suitable terrain for an armoured advance, was a 'much longer route' that passed through high country to reach Tirnavos, whilst the eastern route after passing through the Menexes High Pass and came out on to the Larrisa Plain and skirted the high country, was the most direct route to Tirnavos. Thus while Barrowclough was correct in placing the majority of his assets along the western road, his inexperience with armoured vehicles led him to placing an over-reliance on terrain to either deter or stop

¹³⁷ 'Lessons of Operations in Flanders, 1940', Bartholomew Committee Final Report, CAB 106/220, p.22.

¹³⁸ '6 Infantry Brigade Operational Order 2, 16 April 1941', 6 NZ Infantry Brigade War Diary, April 1941, WAI Series 1, DA 58/1/7.

an armoured attack on the eastern road and the most direct line of advance for the German forces.

Barrowclough also had a naïve idea of the potential effectiveness of infantry when it came to combating armoured vehicles. Instructions from 6 Brigade Headquarters informs the subordinate battalions to operate 'offensively against enemy tanks that penetrate the position' and 'all t[roo]ps must be told that they should engage enemy tanks with fire and tank-hunting methods'.¹³⁹ These instructions were highly optimistic considering the terrain and the weaponry the infantry had to take on tanks. 24 Battalion had a number anti-tank rifles as their primary form of protection from armoured vehicles. These weapons, while useful and able to usually penetrate tank armour during this period, were limited in the effect they could have upon a tank. The small calibre of the rifle round (0.55 inch or 13mm) meant it was difficult for the round to hit anything of significance within the tank once it had penetrated the armour to render it inoperable.¹⁴⁰ Furthermore as A and D Companies were not astride the road and the rocky terrain provided little cover, it would have been at best difficult for infantry to close sufficiently with the armour to engage them effectively with the limited means at their disposal.

In Barrowclough's defence, his ideas were not developed in a vacuum, but rather reflected current thinking in the British Army. The language of the 6 Brigade instructions suggest that the tank-hunting methods espoused by 6 Brigade Headquarters were based on anti-tank doctrine that established itself in the British Army in late 1940 after the experience of the British Expeditionary Force in France had been digested. The Bartholomew Committee that investigated the campaign had

¹³⁹ '6 Infantry Brigade Operations Instruction 1 9 April 1941' 6 NZ Infantry Brigade War Diary, April 1941, WAI Series 1, DA 58/1/7.

¹⁴⁰ Ian Hogg, *Tank Killing: Anti-Tank Warfare by Men and Machines*, London, Sidgwick and Jackson, 1996, pp.38-39.

recommended that 'an aggressive type of defence against any tanks succeed in getting inside or behind our defensive system is essential'.¹⁴¹ This was formalised in August 1940 with the publication of *Military Training Pamphlet No.42: Tank Hunting and Destruction* a pamphlet that advocated small groups of infantry 'hunt down' armour that penetrated FDLs with anti-tank rifles, grenades and improvised weapons.¹⁴²

Whilst this may have had a certain level of practicality against a small number of tanks in a position defended in depth, 24 Battalion had no significant depth in their position, there were more than a few tanks and the Battalion was exposed on terrain with little cover: 24 Battalion therefore lacked an environment in which tank-hunting tactics would be effective. Thus while 6 Brigade had gained an appreciation of anti-tank tactics through the British Army and its pamphlet system, a lack of practical experience with armoured vehicles and capabilities through training both in New Zealand and Egypt led to the doctrine being applied without correct consideration to tactical circumstances.

All these factors however were mitigated by one element, luck. Captain D. G. Morrison, the C Company C.O., believed the armoured attack was stopped by a combination of poor light and restricted views from the tanks that made the crater look bigger than it really was. This accidental combination of factors was further aided by the artillery's ability to drive off the German infantry. Infantry support for the armour that could have complicated 24 Battalion's situation as they would not have been inhibited by the demolition and even worse, could have easily discovered the true extent of demolition. This combination of factors, rather than a series of actions undertaken by 24 Battalion, meant that the decision of 6 Brigade headquarters to place all the anti-tanks in 25 Battalion's sector, an inadequate battalion structure

¹⁴¹ 'Lessons of Operations in Flanders, 1940', Bartholomew Committee Final Report, CAB 106/220, p.22.

¹⁴² Hogg, p.237.

that was incapable of dealing with armoured vehicles and the imprudent placement of C Company in its exposed forward position did not end in disaster for 24 Battalion sub-units.

Despite the negatives that became rapidly apparent, 24 Battalion's first engagement also showed that there were potential benefits from the way the Battalion's formation had been handled. The situation at Elasson had an element of desperation in that there were concerns about the line of withdrawal being cut and the Battalion was facing armour with limited means of defence, and all this in terrain that Battalion personnel were uncomfortable about.¹⁴³ Despite these fears being present, 24 Battalion personnel and in particular, D Company, were prepared to stick to and complete their task. No panic was in evidence and this is in contrast to the many inexperienced troops throughout Europe who had a tendency to display a degree of 'tank fear' during armoured attacks. Additionally 17 Platoon showed good fire discipline during the encounter and there was no aimless firing that is sometimes born out of nervousness. While some this was due in part to the leadership of Second Lieutenant Reynolds, he could not be in all places at once and the control shown by the rest of the platoon indicates, along with the lack of tank fear, that the Battalion personnel had developed one of the important characteristics of a combat soldier, confidence in both themselves and those around them. This confidence (and probably over-confidence) demonstrates the strong group identity that the leadership of the Battalion was able to create and maintain.

With the withdrawal from Elasson, 6 Brigade moved to the Thermopylae Line in southern Greece. Initially 24 Battalion moved to a position to the rear of 5 Brigade,

¹⁴³ 'Appendix 10: Narrative, Tuesday 15 April', 6 NZ Infantry Brigade War Diary April 1941, WAI Series 1 DA 58/1/7.

but along with the rest of 6 Brigade, 24 Battalion was soon preparing a defensive position for the defence of the Thermopylae Line. As with Elasson, 6 Brigade deployed its forces with 24 Battalion on the right of the Brigade sector, 25 Battalion on the left, and 26 Battalion was in reserve.

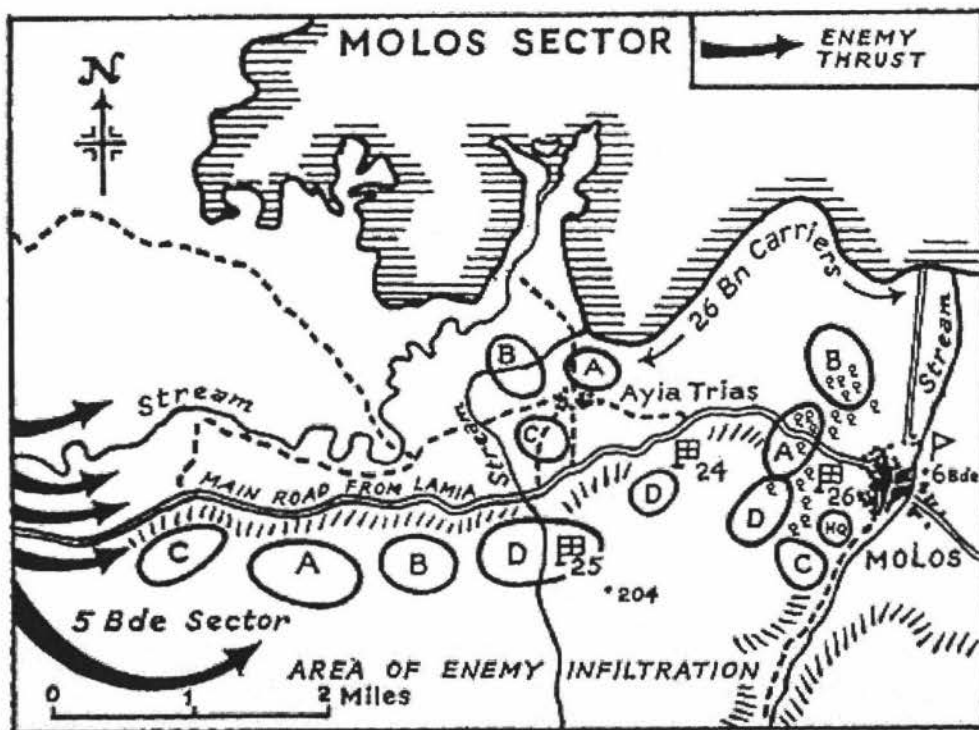
While it had initially been intended to hold the Thermopylae Line indefinitely, on 22 April the Greek Army of Epirus capitulated and at the request of the Greek authorities, the Commonwealth forces were issued with orders to withdraw from the Greek mainland. As the New Zealand Division began to perform a series of withdraws to evacuation beaches, 6 Brigade was tasked with conducting a rear-guard operation for 48 hours (nightfall on 24 April) on the Thermopylae Line. This allowed 4 Brigade to move south on the night of 22-23 April to set up another rear-guard position on the main road to Athens just south of Thebes, whilst the majority of 5 Brigade also moved south on the same night, leaving only a skeleton force known as Hart Force, to cover 5 Brigade's former position and 6 Brigade's left flank for a further 24 hours.¹⁴⁴

The defensive method was once again dictated by the nature of the terrain. The primary defensive obstacle was the Sperkhios River. But as the river had marshy flats on the side that 6 Brigade was defending, occupation adjacent to the river bank was impractical and instead the main line of defence was sited back from the river and along the edge of the high ground on the inland sections of the line. On the coastal flat, the defence line ran behind a small stream that ran parallel to the Sperkhios River. This meant however that sections of the Sperkhios was not under direct observation from 6 Brigades position's, and the river was out of range for the weapon

¹⁴⁴ 'Appendix 10: Narrative, Sunday 20 April', 6 NZ Infantry Brigade War Diary April 1941, WAI Series 1 DA 58/1/7.

systems held at battalion level. Thus the Sperkhios River was to be defended by artillery fire during the day and through the use of strong patrols during the night.¹⁴⁵

Within this scheme of defence, 24 Battalion's position revolved around the village of Ayia Trias. A Company was deployed between Ayia Trias and the coastline, B Company on the western outskirts of Ayia Trias and C Company on the left of B Company and a little to its rear and immediately north of the Lamia-Molos Road.¹⁴⁶ D Company was kept in reserve to the south of the Lamia-Molos road and located near 24 Battalion Headquarters. 22 and 23 April was spent primarily preparing the position with entrenchments and wire on the ground and in stark contrast to Elasson, was covered in scrub and pampas grass (similar to Toi-Toi) that had to be cut away to provide fields of fire.¹⁴⁷



SIXTH BRIGADE POSITIONS, 21-24 APRIL 1941

Source: Burdon, p.39

¹⁴⁵ Burdon, p.42.

¹⁴⁶ Burdon, p.40.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

German forces closed up on the New Zealand line on 22 April and set about establishing their position. Six German AFVs were first observed parked to the north at 1430 hours and by 2215 hours there was considerable movement as German vehicles moved south with their lights on.¹⁴⁸ Whilst there was some German artillery fire during the night, the patrols along the river bank met no parties of Germans and the night passed relatively quietly.¹⁴⁹ 23 April passed much as the previous had with more German transports being observed moving south towards 6 Brigade, as well as intermittent German shelling and long-range machine-gun fire interrupting the relative peace. The New Zealand artillery was also active throughout the day attacking enemy troop concentrations and conducting counter-battery fire. Despite the exchanges of fire, German forces maintained their distance and a 24 Battalion patrol from C Company between 1500 and 1635 hours again found no sign of enemy movement on the New Zealander's side of the river.¹⁵⁰

Throughout the night however German activity started to increase both on 6 Brigades front and Australian forces beyond 6 Brigade's left flank. From 2200 hours gunfire could be heard from the Australian positions in the Brallos Pass and around 0300 hours 25 Battalion was heavily shelled.¹⁵¹ Around the same time a patrol from 24 Battalion's C Company encountered what they believed was a six man patrol, who after not responding to two challenges, they were assumed to be German and opened fire on them.¹⁵² A search of the area by a patrol the following morning, failed to find

¹⁴⁸ 'Intelligence Log Entry 22 April 1941', 6 NZ Infantry Brigade War Diary, April 1941, WAI Series 1, DA 58/1/7.

¹⁴⁹ McClymont, p.376.

¹⁵⁰ 'Intelligence Log Entry 22 April 1941', 6 NZ Infantry Brigade War Diary, April 1941, WAI Series 1, DA 58/1/7.

¹⁵¹ 'Intelligence Log Entry 23 April 1941', 6 NZ Infantry Brigade War Diary, April 1941, WAI Series 1, DA 58/1/7.

¹⁵² 'Intelligence Log Entry 23 April 1941', 6 NZ Infantry Brigade War Diary, April 1941, WAI Series 1, DA 58/1/7.

any evidence of the German patrol and instead a wounded horse that obviously did not know the password was found.¹⁵³

On the morning of 24 April a patrol from 24 Battalion did have the first direct contact with the enemy for the Battalion in the Molos position. Each morning a carrier patrol was sent out by 6 Brigade at dawn to check that the Germans had not started repair work on the Alamanas Bridge over the Skephois River. The battalions of 6 Brigade took turns in conducting this patrol and on the morning of 24 April it was the turn of 24 Battalion who sent out a carrier section under the command of Lieutenant A. C. Yeoman.¹⁵⁴ The patrol found after approaching the bridge area on foot to get a better view, that 20 Germans were undertaking repairs. The carrier section then had to beat a quick retreat after Sergeant J. L. McDonald spotted a German armoured unit on the Allied side of the river heading towards the carrier patrol.¹⁵⁵ Whilst the carriers managed to avoid the German armour, they were 'hunted home' by strafing German aircraft and although one carrier was hit, there were no casualties.¹⁵⁶ The patrol's discovery resulted in artillery fire being brought down on the bridge area and while German and New Zealand artillery continued to exchange fire little else happened around 24 Battalion positions for a time.

This respite was short-lived as the resistance shown by the Australians in the Brallos Pass persuaded the Germans to divert forces towards the coastal plain that 6 Brigade was holding in the belief that it would be lightly held.¹⁵⁷ Three tanks were initially diverted from the German forces around Brallos Pass towards Molos where

¹⁵³ 'Intelligence Log Entry 23 April 1941', 6 NZ Infantry Brigade War Diary, April 1941, WAI Series 1, DA 58/1/7.

¹⁵⁴ Burdon, p.42.

¹⁵⁵ 24 Battalion War Diary Entry 24 April 1941', 24 Battalion War Diary, April 1941, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/9: 'Letter Sergeant McDonald', cited in Burdon, p.42.

¹⁵⁶ Burdon, p.42.

¹⁵⁷ McClymont, p.387.

they were observed by 25 Battalion's C Company and quickly shelled.¹⁵⁸ The German tank platoon who lost one of their number in the shelling, reported that opposition was heavier than expected and another company of tanks from the I/31 Tank Regiment was sent to the Molos area.¹⁵⁹ This tank company inadvertently met the advanced guard of the German 72 Infantry Division who also had orders to attack down the Lamia-Molos Highway.¹⁶⁰ After a brief conference by the German commanders on the spot, it was decided that the tank company should attack in conjunction with the 72 Infantry Division.¹⁶¹

This attack on 6 Brigade was first reported to 6 Brigade Headquarters by 24 Battalion who observed an enemy convoy moving south from Lamia at 1400 hours.¹⁶² At the same time dive-bombing and strafing on 24 and 25 Battalions, as well as the artillery positions, started. Artillery fire from 6 Field Regiment was able to stall part of the attack by forcing the majority of the German forces, including the armour, to go to ground, but 60 to 80 motorcyclists managed to continue until they were stopped by fire from C Company, 25 Battalion.¹⁶³ Whilst C Company pinned down many of the motorcyclists with small arms and mortar fire, a small number moved to the high ground on the Battalion's and 6 Brigade's left flank.¹⁶⁴

Whilst the majority of the German force remained on the ground in front of 25 Battalion's C Company, it was those conducting the flanking movement on the high ground that presented the biggest threat to 6 Brigade. These troops were able to look down and bring down fire on 6 Brigade's positions and C Company 25 Battalion in

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ 'Appendix 10: Narrative, Thursday 24 April', 6 NZ Infantry Brigade War Diary April 1941, WAI Series 1 DA 58/1/7: Puttick, p.56.

¹⁶⁰ McClymont, p.387.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² 'Intelligence Log Entry 24 April 1941', 6 NZ Infantry Brigade War Diary, April 1941, WAI Series 1, DA 58/1/7.

¹⁶³ Puttick, p.56.

¹⁶⁴ McClymont, p.388.

particular started to receive substantial enfilading fire. By 1630 hours C Company was ordered to withdraw behind A Company with 25 Battalion's problems being compounded by a renewed infantry and armoured attack along the Lamia-Molos Highway. 25 Battalion with the assistance of 4, 5 and 6 Field Regiments, as well as 2 Royal Horse Artillery, were able to halt this attack by forcing the infantry to withdraw and totally destroyed twelve of the tanks and damaging the other seven involved in the attack.¹⁶⁵ Whilst the German attacks down the highway were rebuffed, the threat posed by such attacks meant that 25 Battalion could not afford to thin their line to reinforce the left flank where the encirclement was looking increasingly dangerous.

24 Battalion's role within this engagement was largely passive. The Battalion was not attacked in any strength throughout the afternoon except by air attack. B Company 'occasionally [saw] tanks and lorried infantry', whilst C Company, the company deployed closest to the road engaged and inflicted casualties on a group of infantry.¹⁶⁶ The key role for 24 Battalion occurred in the late afternoon when Lieutenant-Colonel Shuttleworth adjusted the Battalion's line to protect the left flank after he received information that German troops were 'penetrating through 25 Bn'.¹⁶⁷ Shuttleworth on receipt of this information took steps to maintain the objectives of the defence by extending his battalion's frontage to cover the open ground between 24 Battalion and the reserve battalion, 26 Battalion, thereby screening the Lamia-Molos Highway from infiltration. Shuttleworth initiated this process by using all spare personnel with the Headquarters Company to cover the gap immediately, then he moved A Company out of its position on the right flank to relieve the composite

¹⁶⁵ McClymont, p.393.

¹⁶⁶ 'Appendix 10: Narrative, Thursday 24 April', 6 NZ Infantry Brigade War Diary April 1941, WAI Series 1 DA 58/1/7

¹⁶⁷ '24 Battalion War Diary Entry, 24 April 1941', 24 Battalion War Diary, April 1941, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/9.

headquarters force.¹⁶⁸ D Company also extended its front to the right to help with the screening process, whilst B and C Companies extended their lines to cover the gap left by the movement of A Company.¹⁶⁹

Whilst occupying the vacant ground between 26 and 25 Battalions was possibly a role better suited to 26 Battalion, the brigade reserve, Shuttleworth obviously felt, based on the information at hand, that an immediate threat existed not only to the security of 24 Battalion, but also 25 Battalion and the objectives of 6 Brigade's rear-guard action. By extending 24 Battalion's frontage, Shuttleworth felt he was undertaking the quickest and most effective action to halt any infiltration and maintain the security of 24 and 25 Battalions line of withdrawal, as well as the wider objectives of 6 Brigade. In short Shuttleworth was displaying effective leadership by being prepared to use his own initiative and resources to meet the demands of the evolving situation on the battlefield.

While 25 Battalion was able to halt the outflanking movement without assistance and thereby render 24 repositioning superfluous, the ability of 24 Battalion to be able to redeploy as it did, indicates good junior leadership within the Battalion. While the exact length of time required to complete this redeployment remains obscure, it did require the men of 24 Battalion to leave the relative safety of their prepared positions and move around an active battlefield. Although 24 Battalion was not under direct assault, the ground that they had to traverse was far from benign. The flanking movement had brought areas of 6 Brigade's positions under long-range machine-gun fire and sniper fire, while enemy artillery and aircraft were still active. To motivate men to move around, and to maintain that movement, in such an environment, requires effective leadership at section, platoon and company level so that morale is

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

maintained and that the objectives that are set out by higher command are reached in a timely fashion. Whilst the ground to be covered by the majority of 24 Battalion's companies was not large, A Company had to move approximately two kilometres, and all movement above ground did require exposure to a degree of danger. That this manoeuvre was completed, demonstrates that 24 Battalion's leadership was able to maintain morale in the Battalion at a level that still enabled battlefield tasks to be completed by a willing unit despite the deteriorating situation of the campaign.

Following the withdrawal of 6 Brigade from the Thermopylae Line, 24 Battalion spent the next four days withdrawing to the south and to an evacuation point. Additionally after two bloodless defences at Elasson and Molos, 24 Battalion started suffering losses and air attack presented the biggest problems for 24 Battalion. Whilst the presence of German aircraft began to be noticed by Battalion personnel as early as 14 April, it was not until the action at Molos that the Battalion came under direct air attack.¹⁷⁰ After Molos, air attacks became a regular event and for example, the move over the mountain range between Moloi and Tripolis was regularly interrupted by strafing German aircraft.¹⁷¹ Even concealment did not offer an ideal solution. On the morning of 26 April, 24 Battalion rested in a dried-up river bed and was adequately hidden from air observation. Unfortunately, a small Australian convoy approached the lay-up area and were spotted by German dive bombers and 24 Battalion's location was repeatedly bombed. As a consequence, four of the eight men 24 Battalion men killed during the Greek Campaign died there.¹⁷² Despite these incidents, the actual physical effects of air attack were light and the most significant effect of the air action

¹⁷⁰ Phillips and Gilmour, p.70.

¹⁷¹ Burdon, p.47.

¹⁷² Ibid, p.46.

appears to have been primarily psychological as the constant presence of German aircraft became tiresome.¹⁷³

24 Battalion reached Molaoi and was evacuated on Royal Navy ships from 0200 hours 30 April.¹⁷⁴ Before the evacuation, there was time for one more piece of misfortune to strike 24 Battalion. On 26 April, Second Lieutenant Bailey, his platoon and half of 8 Platoon, were misdirected by the military police to Kalamata.¹⁷⁵ The majority of these were captured there and only Sergeant A. J. Grimmond and seven other men escaped after they commandeered a caique and sailed to Crete.¹⁷⁶ This error by the military police accounted for the majority of the 138 captured and with only eight killed, six wounded, this mistake also accounted for the majority of total Battalion losses.¹⁷⁷

24 Battalion was fortunate throughout the Greek Campaign. Inexperience at both brigade and at battalion level affected 24 Battalion's deployments and its ability to protect itself at Elasson and it was only a combination of fortuitous circumstances that prevented 24 Battalion elements from being overrun and cut-off by armour. Fortune also smiled on 24 Battalion at Molos with the German attack falling on 25 Battalion instead of 24 Battalion. This is reflected in the casualties that 24 Battalion suffered, with the majority being captured because of human error rather than enemy action. Furthermore as the losses were not disastrously high, this enabled 24 Battalion the opportunity to overcome some of its inexperience by learning lessons under combat

¹⁷³ Ibid, p.47.

¹⁷⁴ '24 Battalion War Diary Entry, 29 April 1941', 24 Battalion War Diary, April 1941, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/9.

¹⁷⁵ '24 Battalion War Diary Entry, 26 April 1941', 24 Battalion War Diary, April 1941, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/9.

¹⁷⁶ Burdon, p.48.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, p.53.

conditions, without suffering the disruption that arises from substantial casualties in the Battalion fighting elements.

Whilst the inexperience led to a mishandling of the method that 24 Battalion used at Elasson, this was in part mitigated by training that gave the men of 24 Battalion self-belief. This self-belief allowed the sub-elements to respond well to situations as they developed. Captain Morrison realised the difficulties that C Company faced on Stony Ridge and took prudent action to rectify the situation. At the same time A and D Companies stuck to their task despite their lack of a credible defence against tanks. Furthermore their ability to stick to the task enabled 24 Battalion to achieve their objective, whilst at the same time allowing all elements of the Battalion to withdraw to safety without substantial difficulty. Nor was this a one off event and 24 Battalion as a whole responded well to the need to carry out a complicated redeployment manoeuvre while their positions were under fire at Molos.

This disparity in results demonstrates that experience was more crucial at higher levels of responsibility in the battalion environment. This is not surprising as Shuttleworth appears not to have had any experience prior to the outbreak in manoeuvring large bodies of troops, and he would have received few opportunities during the training.¹⁷⁸ Conversely for those at the bottom of the structure, their individual influence was less and therefore their inexperience was less critical. More important at this level was the ability to work as a team and to undertake the orders given to them. While experience was useful in such situations because it can for example, allow a body of troops to traverse ground more effectively, self-belief that the ground can be traversed in the first place is of more importance. Training and the building of *esprit de corps* is crucial to that as it builds up the confidence of the

¹⁷⁸ 'Personal File, C Shuttleworth', Base Records.

individual, and they believe that the tasks given to them are possible. Lieutenant Colonel Shuttleworth, as well as the wider Battalion leadership, must be given credit for utilising 24 Battalion's formation period reasonably well.

Rebirth and Resurrection

By the time 24 Battalion reached the start line for Operation *Lightfoot*, as the opening operation of Second El Alamein was known, it had been transformed since its days in Greece. 24 Battalion had suffered such substantial losses at both Sidi Rezegh and at El Mreir and as a consequence the Battalion had to be rebuilt almost from scratch. The rebuilding after the defeat at El Mreir was particularly problematical because not only was there a short period of time before 24 Battalion had to take its place in the line with the rest of 2 (NZ) Division for Operation *Lightfoot*, but some of the reinforcements that 24 Battalion received both lacked skills and experience in even the basics of infantry work.

24 Battalion was however able to rise above these difficulties. The appointment of Lieutenant-General Bernard Law Montgomery to command the Eighth Army brought fresh attitudes to training and 24 Battalion was able to utilise the subsequent 2 (NZ) Division training programme to resurrect itself from a hollow shell into an effective fighting organization in a short period of time with the specific skills it needed for Operation *Lightfoot*. However while training was again used to overcome the limited experience of the Battalion, the short training time meant that not all the Battalion's problems could be overcome and in particular cohesion amongst the senior leadership was lacking in 24 Battalion at the time of Operation *Lightfoot*.

With the end of the campaign in Greece, 24 Battalion, along with the rest of 6 Brigade, returned to North Africa to rest and continue building its military knowledge

through training. This was a blessing for 24 Battalion because it had not only escaped the Greek Campaign with relatively light casualties, it had also avoided the fighting on Crete that left many of the other New Zealand Division's units badly depleted. 24 Battalion was therefore able to keep what experience it had acquired intact, whilst at the same time reinforce established skills and develop new skills in a 'training syllabus [that] gradually expanded, [and took] on a more realistic form' despite having to shoulder its share of rear echelon duties.¹⁷⁹ Thus by the time that 24 Battalion was next deployed into combat, Operation *Crusader*, the Battalion was a rapidly maturing and confident unit.

This establishing pattern of alternating periods of combat and training that allowed 24 Battalion to build skills and experience without suffering the dislocation of heavy casualties came to an abrupt end in November 1941 during Operation *Crusader*. After a number of days of successful operations, 24 and 26 Battalions absorbed the brunt of a German infantry and armoured counter-attack on the Sidi Rezegh ridge on 30 November and the attack overran 24 Battalion and inflicted heavy losses. The Battalion senior leadership was wiped out with Lieutenant Colonel Shuttleworth captured, whilst all four infantry company commanders, the Battalion Adjutant and the Intelligence Officer, were all killed, captured, or wounded.¹⁸⁰ Total losses for 24 Battalion during Operation *Crusader* amounted to 23 officers and 500 men, killed, wounded or taken prisoner.¹⁸¹ Only three officers and 83 other ranks returned from up the 'Blue [the desert]' after the 30 November disaster, and they were joined by the six officers and 80 other ranks of 24 Battalion's LOB component.¹⁸² Timing is everything and fortunately 24 Battalion had ample opportunity to recover from this

¹⁷⁹ Burdon, pp.54-55.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, pp.87-89.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, p.89.

¹⁸² Ibid, p.57, 88.

setback. Not only was there sufficient reinforcements in the 2NZEF replacement system to make good 24 Battalion's losses, the Battalion also had five months of training, amongst other duties, around Cairo, before moving to the military backwater of Syria for more training and garrison duty.¹⁸³

On 19 June, 24 Battalion left Syria as the New Zealand Division redeployed to Egypt in response to the retreat from the Gazala, to the El Alamein Line. 24 Battalion moved into forward positions on 30 June and despite holding a number of positions in the frontline over the next three weeks, 24 Battalion's operations were restricted to patrols and raids until 24 Battalion took part in the attack on El Mreir Depression on 21 July.¹⁸⁴ For 24 Battalion the night attack on El Mreir Depression ended in much the same way as the defence of Sidi Rezegh ridgeline did, armoured counter-attack and heavy casualties. While the attack on El Mreir reached the objective, the heavy resistance over the last 2000 yards of the advance meant that of the three full rifle companies that had left the start line, only 70 to 80 riflemen and some support weapons made it to the objective.¹⁸⁵ At 0500 hours things took a decided turn for the worse when a German armoured attack started. By daylight effective resistance was fading with the anti-tank guns silenced and the British armoured support that had been promised, failing to materialise. 24 Battalion was again overrun, and while some tried to escape, they had to cover two miles of rising ground in daylight and there was, as Burdon put it, 'little chance of reaching safety.'¹⁸⁶

In essence, 24 Battalion was returned to the state it had been in after Operation *Crusader*. While figures for how many men crossed the start line vary, Brigadier George Clifton, the 6 Brigade commander put the scale of the losses in sharp context

¹⁸³ Matthew Wright, *Freyberg's War: The Man, the Legend and Reality*, Albany, Penguin, 2005, p.106.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid*, p.107, pp.109-112.

¹⁸⁵ Don Brash, *The Battle of El Mreir and Events Leading up to it*, Unpublished, p.8: Burdon, pp.113-114.

¹⁸⁶ Burdon, p.117.

when he noted that only eleven 24 Battalion men returned from El Mreir unwounded.¹⁸⁷ In total 24 Battalion lost 280 personnel, 20 officers and 260 from the ranks, with the majority of the men, 170, being captured, while 53 were killed and 57 wounded.¹⁸⁸

24 Battalion's leadership was also badly disrupted due to casualties. Two of the three company commanders, Major A. E. Beyer and Captain J. Conolly were wounded, while the Battalion C. O., Lieutenant Colonel A. W. Greville, and the third company commander, Captain J. Beesley were killed.¹⁸⁹ Additionally, B Company was left with no officers after Second Lieutenant Don Brash, the only officer left in the Company by 0200 hours, was captured during the morning.¹⁹⁰

2 NZEF's general reinforcement situation made replacement of the losses at El Mreir more problematical than they had been after Operation *Crusader*. After the departure of the 7th Reinforcement to the Middle East on 15 September 1941, fifteen months elapsed before the 8th Reinforcement departed New Zealand because the outbreak of war with Japan had caused the New Zealand Government to maintain all available trained personnel in New Zealand in case of invasion.¹⁹¹ The lack of replacements sent to the Middle East obviously caused a strain on 2 NZEF's ability to replace losses, particularly when a number of units in 2 (NZ) Division were also badly depleted from the fighting between July and September.

The reinforcement problem was further compounded by the state of those personnel who remained on strength. While 24 Battalion had a LOB component at Maadi Camp, their health was in a poor state. It had been decided at the beginning of July that each 2 (NZ) Division infantry battalion should send one of their infantry

¹⁸⁷ Clifton, p.200.

¹⁸⁸ Burdon, p.118.

¹⁸⁹ Phillips and Gilmour, p.147.

¹⁹⁰ Brash, p.7.

¹⁹¹ Cooke, p.311.

companies to Maadi as LOB troops because there was insufficient artillery in the Division to adequately support all the infantry.¹⁹² In 24 Battalion's case, A Company became the LOB element and upon reaching Maadi, 75 per cent of the company were sent to hospital with malaria as a result of being stationed at a malaria infested area in Syria.¹⁹³ Malaria was not confined to just A Company and it was an ongoing problem. Jim Hunt succumbed to it during the advance on the El Mreir Depression, while Roger Smith did not fall ill until mid-September.¹⁹⁴ Thus while these men would return from hospital to the Battalion, not all returned before Operation *Lightfoot* and malaria along with outbreak of jaundice, further disrupted 24 Battalion's already perilous manpower state.

Due to this shortfall in fit personnel, and because of the lack of reinforcement personnel available, 24 Battalion was sent back to Maadi Camp where it joined 19 and 20 Battalions who were also trying to rebuild their strength. The first reinforcement to arrive for 24 Battalion was the former Battalion C.O. of 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel F. J. Gwilliam, who took command of 24 Battalion on 26 July.¹⁹⁵ However as the rebuilding of 24 Battalion was not to start immediately, Gwilliam was the last reinforcement for some time and the Battalion was left one step short of disbandment. In early August 135 personnel of 24 Battalion were posted to 9 Training Brigade and only Battalion Headquarters and Headquarters Company remained near establishment levels, while the infantry companies were reduced to an average size of seven men, primarily officers and NCOs.¹⁹⁶

For those who remained in the Battalion, this made 'life pretty dull' although food and the abundance of water did mean that despite the boredom, there was still a

¹⁹² Burdon, p.108.

¹⁹³ 'J A Fenton to 'Jean', letter, 20 July 1942' D Fenton Private Collection: Smith, p.22.

¹⁹⁴ Hunt, *Episodes*, p.26: Smith, p.21.

¹⁹⁵ Burdon, p.119.

¹⁹⁶ Burdon, p.119: Letter from WOII J A Fenton to Jean, 23 August 1942.

certain appreciation amongst those in Battalion lines about the benefits of this lifestyle after being up the Blue.¹⁹⁷ There was also little opportunity to undertake training during August. The lack of functioning rifle companies meant that only 'fatigues, lectures, and purely specialist training' was conducted, as well as the running of a Battalion NCOs school.¹⁹⁸

This situation started to turn around in mid-September. The men who had been posted to 9 Training Brigade returned and they were joined by some of the lightly wounded men from El Mreir, including the B Company C. O., Captain Conolly.¹⁹⁹ Additionally these men were joined by reinforcements found in the wider 2NZEF community. 18 Battalion, who had been serving with 6 Brigade for the last two months, returned to Maadi Camp, and along with other 4 Brigade battalions, was designated for conversion into an armoured regiment. As a consequence of this reorganisation, 4 Brigade was ordered to provide a draft of 600 men from its battalions to reinforce 5 and 6 Brigades.²⁰⁰ Thus when it had been decided that during the initial conversion period that 18 Battalion only required 350 men, the surplus 209 men, as well as 18 Battalion's equipment, was sent to 24 Battalion.²⁰¹

For 24 Battalion the down side in this reinforcement process was the unfit nature of many of these men. Many of the wounded and medically unfit were returned to 24 Battalion earlier than they would have under normal practice and while the returnees would have filled out the Battalion establishment, the poor medical condition of many would have excluded them from full battalion life and would have therefore been quite disruptive to training. The 18 Battalion men were in little better condition. Merv Crockett believed that most, including himself, were unfit when they arrived at

¹⁹⁷ 'J A Fenton to 'Jean', letter, 2 September 1942, D Fenton Private Collection.

¹⁹⁸ 'J A Fenton to 'Jean', letter, 2 September 1942', D Fenton Private Collection: Burdon, p.119.

¹⁹⁹ Burdon, p.120.

²⁰⁰ Walker, p.190.

²⁰¹ Dawson, p.328, 331.

24 Battalion because they only had a few days of rest before being posted to 24 Battalion and this was not enough time to get over the dysentery and the desert sores that most had acquired from the extended stay in the desert.²⁰²

Nor were the 18 Battalion men necessarily hugely experienced men. The selection of who stayed with 18 Battalion and who went to 24 Battalion was based 'purely on length of service with [18] Battalion', the old hands stayed in 18 Armoured Regiment, while the newer arrivals went to 24 Battalion.²⁰³ Thus while gratefully accepting these much needed reinforcements with some combat experience at least, as we will see 24 Battalion was potentially left with an influx of men who had limited military knowledge.

The other significant source of reinforcements was Maadi Camp where the base units were 'combed out' for reinforcement for the combat units.²⁰⁴ Opinions differ about the quality of these troops. Major-General W. G. Stevens, the head of 2 NZEF administration, mounted a defence of base personnel against charges of dodging combat by stating that only four per cent of base personnel had not seen some form of field service and those that had not seen such service, were 'nearly all due to medical unfitness'.²⁰⁵ But as Steven's concedes, there were three groups of men in the base units who 'laid themselves open to criticism; those who dodged field service altogether, those who drifted back from the field for 'unworthy' reasons, and finally, those who were unwanted in the field'.²⁰⁶

It would seem, even when allowing for the bias that frontline units had against base personnel, that a good proportion of these unmotivated and incapable soldiers

²⁰² Merv Crockett, *Infantryman*, Audio Tape, 2005.

²⁰³ Dawson, p.328.

²⁰⁴ Burdon, p.120: Lieutenant-Colonel J L Scoullar, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45: Battle for Egypt: The Summer of 1942*, Wellington, War History Branch, Internal Affairs, 1955, p.374.

²⁰⁵ Stevens, p.53, 182.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid*, p.182.

reached the infantry battalions as reinforcements. Many of those sent forward where in Scoullar's opinion, 'were not suitable for infantry work', whilst Walker lamented that many had spent so long as 'clerks, orderlies or drivers, [they] had forgotten any infantry training they might have received'.²⁰⁷ Major E. R. Andrews recalled of his 24 Battalion company part way through the Battle of El Alamein,

'I might mention that our Coys [Companies] of 50-60 men, included many grade 2, also many just back from hospital from jaundice and desert sores, who would normally have gone to Depot. In the Coy of which I was 2 i/c [second in command], we actually had one man who was quite simple yet he had to go in. He was killed.'²⁰⁸

18 Battalion had similar problems. Brigadier Clifton was aware of one section who had six men from Maadi who had never handled Brens or grenades.²⁰⁹ Furthermore, based on the policy of who was posted from 18 Battalion to 24 Battalion, it is highly likely these men ended up in 24 Battalion.

Thus while 24 Battalion was brought up to strength with 29 officers and 619 other ranks, there was some serious deficiencies in skill and experience levels and there was a need for serious remedial action through training. Instead 24 Battalion had five weeks of training before it took part in Operation *Lightfoot*. However 24 Battalion was fortunate that a new broom was sweeping through the Eighth Army creating a set of conditions where 2 (NZ) Division training could be tailored specifically for the roles they were to undertake during Operation *Lightfoot*.

The appointment of Lieutenant General Montgomery to take command of the Eighth Army was the catalyst for changes within the Eighth Army. While Montgomery is a controversial historical figure, his planning provided various formations in the Eighth Army with a clear framework and vision for what their role

²⁰⁷ Scoullar, p.374: Ronald Walker, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45: Alam Halfa and Alamein*, Wellington, War History Branch, Internal Affairs, 1967, p.52.

²⁰⁸ 'Major E R Andrews Response to Questionnaire, Question 9', Correspondence of Major-General Kippenberger 1947-1955, WAI Series 2, 6.

²⁰⁹ 'Comments by Brigadier G Clifton DSO, MC, on Volume VII, attached to letter, Major-General Kippenberger to Lieutenant-Colonel Scoullar, 8 May 1953', Correspondence of Major-General Kippenberger, 1947-1955, WAI Series 2, 6.

was in Operation *Lightfoot*. This combined with Montgomery's belief that training was essential to the success of a plan, and his willingness to forgo a broad military training syllabus so training could be concentrated on skills required in Operation *Lightfoot*, meant that 24 Battalion could use the five weeks between being reinforced and Operation *Lightfoot* to truncate a standard training programme in an attempt to sufficiently develop skills required for upcoming operations.²¹⁰

The desire by Montgomery to utilise time for training was eagerly ceased upon by Lieutenant-General Bernard Freyberg who had already established a reputation for himself as a good military trainer.²¹¹ 2 (NZ) Division deployed to a section of desert known as Swordfish area and a rigorous training schedule was implemented. As usual, route marching was an important feature of training because Montgomery expressed concerns about the fitness of the Eighth Army. Montgomery was aware that the Eighth Army 'seldom move anywhere on foot and [they] have led a static life for many weeks....it is essential to make our officers and men really fit'.²¹² Thus in 24 Battalion the process of getting all ranks 'really fit' was carried out with a 'drastic thoroughness' and every day in the first half of October for example, 24 Battalion, when they were not on brigade exercises, undertook a route march of varying lengths up to fifteen miles every day.²¹³ Sport also played a significant part in building fitness. Rugby, soccer and hockey had 'fields' marked out for each sport and as Merv Crockett remembered, playing a game a day for three weeks got 'one fit and raring to go'.²¹⁴

²¹⁰ Niall Barr, *Pendulum of War: The Three Battles of El Alamein*, London, Jonathon Cape, 2004, pp.xxxviii-xxxix, 255-256; Stephen Bungay, *Alamein*, London, Aurum Press, 2002, p.144; Douglas Porch, *Hitler's Mediterranean Gamble*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2004, pp.293-294.

²¹¹ Peter Bates, *Dance of War: The Story of the Battle of Egypt*, London, Leo Cooper Pen and Sword Books, 1992, pp.29-30.

²¹² 'General plan of Eighth Army, War Diary, HQ 2 NZ Division', cited in Burdon, p.121.

²¹³ '24 Battalion War Diary, 1-20 October 1942', War Diary 24 Battalion, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/27: Burdon, p.121.

²¹⁴ Merv Crockett, 'Infantryman'.

While fitness was important, it was obviously only one aspect of the sub-unit training carried out in 24 Battalion. Small arms training and range work, layout of section posts in defence, companies advancing from both static and from the line of march, tank hunting and siting of support weapons were all part of the training.²¹⁵ Additionally methods for dealing with mines and booby traps, as well as navigation were all aspects of training that were emphasised as they were considered crucial skills for Operation *Lightfoot*.²¹⁶

The centre piece of 24 Battalion training was however its participation in brigade and divisional exercises and the ground that these exercises were conducted on. Because the planning framework for Operation *Lightfoot* was set out early, an area of desert that approximated, in terms of topography and distance, the ground that 2 (NZ) Division would advance across during the opening night of Operation *Lightfoot* to reach its objective, Miteiraya Ridge, was found and utilised for these exercises.²¹⁷ Additionally, to further add to the realism of the training, all known enemy positions, minefields and wire were then replicated with 'token weapon pits, wire and unfused mines' to give the general layout of the battlefield.²¹⁸

Additionally, the method employed by 6 Brigade during the exercise was the same utilised during Operation *Lightfoot*.²¹⁹ The first exercise was on the night of 22/23 September when 6 Brigade conducted a night attack with 24 Battalion moving to 6 Brigade's first objective, at which point, 25 and 26 Battalions then passed through 24 Battalion and advanced on to the final brigade objective.²²⁰ 6 Brigade repeated this

²¹⁵ 'Appendix 3(a), Training Directive 1-3 October 1942', War Diary 24 Battalion, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/27: 'Appendix 3(a), 24 Battalion Training Syllabus 5-13 October 1942', War Diary 24 Battalion, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/27.

²¹⁶ Phillips and Gilmour, p.157.

²¹⁷ Walker, p.192.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Burdon, p.121: Walker, p.192.

²²⁰ Burdon, p.121: Walker, pp.192-193

exercise, along with an approach march, as part of a divisional exercise on 24 September.²²¹ This exercise that began with 2 (NZ) Division moving forward to the start line over two days, 24 and 25 September, then at 2200 hours on 25 September, 2 (NZ) Division launched its 'attack' with 6 Brigade units, following a live barrage this time, replicating the method it had used during the 22/23 September exercise.²²² While there was some risk in the divisional exercise, with a number of artillery 'shorts' falling amongst the 24 Battalion ranks, no one was wounded in 24 Battalion and lessons were learned both in 24 Battalion and at the higher levels of command. At divisional level lessons learnt included the need for greater traffic control, better concealment from observation and better coordination between 9 Armoured Brigade and 2 (NZ) Division units, as well as need for effective transference of information down the chain of command.²²³ For 24 Battalion these exercises were a dress rehearsal and the men were able to practice skills they would need during *Lightfoot*. The infantry learned how to 'lean' into the rear of an artillery barrage, they gained an impression of how the battlefield topography and defences were laid out and how it would impact on their movements, the sappers practiced lifting minefields, whilst support platoons discovered the chaos that was created by traffic moving through the gaps in the minefields in the wake of the advance. In essence individuals were able to gain some understanding of their role and their place in the upcoming operation although this point should not be overstressed because as the majority in 2 (NZ) Division were not yet aware, for security reasons, of the close relationship between this exercise and future operations.²²⁴

²²¹ Burdon, p.121: Walker, p.192.

²²² Walker, pp.193-194.

²²³ Walker, pp.193-194.

²²⁴ Ibid, p.194.

The first half of October was filled with sub-unit training and there was a temporary break from brigade exercises until 6 October. The brigade exercise on 6 and 7 October practiced day and night brigade movements in a desert formation, as well as the 'rapid occupation of a A/Tk [anti-tank] gun line holding a flanking position' as 6 Brigade trained for mobile operations.²²⁵ The next 6 Brigade exercise was infantry and armour attack on 12 October and this exercise was primarily designed to increase cooperation between armour and infantry formations at all levels after the divisional exercise had demonstrated that successful cooperation was conditional on both arms being familiar with each others methods, language and limitations.²²⁶

On 13 October 6 Brigade's part in the divisional exercise was repeated.²²⁷ This time however the exercise, while conducted as if it was a night operation, was undertaken during daylight so that all personnel could see the details of the operation and therefore gain a greater appreciation of their role with the wider operation.²²⁸ Additionally various 'innovations and alterations' to the attack plans were incorporated into the exercise to try and overcome the deficiencies that had been exposed in the divisional exercise.²²⁹ At the conclusion of this exercise, 24 Battalion moved to the coast where company training competed with swimming in the lead up to Operation *Lightfoot*.²³⁰

By the end of this training period, 24 Battalion had been reshaped into a fighting organisation capable of taking its place in the line. As Harper stated, 'at long last the

²²⁵ '24 Battalion War Diary, 6-7 October 1942', War Diary 24 Battalion, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/27: 'Appendix 3(a), 24 Battalion Training Syllabus, 5-13 October 1942', War Diary 24 Battalion, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/27.

²²⁶ Walker, p.194.

²²⁷ '24 Battalion War Diary, 12-13 October 1942', War Diary 24 Battalion, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/27.

²²⁸ '24 Battalion War Diary, 13 October 1942', War Diary 24 Battalion, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/27: Puttick, p.222: Walker, p.220.

²²⁹ Walker, p.220,

²³⁰ Burdon, p.124.

New Zealand Division and Eighth Army were fully tailoring their training exercises to the plan of attack' and because of this, individuals at all levels in 24 Battalion should have gained a good knowledge of their place in the wider plan, as well as what was expected of them personally.²³¹ Additionally the emphasis on developing skills that were applicable for Operation *Lightfoot* and the subsequent exploitation meant that even those reinforcements that arrived poorly trained must have developed into at least adequate soldiers who were capable of fulfilling their role in *Lightfoot*. Additionally morale was boosted by the arrival of new equipment such as Sherman tanks and 6-pounder anti-tank guns that gave the impression of a material ascendancy being built up by Commonwealth forces, and the news that 4 Brigade was to convert to an armoured brigade was an event that resonated well throughout 2 (NZ) Division.²³² Collectively these events combined to reinstate 24 Battalion as a 'well trained unit' in the opinion of Phillips and Gilmour.²³³

At 2000 hours on 21 October, 24 Battalion started its march into the forward areas in preparation for Operation *Lightfoot*. The first move to Alam el Onsol, a position approximately 10 miles behind the front line, was undertaken in trucks.²³⁴ The following day, all troops had to lay up in slit trenches covered by ground sheets, while camouflage nets were used on all vehicles to try and avoid detection from the air.²³⁵ This process was repeated the following night, but this time 6 Brigade faced a 'gruelling' six march that covered fourteen miles whilst the trucks transporting 5 Brigade passed them throwing up clouds of dust and 'uncomplimentary remarks'.²³⁶

²³¹ Glyn Harper, *Kippenberger An Inspired New Zealand Commander*, Auckland, Harper Collins, 1997, p.181

²³² 'Censor Report, Summary of Weekly Report W/Ending, 19 Oct 1942', WAI Series 1, 302/1/10, NZ Censor Section War Diary, October 1942: Burdon, p.122: Phillips and Gilmour, p.152.

²³³ Phillips and Gilmour, p.152.

²³⁴ '24 Battalion War Diary, 21 October 1942', War Diary 24 Battalion, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/27.

²³⁵ '24 NZ Bn Movement Order No.4, 20 October 1942', War Diary 24 Battalion, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/27: Burdon, p.124.

²³⁶ Burdon, p.124: Walker, p.222.

By the end of the march 24 Battalion was approximately three-quarters of a mile behind their start line.²³⁷

October 23 was spent much the same as the previous day had been. 24 Battalion personnel again spent the day hiding in slit trenches with ground sheets for cover and while the Battalion's official history notes that the heat was again stifling under the ground sheets, the time to rest and recover from the previous nights march was welcomed.²³⁸ There was also time between when the men could emerge from their slit trenches at dusk, and when 24 Battalion departed for the start line at 2100 hours, for a meal and a degree of mental preparation because of the insistence of the 9 (Australian) Division commander, Major-General Alan Moreshead that Operation *Lightfoot* should start as late as possible for this very reason.²³⁹

The defences that XXX Corps faced on the opening night of Operation Lightfoot were extensive and in depth. The first layer of defences consisted of wire and mines laid in depths between 500 and 1000 yards.²⁴⁰ This set of obstacles was defended by a light screen of section outposts that were intended to delay, rather than hold, any attack and provide a warning for the main line of resistance.²⁴¹ It was 24 Battalion's role to breach this line and pave the way for 25 and 26 Battalion to attack the subsequent line of defences. The second line of defences, depending on topography, started with a second belt of mines one to two kilometres behind the initial line of mines.²⁴² Behind the second belt of mines, which was around two kilometres wide, lay the main line of resistance.²⁴³

²³⁷ Burdon, p.124.

²³⁸ Burdon, p.125.

²³⁹ Mark Johnston and Peter Stanley, *Alamein: The Australian Story*, South Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 2002, p.156.

²⁴⁰ Richard Doherty, *The Sound of History: El Alamein 1942*, Stapehurst, 2002, p.68.

²⁴¹ Bungay, p.157: Walker, p.197.

²⁴² Walker, p.197.

²⁴³ Bungay, p.157: Walker, p.197.

The plan for 24 Battalion during the opening night of Operation *Lightfoot* was relatively straight forward. The advance saw A Company on the right, B Company on the left and C Company was to follow the two leading companies and was to remain in reserve as it advance 'astride the BN [Battalion] axis'.²⁴⁴ The rate of advance was to be 100 yards every two minutes until the artillery barrage was reached, and then it was to be 100 yards every three minutes thereafter.²⁴⁵ Furthermore the key to the advance was for 'the...Units [sic] and sub-units will make every effort to keep up with the arty barrage even though flanking units may fail to do so.'²⁴⁶ To that end while it was desirable, it was not necessary for 24 Battalion to eliminate all points of enemy resistance as C and D Companies 28 (Maori) Battalion were tasked to follow in 24 Battalion's wake and eliminate any strong points that were bypassed. Once 24 Battalion had reached their objective, the Battalion was to reorganise, dig-in and wait for 25 and 26 Battalions to move through 24 Battalion positions and attack towards 6 Brigade's final objective.²⁴⁷

At 2100 hours 24 Battalion moved out of the lay up area and moved up to the start line, a piece of desert marked with lights and white tape in front of the FDLs.²⁴⁸ At 2130 hours, 24 Battalion moved over the start line and towards their objective.²⁴⁹ The positioning of the start line was 1800 yards behind the opening line of the creeping barrage and with the initial rate of advance being 100 yards every two minutes, it was planned that 24 Battalion would be approximately 500 yards short of this barrage line when the shellfire commenced at 2200 hours.²⁵⁰ Furthermore the shellfire was to be

²⁴⁴ '24 NZ Bn Operational Order No.1, 21 October 1942', War Diary 24 Battalion, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/27.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Burdon, p.125.

²⁴⁹ '6 Brigade War Diary 22 October 1942', War Diary, 6 (NZ) Infantry Brigade, WAI Series 1, DA 58/1/25: Burdon, p.125.

²⁵⁰ Walker, p.235.

maintained for 23 minutes on this opening line, giving 24 Battalion time to move in as close behind the barrage as they could.²⁵¹ The placement of the start line in front of the FDLs also defeated a known enemy defensive artillery concentration as the start line was far enough into no-man's land that the defensive concentration would fall behind the Battalion and leave them unmolested if and when the enemy artillery responded to the Eighth Army bombardment.²⁵²

The artillery programme, a significant event in its own right due to the effect it had on the senses of those who witnessed it, started at 2140 hours. The initial artillery task was counter-battery.²⁵³ This programme lasted fifteen minutes and it was designed to place a two minute barrage of around 100 4.5 or 5.5 shells, or the equivalent 25-pounder shells, on each known enemy artillery battery.²⁵⁴ At 2155 hours, the counter-battery programme was complete and the artillery in the New Zealand sector initiated the artillery programme to support the infantry advance.

For 24 Battalion the artillery programme initial effect was giving a boost to morale through its impact on the senses and by its billing as the heaviest artillery barrage so far seen in North Africa. Justin "Bill" Fenton in a letter to his future wife, Jean, described the barrage as the 'most terrific yet put up in the Middle East. There was a 25 pdr [pounder] gun every 23 yards along a six mile front.'²⁵⁵ Gilmour and Phillips described the barrage in similar terms, as well as noting that the barrage 'seemed to make the whole earth rock and quiver'.²⁵⁶ For the infantryman in 24 Battalion, this barrage was just one more indication of the material ascendancy being gained by Commonwealth forces and it was another source of confidence to them.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Crockett, *Infantryman*.

²⁵³ '24 NZ Battalion Operational Order No.1, 21 October 1942', War Diary 24 Battalion, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/27: Walker, p.254.

²⁵⁴ Walker, p.254.

²⁵⁵ 'J A Fenton to 'Jean', letter, 17 November 1942', D Fenton Private Collection.

²⁵⁶ Phillips and Gilmour, p.160.

While this barrage certainly was impressive on the senses, a lack of guns caused the New Zealand commanders to compromise on the artillery plan. Only a quarter of the 104 guns available to 2 (NZ) Division were used in a creeping barrage, whilst the rest of the guns were used to lay concentrations on known enemy strong points and these concentrations were timed to coincide with the pace of the creeping artillery barrage.²⁵⁷ This meant that while the artillery barrage was sufficiently heavy for known enemy defences, other positions would escape relatively unscathed because of insufficient weight of fire from the barrage that was more of a 'direction and pace indicator' than a full-bloodied artillery assault.²⁵⁸ This placed the onus of responsibility solely on the infantry to either clear such positions quickly or bypass them so that the advance could maintain pace with the barrage. Thus while the barrage was impressive, it was no panacea, there remained plenty of work for the infantry to do.

The first mile of the advance went smoothly for 24 Battalion because resistance was on the whole, relatively light.²⁵⁹ But as the first minefield and the outpost line was reached, enemy small-arms fire and shellfire started to increase.²⁶⁰ The pattern of resistance that faced 24 Battalion was characterised in the 24 Battalion war diary as the 'enemy appear to fight hard till tps [troops] practically on him then endeavoured to withdraw'.²⁶¹ For A Company the increased resistance did not significantly trouble their advance and the Company was evidently able to deal with enemy positions and still maintain contact with the artillery barrage until reaching the objective around

²⁵⁷ Walker, p.234.

²⁵⁸ Joseph F Cody, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45: 28 Maori Battalion*, Wellington, War History Branch, Internal Affairs, 1956, p.230.

²⁵⁹ Burdon, p.126.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ '24 Battalion War Diary, 23 October 1942', War Diary 24 Battalion, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/27.

2300 hours.²⁶² Such was the success of A Company's advance, C Company 28 (Maori) Battalion who followed A Company to conducted 'mopping up' operations, had an 'uneventful' advance up to the first objective and they only found four enemy soldiers to take prisoner.²⁶³

B Company advancing on the left was not so fortunate. The South African troops on B Company's left flank were using a different method for their advance. In essence the South African artillery programme utilised concentrations, and the infantry had move 'back and forwards across their frontage in order to cope with the enemy's strong points in their sector.'²⁶⁴ Utilising this method, the South African unit on 24 Battalion's left flank, the Cape Town Highlanders, were unable to keep pace with 24 Battalion's advance and as a consequence B Company started to receive fire from their flank.²⁶⁵ In a subconscious attempt to mitigate the risk from this fire, B Company drifted to the right, a drift that was copied by C Company.²⁶⁶ This left Battalion Headquarters, who had been advancing along the Battalion axis to the rear of C Company, and still advancing on the right line, but with no friendly troops in front it.²⁶⁷ Fortunately Battalion Headquarters noticed this drift in C Company, and a runner was sent to C Company to inform them of the problem and to get the Company back on the right line.²⁶⁸

The veer to the right also brought D Company 28 (Maori) Battalion from its 'mopping up' position, into the front row of assault troops because of the lack of troops in front of them. D Company 28 (Maori) Battalion, along with C Company once it had reverted to its original course, undertook several assaults on German posts

²⁶² Burdon, p.126: Phillips and Gilmour, p.160.

²⁶³ Cody, p.232.

²⁶⁴ 'Lieutenant-Colonel F J Gwilliam to R M Burdon, letter', cited in Burdon, p.125ff.

²⁶⁵ Burdon, pp.126-127.

²⁶⁶ Burdon, p.127: Phillips and Gilmour, p.160.

²⁶⁷ Burdon, p.127.

²⁶⁸ 'Account by Regimental Sergeant Major Cohen', cited in Burdon, p.127.

that B Company's drift to the right had missed. Additionally it is believed that D Company 28 (Maori) Battalion crossed into the South African sector to clear posts and reduce the flanking fire from that quarter as well.²⁶⁹ Thus between the C Company and D Company 28 (Maori) Battalion, the situation on 24 Battalion's flank was restored and thereby the passage forward for support units, as well as 25 and 26 Battalions who were advancing up for the second phase of the assault, was eased.

While the left flank was temporarily restored, it quickly became exposed again to the confusion that established itself on the right flank once the objective was reached. B Company's move to the right meant that A and B Companies ended up crowded on A Company's sector of the objective. While this was not a disaster in itself, the situation spiralled out of control as B Company was 'hotly denying' that they were off course and such was the feeling on this issue, Merv Crockett, who as a B Company runner was involved in the navigation process through counting paces, is still insistent to this day that B Company was in the right place.²⁷⁰ Furthermore the navigation confusion was complicated by poor visibility. Whilst there was a full moon, the smoke and dust generated by the bombardment had reduced visibility to around twenty yards and there was no quick way of visually confirming A and B Company's location and the stand off of who was in the wrong continued for two hours.²⁷¹

Others did not however have any difficulty in assessing who was in the wrong and the problems it caused. Lieutenant A. H. Ramsey, 14 Platoon's C.O., after searching for, and finding A and B Companies, realised that B Company was in the wrong place and as a consequence the 'whole left flank of the Bn [Battalion] was open'. Ramsey immediately dispatched a runner, Corporal A. D. Wishart, to his company commander, Captain A. C. Yeoman, to appraise him of the danger. Unfortunately,

²⁶⁹ Burdon, p.127: Cody, p.232: Walker, p.267.

²⁷⁰ Merv Crockett, Interview, 13 October 2005.

²⁷¹ Merv Crockett, 'Infantryman': Phillips and Gilmour, p.160.

Wishart was unable to find the C Company headquarters because it had moved and the poor visibility made finding the new C Company headquarters location difficult.²⁷² Ramsay also made an attempt to find Captain Yeoman, but he also became disorientated and Yeoman was not informed about the situation until around 0200 hours.²⁷³

By this time however, A and B Companies had sorted themselves out more or less by default. Both A and B Companies had crept forward off the objective to deal with enemy posts to their immediate front, but the forward creep came to an abrupt end when the barrage to support 25 and 26 Battalion's advance commenced. This barrage, 300 yards in front of 24 Battalion's objective, started to fall amongst the two companies and they withdrew back on to the objective.²⁷⁴ This forward and backwards movement appears to have been the main driver in getting the two companies into a position that left them 'reasonably well disposed'.²⁷⁵

While the confusion on the objective did not result in ill-effects, the fact that two hours was allowed to elapse before the situation was resolved and the Battalion's left flank was covered against enemy incursion is extraordinary. In part the breakdown between Captain Conolly and Captain Aked may have been a personality clash. Aked, with some at least, was an unpopular company commander. Bill Fenton who was a warrant officer in A Company at the time, and had been a NZPS soldier pre-war, wanted a transfer to get away from him. Bill in a letter wrote,

I have a new Company Commander now [Aked]. He is a school teacher and we all wish to heaven he was miles from us teaching school somewhere....This new OC [Officer Commanding] has a hell of a lot of 'Base ideas'. I am flat out putting in silly returns about works and things unheard of in a line Battalion[sic]. I hope he gets rid of his 'Base complex' soon. I will be in the rathouse along with the 2 I/C [second in command of A Company] if he

²⁷² 'Eyewitness Account, Major Ramsay', cited in Burdon, p.128.

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ '24 NZ Battalion Operation Order No.1 21 October 1942', War Diary 24 Battalion, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/27: '6 Brigade War Diary, 24 October 1942', War Diary, 6 NZ Infantry Brigade WAI Series 1, DA 58/1/25: Burdon, p.128.

²⁷⁵ Phillips and Gilmour, p.160.

doesn't.²⁷⁶

With Aked being an unpopular officer, and with B Company believing that they were following the right course, it is not difficult to surmise that hubris in part led Conolly to 'hotly deny' that they were in the wrong.

The move of the C Company headquarters also compounded the issue of the exposed flank for 24 Battalion. In an age where intra-company communications were still based primarily on face to face contact, the movement of headquarters has the potential to multiply the confusion that exists on any battlefield because finding the location of a new headquarters site in the poor visibility and confusion of an active battlefield can be, unsurprisingly, difficult. This in turn can interrupt the flow of information up and down the chain of command and the decision making process can become unnecessarily elongated. In the case of C Company, the move of the headquarters did cause a temporary loss of communication and it prevented the Company reacting to the danger presented on the Battalion's left flank in a timely manner and it therefore compounded the situation.

Once 25 and 26 Battalions had passed through 24 Battalion, life became relatively uneventful for 24 Battalion until 30 October. C Company's positions were found to be amongst a minefield and in an example of how even small amounts of combat exposure can breed poor habits, the minefield did not seem to worry 24 Battalion initially because the minefields were predominately anti-tank mines. Lieutenant Ramsay noted that precautions until the area was cleared by sappers, were only really taken after a corporal from the carrier platoon blew himself up approximately a 100 yards in front of Captain Yeoman who was on a reconnaissance walk around the company area.²⁷⁷ This was, along with some German air activity and light shelling,

²⁷⁶ 'J A Fenton to 'Jean', letter, 6 June 1942', D Fenton Private Collection.

²⁷⁷ Burdon, p.129; Phillips and Gilmour, p160.

was the most significant threat to 24 Battalion as it was on the reverse slope of Miteiriya Ridge and there was therefore no direct fire on the position.²⁷⁸

On 27 October 24 Battalion was pulled out of the line and the Battalion was rested until 30 October when it relieved a battalion of Cameron Highlanders near Tell el Eisa. The position that was taken over was an uncomfortable one because it was on a forward slope and overlooked by German positions on a ridgeline opposite.²⁷⁹ Furthermore the area around German lines 'was littered with partially destroyed tanks, trucks, or carriers' that were 'infested' with snipers and machine-guns and it was 'dangerous to show so much as a finger'.²⁸⁰

This situation had caused heavy casualties on the Cameron Battalion, but 24 Battalion used aggressiveness and experience to improve their situation. The slit trenches that 24 Battalion inherited were too shallow and deepening them became a matter of 'urgent priority' because it is believed that these shallow trenches were 'largely responsible' for the losses sustained by the Camerons.²⁸¹ Additionally, while the Cameron Battalion had orders to fire only at 'observed targets', Captain Aked whose company was the most forward and exposed, instituted a policy of meeting fire with fire.²⁸² By the time 24 Battalion was withdrawn from this position on the night of 2/3 November, A Company had only suffered two casualties and morale was high because in the opinion of Aked, 'being able to hit back keeps morale high'.²⁸³

Despite the positives, Major Aked again featured in a controversial incident. Because the battalion that 24 Battalion had relieved had four companies, it was

²⁷⁸ '24 Battalion War Diary, 24-27 October 1942', War Diary 24 Battalion, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/27.

²⁷⁹ Burdon, p.132.

²⁸⁰ Ibid, p.132, 135.

²⁸¹ Burdon, p.132: Phillips and Gilmour, p.165.

²⁸² 'Temporary Lieutenant-Colonel E W Aked, Response to Questionnaire, Question No.2', Correspondence of Major-General Kippenberger 1947-1955, WAI Series 2, 6.

²⁸³ Ibid.

decided in 24 Battalion that the most efficient way to organise the defence was to create a composite company under Captain R. J. H. Seal by removing a platoon from each of the existing companies.²⁸⁴ After the defensive position had been established, Aked was with his company, he noticed movement to the front and to the right of A Company's position.²⁸⁵ Aked called upon two mortars under his command to put some shells into the area and when two men in 'grey shorts' starting running from the area, the mortars gave them a 'bit more hurry up'.²⁸⁶ It transpired however that these two men were from Captain Seal's composite company and while Aked received a 'mad' phone call from Captain Seal, this blue on blue incident was a result of a communication failure and a lack of familiarity between the various Battalion elements about each others methods.²⁸⁷ In essence it was another example of a lack of cohesion amongst senior 24 Battalion commanders.

After leaving the Tell el Eisa position, 24 Battalion immediately moved into another section of line when it relieved the 6 Battalion Durham Light Infantry at around 0500 hours on 3 November. By this juncture however, the fighting at El Alamein was all but over. The German and Italian withdrawal to the west had begun and on 4 November at 1200 hours, 24 Battalion was relieved from this position and once the Battalion had marched back to the brigade area, they mounted trucks in preparation for mobile operations. As the light faded out of the day, 24 Battalion bumped its way across the desert in a divisional convoy heading south-west in pursuit of the retreating enemy forces.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁴ Burdon, p.131.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ 'Eyewitness Account, Captain Aked', cited in Burdon, p.132.

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

²⁸⁸ '24 Battalion War Diary, 4 November 1942', War Diary 24 Battalion, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/28.

24 Battalion preformed creditably during Operation *Lightfoot* and its immediate aftermath. A Company in particular preformed well. The advance of A Company on 24 Battalion's right flank during the opening night of Operation *Lightfoot* was a well executed operation that meet all of its objectives. A Company also led an aggressive defence in the Battalion's defensive position to the west of Tell el Eisa, a defence where morale was maintained despite being in a tactically disadvantageous position and where daylight movement quickly drew fire. B and C Companies in contrast, while never quite reaching the effectiveness of A Company during *Lightfoot*, still made an effective contribution to 24 Battalion's efforts and in most facets of their operations, they were not found wanting. Issues such as B Company's navigation error for example, while undesirable, was not an uncommon problem in the almost featureless desert terrain.

Where 24 Battalion did struggle was with the building of cohesion within the Battalion. All the training and all the experience in the world counts for little if the various elements of a military organisation do not work well together. Inter-company communication was an issue within 24 Battalion with both Captain Conolly and Captain Seal having misunderstandings with Captain Aked. While the indications are that Captain Aked was a difficult personality, difficult personalities are inevitable in any organisation and the situation should never have spiralled out of control the way it did. The fact that it did, suggests that Lieutenant-Colonel Gwilliam had not fully asserted his authority over his subordinates and the intensive training period was insufficient for Gwilliam to fully establish his relationship with his company commanders possibly because the training was often at sub-unit level and therefore there was minimal interaction between senior Battalion personnel.

Nevertheless, that 24 Battalion was able to re-establish itself as an effective fighting organisation after sustaining heavy casualties that eliminated both substantial amounts of experience and much of the Battalion leadership on two occasions in eight months, shows that the dislocation caused by substantial casualties is not an insurmountable barrier to rebuilding a fighting unit in a short period. It must however be recognised that while 24 Battalion had the misfortune to be in the direct path of the German assaults that did inflict the losses on them, the Battalion was not without some good luck in the rebuilding process. The period spent training in the Swordfish area prior to Operation *Lightfoot*, while relatively short, was also intensive. Additionally the nature of the exercises that traversed similar ground and utilised the method that would be employed during *Lightfoot*, allowed 24 Battalion to develop skills that would be employed during this operation. Other skills that would be necessary in a military education that aimed to produce a more rounded soldier, could be ignored in the short term with a degree of safety. This does however undermine the validity of this study to a degree as deficiencies would have been camouflaged by the fact that Operation *Lightfoot* did not call upon a broad range of skills and it was not until 24 Battalion became engaged in less structured operations that deficiencies would become evident. Thus the conclusions drawn here should be treated with some reservation.

Dysfunction.

24 Battalion landed in Italy in 1943 and in the intervening period since Operation *Lightfoot*, their experience levels had increased significantly. However as this chapter will show, the nature of attrition in the Italian Campaign was different and 24 Battalion suffered from a steady turnover of personnel. Furthermore the reinforcements that 24 Battalion received typically did not have the relatively lengthy rest periods that were a feature of the North African campaigns to enable integration into the Battalion. Thus the training conducted in New Zealand and at Maadi became the primary source for imparting knowledge to reinforcements and as this chapter will argue, this training was woefully inadequate in teaching skills.

Levels of combat experience within 24 Battalion during the Italian Campaign was conditional on a number of factors that caused subtle but constant changes within Battalion personnel. Weather, terrain, 2 (NZ) Division's force structure and the furlough schemes all had their influence on how wastage, to use the appalling contemporary term, and loss of experience occurred amongst the personnel of 24 Battalion. The close nature of terrain that precluded the use of mass armoured formations, combined with the Allied forces material superiority over German forces, as well as the general defensive posture of German forces, meant that the disasters that had befallen 24 Battalion at El Mrier and Sidi Rezegh were now a thing of the past. Conversely however, the reduction of infantry battalions within 2 (NZ) Division as a result of the formation of the 4th Armoured Brigade, combined with terrain that

suitied infantry operations, placed substantial demand and strain on the infantry battalions of 2 (NZ) Division.²⁸⁹

Consequently, the Italian Campaign imposed a steady attrition in 24 Battalion. From January to February 1944 for example, the Battalion lost on average 4.62 personnel per day to illness and enemy action. Whilst some of the wounded (47 per cent of losses) and the majority of the illness evacuations (41.2 per cent of losses) would have returned to the Battalion eventually, such was the rate of personnel turnover that 24 Battalion losses equated to its establishment of personnel in a period of little more than four months based on those figures.²⁹⁰ Whilst the casualty figures do not reveal how illness and enemy action effected each of 24 Battalion's sub-units, it is reasonable to assume since infantry companies traditionally bear the brunt of the combat casualties, and as the infantry are usually the most exposed to having to live in the elements, that the infantry companies made up a disproportionately high proportion of medical evacuations and casualties. Thus the infantry companies would have reached the point where attrition exceeded establishment more quickly than the previously stated four month period.

Furthermore as there is evidence to suggest that when a casualty 'spike' (a relatively large number of casualties in a single day) occurred, the losses predominately occurred in one section or platoon. The day Keith Holmes was wounded during an ambush of his platoon by Spandaus and mortars, 'most' of his platoon was either killed or wounded during the four hour wait until darkness fell, and the platoon could disengage itself from the predicament it found itself in.²⁹¹ Ian Marshall, a 'casualty spike' survivor and initially a infantry man in 16 Platoon, was

²⁸⁹ Harper, p.238.

²⁹⁰ 'Casualties January 1944', in 6 NZ Infantry Brigade War Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 58/1/39: 'Casualties February 1944', in 6 NZ Infantry Brigade War Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 58/1/40.

²⁹¹ Interview Keith Holmes, 8 October 2005.

transferred after his first engagement to 17 Platoon, as 16 Platoon had been reduced to three men and the redistribution of personnel was considered necessary so that the experience (and inexperience) could be shared around the two platoons after the arrival of reinforcements.²⁹² With both steady attrition and periodic casualty spikes occurring, it is little wonder that when Bill Somerville joined his platoon in mid-1944, he found most of the personnel, including NCOs, were from the 10th Reinforcement and had only arrived in the Middle East as a reinforcement eight months before Bill.²⁹³ Similarly Bob Nairn found the men of his first section had only been with the Battalion for three months at most.²⁹⁴

The other significant personnel disruption that occurred to 2 NZEF was the New Zealand furloughs in the aftermath of the North African Campaign. It became apparent after the conclusion of the North African Campaign and the decision to maintain 2 NZEF in the Mediterranean theatre, that those who had served for the longest periods of time in the 2 NZEF were in need of rest.²⁹⁵ Consequently the New Zealand Government decided that 6000 men of the first three echelons should be entitled to three month furlough in New Zealand and after the arrangements were made, the Raupehu Draft as the first furlough draft was known, returned to New Zealand in July 1943.²⁹⁶ Whilst it had been intended to return those on furlough to the Middle East, married men, Maori, and those now considered medically unfit, were discharged once in New Zealand and only 1637 of the original 6000 were required to report back to mobilisation camps.²⁹⁷

²⁹² Interview Ian Marshall, 9 March 2006.

²⁹³ 'Interview Bob Sommerville 7 February 2005 by Sergeant Beech', New Zealand Army Museum Waiouru.

²⁹⁴ Interview Bob Nairn, 8 March 2006.

²⁹⁵ Ian McGibbon and Paul Goldstone, 'Furlough Affair' in Ian McGibbon (ed.) *The Oxford Companion to Military History*, Auckland, Oxford University Press, 2000, p.189.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁷ Ian McGibbon, *New Zealand and the Second World War: The People, the Battles and the Legacy*, Auckland, Hodder, Moa, Beckett, 2004, p.161; McGibbon and Goldstone, p.189.

However the extension of the furlough from three to six months due to shipping problems, had allowed many of those required to remobilise to fully reintegrate into civilian life. By the time the Raupehu Draft had to remobilise, many of these men felt a sense of grievance as they were being compelled to return to the Middle East, whilst a large body of able-bodied men remained in New Zealand having never served overseas due to their employment in essential occupations. To protest against this inequality of sacrifice, many of those from the Raupehu Draft being remobilised, started a campaign of passive resistance by refusing to obey the order to embark on troopships, and despite a number of government interventions to break the impasse, only 913 of the original 6000 strong Ruapehu draft embarked for further overseas service.²⁹⁸

Whilst Freyberg had taken steps during the planning of the furlough schemes to 'ensure...the fighting efficiency and *esprit de corps*' of the Division remained intact, it is arguable that the furlough scheme and its loss of experience was detrimental to the efficiency of 2 (NZ) Division.²⁹⁹ This loss of experience from the Raupehu Draft was amplified with the second furlough draft, the Wakatipu Draft, being scheduled to return in May 1944 and was made up of men from the first three echelons who had missed the ballot in the Ruapehu Draft, and those from the fourth echelon. Whilst the 2700 men of the Wakatipu Draft remained in the Middle East until departure, they were not used on operational duty as their impending return to New Zealand would, Freyberg believed, de-motivate them and consequently they would 'cease to be good soldiers'.³⁰⁰ With the first men returning from the Ruapehu Draft not returning to

²⁹⁸McGibbon and Goldstone, p.189.

²⁹⁹ 'General Freyberg to the Prime Minister, 22 May 1943', in *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45: Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War 1939-45, Volume II*, Wellington, War History Branch, Internal Affairs, 1951, no.263, p.237.

³⁰⁰ 'General Freyberg to the Minister of Defence, 28 December 1943', in *Documents: Volume II*, no.290, p.262.

units until May 1944 this effectively meant 8700 experienced men out of 2 NZEF's force structure were absent for the first seven months of active campaigning in Italy. Additionally the majority of personnel not returning to the Mediterranean theatre, the overwhelming majority of this experience was lost for the remainder of 2NZEF's life.

The effect of the furloughs is borne out by the 24 Battalion experience. For the Raupehu Draft, four officers and 96 other ranks, or about twenty per cent of the Battalion's current establishment, were granted furlough from the Battalion.³⁰¹ 24 Battalion, like other infantry battalions in 2 (NZ) Division, operated a policy of where infantrymen who had been through a period of combat, or who had suffered a number of 'near misses' during combat, became eligible for what was considered a less dangerous role in either the support platoons of Headquarters Company, B Echelon, or somewhere in the rear echelon of 2 NZEF.³⁰² As such a rearward move was acceptable in the infantryman's culture of 2 NZEF, Headquarters Company was a place where '[many] old soldiers usually gravitated to...if they survived long enough'.³⁰³ Thus the majority of those going on furlough came from the Headquarters Company and within the infantry platoons such as Roger Smith's platoon, the Raupehu Draft caused 'most of the old identities [to leave], some to anti-tank, some to mortars and carriers [in headquarters company], and some to transport'.³⁰⁴ At the same time as the furlough departures occurred, a reinforcement draft of 202 men arrived to bring the Battalion up to a strength of 623.

Despite the flow of experience to the rear and the furlough, the veterans of the Battalion with service in the North African and Tunisian Campaign still outnumbered

³⁰¹ Burdon, pp.195-196.

³⁰² Interview Merv Crockett, 10 October 2005: 'Lieutenant-Colonel R R Boord, Response to Questionnaire, Question No.12', Correspondence of Major-General Kippenberger 1947-1955, WAI Series 2, 6.

³⁰³ Burdon, pp.195-196: Smith, p.105.

³⁰⁴ Smith, p.104.

the 'new chums' by two to one. Whilst this ratio would not have been so favourable in the infantry companies where the casualties were the highest, and where the overwhelming majority of the replacements would have been posted to, the amount of institutional knowledge within the Battalion was still considerable. Roger Smith, for example was considered one of the 'old hands' in his platoon and he had joined the Battalion during 1942 in Syria, and subsequently served through the final North African campaign as a 'Don-R' (dispatch rider) and then as an infantryman in Tunisia. One of Roger's subordinates, on which Roger's infamous fictional character 'Kelly' was partly based, was a 24 Battalion original and a former platoon sergeant who had a habit of losing his stripes for being AWL during rest periods.³⁰⁵ Additionally the B Company runner, Merv Crockett, had served in 18 Battalion in the fighting leading up to El Alamein, before transferring to 24 Battalion and serving throughout the rest of the North African campaigns and into Italy with 24 Battalion. Whilst this is a small number of examples, it does reinforce the statistics that the infantry companies were not bereft of men with considerable experience.

Additionally, whilst the furlough can be seen in a negative light that focuses on experience and cohesion loss, it should also be recognised that benefits flowed from the furlough. Apart from rare exceptions, individuals only have a limited ability to contend with the myriad of challenges upon the battlefield that invoke fear and stress reactions, and ultimately the onset of combat exhaustion. Typically the effectiveness of a new combat soldier on the battlefield in the short-term increases as knowledge helps the individual define what is, and what is not, a threat to survival. As exposure to combat conditions continue, survival instincts start to assert themselves more forcefully and aggressiveness, a key element in effective soldiering, starts to taper off

³⁰⁵ Interview Roger Smith, 26 January 206: Smith, pp.105-106.

and as Keith Holmes summed it up, those nearing combat exhaustion become increasingly 'cautious' as they 'found new ways of surviving'.³⁰⁶ While periods of rest could be used to mitigate some effects of combat exhaustion, prolonged exposure to combat conditions would lead to either some form of psychological neurosis, or as Ron Smith found out to his everlasting regret, individuals would reach a breaking point and abscond from their unit to avoid entering forward positions.³⁰⁷

Whilst it is impossible to establish the psychological damage done to the veterans of 24 Battalion who either left on furlough, or moved to 'safer' positions outside the infantry companies during the re-organisation, it is reasonable to expect that some, if not the majority, had nearly reached the end of their effective life as an infantryman. Whilst studies have attempted to quantify the numbers of days the average soldier could withstand combat before combat exhaustion set in, these figures range from 50 to 400 days (with numerous points in between) and do little except highlight the complex array of variables such as frequency of rest periods, leadership, individual personality and the unequal nature of a 'days' combat that all contribute to the wearing process.³⁰⁸

Despite the problematical nature of establishing a quantifiable combat exhaustion point, based on the above range and using the crude measure of 24 Battalion facing 130 days of combat during the Greek, North African and Tunisian Campaigns, it is reasonable to expect those 'old identities' that did leave the Battalion on furlough, were in varying degrees of declining combat effectiveness. Such an expectation is consistent when a decline in aggressiveness was seen throughout the New Zealand Division after Operation *Crusader* in November 1941. Major-General William

³⁰⁶ Interview Keith Holmes, 8 October 2005.

³⁰⁷ Interview, Roger Smith, 26 January 2006.

³⁰⁸ Richard Holmes, *Acts of War*, London, 1985, Revised Edition, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2003, pp.213-214.

Gentry, then GSO1, felt 'it was doubtful' the Division had ever fought again with the 'same fury and determination as in *Crusader*'.³⁰⁹ Thus the upheaval from the furlough should not only be viewed in terms of experience loss, but also as an opportunity to reinvigorate the Battalion and the infantry companies in particular with fresh blood and thereby boost aggressiveness.

The loss of experience was also mitigated by the timing of the furlough. 24 Battalion arrived back at Maadi on 1 June and whilst the Battalion enjoyed a rest period throughout June, 24 Battalion still had three months of training to integrate new personnel into the Battalion, to develop the skills of those who were undertaking a new role, and to re-establish small group cohesion within the Battalion.³¹⁰ This training culminated in brigade manoeuvres near the Red Sea in early September, and in the 2 (NZ) Division's last divisional manoeuvres in mid-September.³¹¹ Such an extensive training period was a luxury that was not to occur for the rest of the war as the longest rest period for 24 Battalion in Italy was typically under a month, and this was a period considered insufficient for such an extensive re-organisation of personnel to be effective.

Finally, 24 Battalion continued to be generally well served by the systems that selected NCOs. Promotion into the NCO ranks was relatively simple; individuals had to demonstrate their capabilities for leadership, usually on the battlefield, whilst at the same time be willing to take on the responsibility. As there was a reasonable sized body of men who did not wish to be NCOs, this meant that those who were willing to take promotion, could rise through the ranks rapidly. Mike Kennedy, for example, was a platoon sergeant after approximately five months of service with 24 Battalion,

³⁰⁹ 'Gentry, letter of 23 March 1960', cited in W E Murphy, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45: The Relief of Tobruk: The Summer of 1942*, Wellington, War History Branch, Internal Affairs, 1961, p.521.

³¹⁰ Burdon, p.194.

³¹¹ Burdon, p.196.

while Roger Smith took ten months, with a relatively peaceful four month gap between the Tunisian and Italian campaigns where promotion opportunities were relatively stifled.³¹²

In addition to those who moved up the ranks in 24 Battalion, reinforcements who had held NCO and officer ranks in New Zealand or in the Pacific, often arrived at the Battalion as NCOs. As a rule of thumb, officers and NCOs from 2 NZEF(IP) and New Zealand were demoted upon embarkation to the Middle East. While it had originally been intended to demote all reinforcements to the rank of private, it was considered too 'harsh' a policy and instead officers were usually demoted to sergeant and NCOs dropped one rank.³¹³ There were, as Stevens noted in *Problems of 2NZEF*, exceptions to this rule. Doug Lloyd for example was able to retain his commission because there was a need for an escort officer aboard the troop ship.³¹⁴

For those who were demoted, there was high potential to regain their former ranks quickly. Bob Nairn who had risen to the rank of sergeant while training Tongan troops in the Pacific, was demoted to corporal when leaving for the Middle East.³¹⁵ He was promoted back to sergeant soon after arriving in the Middle East after demonstrating his abilities at an NCO's course in Maadi.³¹⁶ Nor does Bob Nairn appear to be any exception to the rule. There is a widespread belief amongst veterans that those who were demoted, usually regained their former ranks quickly after arriving at their battalions.

Additionally while the process of having a reinforcement NCO come into the battalion undermined the battalion's commanding officers prerogative of promoting those he wanted to promote up to the rank of sergeant, it does not appear to unduly

³¹² Interview Mike Kennedy, 9 October 2005: Interview Roger Smith, 26 January 2006.

³¹³ Stevens, p.204.

³¹⁴ Interview Jack Reynolds and Doug Lloyd, 8 March 2006.

³¹⁵ Interview Bob Nairn, 8 March 2006.

³¹⁶ Ibid.

undermine the robustness of the process. All 24 Battalion veterans interviewed for this thesis believed that they were well served by their NCOs and the only exception that could be recalled, was a corporal from the Pacific who was found hiding in the corner of a room during his first action, and was subsequently removed from the Battalion.³¹⁷

Officers, like NCOs, were selected on the basis of proven ability and a willingness to accept the responsibility that went with commissioning. As Doug Lloyd's case demonstrated, and as Major-General Stevens recognised, some reinforcements did arrive in the Middle East as officers, but it appears that the numbers were relatively few and the majority came from 2 NZEF's NCOs.³¹⁸ If a commission was accepted by an individual, they then went on a commissioning course in one of the British officer training facilities in Britain, the Middle East or India prior to December 1944, and then after that date, at the newly set up 2 NZEF officer training unit.³¹⁹ Policy then dictated new commissioned officers would not return to their former unit, but to a sister unit, which in the case of 24 Battalion, was 21 (Auckland) Battalion. However this rule was not applied inflexibly and some individuals such as W. J. Woodhouse, who after being a sergeant in the signals platoon, returned to command the signals in Italy.³²⁰

Interestingly, while the basic principle of officer selection, proven ability, was the same as NCO selection, the results were not seen as positively to those they commanded. At the most benign end of the range all of those interviewed could remember a poor officer within 24 Battalion at some point and comments like Bob

³¹⁷ Interview Ivan Whyte, 9 October 2005.

³¹⁸ Interview Jack Ryan and Doug Lloyd, 8 March 2006: Stevens, p.99.

³¹⁹ Stevens, p.83.

³²⁰ Woodhouse, p.51.

Nairn's 'I know 11 Platoon had a poor officer' were common.³²¹ There also existed two extreme cases that portrayed an unwillingness by those in the ranks to accept the risks that poor officers presented them with. Jack Riddell recalled a corporal in another platoon informing his company commander that his platoon commander was unwelcome on a patrol. When the company commander told the corporal that the platoon commander was going, the corporal bluntly stated that while the platoon commander could 'come along', no-one would take any orders from him.³²² Similarly Bill Somerville remembered an officer, who had been well thought of as an NCO, came back from his commissioning course 'with some funny ideas' and subsequently was reminded 'that no-one knows which way a bullet comes from' during battle and he should correct some of his thinking.³²³ While there is a strong undercurrent of distrust, if not more, towards some officers, it must be stressed that these officers were in the minority and that the majority of officers were well respected and lived up to the common platoon commanders tag of 'Boss'.³²⁴ Thus, while the selection system for officers was not as successful as it was for NCOs, it did provide in the majority of cases, effective leadership.

Whilst 24 Battalion retained a good base of experience entering the Italian Campaign, as previously noted, the demands of the campaign with its steady attrition meant that a constant stream of reinforcements entered the Battalion. Potentially the reinforcements that arrived in 24 Battalion from 1943 onwards, were the best prepared of the war. The advent of war with Japan and the subsequent mobilisation of

³²¹ Interview Bob Nairn, 8 March 2006.

³²² 'Interview Jack Riddell, 10 February 2005 by Sergeant Beech', New Zealand Army Museum Waiouru. 'Interview Bob Somerville 7 February 2005 by Sergeant Beech', New Zealand Army Museum Waiouru

³²³ 'Interview Bob Somerville 7 February 2005 by Sergeant Beech', New Zealand Army Museum Waiouru

³²⁴ Ibid.

the Territorial Force in December 1941 and January 1942, provided an opportunity to expand military training for those who would ultimately serve overseas. With individuals not being able to serve overseas until the age of twenty-one years, or at age twenty years with parental permission, and with the age of call-up into the Territorial Force being eighteen, there existed a period of full time military service on home defence duties for many between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one.³²⁵

This period of service served a dual purpose. It inducted those destined for overseas service into the basic routines of military service whilst living in less than desirable circumstances in such diverse places as the converted animal pens in Claudelands Showgrounds, to isolated areas of New Zealand's coastline.³²⁶ Additionally it also allowed for an expansion in the scope for training to be undertaken to include training activities that were difficult to fit into either mobilisation training for overseas service, or into the short periods of full-time service and the other limited training periods normally available to the Territorial Force during the first two years of the war.

The extended training period was cited by Major-General Stevens, the head of 2NZEF administration, as the reason why the 8th Reinforcement was so well trained, and certainly those 24 Battalion reinforcements who did go through the extended training period, did have a broader military knowledge.³²⁷ Keith Holmes who served with 3 Auckland Battalion after being conscripted as an eighteen year old in 1941 illustrates this point well. In his two years of service with 3 Auckland Battalion, Keith received in addition to his small-arms training in the .303 Rifle and Thompson sub machine-gun, guerrilla, survival and river crossing training as well as being

³²⁵ Peter Cooke, *Defending New Zealand: Ramparts on the Sea 1840-1950s, Volume 1*, Wellington, Defence of New Zealand Study Group, 2000, p.319.

³²⁶ Interview Keith Holmes, 8 October 2005: Interview Mike Kennedy, 9 October 2005: Interview Ivan Whyte, 9 October 2005.

³²⁷ Stevens, p.198.

involved in a number of exercises including a brigade combined arms exercise involving infantry, armour and artillery.³²⁸ Similarly Mike Kennedy spent two years in 16 Waikato Battalion and could recall in addition to the standard army diet of exercises and basic training, construction of kapok bridges and river crossing exercises.³²⁹

There is however, some doubt around how many soldiers departing for overseas service had reached such extensive training. Keith Holmes, for example, an 11th Reinforcement 2nd Draft, felt he was one of the better trained soldiers within the group he associated with.³³⁰ There were certainly discrepancies between the amount of training that individuals received. Ivan Whyte spent approximately a year undertaking home defence duties, before returning to university and completing his teaching degree.³³¹ Similarly Jack Riddell did not undertake any home defence service as he was prior to mobilisation training, a conscientious objector being held in Mount Eden Prison.³³²

An even more extreme case was Alan Mason. Alan had volunteered for the Air Force at age eighteen, but he remained at university and completed his teaching degree before being called into the army at the age of twenty-one.³³³ Alan entered Papakura Camp for mobilisation training in 1944, but his training was interrupted when the government decided that military personnel were required for harvesting, and Alan, as a consequence of this decision, missed approximately half of his training time at Papakura.³³⁴ This lack of training was further compounded when Alan was

³²⁸ Interview Keith Holmes, 8 October 2005.

³²⁹ Interview, Mike Kennedy, 9 October 2005.

³³⁰ Interview Keith Holmes, 8 October 2005.

³³¹ Interview Ivan Whyte, 9 October 2005.

³³² 'Interview Jack Riddell 10 February 2005 by Sergeant Beech', New Zealand Army Museum Waiouru.

³³³ Interview Alan Mason, 26 December 2005.

³³⁴ Interview Alan Mason, 26 December 2005.

removed from the last four weeks of his training in Maadi Camp to guard ships in Alexandria Harbour, but in reality spent most of his time developing a good poker game.³³⁵ Thus Alan received two months effective training before reaching 24 Battalion and even this self-confessed poorly motivated soldier who recalled his annoyance at having to miss a Bach recital at Maadi because he had to go on exercise, was acutely aware that he was badly trained and was a liability to his section in 24 Battalion.³³⁶

Whilst economic and educational imperatives excused some, at least temporarily, from some or all of their home defence service, these men appear to be the exception to the rule. By the end of 1942, virtually all men over the age of eighteen and available for military service had been mobilised. Class I Personnel, those who were eligible for overseas service but had not yet reached the age of twenty or twenty-one, entered the Territorial Force, whilst lower grades of personnel entered the Home Guard which also operated under compulsion from April 1942.³³⁷ In October 1942 the New Zealand Army, both in New Zealand and overseas, had reached a total of over 131,000 men and represented an estimated 19 per cent of New Zealand's total adult population.³³⁸

While the receding risk of invasion saw the number of personnel mobilised start to decline in early 1943, and then dramatically reduce in June 1943 when 'virtually all mobilised Territorial units were stood down', it is difficult to see how many of those that did depart to 2 NZEF, from the 8th Reinforcement onwards, would have not completed at least a short period of home service.³³⁹ The 8th Reinforcement, the first reinforcement to depart to 2 NZEF after the start of hostilities with Japan, left New

³³⁵ Interview Alan Mason, 26 December 2005.

³³⁶ Ibid.

³³⁷ Cooke, p.323.

³³⁸ Cooke, pp.329-330.

³³⁹ Cooke, p.331.

Zealand in December 1942, or almost a full year after the mobilisation of the Territorial Force. Thus the servicemen of the 8th Reinforcement, old enough for conscription, but not old enough for overseas service for the majority of 1942, would have, it is reasonable to assume based on the numbers mobilised, been involved in home defence.

This pattern continued until the 14th Reinforcement, which was the last reinforcement to reach 2 (NZ) Division before the cessation of hostilities in 1945. The 14th Reinforcement left Wellington in January 1945, and the twenty-one and twenty years olds would have reached the age of conscription no later than January 1942 and January 1943 respectively. Thus it is reasonable to expect due to the numbers mobilised, that they did in fact see some service on home defence duties before demobilisation of the Territorial Force in mid-1943, although the twenty year old servicemen in the 14th Reinforcement would have only had a short period of home based service. Those Grade I personnel that did get the opportunity to maintain a civilian life such as Alan Mason and to a lesser extent, Ivan Whyte, were the exception and often it would appear the civilian existence was a life returned too after a period of military service, rather than complete avoidance of home service.

Whilst the majority of personnel sent to 2 NZEF from the 8th Reinforcement on had a greater quantity of training, the quality of training remained poor. Broadly speaking, 24 Battalion veterans fell into two groups when they considered the quality of their training, officers and other ranks. The two men who served as officers in both New Zealand and in the Middle East, thought their training in New Zealand and at Maadi had been effective. The officers had however been part of the New Zealand Temporary Service (NZTS) and had enlisted early in the war.

The NZTS was formed during mobilisation of the first three echelons and because it was in part intended to release NZPS personnel for overseas service, those who were recruited into the NZTS were often Territorial Force members who were still too young for overseas service.³⁴⁰ Jack Ryan and Doug Lloyd are examples of this. Both were eighteen year olds at the outbreak of war and they both had a small amount of pre-war Territorial Force training in addition to the three month camp that was held after the outbreak of hostilities. Both men had minimal military knowledge when they arrived at Narrow Neck Camp to perform instructor duties and initially their areas of expertise was determined by whether or not they had some contact with that particular facet of military life rather than any intimate knowledge.³⁴¹

Both Jack and Doug found this situation excellent for skill development as they were forced to develop their skills to satisfy the demands of their inquiring charges. This development was further reinforced by a wide range of courses that both men went on, and they covered such skills as mountain warfare, battle drill, advanced machine-gun instruction and guerrilla warfare, as well as the commissioning course at Trentham Camp.³⁴² While Doug Lloyd felt that he was 'over-coursed' by the time he reached 24 Battalion, this extensive period of training where the full range of military knowledge had to be acquired to preserve the image of instructorial omnipotence, allowed these men to develop their skills to the point they felt they were as ready for active service as they could be.³⁴³

The majority of reinforcements, naturally enough, did not serve as NZTS personnel and their training experience was vastly different and they expressed less confidence in their military skills. The primary criticism of the New Zealand based

³⁴⁰ Interview Jack Ryan and Doug Lloyd, 8 March 2006.

³⁴¹ Ibid.

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ Ibid.

training was not that it lacked good instructors or that a lack of time prevented proper instruction, but rather that the training bore little relation to the battlefield conditions that they would find in Italy. Mike Kennedy, for example, found that while he received 'fairly useful' training in New Zealand, it was no more than a good base to work from. The leadership of Mike's home defence battalion was dominated by 'retreads' (World War One soldiers), whose attempts at teaching battle methods were 'about as good as it could have been, for what they knew, but conditions were quite different overseas'.³⁴⁴ Mike was, for example, taught how unsupported infantry should attack a pillbox as an infantry section and while it was a lesson that was not completely without relevance, the better integration of artillery and armoured forces with the infantry meant that the approach to the tactical problem of pill-boxes was different, thereby making Mike's training obsolescent. Keith Holmes viewed his New Zealand based training in a similar light and felt that his training lacked relevance to an active service environment. But despite this, both Keith and Mike believed their training was important in building self-confidence for combat conditions and was therefore an important stage in their military education.³⁴⁵

Nor was the teaching of basic infantry skills particularly well developed in the extended period of service. In contrast to Doug Lloyd who felt that the NZTS experience gave him a 'good knowledge of infantry weapons', those in the ranks with home service and mobilisation training, felt inadequately trained in the most basic of infantryman tools, the rifle.³⁴⁶ Ivan Whyte could only recall spending two or three sessions on the firing range in his training in both New Zealand and Maadi. Whilst Ivan was able to pass the army standard marksmanship, and had been extensively drilled on rifles outside the rifle range environment, this school teacher did not feel

³⁴⁴ Interview, Mike Kennedy, 9 October 2005.

³⁴⁵ Interview Keith Holmes, 8 October 2005; Interview Mike Kennedy, 9 October 2005.

³⁴⁶ Interview Jack Reynolds and Doug Lloyd, 8 March 2006.

confident with his weapon.³⁴⁷ Similarly, Ron Lamb went on two rifles ranges to fire weapons, one at Wanganui and the other at Maadi. On each occasion Ron estimated that he fired less than twenty rounds and he believed, much like Ivan Whyte, that he did not have enough physical firing of his rifle to become proficient in the weapon.³⁴⁸

Nor were Ivan Whyte and Ron Lamb the only ones who felt their small arms training was inadequate. Ian Marshall was able to reach Italy with what he considered poor marksmanship skills.³⁴⁹ This he was able to rectify with an unusually long stay at 2NZEF Advanced Base in Bari. While most reinforcements appear to have passed through Bari in about a week when en route from Maadi to their Battalion, Ian and 'a mate' had six weeks there.³⁵⁰ As there was not much to entertain these young soldiers, each day Ian and his friend would each draw 300 rounds of .303 ammunition, retire to the 30-yard rifle range and shoot at cans and spent brass mounted on sticks, amongst other things. Such practice allowed Ian to become what he believed was a 'very good shot' and something that his success in later impromptu platoon shooting competitions against German parachute flares and mess cans floating in lagoons testifies too.³⁵¹ Similarly, Bob Nairn felt that rifle skills were adequate but this was as a result of the Regimental Sergeant-Major of the 1st Field Regiment insisting that his men spent a substantial amount of time on the rifle range.³⁵²

Ian Marshall's and Bob Nairn's stories graphically illustrates the primary problem behind the feeling that rifle training was inadequate. Whilst small arms training appears prolifically in New Zealand Army training programmes, such periods involve

³⁴⁷ Interview Ivan Whyte, 9 October 2005.

³⁴⁸ Interview Ron Lamb, 13 June 2006.

³⁴⁹ Interview Ian Marshall, 9 March 2006.

³⁵⁰ Ibid.

³⁵¹ Ibid.

³⁵² Interview Bob Nairn, 8 March 2006,

weapons drills and not actual firing the weapon.³⁵³ Whilst rifle drill has obvious benefits in building up automatic responses that will hopefully remain with individuals during stressful combat situations, it is not a substitute for physically firing the weapon. Ian Marshall who had built up his marksmanship to such a level that he could keep a can rolling across the 30-yard range while firing from the hip, struggled to even hit the target when he tried out an American M1 Garand rifle.³⁵⁴ This Ian pointed out, was a case of a 'workman not knowing his tools'.³⁵⁵ While Ian had learned the idiosyncrasies of .303, this did not necessarily transfer to other rifles and those reinforcements that only received a couple of training sessions on the rifle range had no reasonable chance of becoming proficient with the weapon they were to carry into battle.

Whilst rifle training was inadequate, training on other weapons within the infantry platoon were close to non-existent because the weapons did not exist in sufficient numbers in New Zealand, if at all, for training purposes. Ivan Whyte, upon arrival at 24 Battalion, had only handled a Bren gun once in his army career, and had never fired the weapon before.³⁵⁶ This he quickly discovered was no impediment and he was quickly made the section Bren gunner, a role he found difficult at first due to the 'on the job training' approach he had to take.³⁵⁷ Jack Riddell, a platoon sergeant by 1944, found his platoon's collective knowledge about the Bren gun wanting. His platoon had to repel a German attack on a winter's night and the task was made more difficult when the section's firepower was degraded due to the Bren gun only firing single shots. The reason for the Bren gun malfunction, as Jack found out later, was

³⁵³ Interview Ian Marshall, 9 March 2006: Interview Bob Nairn, 8 March 2006: Interview Ivan Whyte, 9 October 2006.

³⁵⁴ Ian Marshall to author, e-mail, 11 March 2006.

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

³⁵⁶ Interview Ivan Whyte, 9 October 2005.

³⁵⁷ Ibid.

that the cold (there was snow on the ground at the time) had thickened the weapon's oil and not allowed the recoil mechanism to work fully, a problem that could have been easily rectified with a little knowledge and the proper cold weather lubricant.³⁵⁸

The PIAT (Projector Infantry Anti-Tank) the infantryman platoon's integral tank defence in Italy, was another area where training was lacking. A friend of Ivan Whyle's was made responsible for his platoon's PIAT and had again only received a single session of instruction on the weapon and the lack of training was instrumental in an accident. The first time Ivan's friend had to unload the PIAT (a process of placing both feet on the butt of the weapon so the strong spring mechanism for launching the anti-tank round could be released slowly), he could not remember the correct procedure and in his attempt to unload the PIAT, he released the mechanism incorrectly, causing the PIAT's projectile to shoot out of the launcher hitting and shattering the jaw of a fellow soldier.³⁵⁹

While the extended period of service before reaching the Middle East was of dubious benefit in developing skills for many, it was not necessarily a critical failure in the reinforcement system. The reinforcement system was founded on the premise that reinforcements would only be partially trained when they arrived in the Middle East and that 2 NZEF would provide additional training to bring reinforcements up to the standard they required. Ironically, those interviewees who passed through Maadi felt the training programme was similar to New Zealand based training, with drill, small arms training and route marching being the staple training diet and only a few additions were made to the training programme.³⁶⁰

³⁵⁸ 'Interview Jack Riddell 10 February 2005 by Sergeant Beech', New Zealand Army Museum Waiouru.

³⁵⁹ Interview Ivan Whyle, 9 October 2005.

³⁶⁰ Interview Keith Holmes, 8 October 2005: Interview Alan Mason, 26 December 2005: Interview Ivan Whyle, 9 October 2005.

From 1943 at least, one of the areas where training was expanded on was in mine warfare. Mine training was important as mines were a passive weapon and good training enabled individuals to operate confidently within the vicinity of mines thereby mitigating the area denial role of mines.³⁶¹ Unfortunately, the mine training was a mixed bag and at times at least, potentially very useful training was undermined by the method of delivery. Keith Holmes received instruction on how to identify and disarm mines that also gave Keith practical hands on experience. Whilst Keith managed to cause a detonator to explode while pulling on the detonator's spring to see how far he could pull it, he managed to avoid injury as the brass casing of the detonator contained the explosion, giving him a useful, practical insight into the working of various types on mines.³⁶² In contrast Ivan Whyte received his training in mine warfare in a lecture format and Ivan only viewed the mines on a distant table. It was this poor method of instruction that Ivan blamed for his inability to build his confidence up around mines and he consequently spent most of his time in Italy 'keeping as far away from mines as possible'.³⁶³

Another area of training expansion for reinforcements passing through Maadi was in house to house fighting. House to house fighting training was conducted in a specially constructed mud-brick village outside Maadi.³⁶⁴ Houses in Italy, known as *casas*, were an important feature of the battlefield as they provide protection from both the weather, and due to their thick walls, enemy fire. The high degree of protection provided by *casas*, also meant that such houses were difficult to assault and Bob Sommerville believed the best way to take a *casa* was to bring down a short

³⁶¹ Interview Ivan Whyte, 9 October 2005.

³⁶² Interview Keith Holmes, 8 October 2005.

³⁶³ Interview Ivan Whyte, 9 October 2005.

³⁶⁴ Interview Alan Mason, 26 December 2005.

artillery barrage on it, followed up by a few shots from the 75mm gun on a Sherman tank and quickly infantry assault.³⁶⁵

Whether or not such a method of taking *casas* was common practice, Bob Sommerville's ideal method does demonstrate the relative complexity of house to house fighting and it does beg the question of why the teaching of such techniques was so tardy. It is unclear when the establishment of house to house fighting training occurred, but it is certain that such training was not given to the 12th Reinforcement (in training at Maadi from August 1944), it is unknown if the men of the 13th Reinforcement (at Maadi from November 1944) received house to house fighting training, but it was definitely given to the men of the 14th Reinforcement (February 1945) with Alan Mason's recalling a demonstration of house to house fighting techniques by instructors, and a half day of practical instruction during his truncated training.³⁶⁶ If it was the 13th Reinforcement men who were first to receive this training, house to house fighting techniques were not taught to reinforcements until 2 (NZ) Division had been in Italy for at least thirteen months, or sixteen months if it was the 14th Reinforcement who was first to receive this training.

Such tardiness in introducing house to house fighting techniques and the unevenness of mine training is not unsurprising. The discourse surrounding Maadi based training from interviews was very similar to the New Zealand based training, the training was dated and it did not reflect the realities of the Italian battlefield.³⁶⁷ Those who dominated the ranks of instructors at Maadi were often veterans of the North African campaigns and therefore the lessons they passed on reflected the

³⁶⁵ 'Interview Bob Sommerville 7 February 2005 by Sergeant Beech', New Zealand Army Museum Waiouru.

³⁶⁶ Interview Alan Mason, 26 December 2005: Interview Doug Strid, Interview Ivan Whyte, 9 October 2005: Keith Holmes to author, letter, 26 February 2006.

³⁶⁷ Interview Mike Kennedy, 9 October 2005: Interview Ivan Whyte, 9 October 2005.

experiences they had in desert fighting.³⁶⁸ Thus reinforcements were diligently taught the finer points of how to live off a pint or two of water per day despite the fact they would be operating in an environment where they would be more likely to suffer from trench foot than to die of thirst.³⁶⁹ Additionally they were taught a tactical style of warfare that was more suitable in the wide open spaces of the desert than in the close terrain of Italy.³⁷⁰

At times 24 Battalion did try and influence the quality of training at Maadi by sending instructors to assist in the reinforcement training for those personnel allocated to 24 Battalion. Two sergeants from 24 Battalion assisted at Ron Lamb's (9th Reinforcement) Maadi training, but it does not appear to have not been a great departure from the standard training programme, with Ron not recalling any training that he had not previously covered in New Zealand.³⁷¹ While these sergeants appear to have added little to the standard training at Maadi, this arrangement did help foster an embryonic form of identity between the reinforcement and the Battalion. International studies suggest the earlier the establishment of identity between a reinforcement and his future combat unit can be achieved, the more positive the reinforcements will be, and this in turn minimises the disruption of the small-group environment of the reinforcements unit.³⁷² Ron Lamb, who found out about a month before leaving Maadi that he would be going to 24 Battalion, reflects this international research. Ron was 'happy' to be posted to an Auckland battalion, as despite living in Wellington for a number of years, he felt like an Aucklander after starting his

³⁶⁸ Interview Mike Kennedy, 9 October 2005: Interview Ivan Whyte, 9 October 2005.

³⁶⁹ Interview Mike Kennedy, 9 October 2005.

³⁷⁰ Interview Mike Kennedy, 9 October 2005: Interview Ivan Whyte, 9 October 2005.

³⁷¹ Interview Ron Lamb, 13 June 2006.

³⁷² Michael D Doubler, *Closing with the Enemy: How the GIs Fought the War in Europe, 1944-1945*, Lawrence, University Press of Kansas, 1994, p.247; Martin van Creveld, *Fighting Power: German and US Army Performance, 1939-1945*, London, Arms and Armour Press, 1983, pp.75-76.

schooling there and going to 24 Battalion made him feel he would be amongst friends.³⁷³

Mike Kennedy also received training from a 24 Battalion instructor, in this case Captain R. R. "Sconner" Boord, an officer who 'knew his onions'.³⁷⁴ Boord, a 24 Battalion 'original' who had risen up through the ranks to the position of Battalion adjutant and was waiting to return to New Zealand on furlough, ensured that the 24 Battalion reinforcements did 'quite a lot of night work, night patrols, reece patrols, night attacks', as well as 'developing the 'skill [of] navigating at night'.³⁷⁵ This training was 'good stuff' in Mike Kennedy's opinion as it developed skills that he found useful after being posted to 24 Battalion. Despite the benefits of training Battalion personnel, these examples of 24 Battalion personnel being part of the Maadi training process, seem to be the exception rather than the rule.

Nor was there any official attempt at reinforcement training in 24 Battalion and the training attempts that were undertaken, were opportunistic and informal. Reinforcements, due to official 2 NZEF policy, were 'looked after' at 2 NZEF Advanced Base in Bari until they were required as a replacement and at which time, they were transported forward to their battalion.³⁷⁶ As reinforcements often arrived while 24 Battalion was in the line, there was often not the manpower, nor the time to provide any additional training for reinforcements and organised training in 24 Battalion during the Italian Campaign was limited by the available time to carry it out.

There was no official way of inducting reinforcements into the Battalion, and any assistance offered to reinforcements was haphazard at best. There was, for example, no attempt to provide a 'buddy' system' to pair reinforcements with experienced

³⁷³ Interview, Ron Lamb, 13 June 2006.

³⁷⁴ Interview, Mike Kennedy, 9 October 2005.

³⁷⁵ Interview Mike Kennedy, 9 October 2005: Burdon, p.226.

³⁷⁶ Stevens, p.193.

soldiers to alleviate inexperience and it was left up to individuals within 24 Battalion to take it upon themselves to ease reinforcements into their new roles.³⁷⁷ Keith Holmes was one of those who arrived at 24 Battalion whilst it was in the line. After reporting to Battalion Headquarters, and before marching up to 17 Platoon that evening, Keith and the other reinforcements were told to ‘go and watch that gun [a British artillery piece]’ that was situated adjacent to the Battalion Headquarters. Whilst this action could be construed as an attempt to get the reinforcements out of the way of the Battalion Headquarters staff for a while, Keith watched the gun ‘walk’ a shell (the process of firing at the target and adjusting fire until it hits the target) into a German occupied *casa*. From this experience Keith gained a degree of knowledge about artillery fire and figured if he found himself in the future on the receiving end of such fire, he would take the course that the German troops in the *casa* did, move somewhere else rapidly!³⁷⁸

Similarly Ivan Whyte also received some ad hoc training when his company was in a reserve position. Ivan’s platoon sergeant sent Ivan up an old stone watch tower to observe the fighting in the valley below and to report to him ‘if anything headed this way’. This Ivan believes served no real military purpose (he was the only one to conduct this ‘sentry duty’) and it was instead in all likelihood a relatively benign way of introducing him to some of the sights and sounds of the battlefield, particularly as battlefield sounds are considered one of the most intimidating aspects of the battlefield.³⁷⁹

This pattern of opportunistic training continued at section level although at this level, the information imparted was often a reactive comment following an event.

³⁷⁷ Interview Keith Holmes, 8 October 2005; Interview Roger Smith, 26 January 2006.

³⁷⁸ Interview Keith Holmes, 8 October 2005.

³⁷⁹ Interview Bob Glass and Joe Wright, 9 March 2006; Interview Doug Lloyd and Jack Ryan, 8 March 2006; Interview Ivan Whyte, 9 October 2005, October 2005

Bill Sommerville in his first couple of days in frontline positions received a reactive warning that he believed saved his life.³⁸⁰ Bill's more experienced companion in his slit trench warned him not to stick his head out his slit trench as the reason for the sudden breaking of the branch above their heads, and something that attracted Bill's attention and curiosity, was a sniper's bullet. Keith Holmes also received some advice for a spectacular, but unnecessary dive for cover, when some shells passed overhead. The shells it was pointed out to Keith, had already passed and you could tell this by the whistling sound of the shell. Furthermore, as Keith was standing in the lee of a *casa*, it was improbable the shell could reach them as the shells trajectory meant it had to pass through a number of strong walls of the *casa*.³⁸¹

Mike Kennedy also recalled providing a reactive lesson. Mike, by this time a platoon sergeant, was confronted in the small hours of the morning by a reinforcement who had arrived the previous day cowering in the corner of the room. The reinforcement, who was taking his turn at sentry duty, let his imagination get the better of him in the darkness and noise of battle. Mike found the best way to reassure him was to stand with him for half an hour, both to provide companionship and to explain the noises that occurred around them. This helped boost the confidence of the unnamed soldier and he calmed down sufficiently to continue his vigil by himself and after his small confidence building exercise, he developed into a 'good soldier'.³⁸²

Whilst there were a number of 24 Battalion veterans who could recall receiving help from their more experienced peers, a greater number could not recall any at all. Ron Lamb, Bob Glass, Joe Wright, Mike Kennedy and Ian Marshall all felt they were left to their own devices to handle the transition into combat soldiers as best they

³⁸⁰ 'Interview Bob Sommerville 7 February 2005 by Sergeant Beech', New Zealand Army Museum Waiouru.

³⁸¹ Interview Keith Holmes, 8 October 2005.

³⁸² Interview, Mike Kennedy, 9 October 2005.

could.³⁸³ Even Ivan Whyte and Keith Holmes who could recall receiving some assistance still felt they were largely left to their own devices and Keith Holmes was so disgusted with the lack of communication he found within his army experience, he resolved not to carry such poor habits into his post-war life.³⁸⁴ The only one to break this mould was Alan Mason, too unfit and under trained for the situation he found himself in, he felt that his section looked after him.³⁸⁵ That, Alan believed, was one reason for his survival, the other was the end of the war. Alan believed if he had to continue for longer than the month of active service that he saw, his chances of survival were very slim indeed due to his lack of training.³⁸⁶

Nor was there any readily apparent reason for this lack of desire to pass on knowledge. Roger Smith who rose from the rank of private, to second lieutenant, never tried to ease reinforcements into the units he commanded, nor he definitely stated, did he see any reason for him or others to do so either.³⁸⁷ Whilst Roger's position could be seen as one amongst many, no one else posed this question could articulate an answer as to why help was not more forthcoming despite many believing such help would have been useful. If Roger's answer can be taken as typical, it was perhaps that no one saw the need to provide assistance to 'new chums' as the development of Battalion culture towards training during the first three years of the war would have revolved around the incorporation of reinforcements *en mass* after a campaign, and where senior Battalion leadership could oversee a centralised training programme during a substantial rest period. Thus in Italy where reinforcements commonly turned up in small numbers and the Battalion lacked training time, a more

³⁸³ Interview Bob Glass and Joe Wright, 9 March 2006: Interview Mike Kennedy, 9 October 2005: Interview Ron Lamb, 29 October 2005 : Interview Ian Marshall, 9 March 2006.

³⁸⁴ Interview Keith Holmes, 8 October 2005: Interview Ivan Whyte, 9 October 2005.

³⁸⁵ Interview Alan Mason, 26 December 2005.

³⁸⁶ Interview Alan Mason, 26 December 2005.

³⁸⁷ Interview Roger Smith, 26 January, 2006.

decentralised approach to training perhaps did not occur due the inability of the Battalion culture to change to reflect the situation and it therefore did not occurred to many amongst the junior leadership to step into the training gap that appeared.

The training carried out by 24 Battalion prior to Cassino reflects this. During this training period, 24 Battalion headquarters issued a memo entitled 'Training directive – Company Commander will concentrate on the following Points' and this directive lists 21 points for training, whilst specialist platoons in the Headquarters Company had nineteen areas of training to focus on.³⁸⁸ Broadly speaking this range of training varied from a full range of weapons training on all weapons organic to the Battalion, to battlefield skills related to 2 (NZ) Division's anticipated future role of the time, mobile warfare. While it is not evident how many of these points were covered, it seems unlikely due to time constraints that they were all covered. 24 Battalion war diary indicates, for example, that on 21 January D Company focused on 'Company in Attack as vanguard' training, while B Company worked on the 'correct way to clear an enemy strong-hold in a house'.³⁸⁹ Both of these companies gave demonstrations the following day, before training in any meaningful form was suspended for three days for sporting events and visits to Pompeii.³⁹⁰ Unspecified Company training was resumed on 27 January, with the Battalion exercises of 'forming a gun line' and river crossing on 28 and 30 January respectively.³⁹¹ Thus while training was not without its uses, it was nothing like the training carried out

³⁸⁸ 'Appendices "G": Training directive – Company Commander will concentrate on the following Points', 24 Battalion War Diary, January 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/42.

³⁸⁹ '24 Battalion War Diary Entries, 20 –22 January 1944' 24 Battalion War Diary January 1944, WAI Series 1 DA 60/1/42.

³⁹⁰ 'Appendices "G": Training directive – Company Commander will concentrate on the following Points', 24 Battalion War Diary, January 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/42.

³⁹¹ '24 Battalion War Diary Entries, 28 January 1944 and 30 January 1944', 24 Battalion War Diary January 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/42.

prior to Operation *Lightfoot* due to disruptions and its ability to build sub-unit cohesion and self-confidence would have also been curtailed.

What is striking about the training given to reinforcements coming into 24 Battalion during the Italian Campaign, is the poor quality of training given to most men. While there are obvious exceptions to this rule with Ian Marshall, Doug Lloyd, Bob Nairn and Jack Reynolds all feeling relatively well trained when they reached 24 Battalion, these men were fortunate in that they received experiences in their training that went beyond the standard. The majority of personnel obviously did not have such an opportunity and they were let down by a double failing, the inadequacy of both the training system, and the instructors within the system to provide training in sufficient depth that was pertinent to the battlefield conditions they were going to experience. Ironically the one place where such training could be delivered, 24 Battalion, was the one place where there was a lack of resources and desire to conduct such training in the normal course of events.

The lack of well trained reinforcements placed a heavy emphasis on experience levels to maintain fighting effectiveness. While the systems in place to manage promotion and movement of personnel from the infantry companies to less dangerous jobs were flexible and managed the retention of experience as well as can be expected, they had to contend with the randomness of illness, injury and death. The randomness could quickly undermine levels of experience within Battalion sub-units and force the responsibility of maintaining combat effectiveness on an even smaller group of experienced personnel, and particularly on the leadership within the Battalion. It is this intersection between leadership, experience and a lack of it during

24 Battalion's campaign around Cassino that will be dealt with in the next chapters.

When Plan "A" Fails

On the morning of 25 March, the morning after A Company's withdrawal from the fighting that made up the Third Battle of Cassino, Roger Smith woke in a pile of straw. He recalled,

'...as I woke more fully, my reluctant brain began its work and rushed unbidden memories to the forefront of my mind. I heard frantic voices calling under the road...saw a pair of drumming heels disappear beneath an avalanche of concrete...Robert's body with loops of intestine bursting obscenely from its back...a Hun screaming as he writhed in the dust...I shuddered awake...I wondered how many other of the forms about me, seemingly still and peaceful, were actually fighting similar battles. Fighting memories that threatened to engulf them. Memories of friends that were no more. Memories of sights and sounds unbelievable in terror. Memories of deeds done with...viciousness undreamed of.'³⁹²

While Roger's scarring from Cassino was to be mental instead of physical, he was certainly not alone in gaining scars from Cassino. Nor was scarring restricted to individuals. 24 Battalion's reputation suffered from gossip that suggested that it had lost its fighting efficiency at Cassino and never regained it during the Italian Campaign.³⁹³ Whether or not there is some basis for this rumour is beyond the scope of this study, but it is evident that the poor performance of some elements of 24 Battalion in Cassino ignited the rumours.

The story of 24 Battalion at Cassino is not a simple one. The way the various companies were committed to the fighting during Operation Dickens, meant that the burden of fighting was borne unevenly, as was the influence each company exerted on events. A and D Companies, for example, never undertook any offensive action and because these two chapters focus on 24 Battalion's offensive efforts, these two companies barely feature in the chapters. Additionally, where A and D Companies do enter the discourse, these two companies remain shadow actors, as events, and the

³⁹² Smith, p.223.

³⁹³ Interview Jim Hunt, 14 June 2006.

decisions of Major Guy Turnbull the B Company commander, continued to dominate the decision making process.

Major Turnbull, in contrast, is a central figure. B Company was the first of 24 Battalion's companies to be sent into Cassino. Initially under the command of 25 Battalion, B Company moved into Cassino on the evening of 15 March, and it was the only 24 Battalion company committed to the fighting until 17 March. In that period, Turnbull, on his own initiative, cancelled one attack, delayed another, and only carried out one attack as scheduled. Furthermore, by midday on 17 March, Turnbull had reached the point that he felt it pointless to continue attacking and he used his position as the senior officer of 24 Battalion in Cassino to stop further attacks by both his, and A and D Companies. Consequently, other 2 (NZ) Division units had to continue the attacks that 24 Battalion would not.

On 14 January 1944, 24 Battalion began a journey from the east coast of Italy, across the alpine divide and on to the west coast of Italy as part of 2 (NZ) Division's move from the Eighth to the Fifth Army. The trip across these roads with 'breathtaking views' took 24 Battalion three days with the journey coming to an end at Piedimonte d'Alife in the Volturno Valley.³⁹⁴ 24 Battalion remained in this 'pleasant' location until 5 February, and during this period the 'usual accumulation of courts of inquiry and courts martial [were] disposed of', as well the granting of leave and as we have seen, the conducting of training.³⁹⁵ Additionally the reinforcements that reached 24 Battalion throughout December and January replaced most of the 188 men 24 Battalion had lost in the opening battles of their Italian Campaign and on 24 January the Battalion was deficient two officers and 85 other ranks, a relatively

³⁹⁴ W J Woodhouse, 'Letter 102, 18 February 1944', *Memories*.

³⁹⁵ Burdon, p.224: Woodhouse, 'Letter 102, 18 February 1944', *Memories*.

normal deficiency for 24 Battalion.³⁹⁶ This meant that approximately two-thirds of the Battalion could still be considered experienced to some degree.

24 Battalion's leadership also underwent a disruptive period of change in the lead up to the Cassino Campaign. Lieutenant Colonel J. Conolly succumbed to illness and was evacuated to hospital just prior to moving into the line at Cassino and Major P. R. Pike, who had been 24 Battalion's second in command since January 1943, assumed command.³⁹⁷ All the infantry company commanders were also new to their roles. Major Ted Aked, A Company's commanding officer for the last 21 months, was among the LOB troops and A Company was placed in the command of Captain S. C. Schofield.³⁹⁸ B Company came under the command of Major Guy Turnbull. Turnbull had initially served as a platoon commander before becoming 24 Battalion's adjutant in September 1942. He then subsequently served for a short period of time as the Headquarters Company C.O., before receiving command of B Company.³⁹⁹ Major J. W. Reynolds, a 24 Battalion original and 17 Platoon's commanding officer in Greece, received command of C Company after being absent from the Battalion since his wounding prior to the El Mrier attack.⁴⁰⁰ Finally Captain A. H. Ramsey assumed command of D Company.⁴⁰¹ Ramsey was a platoon commander as El Alamein, but little else is known.⁴⁰² Thus, while all the senior positions in the Battalion were filled with men who appeared to have reasonable amounts of experience, they were all new at the roles they were to undertake during the Cassino fighting.

³⁹⁶ 6 NZ Inf Bde War Diary, 'Fighting State: Approximate Strength as at 0600 24 January 1944', 6 Brigade War Diary January 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 58/1/40: Phillips and Gilmour, p.242.

³⁹⁷ Burdon, p.226, ff. 226.

³⁹⁸ Ibid, p.226.

³⁹⁹ Ibid, p.119, 190, 199, 226.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid, p.106, p.226.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid, p.226.

⁴⁰² Ibid, p.128.

The Third Battle of Cassino was intended to follow on quickly from the failure of II (US) Corps and the New Zealand Corps to open up the entrance to the Liri Valley in the First and Second Battles of Cassino respectively. Despite these failures in part due to strong defences and appalling weather, the Cassino offensive had to be continued in an attempt to try and relieve the embattled Anzio Beachhead some 90 kilometres behind Cassino. Nor was there any logical alternative, due to the nature of Italy's geography, to launch an offensive.⁴⁰³ This left the New Zealand Corps facing a second attack was into an area that considered one of the strongest natural defensive positions in Europe, and one that had been further enhanced by strong fortifications of the Gustav Line.

The Third Battle of Cassino, known as Operation *Dickens* was a plan that emphasised overwhelming firepower. Operation *Dickens* called for the bombing of Cassino by heavy and medium bombers, followed by an artillery programme that utilised 890 guns, whilst 6 (NZ) Infantry Brigade launched an assault from the small northern section of Cassino that had been captured during II (US) Corps operations.⁴⁰⁴ The initial assault was to be led by 25 Battalion, with support from 19 Armoured Regiment, and 25 Battalion was to clear Cassino township, Castle Hill, as well as the lower slopes of Monastery Hill. 26 Battalion was tasked with capturing the Railway Station area after 25 Battalion had reached its objectives, and 24 Battalion was initially in reserve.⁴⁰⁵ Another of the New Zealand Corps units, 4 (Indian) Division, also had a

⁴⁰³ J A Ciciarelli, 'The Geology of the Battle of Monte Cassino, 1944' in Peter Doyle and Matthew R Bennett (eds.), *Fields of Battle: Terrain in Military History*, Dordrecht, GeoJournal Library, 2002, p.329; Stephen Badsey, 'Crown of Thorns: Monte Cassino, Italy, 1944', in Michael Stephenson (ed.), *Battlegrounds: Geography and the History of Warfare*, Washington D.C., National Geographic, 2003, pp.159-161; Parker, p.58.

⁴⁰⁴ John Ellis, *Cassino: The Hollow Victory, The Battle for Rome January-June 1944*, Croydon, 1984, paperback edition, Aurum Publishing, 2003, pp.221-222.

⁴⁰⁵ Kippenberger, p.358.

role to play and it was given the task of clearing Monastery Hill once Castle Hill had been taken.

The perceived need for such firepower was based on the level of fortification that existed in Cassino. The Germans had fortified Cassino as part of the Gustav Line and with the Cassino sector of the Gustav Line being raised to 'fortress level' by Hitler, the Cassino area became 'one of the most formidable defensive systems of the entire war.'⁴⁰⁶ Buildings in Cassino township were reinforced with railway sleepers, steel girders and concrete to provide additional support from hostile fire, whilst bunkers, pillboxes and armoured vehicles were camouflaged within buildings.⁴⁰⁷ Additionally buildings were demolished to provide fields of fire.⁴⁰⁸

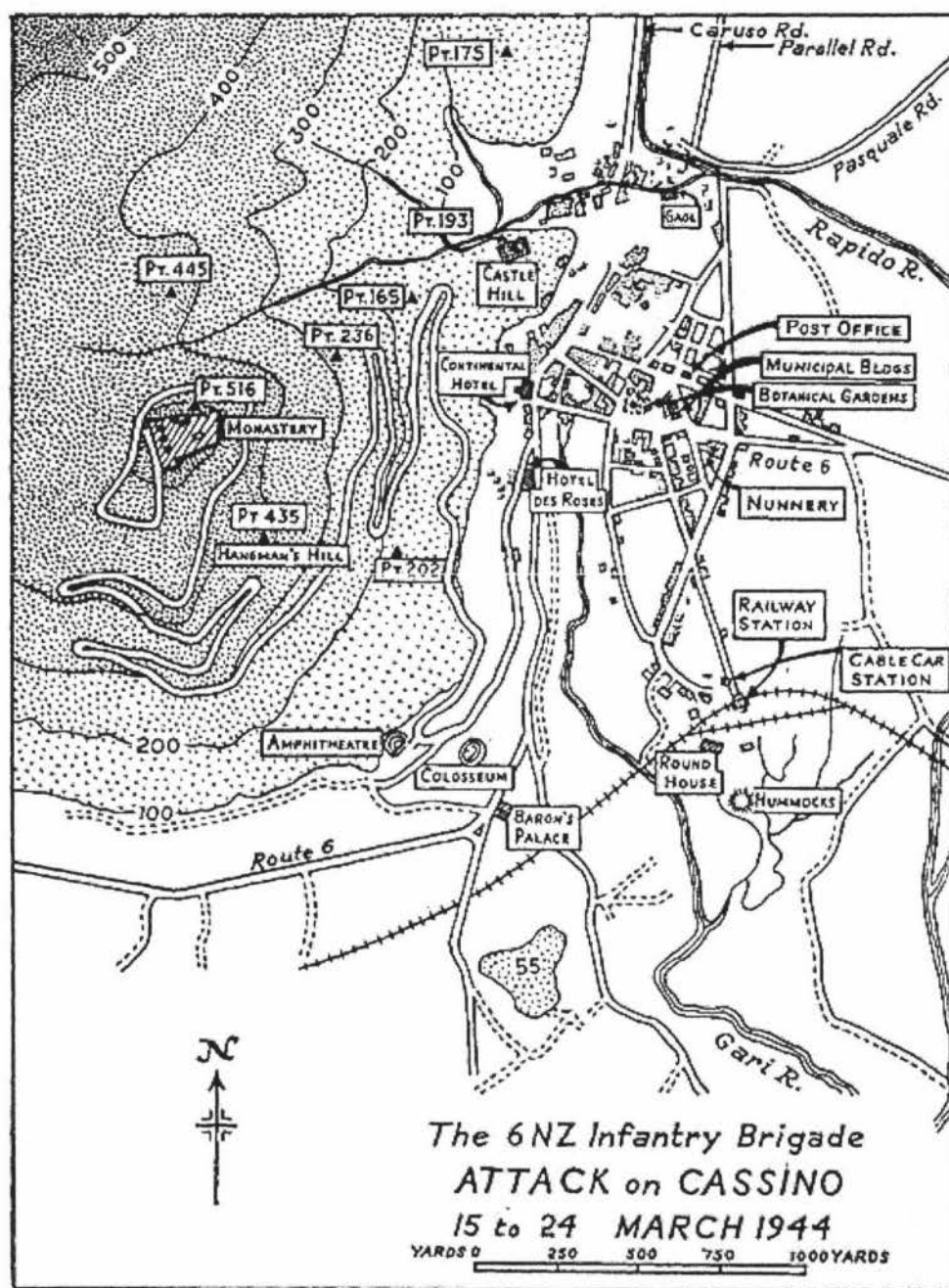
In preparation for Operation *Dickens* 24 Battalion, along with the rest of 2 (NZ) Division, deployed to positions on the northern side of Cassino on the night of 20/21 February. During the wait for Operation *Dickens* 24 Battalion had C and D Companies in frontline positions below Point 175, approximately 500 yards north of Cassino whilst A and B Companies were in a 'reserve' position with Indian and British units in a series of gullies above the Barracks about a mile to the rear of C and D Companies. Additionally while Operation *Dickens* was initially scheduled for 24 February, bad weather repeatedly delayed its start due to the needs of the air and armoured forces. The air bombardment required clear weather to allow a reasonable level of bombing accuracy, whilst it was decided armoured units required three days of continuous clear weather to allow the ground to firm sufficiently so their operations

⁴⁰⁶ Ian Gooderson, *Cassino 1944*, London, Brassey's, 2003, p.67.

⁴⁰⁷ Ellis, pp.115-116: Gooderson, p.68.

⁴⁰⁸ Ellis, pp.115-116: Gooderson, p.68.

would not be unduly hindered.⁴⁰⁹ These conditions did not occur until mid-March and Operation *Dickens* eventually started on 15 March.⁴¹⁰



Source: Burdon, p.232

The intervening 23 days between arriving at their position north of Cassino, and the start of Operations *Dickens*, was a period of misery for 24 Battalion personnel and

⁴⁰⁹ Gooderson, p.92.

⁴¹⁰ 24 Battalion War Diary, p.4.

it was a period that was to undermine 24 Battalion's fighting effectiveness during the Third Battle of Cassino. While technically A and B Companies were in a reserve position known as 'Mud Valley', in reality the two companies were living in the open and were overlooked by German positions. Protection against the elements and enemy fire consisted of sangers and groundsheets, although B Company was even without groundsheets for the first few days in Mud Valley.⁴¹¹ Even with arrival of groundsheets, as Phillips and Gilmour note, 'a rock sanger with a groundsheet roof is not much of a residence during spring rains'.⁴¹² On the night of 28/29 February the two companies in Mud Valley received a demonstration of how fragile their accommodation was, when a flood passed through the position. B Company was particularly hard hit with a 'roaring torrent [that] took bivvies and all kinds of gear with it, salvaging of Vickers guns and our 2 inch mortars being quite the order of the day'.⁴¹³

While the weather was a trial of endurance in itself, these conditions had to be endured while under enemy observation and fire. B Company's 12 Platoon was 'chased by intermittent shelling from one side of the gully to the other'.⁴¹⁴ A Company faced a similar situation when it found its initial position on the south side of Mud Valley was 'apparently under full observation to the north'.⁴¹⁵ This resulted in artillery fire landing around A Company's position from the rear, and because A Company was 'on a slope, [with] all our holes opened on the lower side, which faced the gunfire', this situation became, in Roger Smith's words, 'extremely uncomfortable'.⁴¹⁶ Like 12 Platoon, A Company ended in the gully floor where 'only

⁴¹¹ Ibid, p.230.

⁴¹² Phillips and Gilmour, p. 252.

⁴¹³ 'B Company War Diary', cited in Burdon, p.230; Smith, pp.187-188.

⁴¹⁴ 'B Company War Diary', cited in Burdon p.230,

⁴¹⁵ Smith, p.182.

⁴¹⁶ Smith, p.182.

an occasional shell dropped in at that angle, though the flying splinters of rock and steel were numerous.⁴¹⁷ Consequently, in A Company at least, 'all movement in daylight [was cut down] to an absolute minimum; only in the call of duty or nature was a man allowed to expose himself.'⁴¹⁸

For C and D Companies in frontline positions, the waiting period was also a bleak time. Both companies were regularly shelled and mortared, and D Company had a persistent problem with snipers for a period. D Company's own sniper was kept busy trying to halt the sniping activity directed at D Company between the 8 and 10 of March.⁴¹⁹ The sniper threat was only suppressed when a stick was placed in a bullet hole left in a tree by the sniper, allowing his approximate location to be deduced, and subsequently attacked by nineteen rounds from a US 57mm anti-tank gun that 24 Battalion had taken over during the relief of the area from 133 (US) Infantry Regiment.⁴²⁰

In addition to enemy activity, there were also the daily routines of being in the field. Both C and D Companies sent out at least one patrol every night. In the case of D Company there was a standing patrol of a section commanded by an officer, while C Company sent out a small patrol of an officer and two men each night to contact the Indian unit on 24 Battalion's right flank.⁴²¹ Other infrequent patrols were also sent out by these companies to collect information. C Company, for example, sent out a patrol on the night of 12 March to try and establish whether there were mines on the forward slopes of Point 175 (Castle Hill) and if they could locate the position of the

⁴¹⁷ Smith, p.182.

⁴¹⁸ Smith, p.183.

⁴¹⁹ '24 Battalion War Diary Entries, 8-10 March', 24 Battalion War Diary March 1944, WAI Series, DA 60/1/44.

⁴²⁰ 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, pp.2-3: Phillips and Gilmour, p.252: The US 57mm anti-tank gun was based on, and very similar to the 6-pounder anti-tank gun that 24 Battalion was equipped with. Therefore there were not significant inter-operability problems. George Forty, *US Army Handbook*, Phoenix Mill, 1979, 2nd Edition, Alan Sutton Publishing, 1995, p.145.

⁴²¹ '24 Battalion War Diary Entries, 1-13 March', 24 Battalion War Diary March 1944, WAI Series, DA 60/1/44.

'Spandau firing on Indians'.⁴²² These activities were of course in addition to the daily morning (0530-0600 hours) and evening (1815-1845 hours) stand to periods, and picquet duty. Thus by the time *Dickens* arrived, these two companies were not only wet and cold, they were also tired.

As with the companies in Mud Valley, C and D Companies were troubled by the weather. Immediately upon arriving at Cassino, 'JK 285963' discovered on his first night in the field that the weather was going to be a problem. In his Diary he noted,

'Later, asleep in the slit trench in the bivvy, the rain comes down, a steady trickle of water fills the trench and one wakes up floating on a ground sheet. Sleep is now impossible (while wet through and hunched up in a corner of the bivvy) a letter is written home by the feeble light of a "candle"...What more could one want even if 10,000 miles from home? But everything is relative and at this moment a few miles away men are dying while we can write home saying we are well.'⁴²³

'JK 285963' was soon a 'few miles away' on the frontline and the few words he was able to write in his diary between 23 February and 14 March while waiting for Operation Dickens, continues to show a pre-occupation with weather,

'The incoming shells continue to fall, so does the rain and we are wet most of the time...It is very cold and rations are short.'⁴²⁴

Additionally the extent of enemy action and the length of time the Battalion was forced to live under cover was cause for medical concern. The need to minimise movement meant that in some elements of the Battalion at least, 'the usual sanitary arrangements lapsed in abeyance.'⁴²⁵ There developed a tendency for men to 'defecate just over the side of the slit-trench' as Captain Alex Borrie, the Battalion Medical Officer, remembered.⁴²⁶ This practice, combined with a number of dead

⁴²² '24 Battalion War Diary Entry, 12 March', 24 Battalion War Diary March 1944, WAI Series, DA 60/1/44.

⁴²³ 'Another Extract from the Diary of JK "285963"', 24 New Zealand Battalion Association Inc Newsletter, August 1998, p.22.

⁴²⁴ 'From the Diary of 285963', in 24 New Zealand Infantry Battalion Inc Newsletter, March 1998, p.15.

⁴²⁵ Burdon, p.231.

⁴²⁶ Dr Alex Borrie, *Funny things that happened on the way to Rimini*, 2000, Dunedin, p.67.

mules left in B Company lines resulted in an 'epidemic' of diarrhoea.⁴²⁷ While this medical crisis passed with the burying of the mules and return to accepted practice in regards to sanitation in the field, Phillips and Gilmour looking back 40 years to the events at Cassino felt it necessary to note that the forced period of inactivity 'was poor preparation for an assault which would demand the peak of physical fitness.'⁴²⁸

The feeling of constantly being wet, under observation and under fire also caused the morale of the battalion to drop. Bill Sommerville believed the 'bottom line' for 24 Battalion personnel was taking objectives at low cost. When this was occurring, Bill felt morale improved because it was collectively thought that this was 'another step towards home'.⁴²⁹ With 24 Battalion losing almost ten per cent of its strength, three killed, 30 wounded, and 33 evacuated for illness, while waiting for Operation *Dickens* to start, this combined with the weather and feeling of constant German observation of the Battalion position, developed a sense of frustration in 24 Battalion at the inactivity. Roger Smith huddled at the bottom of Mud Valley judged the mood in his platoon as 'bored, browned off and indescribably filthy....[the] attack...had been made no easier by three weeks of procrastination'.⁴³⁰ C Company who was to end up as the reserve company for 24 Battalion on 15 March got so frustrated with inactivity even after the start of Operation *Dickens*, that the company war diary summarised the days events for the company on 16 and 17 March in one sentence of quiet desperation, 'Co[mpan]y remained in dispersal area – cold, wet and shelled.'⁴³¹

This falling morale occurred despite attempts by Battalion command to provide relief from the conditions. Both B and A Companies got relief from the weather and

⁴²⁷ Burdon, p.231.

⁴²⁸ Phillips and Gilmour, p.252.

⁴²⁹ 'Interview Bob Sommerville 7 February 2005 by Sergeant Beech', New Zealand Army Museum Waiouru.

⁴³⁰ Smith, pp189-190.

⁴³¹ 'Notes for War Diary: "C" Coy 24 NZ Bn: 15-25 Mar 44', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

mud when it was arranged for the companies to go to showers in the rear on 9 and 13 March respectively.⁴³² This period of short relief was intended to 'do everyone a lot of good', something that was achieved in the short-term. The moment quickly passed however and Roger Smith remembered his feelings as A Company returned from the showers,

'I'd like to meet the man who did not have sinking feeling in his stomach as we trudged once more up the rugged track to our sordid gully, feet already heavy and cold in sodden boots, and thinking of the damp welcome of filthy blankets on the floor of a slimy hole.'⁴³³

For 'JK 285963' in D Company showers were just a distant dream and the biggest pleasure he obtained in his three week stay above Cassino was fresh pair of underwear and socks.⁴³⁴ Thus while attempts were made by Battalion command to try and overcome flagging morale, they did not have the means under their control to overcome the major problems of inactivity, poor weather and a feeling of omnipresent German observation and 24 Battalion was destined to enter the Third Battle of Cassino mentally and physically unprepared for the events they were about to face.

24 Battalion's preparatory moves for Operation *Dickens* started in the early hours of 15 March. C and D Companies, with their close proximity to Cassino, had to withdraw approximately half a mile so that they would be behind the bomb safety line.⁴³⁵ The mortars that were also supporting C and D Companies were to be left in their forward positions with their sights and firing mechanisms removed so that the frontline could be re-established quickly in the aftermath of the bombing and so these forward units would be quickly in a position to support 25 Battalion's attack on

⁴³² '24 Battalion War Diary Entries 9 March 1944 and 13 March 1944', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

⁴³³ Smith, p.190.

⁴³⁴ 'Diary of 285963', p.15.

⁴³⁵ '24 Battalion War Diary Entries, 14-15 March 1944', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44 : Diary of 285963, 15/3/44, p.16.

Cassino with fire.⁴³⁶ The thinning out process started at 0330 hours and by 0430 hours only three 24 Battalion personnel, Second Lieutenant Bob O'Brien, Corporal V Stanaway and Corporal J H Bryant, remained in front of the bomb safety line to man the 57mm anti-tank gun behind D Company's position and engage 'known enemy positions (mainly pill boxes) on Point 193'.⁴³⁷

The bombing of Cassino, which started at 0830 hours and lasted until 1200 hours, not only affected the German garrison in Cassino. While Second Lieutenant O'Brien and his anti-tank gun crew deliberately put themselves in harm's way and had bombs landing as close as 600 yards, most others within the Battalion also felt some effects of the bombing. 'JK 285963' noted in his diary that 'occasionally large bomb splinters hit the rocks around us but no one in our group was wounded.'⁴³⁸ Roger Smith had a friend in B Echelon killed when his slit trench collapsed on him from the concussion of a near miss, and Ron Lamb witnessed the aftermath of bomb hitting a mule train near 24 Battalion positions.⁴³⁹ Despite this, 24 Battalion escaped lightly compared to some of the Allied units and the effect of these bombing 'shorts' did not unduly effect the operational capability of the Battalion, but rather helped confirm the suspicions that many held about the ability of American airmen.⁴⁴⁰

With the arrival of H-Hour, 1200 hours, the artillery programme started, 25 Battalion advanced into the town and 24 Battalion completed the reoccupation of Point 175 efficiently. 24 Battalion had started the reoccupation of Point 175 prior to H-Hour with C Company deploying a platoon forward at 1050 hours and the other

⁴³⁶ '6 Infantry Brigade Operation Order No.2, 23 Feb 1944', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44: 'Appendix 'I'', 24 Bn Op Order – Confirming Verbal Orders, undated', in 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44: Burdon, p.231.

⁴³⁷ '24 Battalion War Diary Entry, 15 March 1944', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44: '24 Battalion History:- Cassino Area: Eye Witness Account: Bombing of Town of CASSINO March 1944', 24 Battalion War Diary March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

⁴³⁸ 'Diary of 285963', p.16.

⁴³⁹ Interview Ron Lamb, 29 October 2005: Smith, p.191.

⁴⁴⁰ Interview Jim Hunt, 14 June 2006.

two platoons of C Company, D Company and elements of the mortar platoon, moved towards Point 175 at 1200 hours and 24 Battalion's positions had been fully reoccupied within the hour.⁴⁴¹ A and B Companies were held in reserve near the Barracks and were to move into Cassino when required. However after this initial burst of activity, the afternoon passed relatively quietly for 24 Battalion and only C Company who assisted the attack on Castle Hill by D Company 25 Battalion with supporting fire, took any active part in operations until 1700 hours.⁴⁴²

While 24 Battalion's afternoon was quiet, the same could not be said for 25 Battalion. 25 Battalion had initially made good progress into Cassino and they had regained their former positions on the northern outskirts of Cassino without substantial difficulty.⁴⁴³ But as the assault into Cassino progressed, the problems facing 25 Battalion mounted. The bombing had turned the town into a

'state of utter destruction, every building [was] in complete ruins and open spaces and former roadways [were] churned up or covered by debris and badly cratered. Some streets could hardly be found, much less used.'⁴⁴⁴

In this environment, 25 Battalion fractured into small, uncoordinated groups of men trying to find pathways towards their objective. Additionally as 25 Battalion was unable to maintain contact with the supporting barrage, and as 19 Armoured Regiment tanks only provided limited support due to their restricted mobility in the rubble, 25 Battalion's advance ground to halt in the face of German resistance.⁴⁴⁵

When it became obvious at 1600 hours that 25 Battalion did not have the strength to take their objective, B Company 24 Battalion, was placed under the command of 25

⁴⁴¹ '24 Battalion War Diary Entry, 15 March 1944', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

⁴⁴² Burdon, p.233.

⁴⁴³ N C Phillips, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45: Italy, Volume I: The Sangro to Cassino*, Wellington, War History Branch, Internal Affairs, 1957, p.269; Puttick, pp.393-394.

⁴⁴⁴ Puttick, p. 394.

⁴⁴⁵ Jeffrey Plowman, *Rampant Dragons, New Zealanders in Armour in World War II*, Christchurch, Kiwi Armour, 2002, pp.117-118.

Battalion and ordered into Cassino at 1615.⁴⁴⁶ However it was not until 1700 hours that B Company received this order and the final preparations for the move forward began.⁴⁴⁷ First Major Turnbull went to 25 Battalion headquarters to receive orders, and B Company only started to move into Cassino at 1750 hours with orders to link up with A Company 25 Battalion, then infiltrate towards one of 25 Battalion's objectives, the Continental Hotel.⁴⁴⁸

The march into Cassino for B Company, due to the rubble and the onset of night, was difficult. By the time B Company began to move, darkness had fallen and rain began to fall making the night as 'black as anything'.⁴⁴⁹ In such a dark and ruined environment 'everyone was just groping for what location [we] were in' and B Company ended up taking a circuitous route to A Company's position.⁴⁵⁰ First 25 Battalion's C Company was contacted at the Goal around 1840 hours, followed by B Company 25 Battalion at 1940 hours.⁴⁵¹ The move to the Post Office was to take some time and it was not until midnight that B Company was able to contact A Company 25 Battalion.⁴⁵²

Upon contacting A Company 25 Battalion, Major Turnbull set up his headquarters alongside A Company's headquarters in the Post Office, and the B Company platoons took up positions north of Route Six.⁴⁵³ Turnbull, along with A Company's commanding officer, Major Sanders, took stock of the situation. It was decided

⁴⁴⁶ '24 Battalion War Diary Entry, 15 March 1944', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44: Purrick, p.398.

⁴⁴⁷ 'Appendices "W": Cassino Operation – B Coy 24 NZ Bn', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

⁴⁴⁸ 'Appendices "W": Cassino Operation – B Coy 24 NZ Bn', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44: Puttick, p.398.

⁴⁴⁹ Reginald Minter, 'I had a pretty charmed life', in Megan Hutchings (ed.) *A Fair Sort of Battering: New Zealanders Remember the Italian Campaign*, Auckland, Harper Collins, 2004, p.170.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁵¹ 'Appendices "W": Cassino Operation – B Coy 24 NZ Bn', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

⁴⁵² 'Appendices "W": Cassino Operation – B Coy 24 NZ Bn', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

⁴⁵³ 'Appendices "W": Cassino Operation – B Coy 24 NZ Bn', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44: Puttick, p.398.

between the two company commanders, and subsequently confirmed by 25 Battalion headquarters, that the infiltration towards the Continental Hotel should be postponed.⁴⁵⁴ Additionally B Company should 'liaise' with A Company 25 Battalion, and with 26 Battalion, who was also now in the town, about the most effective way to clear houses to the north of Route Six.⁴⁵⁵ It was concluded that both B Company and A Company 25 Battalion, should launch an attack after dawn despite orders from 6 Brigade Headquarters that the Continental Hotel 'must' be secured before dawn.⁴⁵⁶

In the first twenty hours of Operation Dickens, B Company 24 Battalion's primary contribution to the fighting on the opening day, failed to reach its objectives and had not made a significant impact on the fighting. To a degree this is unsurprising. The move into Cassino was carried out in difficult conditions with the dark night complicating the task of navigating through an environment where the landmarks were obliterated by the bombing. Furthermore the rubble made it difficult to move in a straight line. As B Company had no control over these difficulties, Major Turnbull and his men had to deal with them as best as possible and it is therefore not unreasonable to expect some delays from navigational error during the march into the town.

However when compared with 26 Battalion, who had faced very similar set of circumstances as B Company on 15 March, it does bring into question the eagerness of the Company to carry out its tasks in Cassino. 26 Battalion was ordered into Cassino at 1725 hours on 15 March and as the Battalion was undertaking its intended role within the 6 Brigade plan, 26 Battalion was able to start its move into the town

⁴⁵⁴ 'Appendices "W": Cassino Operation – B Coy 24 NZ Bn', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44: Phillips, p.278: Puttick, p.404.

⁴⁵⁵ 'Appendices "W": Cassino Operation – B Coy 24 NZ Bn', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44: Phillips, p.278: Puttick, p.404.

⁴⁵⁶ Puttick, p.404.

‘immediately’.⁴⁵⁷ 26 Battalion reached the junction of Parallel and Pasquale Road at approximately 1745 hours.⁴⁵⁸ In contrast, B Company 24 Battalion, reached the Goal at 1840 hours, a location some 200 yards further into Cassino than the Parallel/Pasquale Road intersection. Thus B Company was less than an hour behind 26 Battalion at this point.⁴⁵⁹ Beyond this point however, B Company made slow progress and it took B Company over five hours to cover the next 700 metres and reach A Company 25 Battalion. In contrast, 26 Battalion covered the greater distance to 25 Battalion’s A Company in just over two hours despite some difficulty in finding the A Company headquarters.⁴⁶⁰

There are no obvious reasons for the extra time it took B Company to reach the Post Office. Enemy action does not appear to have been the cause of the delay. Whilst there was the ‘occasional burst’ of spandau or mortar into the town, this appears to have been harassing fire and it was no serious impediment to either 26 Battalion or B Company during their move into the town.⁴⁶¹ As already stated, some of the time differential between B Company and 26 Battalion can be explained, quite understandably, by navigation error. However the significant time disparity suggests that B Company was more cautious in its movement, an attribute that permeated 24 Battalion’s decisions in Cassino township.

The greater failure however, was the halting of the attack towards the Continental Hotel. The 25 Battalion objectives on the western edge of Cassino needed to be reached so that 26 Battalion could have a firm base and the room to form up for its planned attack south towards the Railway Station, as well as providing the engineers

⁴⁵⁷ Frazer D Norton, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45: 26 Battalion*, Wellington, War History Branch, Internal Affairs, 1952, p.354.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁹ ‘Appendices “W”’: Cassino Operation – B Coy 24 NZ Bn’, 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44: Puttick, p.397.

⁴⁶⁰ Norton, p.355.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid.

an environment where they could clear a path through the rubble so supporting arms, such as anti-tank units, could reach 26 Battalion once it had reached its objectives.⁴⁶² Thus B Company was not just reinforcing 25 Battalion, it was also undertaking a crucial role in the 6 Brigade plan and until this task was completed, the 6 Brigade's attack stalled.

Again it is not difficult to deduce mitigating factors for the decision to hold back the attack until dawn. B Company must have been physically exhausted by the time they reached the Post Office. After three weeks of inactivity in Mud Valley, they had spent the day watching the bombing, moving around and fighting the nervous tension that affects men before going into battle. This was followed by a six hour move through piles of rubble in 'chilly' rain'.⁴⁶³ Nor had B Company received any hot food and the men must have been tired, miserable and in need of a rest.

The poor physical state of the men would have compounded the environmental difficulties of launching a night attack. Night attacks, Johnston and Stanley assert, require 'assurance in planning, clarity in communications, and certainty in direction.'⁴⁶⁴ None of these conditions were evident in the small hours of 16 March, planning was problematical in a strange, unseen environment, communications were tenuous at best, and maintaining direction difficult as the rubble channelled movement in unexpected directions. Thus the planning and execution of an attack utilising both B Company, and A Company 25 Battalion, would have been difficult at best.

Nevertheless, the belief that operations were too difficult that night is by no means universal. 26 Battalion did not believe the conditions were so poor as to stop offensive operations and 26 Battalion not only expected as late as 0300 hours for the 25 Battalion attack towards the Continental Hotel to occur, they also made as many

⁴⁶² Ibid.

⁴⁶³ Puttick, p.398.

⁴⁶⁴ Johnston and Stanley, p.96.

preparations for their attack as they could in anticipation of attacking before dawn.⁴⁶⁵ Nor was 26 Battalion the only force prepared to launch attacks that night. A group of German paratroopers made a 'determined attack' on 26 Battalion elements in the Municipal Building during the night of 15/16 March, although it must be recognised that they perhaps had the opportunity to plan their attack before darkness fell.⁴⁶⁶

The lack of consensus about the possibilities of success while conducting offensive operations on the night of 15/16 March was the first significant sign of the limitations of experience that existed in 24 Battalion. Major Turnbull and Major Sanders decided not to undertake an *infiltration*, a relatively unique and unfamiliar method for 24 Battalion, but instead they resorted to a familiar course of action, a conventional infantry attack after dawn. While in hindsight this decision can be viewed as poor, for Turnbull and Sanders the idea of a conventional infantry attack must have seemed appealing as it offered a familiar paradigm to operate in.

First light saw the start of preparations for the postponed attack. The rain of the previous night had stopped, but the weather was still cold as B Company's 11 and 12 Platoons under the command of Second Lieutenant McCorquindale, formed up alongside A Company 25 Battalion and 26 Battalion's 11 Platoon, at 0615 hours.⁴⁶⁷ B Company headquarters and 10 Platoon maintained their positions at the Post Office and provided cover fire for the attack.⁴⁶⁸ The B Company attack was short-lived with 'heavy fire' from German positions both in the immediate vicinity and from Monastery Hill forcing the two platoons to seek shelter in a house at approximately 0630 hours.⁴⁶⁹ 11 and 12 Platoons then became trapped by German fire in the house,

⁴⁶⁵ Norton, p.357.

⁴⁶⁶ Norton, p.358.

⁴⁶⁷ Norton, p.359.

⁴⁶⁸ 'Appendices "W": Cassino Operation – B Coy 24 NZ Bn', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

⁴⁶⁹ Burdon, p.234; Puttick, p.404.

known as McCorquindale's House, approximately 250 yards from the start line and at the foot of Monastery Hill.⁴⁷⁰ Two sections of 12 Platoon had reached the first floor of McCorquindale's House, while the remainder of the men were trapped in the building's flooded basement.⁴⁷¹ Casualties up until this point were three killed and seven wounded.⁴⁷²

11 and 12 Platoons spent the rest of 16 March attending to their situation. The most immediate problem was 'rescuing' those men in the basement. The water was approximately six foot deep in the basement and those men there had to stand on 'submerged tables etc' to stay out of the water the best they could while they waited for their turn to be one of the four men who could 'squeeze' on to a 'broad shelf' and get fully out of the water.⁴⁷³ Additionally as there was no internal access between the basement and the house, and because the outside route was covered by 'heavy enemy machine gun and light mortar fire', it was decided to dig a hole in the floor, meaning the men in the basement did not reach the relative comfort of the first floor until 1130 hours.⁴⁷⁴

With McCorquindale realising the perils of daylight movement in Cassino, and with the attack stalled for so long, he felt there was little to do but prepare a secure defensive position, something that was achieved if the repelling of a German attack from three sides that evening is anything to be judged by.⁴⁷⁵ The defence of McCorquindale's House was not maintained however, and McCorquindale's force withdrew to the Post Office around 0400 hours 17 March, in compliance with orders from Major Turnbull and so these two platoons could make another attack, along with

⁴⁷⁰ '24 NZ Bn History:- Cassino Area. Eye Witness Account by 2/Lt J R MCCORQUINDALE', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid.

⁴⁷² Ibid.

⁴⁷³ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid.

the rest of B Company, into the same area they had vacated a few hours earlier.⁴⁷⁶ In essence Turnbull stuck in his rear position was unable to accurately gauge the situation and he committed his company to repeating the mistakes of 16 March.

For B Company, 17 March was relatively similar to the previous day, although these attacks were sapping the strength of the Company. B Company was still under command of 25 Battalion and again it conducted an early morning attack towards the Continental Hotel. B Company's ability to carry out offensive action by this point was however diminished due to losses. 10 Platoon had the highest strength with seventeen men, whilst 11 Platoon had twelve or thirteen personnel, and 12 Platoon had twelve men.⁴⁷⁷ When the headquarters element was included, B Company was now operating with less than 50 men and was under 50 per cent of its establishment.

Despite the growing manpower problem, B Company dutifully linked up with 5 Troop, 19 Armoured Regiment and A Company 25 Battalion in preparation for the attack at 0630 hours.⁴⁷⁸ The attack moved off at 0645 hours into heavy fire.⁴⁷⁹ B Company was 'badly sniped' in the area around the Gardens, and heavy spandau and mortar fire also presented problems.⁴⁸⁰ The tanks accompanying B Company provided 'excellent support' during the initial advance by attacking German strong points at close range, but one tank bogged down and the other two threw tracks around the Botanical Gardens area and B Company had to continue without their support.⁴⁸¹

⁴⁷⁶ '24 Battalion War Diary Entry, 16 March 1944', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44 : '24 NZ Bn History:- Cassino Area. Eye Witness Account by 2/Lt J R MCCORQUINDALE', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

⁴⁷⁷ '24 and 25 Bn Attack on the Continental', Battle of Cassino, WAI Series 3, 25.

⁴⁷⁸ Burdon, p.235: Puttick, p.408.

⁴⁷⁹ 'Appendices "W": Cassino Operation - B Coy 24 NZ Bn', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44: Burdon, p.235.

⁴⁸⁰ 'Appendices "W": Cassino Operation - B Coy 24 NZ Bn', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44: Burdon, p.235.

⁴⁸¹ 'Appendices "W": Cassino Operation - B Coy 24 NZ Bn', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

After the attack had gone some 200 yards, it reached the open ground surrounding the Gari River, and the attack first faltered, and then halted. The area around the Gari River, was a 250 yard wide piece of waterlogged and cratered ground, with little cover. It was also a barrier that the men of B Company considered insurmountable; 'none of us were very optimistic about going any further' noted one anonymous witness.⁴⁸² Major Turnbull also had doubts. He stated to 25 Battalion headquarters later in the day, that he needed another 100 men under command for an attack across the Gari to be successful and he believed at his current strength, 'at best only a handful of troops could hope to reach the objective' and then they would be unable to hold it without 'early reinforcement'.⁴⁸³

Despite the doubts, Major Turnbull decided that the attack must continue and the renewed attack reportedly got at least halfway across the open ground before B Company became pinned down 'with water up to our chests' by 'a tremendous amount of Spandau fire'.⁴⁸⁴ At this point, those on the open ground lost sight of any friendly forces around them, and after the fire slackened, they withdrew back and found Turnbull and the rest of B Company setting up a defensive position in a house to the south of the Botanical Gardens.⁴⁸⁵ Thus it would appear Major Turnbull left part of his Company to their own devices after ordering them into an exposed position.

The attack on the morning of 17 March, while not reaching its objectives, was not a total failure. The westward thrust of B Company and 25 Battalion was able to push the Germans far enough back that 26 Battalion could form up and start their attack to

⁴⁸² 'Unnamed Eyewitness Account of Cassino', Battle of Cassino, WAI Series 3, 25.

⁴⁸³ "Appendices "W": Cassino Operation – B Coy 24 NZ Bn', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44: Handwritten Message from Major Turnbull to O.C. 25 (NZ) Bn, 17 March 1944', 25 Battalion War Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 61/1/44.

⁴⁸⁴ 'Unnamed Eyewitness Account of Cassino', Battle of Cassino, WAI Series 3, 25.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid.

the south and to the Railway Station.⁴⁸⁶ 26 Battalion's attack was successful with the Battalion taking both the Railway Station and the adjacent Hummocks. This success was in turn a precondition to creating the room for A and D Companies 24 Battalion, to enter the town, and for B Company to return to 24 Battalion's command.

A and D Companies moved into the town with orders to clear the houses from the Continental Hotel to the Amphitheatre to the south.⁴⁸⁷ Both companies started to move into the town at 1430 hours and they attempted to enter the town around the area of the Goal, before heading towards the Municipal Buildings. The move into the town was a dangerous journey for both companies. Roger Smith recalled of the A Company move into the town,

'I found Rodgers [Smith's platoon commander] on the tail of the platoon ahead, no wiser than myself. Firing everywhere – Spandau, mortar and rifle – and it was impossible to pick up by sound any indication of the a battle line'⁴⁸⁸

By 1700 hours, A Company was held up by a sniper that could not be located and progress was literally reduced to a crawl when it became obvious that the only way to move past the ground the sniper covered, was to crawl single file through a ditch.⁴⁸⁹ That a sniper could hold up a company was typical of the situation in Cassino. Pathways through the rubble were often narrow and easily covered by fire while the feeling of omnipresent observation by German forces developed during the long wait for Operation *Dickens* compounded this problem by making individuals less confident about the environment they were operating in and therefore more cautious about

⁴⁸⁶ Burdon, p.236.

⁴⁸⁷ Phillips, p.297.

⁴⁸⁸ Smith, p.195.

⁴⁸⁹ '24 Battalion War Diary Entry, 17 March 1944', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

movement. As a consequence A Company did not contact B Company until 2110 hours that night.⁴⁹⁰

D Company fared even worse. After seeing A Company held up by machine-gun fire, D Company moved to the east in an attempt to find a way around the fire. D Company made the 'centre of the village', but were then held up by snipers that could not be located.⁴⁹¹ As D Company could not pass through the defile that the sniper covered, and as D Company believed smoke would not work in that situation, the Company withdrew back to the northern edge of Cassino and again the Company moved left to try and find a way forward.⁴⁹² Perversely after querying the wisdom of continuing to move in the dark, a situation that would have given D Company protection from German observation and fire that so worried them up until that point, they were ordered to proceed by 24 Battalion headquarters, and they finally occupied four houses just north of B Company positions around 0500 hours on the morning of 18 March.⁴⁹³

Despite the tardiness of D Company in their move into Cassino, it had no real impact on the fighting in Cassino. A and D Companies attack was called off between the arrival of A Company at 2110 hours, and 2200 hours when Major Turnbull signalled 24 Battalion headquarters of the decision that he had taken to cancel the attack after consulting with the Captain Schofield, the A Company commander.⁴⁹⁴ Turnbull, after experiencing 'the heaviest fire [he had] seen' during the B Company

⁴⁹⁰ '24 Battalion War Diary Entry, 17 March 1944', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

⁴⁹¹ '24 Battalion War Diary Entry, 17 March 1944', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

⁴⁹² '24 Battalion War Diary Entry, 17 March 1944', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

⁴⁹³ 'Appendix J, "D" Coy Account of attack on CASSINO', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

⁴⁹⁴ 'Message to Brigade Major Approx 2200 hrs 17 Mar 44', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44: '24 Battalion War Diary Entry, 16 March 1944', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

attack that morning, argued that as the man on the ground, he was in the best position to assess the situation and he had come to the conclusion, in contrast to his earlier opinion to 25 Battalion headquarters, that only a prepared attack with A, B and D Companies, along with tanks, would have any success in taking the western edge of the town.⁴⁹⁵

By the morning of 18 March, Major Turnbull reinforced this argument in a message to 24 Battalion headquarters. On the morning of 18 March, the primary task allocated to the three 24 Battalion companies in Cassino, was to conduct an attack from the Continental Hotel, then along the base of the hill towards the Amphitheatre.⁴⁹⁶ However Turnbull continued to feel that such an attack was impossible and he informed 24 Battalion headquarters at 0900 hours of his problems,

'Capt[ain] SCHOFIELD [A Company Commander] badly wounded at 0615 hrs this morning and getting him out this morning. A Coy [Company] 2 wounded this morning. B Coy 33 strong. Have one mobile tank with us. No word of D Coy, should be somewhere Left [sic] of A Coy. Town literally full of enemy snipers and spandaus. They inhabit rubble and ruined houses. We are being as aggressive as possible. Have advanced as far as possible without losing most of my fighting strength. Until MONASTERY Hill is in our hands sniping problem will continue. It is NOT [original emphasis] to be underrated. This does not seem to be getting back. A very large number of troops will be required to clear town. Tanks find it difficult to operate. Movement in daylight NIL [original emphasis]....Am trying to re[s]t troops today, sleep has been NIL [original emphasis] so far. Morale high'⁴⁹⁷

Thus the 24 Battalion attack did not proceed and the primary task of the morning became one of rest: Major Turnbull had reached the point of ignoring orders.

Despite the concerns Major Turnbull was showing early in the morning, by early afternoon it is possible that he had a change of heart and B Company formed up for an attack some time after 1400 hours. There is however confusion about what the attack's objective was. The notes in 24 Battalion's War Diary for B Company's operations in Cassino, imply, but do not state, that the attack was local and intended to

⁴⁹⁵ 'Message to Brigade Major Approx 2200 hrs 17 Mar 44', 24 Battalion War Diary March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

⁴⁹⁶ Puttick, p.412.

⁴⁹⁷ '24 Battalion War Diary Entry, 18 March 1944', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

deal with a party of Germans who had infiltrated into a house behind the Company.⁴⁹⁸ The New Zealand official histories in contrast, are of the opinion that the attack's objective was the Continental Hotel.⁴⁹⁹ It does seem however unlikely that the Continental Hotel was the objective, neither A and D Companies appear to have made any preparations for such an attack and it is improbable that B Company would suddenly undertake such an attack by itself.

Despite these preparations, the attack never occurred as the roof and the two upper floors of the building that B Company was sheltering in, collapsed 'burying Pte [Private] EADE under many tons of masonry and pinning Pte TAYLOR', as well as concussing Second Lieutenant McCorquindale.⁵⁰⁰ In the aftermath of the collapse McCorquindale 'showed great coolness in quelling panic' and 40 minutes were required to extract Private Taylor from the rubble.⁵⁰¹ Additionally, with a substantial amount of weapons buried, 'quite a lot of reorganisation was necessary' and any thoughts of launching an attack were ended.⁵⁰²

⁴⁹⁸ "Appendices "W": Cassino Operation – B Coy 24 NZ Bn', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

⁴⁹⁹ "Appendices "W": Cassino Operation – B Coy 24 NZ Bn', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44: Phillips, p.303: Burdon, p.237.

⁵⁰⁰ "Appendices "W": Cassino Operation – B Coy 24 NZ Bn', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44: Burdon, p.237.

⁵⁰¹ "Appendices "W": Cassino Operation – B Coy 24 NZ Bn', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

⁵⁰² 'Unnamed Eyewitness Account of Cassino', Draft Narrative, Battle of Cassino, WAI Series 3, 25.

A Tale of Two Battles

With the refusal of Major Turnbull to resume the attack towards the Continental Hotel on 18 March, offensive operations for the three 24 Battalion companies in Cassino came to an end. Attacks were limited in nature from this point on and they were restricted to clearing parties attempting to eliminate pockets of infiltrating German troops that appeared around 24 Battalion positions. Additionally there was a lot of defensive work repelling German attacks each night. Throughout the night of 19/20 March for example, D Company fought off three attacks with the first attack coming at 1945 hours, and the last attack at 0350 hours.⁵⁰³ B Company also fought off two attacks in the same night.⁵⁰⁴ Nor were these attacks minor, B Company reported that they were surrounded at 2000 hours and while D Company advised that while they were holding off the attack, there was sufficient German strength around D Company's positions for the attacking force to operate, in a 'cheeky' fashion.⁵⁰⁵

In part this static role became entrenched by the decisions of higher command, and in part it came from the depletion of 24 Battalion's manpower. In an attempt to reinvigorate the offensive, 5 Brigade was given responsibility for continuing the offensive to the north of Route Six from the evening of 19 March, while 6 Brigade maintained a defensive role south of Route Six. By this time manpower had fallen so low that an offensive role was beyond 24 Battalion. By the evening of 20 March, A Company had been reduced to 47 other ranks and no officers, B Company consisted

⁵⁰³ '24 Battalion War Diary Entry, 19-20 March 1944', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

⁵⁰⁴ '24 Battalion War Diary Entry, 19 March 1944', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid.

of Major Turnbull, and 21 other ranks, whilst D Company had three officers and 47 other ranks.⁵⁰⁶ Furthermore the sustained period of poor rations and lack of sleep, had sapped the remaining personnel's fighting efficiency and with the low numbers and general condition of the men, there were doubts about whether a determined German attack could be stopped.⁵⁰⁷ With the companies so badly depleted, they were withdrawn from Cassino between 23 and 26 March, although A Company did return on 27 March for a further six days of defensive work.

As the offensive efforts of 24 Battalion in Cassino were coming to a close, C Company were preparing to initiate their attack. C Company's call into the battle came late on 17 March. At 2130 hours Major Pike called for a meeting with Major Reynolds and his platoon commanders immediately after his return from Brigade headquarters.⁵⁰⁸ Major Pike issued orders that C Company move to Point 165 during the night, and then attack along the slope of Monastery Hill and capture Point 202.⁵⁰⁹ Once a firm base had been established, C Company was then to contact 1/9 Ghurkha Rifles on Point 193 (Hangman's Hill) to the immediate west of Point 202, as well as attack towards Route Six, to the east of Point 202, and take Hotel des Roses and Hotel Continental from the rear.⁵¹⁰

C Company's initial attack was a success. C Company had started its march to the start line on Point 165 at 0100 hours and was ready to move across the start line on time despite having to move across unfamiliar terrain on a 'pitch black' night with many of the landmarks that would have made navigation easier destroyed by

⁵⁰⁶ '24 Battalion War Diary Entry, 20 March 1944', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

⁵⁰⁷ Diary of 285963, p.16: 'Eyewitness Account, Major Ted Aked', cited in Burdon, p.249.

⁵⁰⁸ '24 Battalion War Diary Entry, 17 March 1944', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

⁵⁰⁹ 'Appendices "R" COs Conference of C COY COMD & PL COMDS - 2200 hrs 17 Mar 44', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid.

bombing.⁵¹¹ The attack started inauspiciously with C Company having to 'fight for the start line' in the face of spandau fire, but the rest of the advance went 'favourably' and Point 202 was occupied without significant difficulty.⁵¹² The three platoons then undertook their subsequent roles, 14 Platoon prepared FDLs on Point 202 with the construction of sangers, whilst the platoon commander, Second Lieutenant Doug Lloyd contacted the Ghurkhas on Hangman's Hill.⁵¹³ At the same time 13 and 15 Platoons moved down the hill, with 15 Platoon intending to 'clear [the] Right Flank incl[uding] HOTEL DES ROSES' and 13 Platoon was charged with 'clear[ing the] Left Flank incl[uding] area CONTINENTAL HOTEL'.⁵¹⁴

The attack of 15 Platoon ended in heavy fire. As the platoon moved towards Route Six, they were met by heavy resistance, particularly from one house in Cassino, known as the 'Pink House', and another 'strongpoint...in the north west of Cassino'.⁵¹⁵ This fire finally halted 15 Platoon around 1230 hours when the Platoon was approximately 30 metres above Route Six and here 15 Platoon remained for the rest of the day, unable to move due to heavy German sniper fire.⁵¹⁶ Once darkness had fallen, 15 Platoon withdrew to Point 202.⁵¹⁷

13 Platoon was also having a difficult day, but the Platoon did come within a hair's breadth of reaching their objective. 13 Platoon had taken a more southerly approach to Route Six than 15 Platoon, and were able to avoid some of the heavier fire. 13

⁵¹¹ 'Notes for War Diary; "C" COY 24 NZ BN: 15-25 Mar 44: Sat 18 Mar', 24 Battalion War Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44: Burdon, p.238.

⁵¹² 'Notes for War Diary; "C" COY 24 NZ BN: 15-25 Mar 44: Sat 18 Mar', 24 Battalion War Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

⁵¹³ 'Appendices "R" COs Conference of C COY COMD & PL COMD', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA: Burdon, pp.238-239.

⁵¹⁴ 'Appendices "R" COs Conference of C COY COMD & PL COMDS', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

⁵¹⁵ 'Notes for War Diary; "C" COY 24 NZ BN: 15-25 Mar 44: Sat 18 Mar', 24 Battalion War Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

⁵¹⁶ 'Notes for War Diary; "C" COY 24 NZ BN: 15-25 Mar 44: Sat 18 Mar', 24 Battalion War Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

⁵¹⁷ 'Notes for War Diary; "C" COY 24 NZ BN: 15-25 Mar 44: Sat 18 Mar', 24 Battalion War Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44: Burdon, p.239.

Platoon also received aid from 19 Armoured Regiment tanks who, despite being in the town, were still able to knock out at least three pillboxes that were hampering 13 Platoon's advance.⁵¹⁸ As a consequence of the different axis of advance and the support from the tanks, 13 Platoon was able to reach the rear of Hotel des Roses.⁵¹⁹

However 13 Platoon's attack collapsed at this juncture. 13 Platoon's commanding officer, Second Lieutenant Klaus, led the charge into the Hotel des Roses by initially throwing a grenade through a door of the hotel. Unfortunately the grenade failed to explode and Klaus was killed by fire from the doorway as he attempted to force his way into the building in the wake of the anticipated explosion.⁵²⁰ The abortive assault by Klaus drew the attention and fire of the German Hotel des Roses defenders, and 13 Platoon, suddenly deprived of leadership, was 'forced' back from the rear of the hotel.⁵²¹ Ultimately, 13 Platoon never resumed their advance and the Platoon withdrew back to Point 202 during the afternoon.

By the morning of 19 March, C Company was faced with a deteriorating tactical situation and they had no choice but to revert to defensive operations and conserve their remaining strength. Just before dawn on 19 March, a German counter-attack struck Castle Hill, and while the Castle remained under the control of 4 (Indian) Division, the counter-attack was successful enough to cut 1/9 Ghurkha and C Company's line of withdrawal and supply route.⁵²² This placed C Company in a predicament as the Company had followed orders to attack 'as light as possible' and only 24 hours of rations and emergency rations were carried forward.⁵²³ While a

⁵¹⁸ 'C Coy 24 Bn on Point 202', Battle of Cassino, WAI Series 3, 25.

⁵¹⁹ 'C Coy 24 Bn on Point 202', Battle of Cassino, WAI Series 3, 25; 'Notes for War Diary; "C" COY 24 NZ BN: 15-25 Mar 44: Sat 18 Mar', 24 Battalion War Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

⁵²⁰ Burdon, p.239.

⁵²¹ 'Notes for War Diary; "C" COY 24 NZ BN: 15-25 Mar 44: Sat 18 Mar', 24 Battalion War Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44: Burdon, p.239.

⁵²² Burdon, p.240.

⁵²³ 'Appendices "R" COs Conference of C COY COMD & PL COMDS - 2200 hrs 17 Mar 44', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

carrying party had reached C Company with additional rations on the evening of 18 March, it was the last to be delivered by these means despite a carrying party being lead by Second Lieutenant O'Brien trying to reach Point 202 every night. Instead resupply was attempted by dropping canisters from aircraft on 20 March and subsequent days. But C Company was only able to retrieve canisters with ammunition and water in them initially and by 21 March, C Company were a 'hungry band'.⁵²⁴ On 22 March the situation was relieved to degree when 84 "K" Rations and 22 Packs of Chocolate' were retrieved, but the poor supply situation was never fully overcome.⁵²⁵

On 19 March, C Company, unwilling to be totally passive, tried to find a way out of their isolation. In an attempt to find a route to friendly forces, 14 Platoon moved down the slope towards Cassino at 2100 hours in an attempt to contact 28 (Maori) Battalion near the western edge of Cassino.⁵²⁶ This patrol lead by Second Lieutenant Doug Lloyd, showed a high degree of determination. After moving down the hill, the platoon destroyed a machine-gun post and took a prisoner at the cost of two wounded. Undeterred, the platoon moved into the edge of town to find the 'houses reduced to rubble. This rubble was still occupied by enemy.'⁵²⁷ With their prisoner and wounded still in tow, 14 Platoon attempted to find a way through this enemy position but failed.⁵²⁸ Before a subsequent attempt to pass the enemy position was attempted, Battalion headquarters was contacted through C Company headquarters to inquire whether they were to inhabit a section of the town, or withdraw to Point 202 if the

⁵²⁴ 'C Coy 24 Bn on Point 202', Battle of Cassino, WAI Series 3, 25.

⁵²⁵ 'Notes for War Diary; "C" COY 24 NZ BN: 15-25 Mar 44: Wed 22 Mar', 24 Battalion War Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

⁵²⁶ 'Notes for War Diary; "C" COY 24 NZ BN: 15-25 Mar 44: Sun 19 Mar', 24 Battalion War Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44; 'C Coy 24 Bn, 19 March', Battle of Cassino, WAI Series 3, 25.

⁵²⁷ '24 Battalion War Diary Entry, 19 March 1944', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

⁵²⁸ '24 Battalion War Diary Entry, 19 March 1944', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

next attempt to contact 28 (Maori) Battalion failed.⁵²⁹ 14 Platoon were ordered to return to Point 202, but when the subsequent attempt to reach 28 (Maori) Battalion did fail, 14 Platoon were unable to withdraw to Point 202 before daylight and they became pinned down by sniper fire behind a stonewall 30 metres above the Hotel des Roses.⁵³⁰ 14 Platoon remained in this location throughout the day, and returned to Point 202 with their prisoner and wounded after dark on 19 March.⁵³¹

Unable to find a way through the enemy defences, C Company settled into a daily routine. Artillery fire that constantly landed on Point 202 presented the most danger. While there was an expected increase in German artillery and mortar fire landing on the area from 19 March as German forces reacted to the incursion, Allied artillery also presented a constant danger.⁵³² Company headquarters was hit by a 4.2 inch mortar shell and five men were wounded, while on 22 March the C Company War Diary complains 'a stonk on P[oint] 165 overlaps the left forward Pl[atoo]n area. This stonk has been troubling us every day and we do not seem to be able to adjust it'.⁵³³

Additionally Point 202 had smoke screens laid over for much of the daylight period of C Company's occupation. While the smoke has potential benefits of hiding a position from enemy observation, from the point of view of C Company, it was a curse. The smoke made it seem like 'continuous night [and] double piquets must be maintained and there are continual stand-to's'.⁵³⁴ Because of the wind direction, Point 202 was the 'point of origin for air burst smoke' and the empty smoke shell

⁵²⁹ '24 Battalion War Diary Entry, 20 March 1944', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

⁵³⁰ '24 Battalion War Diary Entry, 20 March 1944', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44: 'C Coy 24 Bn, 19 March', Battle of Cassino, WAI Series 3, 25: Burdon, p.240.

⁵³¹ '24 Battalion War Diary Entry, 20 March 1944', 24 Battalion War Diary, March 1944, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44: 'C Coy 24 Bn, 19 March', Battle of Cassino, WAI Series 3, 25: Burdon, p.240.

⁵³² 'Notes for War Diary; "C" COY 24 NZ BN: 15-25 Mar 44: Sun 19 Mar', 24 Battalion War Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

⁵³³ 'Notes for War Diary; "C" COY 24 NZ BN: 15-25 Mar 44: Thurs 23 Mar', 24 Battalion War Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

⁵³⁴ 'Notes for War Diary; "C" COY 24 NZ BN: 15-25 Mar 44: Tues 21 Mar', 24 Battalion War Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

cases and canisters landed inside the C Company perimeter in considerable numbers.⁵³⁵ Such was the hazard caused, on 22 March a Liaison Officer from 1/9 Ghurkhas was unable to return to his unit until after darkness had fallen and the smoke was stopped because smoke shell cases and canisters were making 'movement...almost impossible without casualties'. The following day casualties did indeed occur, when three men in C Company were injured by falling debris from smoke shells.⁵³⁶

C Company's isolation continued until 24 March when Major Reynolds heard from 1/9 Ghurkha at 0330 hours that a withdrawal of 1/9 Ghurkha and C Company would occur that night at 2100 hours if the appropriate code word was received.⁵³⁷ Major Reynolds immediately visited 1/9 Ghurkha headquarters, and in light of the tactical situation, it was agreed that 1/9 Ghurkha should withdraw through C Company and C Company could provide a rear-guard in case any German troops tried to follow 1/9 Ghurkha.⁵³⁸ Furthermore, as 1/9 Ghurkha was a stronger fighting force, it would 'punch a hole in the encirclement' for both units to pass through.⁵³⁹

When Major Reynolds returned to Point 202, he began to prepare his company for withdrawal. Reynolds initially briefed his platoon commanders, but he ordered them not to tell the men until after the withdrawal had been confirmed.⁵⁴⁰ Confirmation of the withdrawal came after dark and Reynolds issued his final orders to his platoon commanders and told them that the Company would withdraw in the formation of a large fighting patrol with Second Lieutenant Reynolds in command of the lead

⁵³⁵ 'Letter from Major J W Reynolds to R M Burdon, 27 January 1950', cited in Burdon, p.243ff.

⁵³⁶ 'Notes for War Diary; "C" COY 24 NZ BN: 15-25 Mar 44: Wed 22 Mar', 24 Battalion War Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44: 'Notes for War Diary; "C" COY 24 NZ BN: 15-25 Mar 44: Thurs 23 Mar', 24 Battalion War Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

⁵³⁷ 'Notes for War Diary; "C" COY 24 NZ BN: 15-25 Mar 44: Fri 24 Mar', 24 Battalion War Diary, WAI Series 1, DA 60/1/44.

⁵³⁸ 'Eyewitness Account, Major Reynolds', cited in Burdon, p.243.

⁵³⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid, pp.243-244.

element.⁵⁴¹ Reynolds also had the difficult task of telling the wounded, that since he only had 'about' 32 unwounded men left, he was unable to take the wounded that would need carrying because he needed all his men so the Company could fight its way out.⁵⁴² He did however promise to return for them the following morning under a Red Cross flag.⁵⁴³

An artillery barrage that was the signal to start the withdrawal commenced on time at 2100 hours.⁵⁴⁴ Reynolds sent out patrols to contact 1/9 Ghurkha as they moved towards Point 202, but no contact was made.⁵⁴⁵ At 2200 hours, Reynolds decided that he would wait another hour for 1/9 Ghurkha to arrive, and when 2300 hours arrived with no sign of the Ghurkha unit, C Company moved off to the north.⁵⁴⁶ Surprisingly, C Company made it back into friendly territory without seeing anybody, including 1/9 Ghurkha who had taken a different route back to friendly positions, and by 0045 hours C Company were climbing aboard trucks in preparation for transportation to B Echelon.⁵⁴⁷ This just left the task of rescuing the wounded that had been left on Point 202. Major Reynolds 'was forbidden...by the GOC' to lead a party of stretcher bearers back, and instead a party under command of the Battalion Medical Officer, Captain Alex Borrie, managed to pass through German lines and evacuated the wounded to New Zealand lines.⁵⁴⁸

24 Battalion fought two distinct battles at Cassino, one in the town, the other on the flank of Monastery Hill. The two battles also yielded two vastly different results, C Company achieved a qualified success by securing Point 202 and thereby securing

⁵⁴¹ Ibid, p.244.

⁵⁴² Ibid.

⁵⁴³ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁷ 'Eyewitness Account, Major J W Reynolds', cited in Burdon, p.244: C Company 15-25 March, p.2.

⁵⁴⁸ Burdon, p.244ff, pp.245-247.

the flank of Hangman's Hill. That C Company maintained this position despite the difficulties that they faced, was more than an adequate effort in the context of the wider battle. In contrast, Phillips' comment, 'Twenty-fourth Battalion's coming made no real impact on the battle', succinctly sums up 24 Battalion's, and in particular in B Company's, effort in Cassino township.⁵⁴⁹

B Company's efforts were erratic. Of the attacks that B Company were ordered to carry out, one was delayed and its method modified, another was cancelled by Major Turnbull, and only one attack was carried out as ordered. Furthermore only the 17 March attack achieved a concrete long term gain, but bizarrely, this attack left B Company further away from their objectives than 11 and 12 Platoon had been at 'McCorquindale's House' and had only just been relinquished on the order of Major Turnbull three hours previously! Additionally, A and D Companies never had the chance to make an impact as Major Turnbull interceded and cancelled their attack. The nub of the problem is neatly summed up in this dichotomy, why did B Company, who drew its men from the same source, and who undertook the same training as C Company, have 'no real impact'?

A potential disparity in leadership qualities is one obvious difference. Major Reynolds and Second Lieutenants Lloyd and Klaus all demonstrated sufficient leadership qualities to inspire their subordinates to undertake difficult tasks. In Major Reynolds case, his leadership was recognised at the time when he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order 'for the manner in which he conducted the operations of a company completely isolated for six days under the most trying circumstances'.⁵⁵⁰ Similarly, Second Lieutenant McCorquindale also provided strong leadership in B Company.

⁵⁴⁹ Phillips, p.298.

⁵⁵⁰ Burdon, p.244.

Major Turnbull was a contrast to these examples. He was clearly not a 'heroic' form of leader who felt it was his role to 'lead from the front'. He was not involved in the attack on 16 March, nor does he appear to have been amongst the group who tried to cross the Gari. Turnbull, it would seem, was part of the other B Company group who withdrew from the open ground around the Gari, leaving the attacking element of B Company to its own devices in the open ground and heavy fire that ended the attack. Turnbull's style of leadership was not necessarily a problem in itself, company commanders have a considerably broader role than just being at the fore of any attack and in the context of modern warfare, leading from the front, and the risks it entails, is potentially more of a hindrance than help.

However, leadership must be adaptable to the circumstances. B Company had suffered three weeks of misery in Mud Valley and now it was being asked to undertake a role in a challenging environment alongside troops from another battalion that they were unfamiliar with. Furthermore, casualties had disrupted B Company's chain of command. Major Turnbull and Second Lieutenant McCorquindale were the only remaining officers and it is not difficult to imagine that the senior NCOs would have also been depleted. While Turnbull was certainly not conducting a form of 'chateau' leadership by completely divorcing himself from the environment his command was working in, nor could it be said he was fully living up to what John Keegan refers to as the 'first and greatest imperative of command', to be present and to be *seen* to share the dangers that resulted from his orders.⁵⁵¹

While it is far from clear, there is an indication that a lack of appropriate leadership may have led to a low level mutiny in B Company that had its impact on Major Turnbull's decision to halt offensive operations. By the time B Company

⁵⁵¹ John Keegan, *The Mask of Command*, New York, Penguin, 1987, p.329.

reached the open ground around the Gari River, the anonymous account of the period gives the impression that most of the company was unwilling to cross the open ground, but did so under the insistence of Major Turnbull. From this point on Major Turnbull refused to try and take ground no matter what the circumstances, possibly because B Company had lost confidence in his leadership and had become unwilling to follow orders for further attacks.

Without an eyewitness to confirm this state of affairs, such an argument is relatively tenuous, but it would not have been the only time that similar events occurred in 24 Battalion. It is clear that there existed within 24 Battalion's culture, a willingness to take action against officers who the men felt put lives at risk needlessly. Whether or not the command relationship sunk to these levels is open to question, but the consideration of such an occurrence does provide additional context to the decision taken by Turnbull to halt all 24 Battalion attacks.

A myriad of other reasons can be advanced for the failure of B Company in Cassino and this thesis has already advanced some reasons, as have other authors. Cassino was clearly a difficult environment to operate in, the darkness on the night of 15/16 March, the rubble, the poor communications and the restricted nature of armour operations, all had an impact on B Company operations. Furthermore, some have lamented 2 (NZ) Division being committed to a battle of attrition despite the Division being more suited to mobile operations.⁵⁵² With only one brigade in the frontline during the wait for, and for the first five days of Operation Dickens, it was not a question of a lack of infantry, but as Barber and Tonkin-Covell noted, Cassino did not allow the Division an arena 'to show what [2 (NZ) Division] had been *trained*

⁵⁵² For example of this argument, see Matthew Parker, *Monte Cassino: The Hardest Fought Battle of World War II*, New York, Anchor Books, 2005, p.267 and Matthew Wright, *Italian Odyssey: New Zealanders in the Battle for Italy, 1943-45*, Auckland, Reed Books, 2003, p.111.

[emphasis added] to do since El Alamein: a set-piece break-out followed by exploitation with armour and mobile infantry.⁵⁵³

During 1942, the doctrine of 2 (NZ) Division evolved with developments in artillery fire codes, and the integration of armour into the New Zealand force structure. These developments led to successful combined arms offensive method that involved ‘carefully stage[d attacks]...with...taped lines, precise rates of infantry advance and barrage lifts’ to ensure that all force elements worked in unison and so infantry could fully utilise the firepower generated by artillery and armour.⁵⁵⁴ The New Zealanders had in effect obtained a degree of mastery over what Steven Biddle referred to as the ‘modern system’ of offensive tactics, a system that enabled victory on the battlefield.⁵⁵⁵ With a successful combined arms offensive method established, it was not only used operationally, but also emphasised in training programmes.

This carefully trained for and utilised method, became the crux of the problem for 24 Battalion because the rubble of Cassino defeated it. Infantry seeking pathways to move forward through the rubble, could not advance quickly enough, nor concentrate sufficiently in the confined spaces amongst the rubble, to fully utilise an artillery barrage. Coordinating barrage lifts with rates of infantry advance became impossible, while communication difficulties precluded any attempt to coordinate barrage lifts with advance rates on an *ad hoc* basis.

Thus after the initial artillery programme on the afternoon of 15 March, no artillery fire plan in direct support of an infantry assault was attempted again in the Third Battle of Cassino.⁵⁵⁶ Rather the artillery was utilised with defensive and harassing

⁵⁵³ Laurie Barber and John Tonkin-Covell, *Freyberg's Salamander*, Auckland, Century Hutchinson, 1989, p.252.

⁵⁵⁴ Phillips, p.351.

⁵⁵⁵ Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2004, p.35.

⁵⁵⁶ Phillips, p.351.

fire, impromptu fire on targets of opportunity, counter-battery and counter-mortar fire, as well as supplying the ever present smoke screens around Cassino.⁵⁵⁷ Nor was 24 Battalion's mortar platoon able to supply any fire, as the mortars remained outside Cassino and were therefore out of range.⁵⁵⁸ Additionally, while tanks became a substitute for artillery in Cassino, their support was limited by their inability to maintain mobility in the rubble. In essence 24 Battalion had the knowledge of the 'modern system' of offensive tactics, 'cover, concealment, dispersion, small-unit independent maneuver, suppression and combined arms integration', they lacked the ability in the Cassino environment to implement tools of combined arms integration with the armour and artillery and were unable to generate the firepower required.⁵⁵⁹

Thus 24 Battalion companies had to overcome the tactical challenges that faced them by developing a new 'solution to the problem of how to advance by means of fire and movement, and dislodging the enemy from his position.'⁵⁶⁰ Turnbull however continued to think within the parameters of his experience, staged attacks that were conducted in daylight so intra-company control could be maintained and where he hoped tanks could generate enough firepower to re-establish the Division's normal offensive method. Emulation of German tactics of infiltration that sought to gain key terrain and disrupt enemy rear area operations, and a operation that Turnbull had been ordered to undertake on the night of 15 March, was clearly unacceptable to Turnbull.⁵⁶¹

It is unsurprising that Turnbull did not have the knowledge to easily modify his tactics. While 24 Battalion was an experienced unit, much of the experience only

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁸ Interview, Jim Hunt, 14 June 2006.

⁵⁵⁹ Biddle, p.35.

⁵⁶⁰ Dr Stephen Bull, *World War II Infantry Tactics (1): Squad and Platoon*, Oxford, Osprey Publishing, 2004, p.30.

⁵⁶¹ *United States Army Field Manual FM 100-5 Operations*, United States Army, 1998, 7-19.

went as far back as El Alamein because 24 Battalion's near destruction at El Mreir and Sidi Rezegh, as well as the furlough scheme, had removed many of the longer serving personnel. Additionally with the transference of institutional experience from 'old hands' to 'new chums' being haphazard, it is reasonable to assume that much of the institutional knowledge that existed about offensive methods prior to the establishment of the current method, was lost. Thus while 24 Battalion had a significant number of experienced personnel, that experience lacked sufficient diversity and depth to have either been conveyed, or accessible to Major Turnbull so that he could find an alternative solution to his tactical problem. 24 Battalion, therefore did not have the confidence to change tactics in the cauldron of Cassino.

Unable to change tactics, Major Turnbull turned to manipulating the command system. A mission orientated command system was utilised by the New Zealanders and this allowed Turnbull a degree of initiative. Thus when ordered to infiltrate forward on the night of 15 March, Turnbull, upon realising the conditions in the town, felt for the purposes of reaching the objective, it would be better to wait until daylight. However when this attack, and the subsequent effort on 17 March failed, Turnbull became unwilling to comply with orders to continue to try and reach his objective.

Instead Turnbull used his position as 'the man on the ground' to abuse his freedom of action and block orders for an attack, whilst at the same time, requesting reinforcements as a pre-condition for the resumption of offensive operations as a way of avoiding direct confrontation with higher command. Initially, Turnbull insisted that 100 extra men were required before B Company could resume the attack on the Continental Hotel. But when these reinforcements arrived in the form of A and D Companies, Turnbull halted their attack and then informed higher command that tanks, not just men, would be needed. That Turnbull was able to maintain this

charade was due to the siting of Battalion headquarters outside of Cassino and with poor communications, Battalion headquarters never had a full enough grasp of the situation to impose its will on Turnbull and eventually other units of 2 (NZ) Division had to take on the job that Turnbull refused to undertake. Yet again, the constraints on experience at the senior levels of the Battalion negatively impacted on 24 Battalion's ability to carry out its operational tasks.

Conclusion.

As 1945 drew to an end, so did the life of 24 Battalion. As shipping became available small groups of men left the Battalion for New Zealand or J Force and by New Year's Day 1946, Lieutenant-Colonel Ray Boord, 24 Battalion's last C. O., was out of job as the Battalion had finally dispersed.⁵⁶² It was fitting that Boord was the final C. O. of 24 Battalion. Boord had left New Zealand as a sergeant in 24 Battalion and apart from being wounded in 1943, as well as a furlough, Boord spent his entire war with 24 Battalion and he was in all probability the only individual to achieve such a length of service in 24 Battalion.⁵⁶³ He was, it could be argued, the Battalion's most experienced soldier and experience is, this thesis has argued, a useful thing to have as an infantry battalion commander.

Experience is however a mercurial thing and if the experience of 24 Battalion is anything to judge by, it is clear the simplistic notions of 'experience' that permeate military historiography do little to define the abilities of a given unit. The discourse surrounding 2 (NZ) Division by 1944 was that the Division was an elite one and that experienced personnel played its part in the achieving of that status. In part this argument is not hard to support, 2 (NZ) Division was indeed experienced and within 24 Battalion at least, between half and three-quarters of personnel on any given day were long-serving soldiers who had seen more than just a brief period of combat. Thus to a superficial glance these figures support the notion that 24 Battalion *should* be an effective unit.

⁵⁶² Burdon, p.338.

⁵⁶³ Burdon, p.119ff.

However such levels of experience are no 'silver bullet' in determining the fighting effectiveness of a unit, where that experience is concentrated and the nature of the experience is much more critical. Unsurprisingly, experience at the highest levels of the battalion hierarchy, the battalion C. O. and the company commanders, was the most important. 24 Battalion's rear-guard action at Elasson demonstrates the problems that can arise when inexperience does not lead to realistic appreciation of the tactical problems facing a battalion. Similarly Major Guy Turnbull, while more experienced than his predecessors at Elasson, was an inexperienced company commander and when it became apparent that the situation was outside his knowledge, he lacked the ideas born from experience to try and resolve his tactical problems.

In part the need for greater experience in these levels of the battalion hierarchy is due to the difficulty in transferring knowledge to them. Much of the training carried out by 24 Battalion through the three studied periods was below company level and this means that company and battalion commanders do not get to operate and interact with larger environments often during training. Thus these men do not have the opportunity to develop a broad range of skills during training as their subordinates did, and instead they had to rely on previous experience and knowledge they can garner at the time.

The inverse is true for those in the ranks. Confidence in one's ability was a key attribute for those in the ranks and confidence in one's skills could be generated from training alone. 24 Battalion troops in Greece and El Alamein, despite not having the experience that the Battalion was later to acquire, were still confident troops and therefore they willingly undertook tasks that were asked of them. 24 Battalion held firm in Elasson, conducted a redeployment on an active battlefield at Molos, and

walked into a storm of fire during the opening night of Operation *Lightfoot*.⁵⁶⁴ It can be easily argued that experienced soldiers would have done the same thing but with less casualties, but such an argument would quickly descend into a conversation about how long a piece of string is and the crucial point is that both experienced and inexperienced soldiers, providing they had self-confidence and confidence in their commanders, operate well under fire.

Experience can also act as an inhibitor to aggression in the infantryman as well. The growth of experience in 24 Battalion, as well as the stark realities of battlefield disasters such as El Mreir changed 24 Battalion's culture, soldiers became more cynical, and not unexpectedly, more conscious of the demands of battlefield self-preservation. This in itself did not in itself make the ranks less effective soldiers, but rather they became more aware of the line between what they believed was effective soldiering and foolishness. While it remains shrouded in mystery, it would appear that the line was crossed by Major Turnbull at Cassino and this event does demonstrate that experience is a double-edged sword and if not allied with effective leadership, 'more' experience was not necessarily a good thing.

That training could be substituted for experience to a degree was also a fortunate thing. Training, allied with a strong battalion culture, rather than experience was a more effective determinant in establishing an efficient body of men. The training programmes that preceded the Greek Campaign and Operation *Lightfoot*, despite their limitations, managed to provide sufficient self-confidence and skills to enable 24 Battalion to operate effectively. But the ability to boost self-confidence and skills amongst the ranks was done at the expense of providing training opportunities for officers, and senior officers in particular.

⁵⁶⁴ Crockett, *Infantryman*.

Despite the importance of training, it was a tool that was rarely well utilised and those who needed training the most, the inexperienced soldiers, were poorly served. Because of a lack of knowledge of current combat conditions, training in New Zealand and at Maadi lacked the ability on many occasions to effectively pass useful information on to reinforcements. When it did become evident that a new area of instruction needed to be added to the syllabus at Maadi, the evidence suggests that the training system was slow to respond with such developments as house to house fighting not being taught until after 2 (NZ) Division had been in Italy for a substantial period of time, or the method of delivery, as Ivan Whyte discovered with mine training, undermined any attempt to pass on useful knowledge. In essence the most significant benefit training in New Zealand and Maadi could have in most cases, was to build at least the illusion in most individuals that they were soldiers and thereby build a degree of self-confidence. While this building of self-confidence was of vital importance, a more responsive system could have achieved so much more.

Where these skill deficiencies that resulted from New Zealand and Maadi based training could have been overcome was with 24 Battalion itself. To a degree this process did occur during the various North African campaigns because 24 Battalion had lengthy periods of time where training could take place. The lead up to Operation *Lightfoot* is case and point for this process even though it was a truncated period of training. This focused period of training was able to impart the skills and build sufficient small group cohesion in 24 Battalion that the men of the Battalion were able, just as they were able in Greece, to deal with the situations they found themselves in willing despite some poor decision making at higher levels.

This formal process of passing on experience started to breakdown in Italy because suddenly the long rest periods were not available and reinforcements would

commonly turn up at 24 Battalion while it was in the line. Thus a new system was required to enhance the skills of those who arrived at the Battalion, a system such as a buddy system where the inexperienced were paired with the experienced so that information could be passed on without interfering with Battalion operations. Nothing of the sort was forthcoming however and instead, except where individuals took it upon themselves to assist newcomers, it was a case of 'on the job training' and hopefully living long enough to figure what was happening. Even when individuals did try and assist newcomers, the transference of knowledge was at best haphazard and as a consequence institutional knowledge had a tendency to leak out of the Battalion's collective memory.

Because of this loss of knowledge and the inability to senior commanders to conduct development through training, there is no real correlation between the levels of experience in 24 Battalion and its combat performance. While 24 Battalion had a degree of good fortune during the Greek Campaign and during Operation *Lightfoot* that offset some of the dubious decisions were made at the higher levels of battalion command, the bottom line is that 24 Battalion still had to perform well to be in a position to have that luck fall their way. In contrast, at Cassino where dubious decisions were again part of the equation, but no luck came B Company's way, experience was no panacea because the experience that existed was not broad enough. Thus B Company with enough experience to appreciate the difficulty of the situation, lost their confidence to continue offensive operations. Thus this study suggests, and it can do no more than that due to its narrow focus, that New Zealand's battlefield performance should not be sought so much in experience, but in where and when they obtained training opportunities and how effectively they were used.

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