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# **Sir John White:**

## **Witness to History**

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## ABSTRACT

Many contributions have been made to New Zealand's literary record of the Second World War, from the comprehensive War History Series that recorded each action and every unit of the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Expeditionary Force through to the memoirs of lowly contributors down the ranks. Everyone saw the war through different eyes. While much has been written, so there is much still to be understood about New Zealand's contribution to the defeat of the forces of fascism and Nazism between 1939-1945. By far the majority of those who served the nation declined to talk, even to their families, about their experiences, preferring to keep them bottled up, possibly as a result of what they saw, memories of lost comrades or believing non-participants would not understand. Debate, controversy and study have gone into many of the writings from the war and into the actions in which New Zealanders were involved.

Typical of many of those who largely decided to retain their own counsel, a not inappropriate description given his later status, was John White. He started the war as a second-lieutenant and ended as a Major. He began his working life as a solicitor and ended as a Supreme Court Judge, having also served as Solicitor-General. This thesis largely relates to his unique role, as personal assistant to the General Officer Commanding (GOC) of the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Division, General Bernard Freyberg, a figure of immense stature in New Zealand history.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

To the family of Sir John White, and especially Douglas White, a Judge retired from New Zealand's Court of Appeal, for access to the large collection of papers in the possession of the White family, and to the Alexander Turnbull Library and the National Army Museum for access to papers of relevance. To my supervisor Dr Adam Claasen for all his assistance and guidance. To my wife Barbara, for her patience and understanding in the quest for research and the writing of this thesis.

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis while biographical in matters of Sir John White's war experience, and in some parts of his pre and post-war careers, cannot be regarded as a complete biography nor is it intended as such. Rather, it is an analysis of his involvement in the Second World War, his relationship, and observations of, one of the most formidable figures in New Zealand military history Lieutenant-General Bernard Freyberg. White's comments on Freyberg's leadership are relevant given the comments of Ross Keith Mackie, who said high command had been a neglected area of study in New Zealand and was an area not well served by the country's archives, libraries and museums.

Only one New Zealand general (Major-General Howard Kippenberger) published an autobiography, and there are few worthwhile biographies of senior military and political figures. Of the communications between Freyberg and the Government, only a portion has survived in archives, and there are significant omissions from other records. Glyn Harper said it was a tragedy for New Zealand's military history that Freyberg's reputation and fame had overshadowed contributions made by other commanders in the 2<sup>nd</sup> NZ Division. The lack of high command source material is not a uniquely New Zealand or military phenomenon.<sup>1</sup>

This was in keeping with the view of Australian academic Dr Chris Clark who said biographies exploring Australian Army experiences were a neglected genre.<sup>2</sup> In studying Clark's claims, Peter Dean believed an undervaluation of militarism as it featured in Australian society, along with the preoccupation with the ordinary soldier as promulgated by official Australian First World War historian Charles Bean, contributed to the concentration on everyday events in the field, rather than upon

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<sup>1</sup> Ross Keith Mackie, *Freyberg's High-Command Relationships 1939-1942*, thesis, Massey University 2014, p.8

<sup>2</sup> Dr Chris Clark, Exploring the History of the Australian Army Through Biography, *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, 34, June 2001, quoted by Peter Dean, "Commemoration, Memory and Forgotten Histories: The Complexity and Limitations of Army Biography," *War and Society*, 29:2, p.118-136

those determining strategy at General Headquarters.<sup>3</sup> This was also a reaction to the British style of military hierarchy among Australians who preferred the more democratic approach that applied not only in the military but to Australian life in general. There had been a change in emphasis in recent years and more biographies of the officer class were emerging. While the scale of indifference to officer's biographies was not as significant in New Zealand, it was a fact that few biographies existed, although in more recent times, they have started to emerge, notably from the First World War among New Zealanders like: Major-General Sir Andrew Russell<sup>4</sup>, Lieutenant-Colonel William Malone<sup>5</sup>, Lieutenant-Colonel Edmund Bowler<sup>6</sup> and Brigadier-General Herbert Hart.<sup>7</sup> By comparison, New Zealand has been reasonably well served with biographies of airmen in the Second World War. Vincent Orange's works on Air Chief Marshall Sir Keith Park<sup>8</sup>, Air Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham,<sup>9</sup> Wing Commander Johnny Checketts<sup>10</sup> and Devon Sutcliffe's 2011 thesis on Chief of Air Staff Sir Leonard Isitt.<sup>11</sup>

From a Second World War perspective of the 2<sup>nd</sup> NZ Division, White's prolific private writings, letters and papers offer partial remedy to the faults Mackie listed. They represent arguably the closest observation of a man writ firmly into New Zealand's history. White, although a legal scholar, showed an uncommon appreciation of history and more than once utilised the Greek classics in references to warfare in aspects of the Greek campaign. His was not an uncomfortable war when compared to the lot of the infantryman. He, for the large part, travelled in comfort, ate from the General's Mess and slept in relative luxury. He was exposed to the enemy on occasion but was not required to take up arms at any stage. Instead, he took up his pen, and created an unappreciated legacy that has been opened by this study. He was at his General's beck and call, day and night, and approached his role with respect both for Freyberg and the position in which he served. He met, observed and recorded

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Dean, "Commemoration, Memory and Forgotten Histories: The Complexity and Limitations of Army Biography," *War and Society*, 29:2, p.118-136

<sup>4</sup> Jock Vennell, *The Forgotten General: New Zealand World War One Commander Major-General Sir Andrew Russell*, Allen & Unwin, 2009

<sup>5</sup> John Crawford, *No Better Death: The Great War Diaries and Letters of William Malone*, Exisle Publishing, Auckland, 2005

<sup>6</sup> Frank Glen, *Bowler of Gallipoli*, Australian Military History Publications, Loftus (Australia), 2004

<sup>7</sup> John Crawford, *The Devil's Own War: The Diary of Herbert Hart*, Exisle Publishing, Auckland, 2009

<sup>8</sup> Vincent Orange, *Park: the biography of Air Chief Marshal Sir Keith Park*, Methuen, London, 1984

<sup>9</sup> Vincent Orange, *Coningham: a biography of Air Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham*, Methuen, London, 1980

<sup>10</sup> Vincent Orange, *Johnny Checketts: the road to Biggin Hill*, Grub Street, London, 2006

<sup>11</sup> Devon Sutcliffe, "Sustained effort: the life of Sir Leonard Isitt," Thesis, Massey University, 2011

many of the key figures in the Allied forces and his day-to-day record-taking in what is known as the General Officer Commanding's Diary (GOC Diary) provided invaluable archival material for historians.<sup>12</sup>

A criticism of biographical works and those writing them is that the proximity between author and subject can be too close – the world is seen without a degree of detachment. The writer was conscious of that in researching this thesis. However, the uniqueness of White's position makes his observations relevant. Samuel Johnson said, "History can be formed from permanent monuments and records; but lives can only be written from personal knowledge, which is growing every day less, and in a short time is lost forever."<sup>13</sup> Criticism and comment abounded in aspects of Freyberg's career and White offers some reasoning for those controversies, if not always agreeing with the criticisms.

If the issue of the proximity of the writer to his subject is one aspect to be mindful of in presenting this thesis, the place of biography in academic study is another. As David Levering Lewis pointed out, "The new social sciences regarded the study of the individual as of limited value in the scheme of understanding institutional forces. The university – certainly the research university was not the place for a biographer to make a name for himself."<sup>14</sup>

From a New Zealand perspective, Jock Phillips believed biography had been "the most distinctive and distinguished contribution of New Zealand academic life since the Second World War."<sup>15</sup> He said in New Zealand "where history is short and social forces have had less time to develop, biography still has an important part to play."<sup>16</sup> Michael King said in writing biography "we ought to be as much concerned with elements that throw light on individual character and motivation as on those that deal with the wider contexts of social, political and economic conditions."<sup>17</sup> Sir John White's writings do 'throw light' on the individual characters and motivations of

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<sup>12</sup> See, Matthew Wright, *Freyberg's War*, Penguin, Auckland, 2005; Laurie Barber and John Tonkin-Covell, *Freyberg: Churchill's Salamander*, Century Hutchinson, Auckland, 1989 and Chris Pugsley, *A Bloody Road Home*, Penguin, Auckland, 2014

<sup>13</sup> Samuel Johnson, quoted in *The International Dictionary of Thoughts*, John P. Bradley, Leo F. Daniels, Thomas C. Jones, J.G. Ferguson Publishing Coy., Chicago, 1969 p.83

<sup>14</sup> David Levering Lewis, *The Autobiography of Biography*, *The American Scholar*, Summer 2014, p.94

<sup>15</sup> Jock Phillips, *Biography in New Zealand*, Allen and Unwin, Port Nicholson Press, Wellington, 1985, p.2

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Michael King, *Political Biography: A Commentary*, in *Biography in New Zealand*, ed.Jock Phillips, Allen and Unwin, Port Nicholson Press, Wellington 1985, p.37

Freyberg and others in the 2<sup>nd</sup> NZ Division and while modern trends have focused on the lives of ordinary people as being more acceptable for biographical study, it could be argued that by his reticence in telling his own story in public form, White had attempted to make his life less ordinary than those with whom he served. John Milton Cooper Jr. said, “There are many reasons that people choose their subjects and write their biographies. For me, and my academic ilk, however, there is always the requirement that our subjects have historical significance and that they illuminate important things about the times in which they lived and the events in which they participated.”<sup>18</sup>

With this in mind this thesis will show that Sir John White’s writings fit Cooper’s bill. Cooper added that it was a requirement that sufficient material exist for an examination of their subjects’ lives. There is no doubt about the extent of White’s repository and given the amount he acquired it would be difficult not to at least draw some interest from his observations and, in presenting them to a wider public, to extend the understanding of a significant slice of New Zealand history. Cooper distrusted any biographer who did not share a similar interest with his subject.<sup>19</sup> This, he said, allowed the biographer “to question and change preconceived ideas and to appreciate the subject in a rich and truer way.”<sup>20</sup> At the same time, Keith Sinclair said the biographer decided what to put in and what to leave out. “In a sense he shapes his subject’s life. It is partly for this reason that the author should not judge his subject.”<sup>21</sup> The importance of gaining impressions of those who may have known the subject was also important, but not as important as documentation. White had both. Cooper quoted the Chinese saying, “Palest ink is stronger than brightest memory.”<sup>22</sup>

If you think of his war experience alone, he [Sir John] has an unrivalled insight into one of the two great military commanders that New Zealand has produced and then, when you add his post-war career, this is a unique man

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<sup>18</sup> John Milton Cooper Jr., *Conception, Conversation, and Comparison: My Experiences as a Biographer, Writing Biography, Historians & Their Craft*, ed Lloyd E. Ambrosius, University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln, 2004, p.81

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p.90

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>21</sup> Keith Sinclair, *Political biography in New Zealand*, in *Biography in New Zealand*, ed. Jock Phillips, Allen and Unwin, Port Nicholson Press, Wellington, 1985, p.36

<sup>22</sup> Cooper, *ibid*

who was almost witness to, and then put his mark on, New Zealand in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>23</sup>

Primary sources utilised in the preparation of this thesis include Sir John White's personal papers held by the White family.<sup>24</sup> These include his copy of the GOC Diary that he wrote, campaign articles and letters, specifically on the Greek, Crete, North Africa and Italy campaigns. Letters to family and friends supplement the diary and his battle records. There are also post-war letters he deemed it necessary to write to newspapers and book publishers to correct their misrepresentation, as he saw it, of Freyberg's actions during the war. Reference will also be made to oral histories he provided for the New Zealand Army for the National Army Museum<sup>25</sup>, the Wellington Law Society<sup>26</sup> and the New Zealand War History Project (unused)<sup>27</sup>. Further primary sources include the war-time diary of his brother-in-law, the former Chief Justice, Sir Richard Wild, the unpublished biography of Lieutenant-General Sir Leonard Thornton "Marking Time" and an interview with historian Christopher Pugsley<sup>28</sup>.

Secondary sources include Sir Geoffrey Cox's 1943 study of Freyberg for *The Atlantic Monthly*, Freyberg V.C.<sup>29</sup> and his books *A Tale of Two Battles*,<sup>30</sup> which covered the Battle for Crete and the subsequent Battle of Sidi Rezegh, and *The Race to Trieste*<sup>31</sup>, which described the last days of the Second World War when New Zealand denied Yugoslavia's aims of securing Trieste from Italy. Dan Davin, an intelligence officer with the NZ Division and later an editor at Oxford University Press, provided a study of Freyberg in Lord Carver's *The War Lords*<sup>32</sup>. He also wrote the volume on *Crete*<sup>33</sup> in the Official War History series. Davin was also interviewed for the television documentary series, *Freyberg VC*, and the notes of that interview,

<sup>23</sup> Christopher Pugsley, interview with Lynn McConnell, 9 October, 2015

<sup>24</sup> Sir John White Papers, White Family Collection (hereafter: Sir John White Papers, WFC)

<sup>25</sup> Sir John White, Oral History interview with SSgt Brenton Beach, 14 February 2007, 8-12 March 2007, 3 May 2007, National Army Museum (Hereafter, White NAM)

<sup>26</sup> Sir John White, Oral History interview with Hugo Manson, 22 March-6 April 1995, Wellington District Law Society oral history project, OHColl-0082 (Hereafter, Law Society Interview)

<sup>27</sup> Sir John White, interview with Jock Phillips, 21 January 2001, Oral History Project, Ministry of Culture and Heritage, Alexander Turnbull Library, OHA 3070 (Hereafter, Oral History Project Interview)

<sup>28</sup> Christopher Pugsley, interview, *ibid*

<sup>29</sup> Geoffrey Cox, Freyberg V.C., *The Atlantic*, Spring 1943

<sup>30</sup> Geoffrey Cox, *A Tale of Two Battles*, William Kimber and Co., London, 1987

<sup>31</sup> Geoffrey Cox, *The Race to Trieste*, William Kimber and Co., London, 1977

<sup>32</sup> Lord Carver (ed), *The War Lords*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1976

<sup>33</sup> Dan Davin, *Crete*, War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, 1953

and those with several other soldiers, are held among Sir John White's papers. The most in-depth study of Freyberg, and the closest to an autobiography that Freyberg intended to write but which was never completed, is that by his son Paul, *Bernard Freyberg V.C.: Soldier of Two Nations*<sup>34</sup>. Paul Freyberg explained that he wrote the biography after his father had been unable to complete it, as he intended, after the war. When he was eventually free to concentrate on the task he had become bored.<sup>35</sup> General Freyberg did write an unpublished paper titled "*The World War*" which covered the first year of the war and a "*Narrative on Crete*", copies of which are also among Sir John White's papers, along with another document containing Freyberg's comments on the Second World War History project's narrative of the Tunisian Campaign. This was important in understanding Freyberg's reaction to the controversy at Tebaga Gap which is dealt with in Chapter Four, part three. White also had a rare copy of a speech made by Freyberg to the 4<sup>th</sup> Armoured Regiment regarding his tactical philosophy of the 2<sup>nd</sup> NZ Division.

One of the first New Zealand analyses of the Freyberg method was *Freyberg, VC: The Man 1939-45*<sup>36</sup> by Major-General W.G. Stevens. This was significant because Stevens had served in England at the time of Freyberg's appointment and had early impressions of the man who would lead the Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force (2NZEF). Another early appreciation was by Peter Singleton-Gates in 1963, *General Lord Freyberg VC*<sup>37</sup>. More recently, an in-depth look at him and many of the controversies surrounding his relations with Middle East High Command, and New Zealand's campaigns, was, *Freyberg, Churchill's Salamander*.<sup>38</sup> John McLeod's *Myth and Reality – the New Zealand Soldier in World War II*,<sup>39</sup> contained criticisms of the 2NZEF and of Freyberg's leadership. Also referred to are observations of Freyberg in action and in consultation with other military commanders in the writings of Alan Moorehead, a prolific writer on the North African campaign. A trilogy of earlier works titled *Mediterranean Front*,<sup>40</sup> *A Year of*

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<sup>34</sup> Paul Freyberg, *Bernard Freyberg V.C. Soldier of Two Nations*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1991

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, p.2

<sup>36</sup> Major-General W.G. Stevens, *Freyberg, VC: The Man*, A.H.&A.W. Reed, Wellington, 1965

<sup>37</sup> Peter Singleton-Gates, *General Lord Freyberg VC*, Michael Joseph, London, 1963

<sup>38</sup> Laurie Barber and John Tonkin-Covell, *Freyberg, Churchill's Salamander*, Century Hutchinson, 1989

<sup>39</sup> John McLeod, *Myth and Reality – the New Zealand Soldier in World War Two*, Reed Methuen, Auckland, 1986

<sup>40</sup> Alan Moorehead, *Mediterranean Front*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1941

*Battle*<sup>41</sup> and *The End in Africa*<sup>42</sup> were combined in one volume, *The Desert War*<sup>43</sup> and his biography of Field-Marshal Montgomery, *Montgomery*.<sup>44</sup> Few people from outside the military had closer contact with the Middle East High Command than Moorehead. Montgomery's own autobiography, *Montgomery of Alamein*<sup>45</sup>, like Moorehead's works offered more evidence of Montgomery's respect and use of Freyberg in key areas of the North African campaign. Reflecting more of Freyberg's inter-relationship with New Zealand officers is *Infantry Brigadier*<sup>46</sup> by Howard Kippenberger, one of Freyberg's replacements as Commanding Officer of the New Zealand Division on occasion during the war.

Backing Kippenberger's own work are biographies of him by Glyn Harper, *Kippenberger*<sup>47</sup> and Denis McLean, *Howard Kippenberger, Dauntless Spirit*.<sup>48</sup> Harper and Tonkin-Covell's *The Battles of Cassino*<sup>49</sup> was relevant for that phase of the war. *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Military History*<sup>50</sup> was a constant reference source for aspects of New Zealand's campaigns. Corelli Barnett's *The Desert Generals*<sup>51</sup> remains an important study of the forces in action of the Middle East High Command as does *Churchill's Generals*,<sup>52</sup> edited by John Keegan. The campaign of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division is covered in Christopher Pugsley's *A Bloody Road Home*.<sup>53</sup> Specific campaign books included *Greece and Crete*<sup>54</sup> by Christopher Buckley, one of the earlier studies of the failed campaigns which involved the New Zealanders. *The Fall of Crete*<sup>55</sup> by Alan Clark and *Crete – The Battle and the Resistance*<sup>56</sup> by Antony Beevor offered criticism of Freyberg's handling of Crete - Clark's book having been written before disclosure of the Ultra (German coded messages) intercepts to the public. Callum MacDonald's *The Lost Battle – Crete 1941*,<sup>57</sup> was one of the more

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<sup>41</sup> Alan Moorehead, *A Year of Battle*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1943

<sup>42</sup> Alan Moorehead, *The End in Africa*, Harper and Brothers, New York, 1943

<sup>43</sup> Alan Moorehead, *The Desert War*, Aurum Press (ebook), London, 2012

<sup>44</sup> Alan Moorehead, *Montgomery*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1967

<sup>45</sup> Field-Marshal Montgomery, *Montgomery of Alamein*, Collins, London, 1958

<sup>46</sup> Major-General Howard Kippenberger, *Infantry Brigadier*, Oxford University Press, London, 1949

<sup>47</sup> Glyn Harper, *Kippenberger*, Harper Collins, Auckland, 1997

<sup>48</sup> Denis McLean, *Howard Kippenberger, Dauntless Spirit*, Random House, Auckland, 2008

<sup>49</sup> Glyn Harper and John Tonkin-Covell, *The Battles of Monte Cassino*, Allen&Unwin, Auckland, 2013

<sup>50</sup> Ian McGibbon, *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Military History*, Oxford University Press, Auckland, 2000

<sup>51</sup> Corelli Barnett, *The Desert Generals*, William Kimber, London, 1960

<sup>52</sup> John Keegan (Ed), *Churchill's Generals*, Abacus, London, 1999

<sup>53</sup> Chris Pugsley, *A Bloody Road Home*, Penguin, Auckland, 2014

<sup>54</sup> Christopher Buckley, *Greece, Crete 1941*, HM Stationery Office, London, 1952

<sup>55</sup> Alan Clark, *The Fall of Crete*, New England Library, London, 1969

<sup>56</sup> Antony Beevor, *Crete – The Battle and the Resistance*, Penguin, London, 1992

<sup>57</sup> Callum MacDonald, *The Lost Battle*, Macmillan, London, 1993

sympathetic treatments of the Crete campaign, offering criticism of the Middle East High Command whereas others tended to lay the blame at Freyberg's feet. Compton Mackenzie, an intelligence officer in Greece, wrote *Wind of Freedom*,<sup>58</sup> a little quoted understanding of the Greek campaign from a critical viewpoint. Perhaps the best independent study of the Crete campaign is Ian McD. G. Stewart's *The Struggle for Crete*<sup>59</sup> which provides a significant overview of the battle and when released it included much new material. Basil Liddell Hart's *The Other Side of the Hill*,<sup>60</sup> had an interview with the German mastermind of the aerial invasion of the Battle for Crete, General Kurt Student, revealing how close the New Zealanders came to denying the Germans their prize.

In relation to the North African campaign Major-General Sir Francis de Guingand's *Generals at War*<sup>61</sup> provides his view of the relationship between Freyberg and General Montgomery from before Alamein until the end of the campaign. This included the breaking of the Mareth Line and the controversy associated with Montgomery's mid-battle appointment of General Brian Horrocks over Freyberg at Tebaga Gap. Horrocks gives his own version of the incident in *A Full Life*.<sup>62</sup> Field-Marshal Alexander of Tunis was closely associated with the 2<sup>nd</sup> NZ Division from Alamein and through the North African and Italian campaigns and in his book *The Memoirs of Field-Marshal Earl Alexander of Tunis 1940:1945*<sup>63</sup> described the controversial incident at Cassino where the monastery overlooking the town was bombed. American General Mark Clark who commanded the Fifth Army at Cassino put his side of the incident in *Calculated Risk*.<sup>64</sup> Another view of that battle is provided in Fred Majdalany's *Cassino: Portrait of a Battle*.<sup>65</sup>

This thesis explores White's involvement with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division, as Freyberg's personal secretary, chronologically and thematically across five chapters. Chapter One will provide background on John White, his preparation for his task on Freyberg's staff and the way his role developed. Utilising White's writings the

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<sup>58</sup> Compton Mackenzie, *Wind of Freedom*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1943

<sup>59</sup> I. McD.G. Stewart, *The Struggle for Crete*, Oxford University Press, London, 1966

<sup>60</sup> B.H. Liddell Hart, *The Other Side of the Hill*, Hamilton and Co. (Stafford) Ltd., London, 1950

<sup>61</sup> Major-General Sir Francis De Guingand, *Generals at War*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1964

<sup>62</sup> Brian Horrocks, *A Full Life*, Leo Cooper, London, 1974

<sup>63</sup> Field-Marshal Earl Alexander of Tunis, (ed. John North), *The Alexander Memoirs, 1940-1945*, Cassell, London, 1962

<sup>64</sup> General Mark Clark, *Calculated Risk*, George G. Harrap and Co. Ltd, London, 1951

<sup>65</sup> Fred Majdalany, *Cassino: Portrait of a Battle*, Longmans, Green, London, 1957

respective campaigns in Greece, Crete, North Africa and Italy and his everyman's observations both of the action and Freyberg's roles within them will feature in Chapters Two, Three, Four, in three parts, and Five. At the end of each chapter analysis of criticisms involved in the campaigns will be made. The specific questions this thesis will address are: What fresh perspective do Sir John White's writings lend to our understanding of New Zealand's war effort and the criticisms made of Freyberg; how much does White increase our understanding of the impact of General Freyberg on the leadership of the New Zealand Division; and how did he show the war shaped attitudes towards Britain?

## CHAPTER ONE – Beginnings

John White was born in Dunedin on 1 November, 1911. His father, lawyer Charles Gilbert White graduated from Otago University with a BA and LLB and practised law in Dunedin where he was a lawyer, and a director, for the Union Steamship Company, specialising in workers' compensation. He moved to Wellington in 1922 when the Union Steamship Company transferred its head office from Dunedin and was a common law partner with Young, Neave and Courtney.<sup>66</sup>

John White's mother Nora Addison Scott Ramsay was the granddaughter of Keith Ramsay, a Mayor of Dunedin, who became a shipowner and a foundation member of several Dunedin companies. John White was the oldest of four siblings, three sisters being born in 1914, 1918 and 1922. Before the family left for Wellington, John White attended John McGlashan College in Dunedin until Standard 3 where he was dux of the Preparatory School. At Wellesley School in Wellington, he was dux of the Middle School. He returned to Dunedin as a boarder at John McGlashan College for his secondary education. He was successful in history studies, a link that would be utilised in his war service. He started university during the Depression feeling it was best to study law because he knew there would be a job at the end of it all. In his first year he decided to learn shorthand. He recalled a friend of his father, Justice Smith, had said he might like to be a judge's associate but to do that he would need to learn shorthand. He took his advice and got close to Hansard speed in shorthand while he also taught himself to type. "It stood me in good stead. It was the thing I imagine caught the ear of Freyberg when [Justice] Ostler, his friend of younger days, suggested me to Freyberg as an ADC."<sup>67</sup>

After graduating, White spent two years as an associate to Justice Ostler. Ostler needed an associate as he had been crippled when thrown from a horse injuring his cervical spine. It gave him a look at the machinations of the Law Courts. He learned first hand what was good advocacy and what was not.<sup>68</sup> White's role was basically a judge's secretary. It is a job now done by women. Using a Remington noiseless typewriter while sitting beside the Judge on the bench he took down evidence – a system unique to New Zealand. It allowed the Judge to mark his notes

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<sup>66</sup> The firm now operates as Kensington Swan in Wellington.

<sup>67</sup> White, Law Society Interview, Side 6

<sup>68</sup> Ibid

for material to refer to juries. But White's habit of taking a carbon copy allowed him to charge for copies to counsel – a recognised perk. It was sufficient to earn him enough money for an overseas trip and made him better off than he would have been working in a law office. "I was really clear in my own mind at the end of those two years that I wanted to be at the bar. I would have been able to slip into it with a feeling of familiarity with the system."<sup>69</sup>

But before taking that step White opted for some overseas travel. Travelling as a ship's writer on the meat ship *SS Waipawa*, White left Lyttelton on 11 February, 1939. His fiancée and future wife, Dora, the sister of Dick Wild, and an Australian friend joined him later in England. Before they arrived, he completed one of the goals of his trip, a study of the systems of justice, in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Eire. White said in later years it had been interesting to see Europe just before the war. The trio headed from London to the Continent in July, 1939 with the words of the New Zealand High Commissioner, Sir William Jordan, ringing in their ears. He told them, '...there'll be lots of goings-on, but I'm pretty sure there won't be any war'.<sup>70</sup> But it was when calling on the Consul General in Munich that the gravity of the situation was hit home harder.

He [the Consul General] said he had a formula for people like us. If we were the type of people who liked to walk on the edge of a volcano likely to erupt, then carry on. From then on we kept our petrol tank full so we could always get to a friendly frontier. In France when going out to Versailles, and at Versailles, the grounds were full of troops. They had begun to mobilise. The Dutch had closed their frontiers and we moved to the nearest port and got back to Dover. I wrote in my diary I welcomed the White Cliffs of Dover more than any Englishman.<sup>71</sup>

White and his fiancée had some difficulties returning to New Zealand but eventually they got steerage passage. They had passed their time while waiting by camping in a relative's garden and preparing sandbags. "I heard Chamberlain's announcement of war. By that time we knew it was coming. Having been engaged to

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid

<sup>70</sup> Chris Griggs, The Honourable Sir John White, MBE, QC, *New Zealand Armed Forces Law Review*, 2001, p.25

<sup>71</sup> Ibid

be married the sensible thing was to come home and think again.”<sup>72</sup> They arrived back in New Zealand in November having sailed from England on the *Rangitata* in a convoy under the Stars and Stripes which White felt must have been illegal. During the ship’s voyage back he recalled someone had heard the ship’s wireless news advising that Bernard Freyberg had been appointed Commander of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force and adding the comment, ‘He’ll lead his troops a pretty dance’.<sup>73</sup>

At that time I little knew I would be calling him ‘my General’. That I did become his A.D.C. was a freak of fate. When he came to New Zealand, at the end of the 1939, Mr Justice Ostler, to whom I had been Associate and who knew the General as a young man, suggested to him that I would make a useful A.D.C. because I knew shorthand and could type. I learnt of this when a message came from the Judge.<sup>74</sup>

White had been visiting an uncle who owned a farm in Hawke’s Bay when he received a message to report to Wellington to meet with General Freyberg on 3 January at a reception Freyberg was attending. They spoke and he believed Freyberg decided White would be suitable.

I was very impressed. He just dominated the scene. He said, ‘I understand you want to go to war’. Well, I didn’t think it would be very good to say that I was still making up my mind and had no great wish at all...we sat down and had quite a good talk. I was told to report to Army HQ the next day. I was to go into camp and to come with the Second Echelon.<sup>75</sup> His physique and bearing and the ribbons of the first War, headed by the Victoria Cross, caught one’s eye. Despite the whirl of events his interest in my appointment seemed to absorb him for those few brief moments, his decision was made, and he was away to talk to someone else.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid

<sup>73</sup> White, A.D.C. to a General, 13 February, 1944, Sir John White Papers, WFC, p.1

<sup>74</sup> Ibid

<sup>75</sup> White, Law Society interview, ibid

<sup>76</sup> White, A.D.C. to a General, ibid. p.2,

White reported to Army Headquarters and was leaving when he was approached and told that Freyberg had just been in touch and wanted him to leave the next day. Asked if that was possible he thought it could be. He was enlisted in 19 Battalion and seconded to HQ 2 NZ Division as Personal Assistant and Aide-de-Camp to Freyberg, a position he held until the Division reached Faenza in February 1945. “I was enlisted, equipped, swore allegiance and in uniform and on the wharf...I had no military experience apart from School Cadets.”<sup>77</sup>

Soon after daylight on the morning of 6 January 1940, White performed his first duty, waking Freyberg and getting him on deck as the flotilla of boats sailed from Wellington. The responsibility Freyberg felt was evident to White on that first morning as the ships set off in convoy.

He stood on the boat deck with a grave face, looking back at the land, his mouth set in a determined line, apparently deep in thought. How often I have seen that look. A great responsibility was his, and now the first part of his force was setting out for a destination they had so far only guessed.<sup>78</sup>

While sailing to Australia White learned more about what was required of him in his position and also more about Freyberg and the unique document representing the contract he made with the New Zealand Government known as his Charter.<sup>79</sup>

I never had any introduction to what my job was. It soon developed. My first job on board was rather amusing. ‘Here are my charter, they are in legal language drawn up by the New Zealand Solicitor-General, put them in simple language please’.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid

<sup>78</sup> Ibid

<sup>79</sup> Freyberg’s Charter was a document between the NZ Government and Freyberg setting out his responsibilities to the government. He would be directed by his Commander-in-Chief, but would also have the right to confer with the NZ Government and the Commander-in-Chief in matters leading up to and arising from policy decisions.

<sup>80</sup> Ross Keith Mackie, “*Freyberg’s High-Command Relationships, 1939-41*,” PhD thesis, Massey University, 2014, p.38

Much conjecture has centred on who wrote the charter which played such a key role in the 2<sup>nd</sup> NZ Division's deployments. While Major General W.G. Stevens<sup>81</sup>, Gerald Hensley<sup>82</sup> and Freyberg's son, Paul,<sup>83</sup> all believed it was Freyberg's own work, Mackie claimed it was the Attorney-General Rex Mason who re-wrote Freyberg's version. However, White says it was the Solicitor-General, Henry Cornish, who compiled it from the original notes Freyberg had taken in England with the extra comments from Australia - a significant difference. The charter resulted from a meeting at the War Office on 22 November 1939. Freyberg was given advice by the Director of Military Operations, Major-General Richard Dewing, that he would be in for a difficult time. There would be friction and hard words, Freyberg was told. Significantly, Dewing advised him he should reserve 'certain powers' for himself while the New Zealand Government should likewise reserve powers and that in partnership with the NZ Government they should agree the channels of communication between them.<sup>84</sup> Visiting the commanders of the First New Zealand Expeditionary Force in the First World War, Lord Birdwood and General Sir Alexander Godley, before he travelled to New Zealand, resulted in them confirming Freyberg's need for a Charter and they advised him the best person to consult was the Australian General Sir Brudenell White.<sup>85</sup>

On 15 November 1939, Freyberg visited Egypt en route to New Zealand with deputy Prime Minister Peter Fraser and made contracts for the establishment of the New Zealand base at Maadi. Significantly, on 17<sup>th</sup> December, they stopped in Sydney where conferences were held with Australian military figures, including Brudenell White. Freyberg showed him his planned charter. White strengthened it in several places while also advising Freyberg that when agreement was reached between the British and New Zealand Governments it should be Government to Government and not Dominion Office to War Office.<sup>86</sup> No longer would the NZ Division be employed

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<sup>81</sup> Major-General W. G. Stevens, *Freyberg, VC: The Man*, A.H. & A.W. Reed, Wellington, 1965, p.19-20

<sup>82</sup> Gerald Hensley, *Beyond the Battlefield – New Zealand and its Allies 1939-45*, Penguin, Auckland, 2009, p. 68-69

<sup>83</sup> Paul Freyberg, *Bernard Freyberg VC, Soldier of two Nations*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1991, p.210

<sup>84</sup> *ibid*

<sup>85</sup> General Sir Bernard Freyberg, Speech to the House of Lords, 17 March, 1954, Hansard, Vol.181 [http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1954/mar/17/the-statement-on-defence#S5LV0186P0\\_19540317\\_HOL\\_25](http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1954/mar/17/the-statement-on-defence#S5LV0186P0_19540317_HOL_25), p.474-475

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*

at the behest of a British commander alone.<sup>87</sup> White set about putting the Charter in everyday terms.

The powers given to him as Commander of the Expeditionary Force were impressive. At the time they reminded me of those granted by the Roman Senate to the Consul Pompey when given complete authority and responsibility to stamp out piracy in the Mediterranean. The General was vested with full power to command and administer the Force outside New Zealand. He was the servant of the New Zealand Government and responsible only to it.<sup>88</sup>

At Sydney, Freyberg left the ship to fly to Cairo. White stayed, and during the remainder of the voyage learned more about armed service and, as he said, the way the General's 'staff' were looked upon as 'a necessary excrescence' by other ranks who saw them as sent to try the fighting soldier.<sup>89</sup> But that time also gave White the chance to improve his understanding of military matters. Among these were the facts that five or six companies comprised a battalion, three battalions made a brigade and there were three brigades in a Division. Two or three Divisions formed a Corps and above that was an Army.

I found that a division was quite a complex thing. The three infantry brigades were only a part of it; there were also three regiments of field artillery, three engineers' companies, a Cavalry regiment (not riding horses, but in armoured cars or light tanks), and a machine gun battalion. In addition to the fighting troops there were the 'services'. Three motorised companies of the Army Service Corps carried the ammunition, food and petrol, and another company was provided to carry infantry. Then there was the Medical Corps with three Field Ambulance Companies, the Signals Corps which provided the wireless

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<sup>87</sup> General Freyberg, Speech to the House of Lords, 15 April, 1953, Hansard, Vol 181, [http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1953/apr/15/defence#S5LV0181P0\\_19530415\\_HOL\\_43](http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1953/apr/15/defence#S5LV0181P0_19530415_HOL_43), p.775

<sup>88</sup> White, A.D.C. to a General, *ibid*, Sir John White Papers, WFC, p.5

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, p.6

and telephone service, the Ordnance which dealt with equipment and mechanical workshops.<sup>90</sup>

On 12 February 1940, the voyage was completed and Freyberg was the first out to meet them in Egypt. Life as ADC began in earnest for White with the initial communications to be sent back to New Zealand. "I soon felt that he [Freyberg] regarded this as his destiny to command the New Zealand Division and he had tremendous confidence in our ability, much greater confidence than I had in my fellow men."<sup>91</sup> At the same time White acknowledged that Freyberg faced early difficulties with his senior officers because he was still regarded as a British general. Some of his brigadiers were senior and experienced from the First World War.

They say that there were difficulties and you had to get used to him but I would say his influence in moulding, and getting everybody working together, and all that kind of thing, began and continued from as soon as we reached Egypt where we caught up with him again. We owe him much for that because with his reputation and prestige he was able to arrange for us to get things, and to get on with our training in a way, which made all the difference because the whole of that first year as it turned out was taken up. We didn't have an operational role thank God, although the troops in England did, but they were only partly training, basically trained. So many of them were like me with no military experience at all and it was remarkable what was done in that year. By the end of the year the three echelons had arrived and we were able to have done what he called 'divisional training' all out in the desert, exercises and things like that, and co-ordination before the Division declared ready for the operations in the Balkans.<sup>92</sup>

It was immediately apparent to White that Freyberg was not an orthodox English officer, and he undoubtedly did not deal with the New Zealanders as if they were British soldiers. White believed that once reunited with the New Zealanders, Freyberg suddenly transferred himself to the days of his youth, recapturing the spirit

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid, p.6

<sup>91</sup> White, interview with Jock Phillips, Oral History Project, Ministry of Culture and Heritage, Alexander Turnbull Library, OHA 3070 (Hereafter, Oral History Project Interview)

<sup>92</sup> White, Wellington Law Society interview, *ibid*

of those times and treating everyone as if they had been friends setting out for a trip across Wellington Harbour for Soames Island. “He was able to do that, and enjoyed it – this was something great. He thought we were great – much greater than I thought we were – and so it turned out to be. You can tell too, when you look at the documents, all the time his confidence, and his real confidence, and his real pride, in his fellow New Zealanders.”<sup>93</sup>



Figure 1: General Freyberg in Italy, 1944 – McDermott family collection (with permission)

Freyberg did expect his officers to be team players. Those who were unable to deal with that approach did not stay long. The only time he was away from commanding the Division was when he was wounded. He tried to look after himself physically, walking in the mornings around the boundary at Maadi Camp. He marched on route marches. He did a lot of inspection and meeting and talking with troops and he would walk into secret intelligence places. After Greece he wrote appreciations of action to keep New Zealand in touch. And in the first year he entertained a lot, not just with officers but with corporals and sergeants. White was in Egypt a year, and remained there while Freyberg went to England where he was in command of the Second Echelon of 2NZEF who were diverted to be in reserve had the invasion of Britain occurred. Freyberg flew back later. In the meantime, White had gone to the Machinegun Battalion and took part in a refresher course with the young officers in that Battalion. But was never required to take part in action.

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid, p.12-13

Lieutenant-General Sir Edward Puttick had been left in charge in Egypt. White did his training in the morning and then the administrative work required by Puttick in the afternoon. He learnt all the duties required for the organisation, administration and training in command of the Division. “His [Freyberg’s] reputation was such that he was the most experienced general in the Middle East bar Wavell. He and Wavell had served together in the first war and had been selected, funnily enough, at the end of the first war to go to the French Academy to represent England.”<sup>94</sup>

The independence provided by Freyberg’s Charter did cause ongoing problems with the Middle East High Command who maintained a paternal view of the New Zealand Division’s place in the scheme of things, much as the British had during the First World War. It took the English some time to get used to the implications of his Charter. As had been feared, the British failed to recognise the independence of the Division. Freyberg told the House of Lords in 1953,

My Government gave me full powers to organise, to equip and to train the New Zealand Expeditionary Force in Egypt; and when they were fit for war I was to notify the New Zealand Government, who would decide where they were to be employed. When France capitulated Egypt became a theatre of war, and Middle East Headquarters in Cairo held a conference at which I was not present, and sent me a message saying that they were splitting the New Zealand Forces into six. Part were to go to each of the 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured, 6<sup>th</sup> Australian and 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Divisions, part to the Western Defence Force, part were to be in reserve and part on the lines of communication. Cynically, New Zealand Force Headquarters with its commander were to remain in Cairo—in other words, my headquarters and my staff were to remain in Cairo whilst the rest of my troops were sent out to do battle in the Western Desert.<sup>95</sup>

Upon his return from Britain in 1940, Freyberg found the Middle East High Command had already been using parts of the Division in the piecemeal manner Freyberg had been determined to avoid when compiling his Charter. Initially it began

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid

<sup>95</sup> Freyberg, Speech to the House of Lords, Hansard <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/people/mr-bernard-freyberg/1953>, p770-771

with a request for its railways branch to provide units to the British.<sup>96</sup> Freyberg replied in the affirmative on 11 June 1940 but added the rider that he reserved the right to decide the scope of active operations in which New Zealanders would engage.<sup>97</sup> By September, with the arrival of the second contingent (the third echelon) in Egypt and with the second echelon who had been diverted to Britain due to leave Britain for the trip around the Cape of Good Hope to Egypt, Freyberg requested the attachments lent be returned in order to allow training to occur, although he did delay the return until replacements could be organised.<sup>98</sup> By 10 October, Freyberg expressed concern that information had not been forthcoming and on 19 October Brigadier A. 'Sandy' Galloway replied that it was not possible to say when the 4<sup>th</sup> New Zealand Brigade could be withdrawn from the Western Desert to Maadi but Freyberg could rest assured that 'every New Zealander in the Western Desert Force is getting very good training whatever he is doing'.<sup>99</sup> Freyberg responded immediately saying the New Zealanders were a distinct force representative of their country and not 'an integral part of the British Army'. Freyberg regretted lending personnel. It had been a mistake. "Now, because we are insisting on concentrating as a force, we are most unpopular." He sent Galloway a copy of his powers as provided by the New Zealand Government and added the position was clear. "In an emergency we will all work under anybody's command, and do any job for which we are trained and equipped. The Division meanwhile cannot be used piecemeal."<sup>100</sup>

While the equipment and the Middle East command were British that did not stop the New Zealanders regarding themselves 'as a part, an integral part, but an independent part', of the operation.<sup>101</sup> Wavell was frustrated by the stance of both the New Zealand and Australian forces. He was short of manpower while attempting to fight on five different fronts.<sup>102</sup> From the outset, Blamey had refused to offer any

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<sup>96</sup> Sir Ronald MacKenzie Scobie, Deputy Adjutant-General, GHQ, Middle East, memo to 2<sup>nd</sup> NZ Division, 8 June 1940, *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War: Vol. 1*, p.182

<sup>97</sup> Major-General B.C. Freyberg, GOC, 2<sup>nd</sup> NZ Division, *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War: Vol. 1*, 11 June, 1940, p.183

<sup>98</sup> Freyberg *ibid*, 29 September, 1940, p.184

<sup>99</sup> Brigadier A. Galloway, Memorandum to Freyberg, 19 October, 1940, *ibid*, p.189

<sup>100</sup> Freyberg, letter to Brigadier Galloway, 19 October, 1940, *ibid*, p.190

<sup>101</sup> White, Law Society Interview, Side 7

<sup>102</sup> Denis McLean, *Howard Kippenberger Dauntless Spirit*, Random House, Auckland, 2008, p.198, said, 'For New Zealand this one infantry division was effectively a national army; for the arbiters of war in the desert it was one formation among several. This was the crux of a succession of serious, often bitter, disputes between the British High Command and the commanders of national units from the Commonwealth.'

Australian support but Freyberg suffered divided loyalties. Wavell's biographer Victoria Schofield said:

...technically still a British Army officer on secondment [Freyberg], he was yet committed to following the New Zealand Government's directives. Unfortunately for both Wavell and Freyberg, this conflict of interests resulted in heated arguments which strained both their friendship and their working relationship.<sup>103</sup>

While Freyberg did get his Division back, the treatment they received, along with the Australians when being sent to Greece, was a reversion to type for the Middle East Command.

Freyberg and White slipped into a routine that would continue until 1945. White's job was much like that of a personal secretary. It was a close, personal association. Freyberg had a lot of matters he had to deal with both as GOC of the 2 NZEF and as GOC 2 NZ Division. White said work could vary from the highest plane of policy decisions to the routine distribution of Christmas cards and 'letters from lunatics requiring polite answers'.<sup>104</sup>

In high policy matters the General may dictate or write a rough draft and expect the PA to redraft it. The process will then continue and there will be much drafting and redrafting before a cable is despatched. The General insists on a high standard of correspondence and himself works very hard to achieve it. I would say the job of the PA is to assist in presenting an ordered argument in a brief and clear form.<sup>105</sup>

By comparison, in 2 NZ Division work, when on operations, the PA was more of a liaison job. The General was often in direct touch with Brigadiers and Commanders and through use of a party telephone line the PA tapped all the General's conversations and passed the information received on to the GSO 1, along with any orders given by the General. At the same time a full diary of events was

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<sup>103</sup> Victoria Schofield, quoting Paul Freyberg in Bernard Freyberg VC: Soldier of Two Nations, in *Wavell: Soldier and Statesman*, John Murray, London, 2006, p.203

<sup>104</sup> White, Notes on Job of PA, report held by Valerian Freyberg, Freyberg Papers.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid

kept. He attended conferences of the Divisional Orders Group and took notes which were typed up and distributed if necessary.

The filing system was also handled by White. It was always intended that it be kept simple and to keep moving files back to Base. This was the case in the early days of the war when the records were mobile by necessity, and in some cases destroyed, to avoid capture by the enemy. There was not enough space in the General's caravan to store files and they were sent to Maadi or to HQ 2 NZEF at Senigallia. At Maadi, the camp commander held keys to the General's personal boxes which were held in the Pay Office strong room. Copies of the most important files were sent to NZ MLO [NZ Military Liaison Office] in London and to Army HQ in Wellington. For the General's personal archives, White worked on the principle of keeping what might be useful should the General write a history. He was responsible for all the despatches both from the General's desk and anything from New Zealand that passed through.

As well as settling into administrative life with the General, White was entrusted with Freyberg's camera. Freyberg had tried to use the camera in Egypt before White's arrival but had not been able to use it effectively. "He handed the camera to me and said, 'You handle this and make use of it when you can'. I had it around my neck, no-one else was supposed to carry cameras, although some did. I used it whenever I could."<sup>106</sup>

By the time the Division was in battle mode, White had a greater appreciation of where he stood while working with Freyberg, but was aware of a gulf still between them. White appreciated his leader had a capacity to be friendly to the younger age group but Freyberg was wary of close friendship because he did not want to have a deep affection for people when death was a constant companion in war.

We understood one another. He knew that I didn't have my heart in the war, that I was just doing a job, and the kind of things that he would be thinking about, they weren't for discussion with someone like me. If he was going to discuss things affecting the way, the important things, they would be with his right-hand men and I thought that was right so far as I was concerned.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> White, Law Society Interview, Side 6

<sup>107</sup> White, Law Society Interview, *ibid*

After the New Zealand Division had been united, they were sent to Greece as part of Operation Lustre, without having had any contribution to the planning of the exercise.

But in the days of Greece and Crete, in 1940 and 1941, the senior British commanders failed to take Blamey or me into their confidence or to comprehend our special status and special responsibilities. All the time this was going on our Governments were complaining to us, with justification, that we were not keeping them sufficiently in touch with our problems.<sup>108</sup>

Freyberg likened the problem to that of the father not realising, nor wanting to realise, that his sons have grown up desiring full partnership in the family business.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Freyberg, Speech to the House of Lords, Hansard, [http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1954/mar/17/the-statement-on-defence#S5LV0186P0\\_19540317\\_HOL\\_25](http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1954/mar/17/the-statement-on-defence#S5LV0186P0_19540317_HOL_25) p.475

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, Freyberg to House of Lords 1953, p.774

## CHAPTER TWO – GREECE – March-April 1941

John White's first taste of active service occurred in the Greek Campaign of 1941 and it provided him with not only a first-hand look at the shortfall in preparation for the ill-fated venture but also at General Freyberg's leadership style and experience in what soon became an organised retreat. In the aftermath of the Greek campaign of March-April 1941 "It seemed clear that the adventure must have been known to be almost hopeless from the start."<sup>110</sup> It was undertaken for political and moral reasons he believed, firstly to give the Greeks support in their fight against Italy while showing the United States, at a vital time in Lend Lease developments, that the British were prepared to fight.<sup>111</sup>

The Greeks were able to fight successfully against the Italians, even pushing them back, while enjoying open British air support. With the Division finally united Freyberg informed Wavell that the 2<sup>nd</sup> NZ Division would soon be available to take the field in some operational role. Wavell then gave Freyberg a list of possible battlefields for which the New Zealand Division should prepare. They were: the Dodecanese, Sicily, Greece, Eritrea and Abyssinia, Tripoli, Iraq and Syria.

Such a collection would no doubt have appalled the planning staff of the War Office. Nevertheless, the problem was attacked by the General and his GSO 1, Colonel Stewart. A special map room was boarded up and locked, for an imposing collection of maps covering the countries of the Middle East enumerated above. It was the hottest room in Egypt and only bearable in the heat of the day if one got down to underpants only – and still the perspiration trickled.<sup>112</sup>

All indications pointed to involvement in Greece and by 17 February 1941 Wavell told Freyberg, as opposed to discussing the prospect, the New Zealand Division was to be part of Operation Lustre – the defence of Greece. Wavell told Freyberg the New Zealand Government had approved the involvement, just as the

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<sup>110</sup> White, "The Gamble for Greece," (Unpublished), Sir John White Papers, WFC,

<sup>111</sup> Ibid

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, p.2

Australian Government had approved the Australian force.<sup>113</sup> While the Maadi-based first and third echelons had undertaken training, the second echelon only arrived on 3 March, and it was not until 1 April, in position in the north of Greece, that Freyberg had the complete Division under his command. They had been stocked with twenty-five pounder field guns, two-pounder anti-tank guns, bren carriers and hundreds of vehicles. The training was not without incident. An exercise involving Brigadier Barrowclough's 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade Group, driving across country without lights, had caused issues in a local village of mud and straw houses when a navigation error resulted in vehicles charging through in the early hours of the morning. And in the transfer to Greece, the Division was caught in one of the worst sand storms in Egyptian history. That was followed by heavy rain flooding the temporary camp and turning the desert into mud. Freyberg, White and the rest of General's staff were oblivious to these issues as they had sailed to Athens on 15 March.

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<sup>113</sup> W.G. McClymont, *To Greece*, Historical Publications Branch, Wellington, 1959, p.103-104 said that a request to the New Zealand Government was not received in Wellington until 25 February. Its receipt was coincidental with a message from Freyberg that the New Zealand Division was 'fit for action'. The Government believed the message was a signal of Freyberg's approval of the action. Reality would prove different although the details of the mix-up would not be known until the reviews completed after the loss of Crete, later in the year.

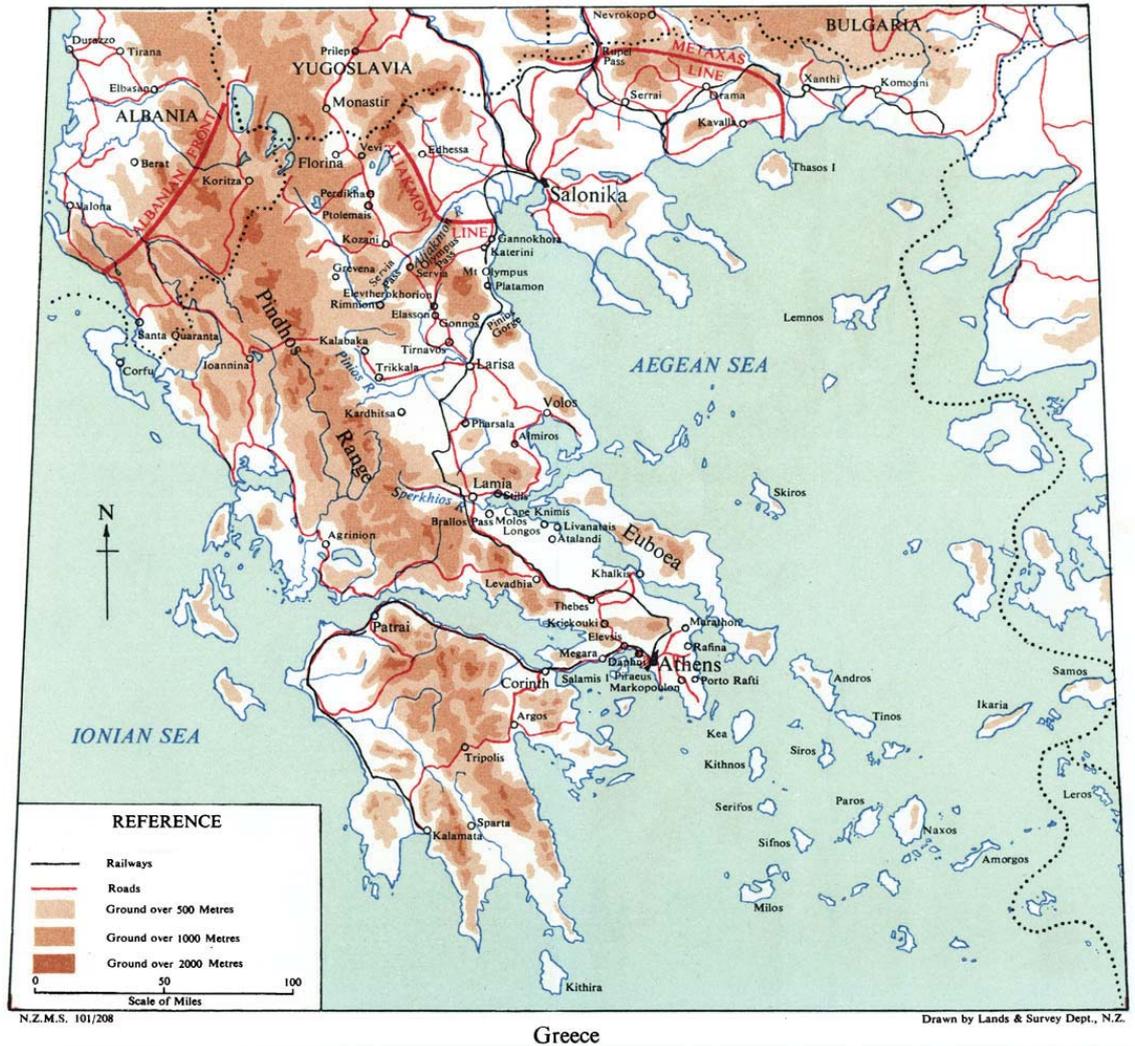


Figure 1: Greece, reproduced from *To Greece*<sup>114</sup> (with the permission of the Ministry for Culture and Heritage)

Once landing in Athens, Freyberg met the Commander-in-Chief of the British force, General Henry Maitland ‘Jumbo’ Wilson, who, because German diplomats were stationed in the city (the British and German Embassies were on the same street), preferred to be known as Mr Watt. He told Freyberg of the preliminary plans before Freyberg flew north to see the terrain and meet Greek commanders.

The picture was becoming clearer, and the more the General saw the less he liked it. He seemed to have seen more than anyone else. He learnt how few

<sup>114</sup> Ibid

Greek troops there were available, he saw their equipment – a so-called armoured division armed with bren-carriers and ox-drawn supply wagons.<sup>115</sup>

As the force left Athens and headed north to the Metaxas Line where Australians and the 2<sup>nd</sup> British Armoured Brigade would combine with the New Zealanders and Greeks to stem the anticipated German movement, White was left with an understanding of the value of what would become to be known as logistics.

...watching the organisation for a move of troops taking shape was rather interesting and instructive – sufficient to say that great organising ability is required in every department. It is no easy matter and there can be no doubt that the difficulties facing a German invasion of England would be pretty gigantic, that is from the organisation point of view assuming they could get ashore and stay ashore.<sup>116</sup>

The requirement for accuracy in logistics had been demonstrated in the failure of the GHQ in Cairo to handle the Division's movement north in Greece. There was no consultation with the New Zealanders and from the outset the units were sent north in the reverse order. The Divisional HQ, which should have been in place first, was the last to arrive. When finally getting away from Athens, White relished being free from the ever-present attention of spies, and journalists, while also minding the General. It had been a strain with German spies known to be in action. Compounding problems for White was the fact Freyberg had 'a penetrating voice which he cannot reduce to a whisper despite his best endeavours'.<sup>117</sup> Any conversation entered into by Freyberg proved a trial, whether in dining rooms, public places or even hotel bedrooms which were staffed by civilians, was dangerous so far as White was concerned.

I took the greatest care I could think of, scraped my feet on the pavement during street corner talks, rattled things at the table, reminded the General about his voice when absolutely necessary – and yet failed. I was horrified one

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<sup>115</sup> White, "The Gamble for Greece," *ibid*

<sup>116</sup> White, Letter, 5<sup>th</sup> April, 1941, Sir John White Papers, WFC

<sup>117</sup> White, "The Gamble for Greece," *ibid*, p.8

morning to hear that a war correspondent who had a room next to the general at the hotel, had been eavesdropping somehow, and had been heard boasting in his cups, that he knew Freyberg's plans.

<sup>118</sup>

Conditions as they drove north were cold among snow-clad mountains and the roads were wet and treacherous with many hairpin bends on poor surfaces.<sup>119</sup> Upon arriving at Divisional HQ, Freyberg was unhappy, complaining to Wilson that battalions were having to hold fronts that would have been too long even for brigades. It was only when the Australian Corps Commander, General Blamey visited that Freyberg's fears were supplemented. Blamey decided the shelter of the mountains around Mt Olympus provided better cover. "God gave us those mountains, the sooner we get there the better,"<sup>120</sup> he said.

When Generals Wilson, and Blamey, visited the New Zealand Division HQ it was agreed they should fall back to the mountain passes as Blamey had suggested. The retreat to the mountains began, on a single road leaving everything that had been done by way of preparation at Aliakmon as a wasted effort. Two infantry brigades, the field and anti-tank artillery and supplies that had been dumped forward all had to be taken back over a single road made slippery by heavy rain. Yet, the move was successful with no loss of equipment or supplies. As the next line of defence was being established, the New Zealanders were treated to the first sight of the air war they were to become so familiar with later on Crete. "We saw the German air force for the first time when yellow-nosed squadrons flew over our headquarters and north over Olympus after a raid in the south. From then onwards enemy fighters and reconnaissance aircraft also were often over the Olympus positions."<sup>121</sup> New Zealand's first clashes with infantry and artillery against the Germans occurred at Servia on the Katerini Road and at the Platamon tunnel. Strong German forces engaged 21 Battalion on the approach to the tunnel on the eastern side of the long line on which the New Zealanders were stationed. "The right and left flanks of the battle being fought by the New Zealand Division were miles apart. It was an impossible front to control properly. It took the General hours to get to the 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade and back

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid

<sup>119</sup> White, extracts of an undated letter after his return to Egypt from Greece, Sir John White Papers, WFC

<sup>120</sup> White, "The Gamble for Greece," *ibid*, p.9

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid*, p.12

again: it was impossible for him to get away and see what was really happening at the Platamon tunnel.”<sup>122</sup> The sheer weight of German numbers strained the defences on the right while in the centre they began to outflank the New Zealanders by making use of mist and bush land to get behind the defensive positions. However, the Germans chose to make their move on the Maori Battalion’s front and they soon had the situation in hand, ‘the Maoris finding that type of fighting in the bush entirely to their liking’.<sup>123</sup>

Another withdrawal was ordered, this time to hills south of Lamia and although more difficult, the use of leap-frogging retreats saw progress made. Mists proved helpful in allowing transport vehicles to escape the area in daylight without the attentions of the Luftwaffe. Freyberg maintained his headquarters south of a key crossroad.

From Larissa there were two roads south, the Australians were allocated the central road and the New Zealanders the coast road to Thermopylae. But heavy rain made the coast road impassable. It became a question of time whether the retreat could be made on one road, or if the coast road might dry sufficiently. While the mists had been an asset, when they cleared the rout that had been avoided was evident when the German air force turned their attentions on Larissa railway station. The attack was relentless both from single planes and organised formations.

Another formation of 20 to 30 Stukas circled the town and gave a fierce uninterrupted exhibition of perpendicular diving on to the Larissa station to increase the shambles there. There was a constant procession of planes up and down the road bombing and strafing, endeavouring to smash bridges and block the line of retreat. Divisional HQ had moved that morning to the high ground just off the road south of Larissa so was well placed to observe the Luftwaffe at work...It was a ‘slit trench’ day.<sup>124</sup>

An attempt was made to shift headquarters back through Larissa to the north and onto the coast road. But as the HQ column headed off it was seen by the Germans

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid, p.13

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, p.13

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, p.16

and a squadron of Stukas were employed causing the column to stop and occupants of vehicles to seek cover.

[Former All Black and General Freyberg's ADC] Jack Griffiths assured me he crossed a deeply-ploughed paddock faster than he ever crossed Athletic Park, and the General was close behind him. For many of us it was our first concentrated dive-bombing attack. We had moved from our slit trenches and just lay very flat on the ground a hundred yards from the road. I watched that first plane and saw the bombs coming down – I think there were three. Then there was a thump which shook the ground and a burst of flame and smoke; then 'thump' came the second and third, and more planes were coming. I saw a slit trench and ran for it; bits were flying about and I had a great desire to be below ground level. The trench was narrow and shallow and it was occupied, but we squeezed in as the ground rocked again and again; each thump was like a mighty drum being beaten, one blow after another making a crashing crescendo for the shrieking of plane and bombs. The Stukas were gunning too as they dived across, and as a first raid it was certainly a memorable one.<sup>125</sup>

The Division HQ suffered heavily with several vehicles, including the Mess, left ablaze but the General's car was undamaged. Returning to Larissa they had to turn and join a retreating column. Freyberg drove back through Larissa to the coast road in spite of enemy patrols having reached the outskirts of Larissa. They kept out of contact however, and the 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade, after repulsing the last German attack at Elasson had disengaged and moved back safely. It was here they found Freyberg standing on the side of the road with Griffiths in a classic display of his concern for his men.

He was looking at the big picture, and the leap-frogging and how it was best to be done and then, as Jack [Griffiths] said, he gets at Larissa...the people of the 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade on the side of Olympus, a lot of Australians and British armour and our own 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade all passing through in the middle of the night, 'put on your headlights and drive like hell' and that was exactly right. All the time he

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid, p.17

was doing those things at that level. But in addition to that, he was trying to get people through to the next bottleneck of Thermopylae.<sup>126</sup>

It was described as a nightmare trip to try to reach Molos, near Thermopylae, before daybreak. However, it was not possible and the HQ group took shelter off the road where those who could not move were hit hard by the German Air Force. The carnage only halted when remnants of the Royal Air Force in Hurricanes arrived to break up the German assault. A diversion road was found and provided some respite from the air attention. In spite of all the concerns the Division reached the new line in what White described as ‘good order’ and with all its equipment and supplies.

There was no feeling of despondency in the Division. It had got back in good order after holding the enemy off in rearguard actions which had been expensive for the enemy – no unit had been outfought; only the 21<sup>st</sup> Battalion had been overrun by force of numbers.<sup>127</sup>

No sooner had the lines been drawn at Thermopylae than word was received that the Greeks had surrendered and the British Expeditionary Force was to evacuate Greece.

I was awakened early one morning by the arrival of a Liaison Officer, and had to take notes which began as follows, “It has been decided to evacuate Greece”. I have been present for quite a few of these dramatic moments, e.g. “N.Z. Division will move into the Western Desert” – that was the first I recollect. “At .....hrs, on .....the Australian and N.Z. Divisions will form the 2<sup>nd</sup> ANZAC Corps”. But certainly the one above was about the most tense bit of shorthand I have written. I venture to predict that the withdrawal to Thermopylae and the subsequent moves in the evacuation will go down in history as a military operation of the highest order, and it is one in which our Division certainly played a big part.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> White, White NAM, Tape 1, Side 2

<sup>127</sup> Ibid, Remnants from 21 Battalion who had been cut off dispersed into the hills. Many made good their escape over several weeks arriving in Crete or even Egypt courtesy of Greek fishing boats.

<sup>128</sup> White, extract from a letter – undated, after his return to Egypt from Greece, Sir John White Papers, WFC, p.2

With secret plans afoot to make the evacuation there was also a requirement to fight for as long as possible to delay the German advance at the Pass of Thermopylae. “It was clear that a very difficult period lay ahead. The enemy was probing forward from the Lamia plain and preparing to assault our positions. This attack had to be held and it was equally essential to begin thinning out the front.”<sup>129</sup> Still the Luftwaffe probed during the daylight hours and when they could see nothing they were not averse to spraying the olive groves just for luck. It soon became vital to keep the trunk of an olive tree between oneself and the enemy. No movement was allowed on roads during the day so as to avoid warning the Germans of the retreat. One day when Freyberg came across vehicles moving down the road he got out and “left a few limp people recovering from the shock under the nearest and most convenient trees.”<sup>130</sup> One Australian who argued found himself ordered to report to General Blamey under arrest. White suggested to Freyberg that the large red pennant on the front of his car might be a little obvious but Freyberg did not agree leaving White feeling as if he had suggested a surrender. However, a little further along the road, reality struck. The terrain was part wooded country and part open farmland. The open stretches were the subject of enemy watch and two patrolling Messerschmitts caught the General’s party. As the car in which Freyberg and White was travelling emerged from cover, the Germans were on their approach. White said the first indication of something awry was when the brakes were applied with the driver immediately disappearing – ‘a not unnatural reflex when you see a fighter aircraft coming straight at you down the road’.<sup>131</sup>

The General was on the right at the back. I was beside him. The explosive bullet went through the panel of the left front door. It was not a pretty sight. For this phase of the operations we sat as small as possible, then, as if by clockwork, we opened doors and jumped out and into the gutter of the road for the driver and me, as another plane bore down and machine gun bullets spattered the car and road. I looked up to see the General standing on a slight angle putting as much of his body as possible under the protection of his tin

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<sup>129</sup> White, “The Gamble for Greece,” *ibid*, p.22

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid*, p.24

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid*, p.23

hat and, incidentally, as little as possible in the line of fire. The principle no doubt is very sound. Then we ran into the field. It had a crop of oats or barley about one inch high. I had never seen a barer looking field. There was nothing but a slight depression to go to. We went there and driver Cropp reported, 'Here they come again, sir'. After that it was just a case of hoping and praying for the best, for two of these planes were carrying out a very personal attack. That they did not get any of us and finally desisted after two runs over the target was probably due largely to a bren gunner at the edge of the wood who engaged them as they came down to engage us. Marvellous as it may seem, the car still went and no tyres were punctured.<sup>132</sup>

White expanded on the incident in a letter home.

The General and his driver are good company on such an occasion – I won't say they like it but they look upon it as some thrill – you should have heard the General roaring with laughter when he looked at his car with a splintered windscreen and various other perforations. This was his third car during the withdrawal – he finally abandoned his sixth on the beach. This one we were in was quite all right incidentally and went despite the holes.<sup>133</sup>

The line was set at Thebes and covering evacuation occurred with brigades leap-frogging each other to the rear. Eventually orders were received for Freyberg to withdraw and to depart Greece by air leaving the evacuation to be handled by the British. Freyberg's retort was, 'I'm fighting a battle, I can't do that'.<sup>134</sup> The lack of detail in orders and failed communication saw Freyberg head to Athens. Arriving at Force HQ, Freyberg found preparations under way to leave. He pointed out that it would be impossible to get everyone off from the Marathon beaches and he decided to take 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade and Divisional HQ to the Peloponessus, followed by 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade and they would be taken off from ports there. A programme was worked out and Freyberg returned to his HQ.

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid, p.23-24

<sup>133</sup> White, Extracts from a letter – undated, upon his return to Egypt from Greece, Sir John White Papers, WFC, p.3

<sup>134</sup> White, Oral History Project Interview, p.4

That night the 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade and Div HQ set off at dark for the Peloponessus driving, as usual, without lights. Again there were delays at points where the road had been damaged or vehicles broke down. Little time was wasted over vehicles with mechanical trouble. If they blocked the road they were tipped over the bank or into any ditches. In the middle of the night they crossed the Corinth Canal bridge and passed through Corinth where parts of the town were blazing following an enemy air raid. It proved a tortuous route through the town.<sup>135</sup> The move proved timely as the morning after word was received the Germans had launched a parachute drop to gain control of Corinth while the bridge across the canal had been blown. That left 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade stranded without knowing of Corinth's capture or of the bridge being blown. Word was eventually passed through the 2<sup>nd</sup> British Armoured Brigade who despatched liaison officers to inform 4 Brigade that they were to head to Porto Rafti to be taken off from there. During this morning the command of British forces in Greece was passed to Freyberg from General Wilson who was due to fly to Crete. He was entrusted with a message for the Navy to ensure they would have ships available for the Porto Rafti operation. Fears were held that 4 Brigade would be able to contain the enemy long enough to get away. However, the Germans failed to press to find the New Zealanders at Porto Rafti. White said if the enemy had followed up fast and deployed it was hard to see how an evacuation would have been possible. When advance elements did appear during the afternoon they did not engage the New Zealanders who maintained fire at them. Instead, they left it to their bombers which probed all day. But at night the air cover was eliminated and ships came in allowing the entire force to be taken off without incident.<sup>136</sup> They were not so fortunate the next morning when pounded by Stukas as they steamed away. But as they waited in the Argos area for their own evacuation, Divisional HQ had plenty of time watching Luftwaffe attention on the adjacent aerodrome. White also spent time while waiting reading an article by General Wavell that had been published in *The Times* on the subject of '*Generals and Generalship*'.<sup>137</sup>

Number one in the list of qualities in General Wavell's opinion was 'robustness, the ability to stand the shocks of war'. Undoubtedly this quality, as well as most of the others, was possessed by the Commander of the New

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<sup>135</sup> White, "The Gamble for Greece," *ibid* p.27

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid*, p.29

<sup>137</sup> General Archibald Wavell, *Generals and Generalship*, The Lees Knowles Lectures, Trinity College, Cambridge, 1939, published by The Times Publishing Co., 1941

Zealand Division. During the cumulative strain of the days and nights of the retreat, he had been under constant tension and had withstood a succession of 'shocks of war' which only the most robust body and mind could have withstood. Nothing could shake him from his concentration on the task in hand.<sup>138</sup>

Eventually the remaining New Zealanders moved south to Monemvasia. White related the dangers involved in that transfer. Vehicles were to travel independently so as not to attract the interest of the patrolling Luftwaffe in the way that a convoy would draw attention. The super sensitivity towards aeroplanes ensured that each vehicle had at least one person acting as a spotter. Whenever a plane was seen the cry of 'aircraft' would go up, the truck would stop and everyone would run to the nearest cover. On one occasion White yelled a warning when seeing a plane some distance away. But he had got halfway through warning the driver to seek cover when another plane came from the opposite direction with machine guns blazing. However, no-one was hurt and the truck was undamaged but it was a demonstration of the need for constant vigilance during the retreat. Compounding the situation was a lack of maps because it was never intended they would campaign in the Peloponessus. Passing through Sparta, they did not stop and reached Monemvasia in the evening. The 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade came through at night and by morning were well hidden in olive groves from prying German planes. Freyberg met with Admiral H.T. Baillie-Grohman, the naval officer in charge of the evacuation. He had been waiting in a local cave for several days for the New Zealanders to arrive. However, as White related, he was lucky to be there after being arrested by one of the General's drivers who thought Baillie-Grohman looked suspicious.<sup>139</sup> Upon darkness the move to the beach began.

As they waited for the Navy's arrival, to the sound of all their vehicles, engines drained of water and oil grinding until they seized, there was concern as the arrival time passed. Both Freyberg and Baillie-Grohman were pacing with Freyberg cross-examining the Admiral to make sure they had the right night. Earlier that day, the Luftwaffe had destroyed several landing barges that had been left for the transfer ensuring the embarkation would take longer.

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid, p.30

<sup>139</sup> Admiral Baillie-Grohman knew the New Zealanders as he had been Commander of H.M.S. Ramiilles which had escorted the first echelon from Wellington at the start of the New Zealand campaign.

Suddenly, out in the bay, a light shone and was gone. All eyes were turned seaward and the boats got ready. Yes, as at Dunkirk, 'There in the sea was England and her ships'. It was a race against time, for the ships had to leave by 3am to be out of range of German dive bombers by daylight. It was a blessedly calm sea and we could see the dark shapes of at least two ships coming in as close as they dared. The wounded were taken first. This unfortunately caused another delay because the destroyers could not take the wounded, who were to go on to a cruiser. The wounded were brought back and taken off again so that the boats would not waste time. But would the cruiser come? It was *H.M.S. Ajax*, famous for her part in the battle against the *Graf Spee* pocket battleship. She came not long after the destroyers and nosed in so close it looked as if she would go aground... With the *Ajax* in so close the turn round of the boats was about half the best time we had dared to hope for. With about a quarter of an hour to go a boat went off only just full.<sup>140</sup>

The Admiral and the General and their staff were all that was left and a ship's boat from the *Ajax* was shore bound to collect them. They moved out to the *Ajax* and climbed the rope nets to safety.

While the Greek episode has been the subject of much historical study it served the purpose for White of exposing him, finally, to warfare, observing Freyberg's *modus operandi* in conflict, and gave him an appreciation of the vision Freyberg enjoyed clearly as the result of experience, albeit in a different style of warfare, and from his innate perception of the realm of strategic possibilities on the field of warfare. That was never clearer than when he witnessed the General's observations of the terrain in the north of Greece and his comment that the more Freyberg saw of the situation the less he liked it. Then, in gaining Australian General Blamey's support for a move back to Mt. Olympus, Freyberg's prescience was evident.

Whether this decision would have been taken at all but for the General's grasp of the realities of the situation, I doubt very much. Certainly it would not have been taken in time, but for his insistence and tenacity, and if it had not been

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid, p.32

taken in time the history of the New Zealand Division could have begun and ended in Greece.<sup>141</sup>

Freyberg's refusal to obey the command that he and his HQ staff were to leave Greece by air, along with the Australians, who did leave, was an early example of his concern for the welfare of his men. That was further evidenced in his concern at the lack of detailed orders from both Corps or Force HQ that resulted in Freyberg visiting Athens and organising the programme of withdrawal that was eventually applied for the New Zealand and Australian forces. In spite of comments by Francis de Guingand to the contrary,<sup>142</sup> Wavell claimed, "We had fortunately foreseen the possibility of an evacuation and had prepared a plan at an early stage."<sup>143</sup> Blame for the failure of the Greek campaign could not be apportioned to the participants. Historians recognise that the British Expeditionary Force was ill-equipped and out-numbered and lacking the all-important air support that was so crucial to the type of warfare Germany was employing.<sup>144</sup> Yet that didn't stop criticism of Freyberg from Brigadier James Hargest of 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade.<sup>145</sup> Already upset at the lack of training resources while the 2<sup>nd</sup> Echelon of 2 NZEF was diverted to Britain – a small concern given the plight of Britain facing invasion at that time and ironic given the criticism directed at Hargest for his failure to train his Brigade in counter-attack measures a few weeks later in Crete - he was critical of the withdrawal from Greece although the criticism in this instance was directed at the Staff based in Athens.<sup>146</sup> However, he did make one charge against Freyberg of 'not having control during the retreat from Mount Olympus to the

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid, p.10

<sup>142</sup> Major-General Sir Francis de Guingand, *Generals at War*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1964, who was a staff officer at GHQ Cairo, wrote after the war that when the Joint Planning Staff began working on an 'Evacuation of Greece' paper General Wavell's second-in-command General Arthur Smith informed de Guingand that Wavell was annoyed and wanted him to stop. However, the Naval and Air representatives on the Joint Planning Staff objected because Wavell had no jurisdiction over them. After being informed of their objection Smith said they should go ahead but to keep it to themselves. It was only on a trip to Athens after a flight with Wavell, that Wavell told de Guingand he should continue to work on an evacuation plan, but in total secrecy.

<sup>143</sup> Field-Marshal Earl Wavell, *The British Expedition to Greece*, *The Army Quarterly*, January 1950, p.184

<sup>144</sup> W.G. McClymont, *To Greece*, War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington, p.478

<sup>145</sup> Brigadier James Hargest, "Letters to Mrs Hargest," 2 June 1941, Notes taken by Angus Ross from Hargest Family Letters, WA11 1, DA 52/10/10, National Archives: "It is too early to criticise...but everything was bad about this campaign. First the insane desire of Mr Churchill and the Govt. to help Greece when we had nothing help her with. To embark on a campaign without any chance of success was sheer lunacy. The Staff work was not good – the Intelligence was bad – in every details we were wrong informed and the attitude of the Staff at Athens deplorable."

<sup>146</sup> Ibid

Thermopylae line'.<sup>147</sup> White felt completely the opposite to Hargest and was dismissive of his criticism. "Hargest's view of the withdrawal from Mt Olympus was rubbish, as was the mismanagement of the reinforcements from Kalamata. He was a clever arguer. That's an absurd suggestion not supported by the evidence."<sup>148</sup>

Freyberg had not wanted Hargest from the outset and had received advice from the New Zealand Chief of Staff, Major General John Duigan, that Hargest 'was not the sort of chap that would be helpful'.<sup>149</sup> "The General was concerned to have politicians, for good reasons, particularly if they were using their political influences and he was applying the same kind of attitude to Hargest as he was to Labour members. But he got great support from [Captain W.J. Lyon and First World War veteran who was M.P. for Waitemata] Lyons [sic] but he made personal opportunities for them to be prominent in his thinking and that was all."<sup>150</sup> Freyberg's actions were praised by Wavell. When they met on Crete, Wavell said, "I want to tell you how well I think the New Zealand Division has done in Greece. I do not believe any other Division would have carried out those withdrawals as well."<sup>151</sup> Freyberg was vindicated further by the Inter-Services Committee after the Battle for Crete.<sup>152</sup> The Committee found there was "ample evidence to prove...that General Freyberg, by his presence in the forward area at difficult moments was personally responsible for putting new heart into commanders and for stemming what might have developed into a rout."<sup>153</sup>

White recalled thinking at Thermopylae, on the eve of Anzac Day, after a rare comment from Freyberg about Gallipoli. "As we sat on the ground under the trees eating an evening meal, the General spoke for the first time of his own exploit at Gallipoli, merely saying, 'Well, 25 years ago tonight, I swam ashore at Gallipoli'. As I looked at him and thought of the last few days I felt that he was living up to his reputation, for it was clear that he was the moving spirit in the conduct of a fighting withdrawal, which kept everyone with whom he came in contact in a state of optimism and confidence. And in the course of this campaign he must have been seen

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid

<sup>148</sup> Sir John White, NAM, Tape 9, side 2

<sup>149</sup> Ibid

<sup>150</sup> Ibid, Tape 10, side 2

<sup>151</sup> Bernard Freyberg, Narrative on Crete (unpublished), Sir John White Papers, NAM, p.2

<sup>152</sup> Paul Freyberg, *Bernard Freyberg V.C., Soldier of Two Nations*, quoting Inter-Services Committee on Crete, chaired by Brigadier G. Salisbury-Jones, 2 July 1941, PRO Kew 201/99

<sup>153</sup> Ibid

by almost every man in the Division as he went from front to front and followed every move.”<sup>154</sup> Freyberg had been active throughout the withdrawal.

Later in the war, during the Italy campaign, Freyberg told his officers who had gathered for a conference that Wavell, before Operation Lustre to Greece, had told him, “This is the worst campaign I have ever heard of – it breaks every principle of military teaching. We will be out of Greece in a month.”<sup>155</sup> Freyberg also said to White as they awaited their departure on *H.M.S. Ajax*, “I’ve now taken part in three of Winston’s disasters, Gallipoli, Antwerp [WW1] and Greece [WW2].”<sup>156</sup> The next episode in Crete would be no different.

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<sup>154</sup> White, *The Gamble for Greece*, *ibid*, p.24

<sup>155</sup> White, quoting General Freyberg, *G.O.C Diary*, 3 Nov 1943, addendum, Lecture by Brigadier Stewart, Sir John White Papers, WFC, p.8,

<sup>156</sup> White, NAM, Tape 6, Side 2

### CHAPTER THREE – CRETE (May 1941)

John White almost missed the Battle for Crete. That he did not is useful for the historical record given his closeness to General Freyberg throughout the battle, to the decision-making and to the flow of information that allowed him significant credence in post-war revisionist debate. White's unpublished writing on the defence of Crete, his letters, his appreciation of the sequence of events, and transfer of information, make him a credible witness to the history that unfolded. The battle for the strategic Mediterranean island became synonymous with New Zealand's war effort and proved the Second World War equivalent of Gallipoli, certainly the two defeats form a considerable share of the war literature relating to New Zealand in conflicts. Debate still continues about the handling of the battle and while Germany eventually won the island it was at a considerable cost in manpower for negligible strategic return. And after the battle was complete, Wavell was able to reflect, "I do not believe that we could have held Crete with Greece in the possession of the enemy."<sup>157</sup> However, the Battle for Crete weighed heavily on Freyberg's mind for the remainder of his life, part of his frustration being unable to talk publicly about the Ultra intelligence information provided from the breaking of the Enigma code. Instead of the island being a drop-off point after the evacuation of Greece, the New Zealanders and Australians were told that they were to be part of the defence of the island. After Freyberg and his advance party, including White, landed at Suda Bay in Crete, word came through that General Wilson wanted to see Freyberg before flying to Egypt later that day. In keeping with the New Zealanders' expected departure for Alexandria, White and Freyberg's ADC Jack Griffiths returned to *HMS Ajax* at Suda Bay and were soon on their way back to Egypt. Woken by Griffiths the night after returning to Maadi, White was told they were to return to Crete the next day. Upon arrival at Suda Bay, they made straight for HQ where Freyberg was in one of a line of little rooms in a quarry overlooking Canea. It was then that White learned what had happened at Freyberg's earlier meeting. It had been called by the Commander-in-Chief, General Wavell. Wilson attended along with Admiral Baillie-Grohman and Air-Marshal J.H. D'Albiac, the Commander of the Crete Garrison, General Eric Weston and other senior officers of the Navy and RAF.

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<sup>157</sup> Field-Marshal Earl Wavell, *The British Expedition to Greece, 1941*, *The Army Quarterly*, January 1950, p.185

The General went there with not the faintest idea what was in store for him. He expected to find out when the New Zealand troops would be shipped back to Egypt. Instead, General Wavell told him the New Zealand troops were required to hold Crete. The General pointed out that the force was disorganised and in need of refitting but the Commander-in-Chief said there was no shipping available to take them to Egypt and that he proposed to appoint the General, Commander of Crete. Thus it was that the General came from the Conference with a new operational commitment bristling with problems, besides which the campaign in Greece was almost a side show.<sup>158</sup>

Wilson had arrived in Crete to receive instructions to consider the defence of the island before Wavell made his mind up to appoint Freyberg. One of the first tasks for Freyberg was to ask for a War Office appreciation of the scale of attack expected. This was to prove a significant request in the light of post-war revisionist criticism of Freyberg after the Ultra information was released. Wavell eventually responded by cable advising an estimate of heavy bombers, dive bombers, troop carriers and fighters along with anticipated numbers involved in seaborne landings. "The aerial armada the Luftwaffe had available was most impressive and calculated to cause some 'despondency and alarm' to the garrison which had to meet the attack. Needless to say the detailed information, which included possible dates for the attack, was not released."<sup>159</sup> During his work White

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<sup>158</sup> White, "Crete," unpublished paper, Sir John White Papers, WFC p.2

<sup>159</sup> Ibid p.6

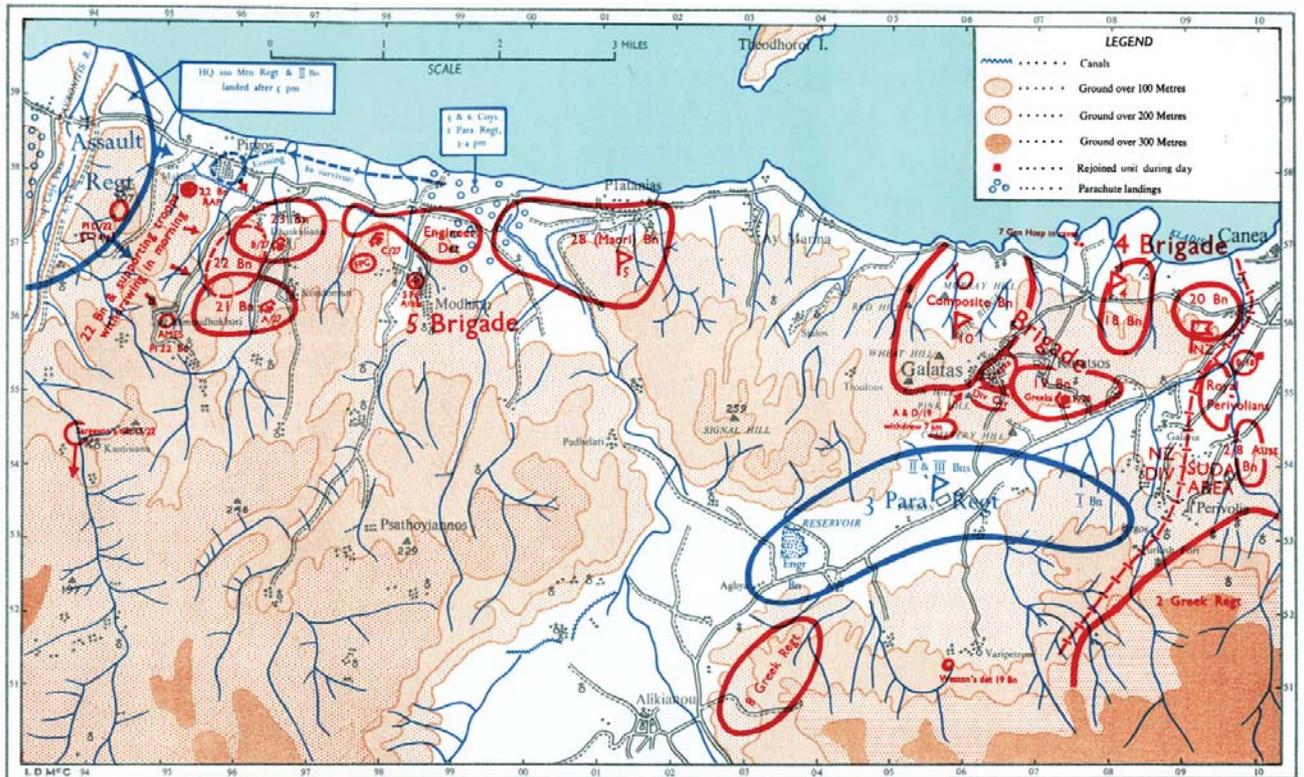


Figure 2: New Zealand Divisional area, Crete, from *Crete*<sup>160</sup> (reproduced with permission of the Ministry for Culture and Heritage)

became aware of the communications Freyberg was receiving from England which would in time become known as Ultra.

At that time I didn't know, but I was brought into the picture because the General, using the Intelligence Officer instead of me, had sent two cables, one to Middle East and one to New Zealand, passing on the information that an air and sea invasion, simultaneous, was imminent. It came from the War Office, that was the information being passed to us from Ultra. The fact that these messages have come in and will be coming in is absolutely secret. As soon as the General's read them they will be burnt. I think I had one in my hand because some of them were imperfect, mutilated we called them, and you couldn't read them and couldn't get what the code letters meant or said. I was left quite clearly with the impression that this information was very secret and if anybody got to know we had received it then lives would be at stake quite apart from the fact that source would be gone after that. We were told at that

<sup>160</sup> D.M. Davin, *Crete*, Historical Publications Branch, Wellington, 1953

time that it was never to be discussed in any circumstances and it was covered in secrecy forever, so to speak.<sup>161</sup>

White was never told that someone had broken a code. Second Lieutenant Geoffrey Cox confirmed this and said Wavell gave Freyberg no indication of the origin of these Ultra messages, "and indeed until late in the war Freyberg believed them to have come from a British spy planted right in the German general staff."<sup>162</sup> Paul Freyberg refuted this and said General Freyberg was emphatic he was told by Wavell that Ultra involved the decrypting of German wireless transmissions.<sup>163</sup> This was further confirmed by a letter from Wavell to Freyberg on 8 May which added in a footnote, "Be very careful of security (underlined). Crete is certain to have many enemy agents. especially [sic] keep all knowledge of O.L. to yourself."<sup>164</sup> (O.L. was Orange Leonard, the code word in the Middle East for Ultra). This also refuted the claims of Lewin that Freyberg had been told, and believed until the end of the war, that the information came from a highly-placed source in the German high command.<sup>165</sup> A claim repeated by Sir Stewart Menzies in his autobiography.<sup>166</sup> Initially, the information had come from the Chiefs of Staff, but by the time White arrived in Crete a day or two later the information was coming directly from Bletchley Park, the code-breaking centre in England, and without the editing that made the information easier to understand. "We were getting the information as Bletchley Park sent it. We got it in that form and it was difficult to handle."<sup>167</sup>

The original information was not precise as to an air or amphibious threat but it gave the scale of the assault which was much more definite in the air and the second part of it, made it perfectly clear there would be a naval assault at the same time.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> White, Oral History Project Interview, *ibid*, p.5

<sup>162</sup> Sir Geoffrey Cox, *A Tale of Two Battles*, William Kimber and Co. Limited, London, 1987, p.51

<sup>163</sup> Paul Freyberg, *Bernard Freyberg V.C., Soldier of Two Nations*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1991, p.268

<sup>164</sup> General Archibald Wavell, letter to Bernard Freyberg, 8 May 1941, Sir John White Papers, White family

<sup>165</sup> Ronald Lewin, *Ultra Goes to War: The Secret Story*, Hutchinson, London, 1978, p.158

<sup>166</sup> Anthony Cave Brown, *The Life of Sir Stewart Menzies*, Michael Joseph, London, 1988, p.338-340

<sup>167</sup> White, NAM, Tape 8, side 1.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid*

Then we had the message from the Chiefs of Staffs which came from them, suddenly on the same day, which contained the information that was to be treated as reliable information, that a simultaneous invasion, and I think they used the word invasion rather than attack, from the...that was going to be on Crete. Up to that point there was no certainty that there was going to be an attack on Crete and that's one of the reasons why defence arrangements hadn't really been made. They hadn't been equipped in men or arms.<sup>169</sup>

This information, and its quality, was to become a significant feature of post-war study. Crete had not been prepared as a fortress like Malta and Gibraltar. What British forces had been on Crete had done no more than prepare defences for the naval station at Suda. Freyberg had insisted on Royal Navy support in the event of an attempted invasion of Crete by sea. The commander of the Mediterranean Fleet, Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham accordingly ordered that any force setting out from Greece to invade Crete by sea was to be destroyed.<sup>170</sup> Poorly equipped forces evacuated from Greece had left their artillery pieces and all that were available on Crete were French and Italian 75mm guns, some without proper sights while no transport was available. There was little by way of support that Wavell could offer. Any field guns that did arrive were quickly unloaded and rushed to pre-arranged positions where crews were waiting to man them. But many ships unloading cargo were bombed in Suda Bay leaving supplies on the bottom of the harbour. Improvisation in all matters was the keynote of the preparations. Another frustration was the failure of the Middle East Command to allow the 6<sup>th</sup> New Zealand Brigade to join the remainder of the Division on Crete, instead they were shipped on to Egypt, in spite of having called into Suda Bay. The same occurred with Freyberg's Intelligence staff, and they were not returned to Crete. This created a problem when Cox was reading a bundle of captured German documents on the night of May 20 – the first day of the invasion. Cox said some time later that there was every chance the Intelligence team would have understood from the documents that General Kurt Student had committed all his reserves which could have allowed for a bolder

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid, Tape 7, Side 1

<sup>170</sup> Ibid, p.7

defensive response on the second day.<sup>171</sup> An early problem was the staff Freyberg had inherited. While Crete should have had a Corps Headquarters at least, Freyberg's staff was what White called 'a polyglot organisation with no proper layout or cohesion'.<sup>172</sup>

The balance of the improvised staff were mostly untried and looked it. The Intelligence Office contained quite a remarkable collection of University dons, one of who read Horace's Odes in his leisure moments, no doubt to recapture the calm of Oxford's quiet cloisters amidst the stormy uncertainty and clatter of war in Crete. In the 'I' office one could hear very clever talk and a type of wit and language to which we were to grow familiar as the recognised medium in which these men wrote their intelligence summaries... This was the first Anglo-New Zealand staff I had seen in operation. It worked, but not well. There were too many misfits; it was too much of an improvisation. It takes time for men from the Dominions and men from the old country to learn how to work together. To us they appear haphazard, lacking in system – their hours for meals, their dress, their 'old boy, old school tie cum Poona' language, their caste system – take a bit of getting used to while for them the lack of these things, the brusqueness and disregard of the formalities in men from the Dominion is so galling at first that we are likely to have the honour of being classified as 'socially impossible'.<sup>173</sup>

Under the circumstances Freyberg was the right man to command Crete, White said. The only considerations were New Zealand's Brigadiers and the English Brigadiers. The man among them all who might be able to do it was Freyberg.<sup>174</sup> By taking command of CreForce, command of the remnants of the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Division was passed to Puttick who White felt was not at his best. "Puttick was the man who should have exerted his influence over everybody and he didn't do so. Puttick was not in a good position to deal with either because he had a composite force."<sup>175</sup> Frustrating their efforts were communication issues. "It seemed impossible to get messages across which had any effect. All the time communications were

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<sup>171</sup> Gerald Hensley, *Beyond the Battlefield – New Zealand and its Allies 1939-45*, Penguin, Auckland, 2009, p.128

<sup>172</sup> White, "CRETE," *ibid*, p.8

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid*, p.9-10

<sup>174</sup> White, NAM, Tape 8, side 1

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid*, Tape 7, side 2

doubted,” he said. “The planes severed communications, so robbing commanders of information essential for them to take the right decisions. At the same time it wearied them, numbing their powers of decision, inducing inexplicable errors of judgment.”<sup>176</sup> Central to the battle was the loss of Maleme Aerodrome, a situation made possible when the force in place, in Hargest’s 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade, 23 Battalion and 22 Battalion, failed to carry out an immediate counter-attack that had been anticipated in pre-battle discussion. Hargest was criticised by others for not preparing his troops for the immediate counterattack.<sup>177</sup>

There was some talk that Hargest didn’t really apply his mind to the subject. I have no doubt that something in the atmosphere was affecting people. At the very times when they were required to be at their greatest ability they were bowed down by this constant attacking, and it had an effect on Gentry, and he talks about feeling he had to go to sleep. Some of Hargest’s comments he made to people would support that. Our HQ [CreForce] was never under that particular kind of pressure at all.<sup>178</sup>

Freyberg, as commander of the overall operation, had accepted the responsibility for the actions of his commanders. But Pugsley said Puttick had been overwhelmed by his responsibilities and had been bullied by his subordinates, Hargest was exhausted and abrogated his command in the first days of battle, Inglis had failed to match the expectations he had of others and disobeyed Freyberg’s instruction when commanding Force Reserve and that had led to the destruction of the force while Colonel Howard Kippenberger had also shown his inexperience.<sup>179</sup> White said, “I thought Hargest must have been deranged as a result of what he had been through in Crete.”<sup>180</sup> White felt Hargest’s criticisms of Freyberg’s method of command were unjustified. While not knowing what Hargest said to Fraser, White believed it may have been to do with not being allowed to have more say at meetings. “Which is what he appears to have been complaining about. All I would say is that I didn’t notice that they were being stopped from expressing their views and I would have thought it was

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<sup>176</sup> Cox, *ibid*, p.110

<sup>177</sup> White, NAM, Tape 9, side 2

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid*, Tape 8, side 1

<sup>179</sup> Pugsley, *ibid*, p.179

<sup>180</sup> White, NAM, Tape 3, side 2

extremely difficult to stop Barrowclough from expressing his. Kip, on the other hand, was a very silent man.”<sup>181</sup> So far as 22 Battalion commander Colonel L.W. Andrew VC was concerned, White said he had been given command to hold his point overlooking Maleme and it had been claimed that he failed to carry out his orders to counter-attack. White recalled that at some stage, long before the criticism had arisen in post-war years, Andrew had received an apology and the blame had reverted to Hargest.<sup>182</sup>

As it was, the defence of Crete presented difficulties at every turn. It was impossible to defend every danger point so the plan was to hold the airfields and ports. This meant that Freyberg had to spread his forces and lack of transport meant that each defended locality had to be independent and self-contained.<sup>183</sup> They were always aware that had the Germans chosen, parachutists could have been landed in many other places without opposition. Later criticism of Freyberg’s deployments on Crete and his seeming pre-occupation with a seaborne landing became a focal point for historians.<sup>184</sup> But White was emphatic and his response to them was summed up in reaction to comments published in the New Zealand Herald regarding Ronald Lewin’s book *Ultra Goes to War*. Lewin believed Freyberg ‘should have concentrated on holding the island’s airfields rather than to have expected the major German thrust to come from the sea’ and that Freyberg failed to appreciate, in light of the information he received from Ultra, that the key to Crete was Maleme airfield. Lewin claimed that while Freyberg was ‘a fighting general’ another commander like Montgomery, with his ‘incisive mind’ would have realised Maleme’s worth.<sup>185</sup> White made the point that he saw the Ultra information and typed Freyberg’s cables to General Wavell and New Zealand before they were encoded.<sup>186</sup> “My knowledge of the information and my position in the wings of the stage mean that I am in a position to state categorically that Mr Lewin’s conclusions are wrong and an unjustified and unfair reflection on a great commander.”<sup>187</sup> Responding to claims of Freyberg’s pre-occupation with a seaborne landing White said, ‘...with the information he had it was as obvious to

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid, p.18-19

<sup>182</sup> Ibid, Tape 11, side 2

<sup>183</sup> White, Oral History Project Interview, *ibid*, p.11

<sup>184</sup> John McLeod, *Myth and Reality*, Reed Methuen, Auckland, 1986, p.40

<sup>185</sup> Lewin, *ibid*, p.159

<sup>186</sup> White, Letter to the Editor, NZ Herald, 23 April 1979, Sir John White papers, National Army Museum, p.1

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid*, p.2

General Wavell and General Freyberg, as it would have been to General Montgomery, that the first priority was to deny the enemy a foothold on any of the three airfields on the island at Heraklion, Retimo and Maleme – not just Maleme'.<sup>188</sup> With the port of Suda also needing to be defended it was necessary to have a plan, and reserves in place, to cope with any attack there.

In fact, the planning and the preparations to meet the airborne attack at all airfields in the time and with the meagre equipment available were proved to be almost precisely correct. History shows that the camouflage and care taken to avoid movement during the days of air bombing before the parachute attack resulted in the enemy being unaware of the defenders' positions. As a result, the great majority of parachutists and gliders were dropped in the defended area and they were killed or captured.

Cox highlighted the failure of the German reconnaissance missions before the battle. "They had underestimated the total strength of the British forces six-fold, and set the British fighting strength at a third of its effectiveness."<sup>189</sup> Subsequent claims by the German commander of the Crete operation, General Kurt Student that Crete was the grave of the German parachutist was confirmation of Freyberg's effective planning in defence of the airfields, White said. Where the parachutists gained a foothold, the orders had been precise - immediate counter attack. It was in this phase that the battle for Maleme and Crete was finally lost but that had not been because of any lack of concentration by Freyberg in the priorities for defence or command during the battle. "History indeed suggests that the defenders were close to victory but it was the lack of adequate equipment and transport and, perhaps above all, communications in a battle where the enemy had complete air superiority that led to the failure of counter attacks at Maleme and defeat."<sup>190</sup> This was borne out by Mackenzie, "General Freyberg's problem was not numbers; it was equipment, transport, communications, arms, ammunition, and bigger than the problem offered by all these put together, the insoluble puzzle of how to defeat an airborne invasion without the help of aircraft."<sup>191</sup>

White said there was an unpleasant irony in the situation when a writer [Lewin] reached conclusions without supporting evidence to support them and failed to see that the near success of the defence was in large measure the result of

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid, p.2

<sup>189</sup> Sir Geoffrey Cox, *A Tale of Two Battles*, ibid, p.112

<sup>190</sup> Ibid, p.2

<sup>191</sup> Compton Mackenzie, *Wind of Freedom*, Chatto and Windus Ltd, London, 1943, p.227

Freyberg's use of the information he had, and his capacity as a commander. "His military insight was to lead on to triumphs of tactics and planning which proved many times over that he was much more than 'gallant, enduring Freyberg'."<sup>192</sup> Freyberg foresaw some of the criticisms of the defence of Crete:

A question critics will ask is 'Why were the aerodromes not put out of action by mining or cratering?' This, of course, was considered and in the end was vetoed on the grounds that the aerodromes at Heraklion and Maleme might be wanted by us for operational purposes. At Retimo there was another possible aerodrome which the enemy could use. I wanted to make it unserviceable by mining or blowing it up as otherwise we would have to find a garrison to prevent troops landing there. I discussed this question with the ACC but they wanted it kept as a possible satellite aerodrome for Maleme or Heraklion. Therefore, a garrison had to be provided.<sup>193</sup>

Among Sir John White's papers was research undertaken by Freyberg's son Paul attempting to piece together the events prior to the Battle for Crete dealing with the refusal, or otherwise, of a request allowing General Freyberg to change the dispositions of troops around Maleme. Paul Freyberg said that by 12 May, at the latest and probably earlier, his father knew that he did not face any assault from the sea. The HQ Creforce intelligence summary stated on 12 May any seaborne contingent was not due to arrive until D plus 2. "Freyberg was therefore in the clear to concentrate on dealing with the main airborne assault on the airfields."<sup>194</sup>

At this stage a number of difficulties presented themselves. When Wavell briefed Freyberg about Ultra on the 30<sup>th</sup> April at their only meeting before the battle, he gave two specific orders. Under no circumstances was Freyberg to mention the existence of Ultra to anyone else on Crete, which meant that he could not discuss impending moves with his Commanders and Staffs, as it would have meant disclosing to them the reasons for such moves and risked compromising the source. Secondly, he was not to take action on any information he obtained solely from Ultra without his

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid, p.3

<sup>193</sup> General Bernard Freyberg, "Narrative on Crete," (unpublished), Sir John White papers, NAM, p.13

<sup>194</sup> Paul Freyberg, *The Battle for Crete and the Ultra Factor* (unpublished), Sir John White Papers, NAM, p.2

Commander-in Chief's agreement. That was one of the most important of the Ultra standing orders, and it was rigidly enforced in 1941.<sup>195</sup>

Cox said that while other commanders, notably in the Royal Navy at Cape Matapan in March 1941, or at Alam Halfa and Alamein in 1942, were able to put aircraft on reconnaissance missions, to conveniently suggest sightings by accident so as not to jeopardise Ultra, that option was not available to Freyberg on Crete who had no resources at all.<sup>196</sup> General Freyberg asked that permission be given to relax the ruling to allow him to put forces on the western side of the airfield. His request was declined by Wavell, but Churchill did not know that. Freyberg had warned a messenger on 12 May that without a change the battle would be lost.

My father told me that the officer [messenger] concerned was on the GHQ Intelligence Staff, but that it was not John Shearer who he knew well. The probability is that it was the No.2 to the DDMI – one Colonel R.V. Hume. Hume was on the Intelligence staff in Cairo for all the early part of the war, and he himself was to become DDMI Intelligence in 1943. It was a categorical reaffirmation of the Ultra Standing Order that no action could be taken on information obtained from Ultra alone, and that therefore there could be no question of any re-deployment at Maleme as a result of the information contained in the 'Compendium of Documents' or any other information derived from Ultra. My father warned that this would mean the loss of Crete.<sup>197</sup>

As to the battle itself White said the preparations for the May 20 invasion had offered some 'remarkable spectacles' as 30-40 dive bombers approached from the sea, with an escort of fighters, before diving one after the other with shrieking screams until releasing their cargo of bombs. By blazing away with their machine guns on the way down the noise was incredible. And while the aircraft flew over Creforce HQ on their route to Suda Bay, it was a source of amazement that they never attacked the quarry in which the headquarters were based. 'I think it was so open and clear to view that they must have thought it was a refugee centre or workers' huts!' In

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid, p.2

<sup>196</sup> Cox, *A Tale of Two Battles*, ibid, p.106

<sup>197</sup> Paul Freyberg, *The Battle for Crete and the Ultra Factor*, ibid, p.4-5

a letter home on the Greek campaign, White had written when en route to Crete that the German air superiority achieved in Greece was unlikely to be repeated. He acknowledged after Crete that had been 'cheerful optimism'. In Crete it was not a case of German air superiority; it was German air monopoly.

White recounted that the date of the invasion of Crete changed from May 16 to May 20. He did not know what was going to happen, but Freyberg was aware the invasion would be preceded by a bombardment, and that the invasion would come from parachutists. But it was not known, to the rank and file, at what time they would enter the fray. And while the Maleme area of Crete got them in the morning, it was not until the afternoon that they attacked Heraklion and Retimo. The invasion of 20 May had been preceded on the 19<sup>th</sup> by a heavy-scale air attack. Once the 20 May assault began at 8am there were planes overhead for most of the rest of the day. These included bombers, fighters and reconnaissance craft.

It was certainly a merry picture. There were high-level bombers, screaming Stuka dive-bombers, Messerschmitt fighters firing cannon guns and machine guns and every type of anti-aircraft gun blazing into a cloudless sky. Needless to say we had by this time donned our tin hats and yours truly was sitting in a slit trench. The General, as per usual, was standing outside the trench. Being fairly high up on the hill we had a good view of the bombing attacks against our gun positions, etc.<sup>198</sup>

Then, while the noise was at its greatest their attention was drawn to more aircraft coming in from the sea, the troop-carriers who dispensed their parachutists from about 500 feet with a variety of colours.

There were, in fact literally, hundreds of aeroplanes in the sky and, without any exaggeration, thousands of parachutists were landed. At the same time there were gliders floating about – sinister in the silent way they slipped over the hills and down into river beds. But parachutists and glider travellers had a bad day and at Maleme, and in the Canea area, their losses were extremely

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid

heavy. They got a reception they did not expect in every place they landed poor devils.<sup>199</sup>

In the Maleme-Galatas area, the German orders of the day had been captured and by days end it was clear that not one of the German objectives had been achieved. The quality of the defence had been high and remained so for some days.<sup>200</sup> White said the battle raged for eight days with the Luftwaffe a constant force during daylight hours. While the Germans concentrated on Maleme as their entry point in building a force capable of leading their attack, in other places the Germans took up key positions on roads to cut communication lines between the various garrisons. Freyberg noted, significantly, at the end of the first day, “We know now that on Maleme Aerodrome the 22<sup>nd</sup> Battalion had suffered very heavy casualties in a particularly bitter battle. The troops actually on the aerodrome had been overwhelmed. It was estimated that 1800 parachutists (one regiment) together with stores and equipment landed on top of them. In addition, two Battalions landed by glider just to the west.”<sup>201</sup> HQ was not made aware of the situation on Maleme until the morning of 21 May. Gun positions and forward troops were subjected to a ‘severe dive bombing attack before 9am’.<sup>202</sup>

There were further parachute landings and it was obvious that the enemy were making a most determined attempt to wrest control of the aerodrome from us. It had not been considered feasible for aircraft to land in the river bed west of Maleme Aerodrome but, during the morning, troop carriers began to land there and also on the beaches west of the aerodrome. These landings continued under constant shell fire from nine field guns and despite the heavy artillery fire which destroyed numbers of the enemy planes they continued to land regardless of loss of machines or life. The enemy was prepared to lose any number of planes, for those which were wrecked in landing or from fire, were simply dragged off the landing ground to make room for more to be destroyed.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid, p.6

<sup>200</sup> White, Oral History Project Interview, *ibid*, p.6

<sup>201</sup> General Bernard Freyberg, Narrative on Crete (unpublished), Sir John White Papers, NWM, p.29

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid*, p.30

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid*, p.30-31

Eventually, under the threat of superior numbers, the Australian, British and New Zealand troops were forced to retire and retreat over the mountain range, fighting rear-guard actions en route to Sphakia.

I shall never forget the road from Suda to Sphakia – over steep hills and through mountain passes to one of the most inhospitable coast lines I have ever seen – not unlike the coast round about Karori Rock...In Greece the fighting Division, fully equipped withdrew phenomenal distances with all its transport and essential supplies. In Crete troops marched and stood and fought and they abandoned their supplies because we were not a mobile force. The badly wounded were left in clearing stations and hospitals. Such is the war of movement.<sup>204</sup>

It was during the retreat over the White Mountains to Sphakia that White witnessed again Freyberg's remarkable ability to appreciate events on the battlefield.

He [Freyberg] did see the counter-attack at 42<sup>nd</sup> Street<sup>205</sup>. He went up the hill, he had glasses [binoculars] and had an extraordinary pick-up of the situation from what he could see and from what was available. That was one of the things that was remarkable as far as I was concerned.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> White, letter to family, 29 July 1941, Sir John White Papers, WFC, p.8

<sup>205</sup> The charge at 42<sup>nd</sup> Street involved Australian and New Zealander soldiers from 5 and 19 Brigades. The Australians started the counter-attack against the advancing 141 Mountain Regiment and were joined by New Zealanders, especially the A and B Companies of 28<sup>th</sup> (Maori) Battalion who led the bayonet charge which forced the Germans back giving invaluable time for the retreating forces, 'The retreat: days 7-9', <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/war/the-battle-for-crete/retreat-days-7-9>, (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 20-Dec-2012

<sup>206</sup> White, Oral History Project Interview, *ibid*, p.7

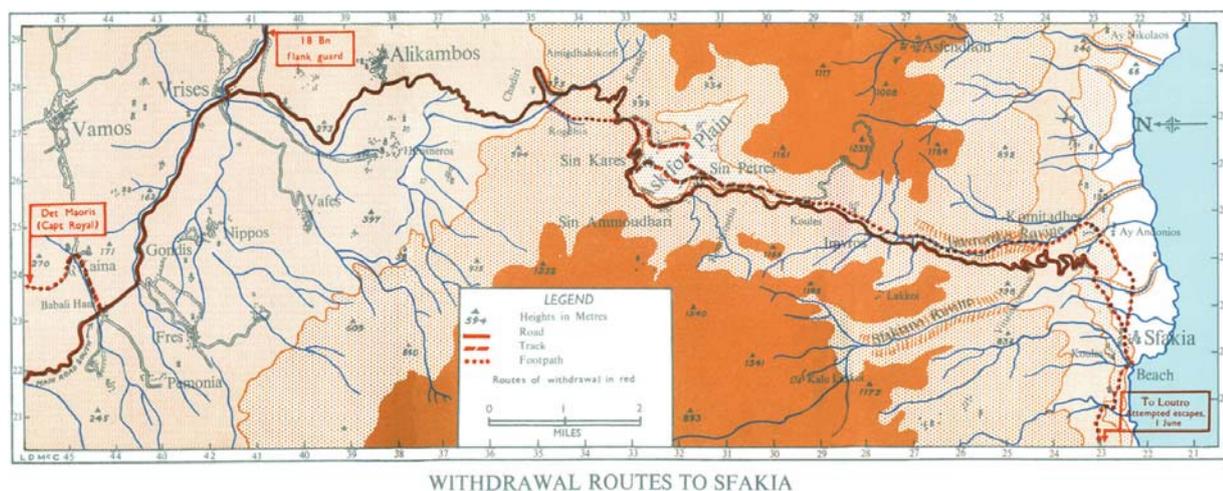


Figure 3: The evacuation route to Sphakia, from *Crete*<sup>207</sup> (reproduced with the permission of the Ministry for Culture and Heritage)

Having taken about a day to make the climb over the White Mountains, without harassment by German aircraft, they reached the little cove at Sphakia and then retreated behind the township into caves which were used by locals to house their animals in rough weather, or during the night, and were within walking distance of the bay. White was ordered from Crete before Freyberg to deliver a dispatch. He had suggested he should stay with his Chief only to receive a military rebuke.

As soon as I arrived [in Alexandria] on the Australian destroyer I said I needed transport to take this dispatch and I went straight through to Cairo. By that time it was late at night and fortunately I found that the man in charge was a Brigadier at the headquarters, Sherston, and I added to the report that having regard to how the General behaved in Greece I suppose I said if the Commander-in-Chief wants General Freyberg off Crete it would be advisable to send a direct order. He [Freyberg] got the direct order and sent an excuse for not going at once, and stayed another day and then came. He was an absolute realist at times but to retreat, to go back, he continued to be very difficult. I always felt that was probably my most important contribution to the military history of the nation. Putting it more positively [than having him

<sup>207</sup> Davin, *ibid*

caught as a prisoner-of-war] it was necessary for us. That's exactly what happened, he was superb in the desert.<sup>208</sup>

Apart from Hargest's post-campaign criticism there was cause for Prime Minister Peter Fraser to make his own enquiries on proceedings. After hearing of the confusion regarding the whole Greek episode in which both the Government and Freyberg believed the other was in agreement with the operation, Fraser said that even if they had all the knowledge beforehand that was acquired in hindsight it was still 'right and proper to go'.<sup>209</sup> White said Freyberg and Fraser were respectful of one another and eventually forged a very strong relationship. "Fraser, of course, was a very great politician – a real politician – but the General also was a very shrewd man."<sup>210</sup>

In the wake of the defeat on Crete, the Inter-Services Committee undertook an inquiry. Meanwhile the Chief of General Staff, Sir John Dill, had asked Wavell to send to England a senior officer who had experienced the fighting in Crete. This was with the aim of lecturing others on how the German airborne attacks might best be countered. With Hargest, the first choice for the task, having been injured Brigadier L.W. Inglis, the Commander of the 4<sup>th</sup> New Zealand Brigade, was sent. He met Churchill on 13 June where he reported how badly equipped the men had been and how poor the defences were. A day later Churchill minuted the Chiefs of Staff on this 'shocking account' of the state of the troops in Crete and how slow Middle East HQ had been to act on the 'precise intelligence' [Ultra] they had been given. Raugh claimed, Inglis' account had also fuelled Churchill's belief that the Middle East HQ had never shown that it had any 'real grip' on the operation, providing a further reason to replace Wavell'.<sup>211</sup>

Paul Freyberg's investigation claimed Churchill sent a message to Wavell testing Inglis' statements. The exact signal and reply have not been released. But he believed they occurred between 15-17 June. While dining with Paul Freyberg in Cairo, General Freyberg received a message that Wavell wanted to see him urgently.

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid, p.7

<sup>209</sup> White, Oral History Project Interview, *ibid*, p.8

<sup>210</sup> Ibid

<sup>211</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel Harold E. Raugh Jr, *Wavell in the Middle East 1939-41*, Brasseys, London, 1993, quoted by Victoria Schofield, *Wavell: Soldier & Statesman*, Pen and Sword, Barnsley, 2010, p.206

They called at GHQ, Freyberg snr expecting to be only a few minutes. He came back over an hour later and was angry.

We cannot be certain exactly what the row was about until the signals are released, but it is not very difficult to work out more or less what they contained. The signal from London would have told Wavell that the fat was in the fire, and than the BLUNDER [Paul Freyberg's own emphasis and his name for Wavell and Chief of Staff Middle East HQ General Arthur Smith's refusal to allow changes to dispositions] of the 12<sup>th</sup> May was about to be exposed to the Prime Minister. Wavell would have realised that his own head was now on the block. He knew that Freyberg had had a long friendship with Mr Churchill, and he jumped to the conclusion that Freyberg had briefed Inglis about what had happened in Crete, and told him to go and see the Prime Minister. Freyberg was livid with rage at being accused of going behind his Chief's back and of doing the unforgivable. He denied the accusation furiously, but what probably neither of them realised at the time was the Inglis, no doubt flattered by the attentions of the Prime Minister, had been thoroughly indiscreet and disloyal about both of them. Inglis did not know about Ultra, but he probably told Mr Churchill enough for him to work out for himself that his own messages, and those of the Chiefs of Staff, had not been passed on to Crete, and therefore would have given away the nature of the BLUNDER. Wavell's reply probably confirmed this.<sup>212</sup>

Paul Freyberg said Wavell never admitted to his father that there had been a BLUNDER, and he was possibly covering up for Smith. "By mid-June they [Wavell and Smith] were both probably beginning to hope that no-one had noticed, which would account for their fury when Inglis unwittingly let the cat out of the bag. But my father knew perfectly well that something had gone badly wrong, although he never knew the precise details."<sup>213</sup> Paul Freyberg believed Smith misunderstood instructions sent by Churchill and the Chiefs of Staff that over-rode the Ultra standing orders and gave General Freyberg additional information to use as he thought best. Instead of

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<sup>212</sup> Paul Freyberg, *The Battle for Crete and the Ultra Factor* (unpublished), Sir John White Papers, NAM, p.7

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid*, p.12

doing that Smith, and Wavell, had enforced the original orders which resulted in the messenger visiting Freyberg on Crete on May 12.<sup>214</sup> Soon after their dispute Wavell apologised to Freyberg and they retained their relationship, however, the damage had been done so far as Churchill was concerned and Wavell was replaced in an interchange of position with General Sir Claude Auchinleck.

White was not aware at the time of Crete, and until many years later, of the machinations of Inglis and Hargest behind the scenes. He also never saw any of the messages interchanged between Sir John Dill and Wavell and Auchinleck after an inquiry from Fraser about Freyberg's command on Crete and which resulted in Wavell saying he would have Freyberg with him in India if he was not to continue with the 2<sup>nd</sup> NZ Division. White said while in many ways he was 'a very close confidant' of the General, it would not have been impossible for Freyberg to keep that sort of thing to himself. When Freyberg visited the Commander-in-Chief, White didn't always go into meetings with him. Nor did Freyberg return and record events of the meetings in the diary.

White added that he felt if Freyberg had known what Inglis and Hargest had said about him, and if it was as bad as it appeared to have been, he would have been very surprised if Freyberg would have treated the pair with confidence.<sup>215</sup> White recalled that Freyberg was angry with Churchill for not sending messages of congratulations on the defence of the island. White added further that when Wavell had appointed Freyberg as Commander on Crete he offered a promotion but Freyberg's response was that he was not going to be 'bribed' by promotion.<sup>216</sup> But he was decorated and for the first time received a knighthood.

Hensley said for all the mistakes on Crete it would have been a miracle if a 'scratch collection of weary and ill-equipped troops, lacking armour, guns and above all air support' could have held Crete.<sup>217</sup> Fraser came to believe that the island was 'indefensible with the means at Freyberg's disposal'.<sup>218</sup> White was more insistent, "The General did everything possible and the success we did achieve was entirely due to the manner in which the forces were commanded."<sup>219</sup> He added further, "If we had had our 25-pounders for the two brigades that were there, I don't think the attack on

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid, p.13

<sup>215</sup> Ibid, p.10

<sup>216</sup> Ibid, p.8

<sup>217</sup> Hensley, *ibid*, p129

<sup>218</sup> Ibid

<sup>219</sup> White, Oral History Project Interview, *ibid*, p.8

Maleme would have succeeded.”<sup>220</sup> White agreed when Paul Freyberg said General Freyberg had been obsessed about Crete.

Crete became a constant subject. [With] people like Gentry, he couldn't talk about anything else when they were invited to Government House and he seemed to have developed a phobia about Crete. I hadn't noticed that. He didn't treat me to diatribes on Crete at all. My wife and I were invited to things and they were a natural reflection of the close relationship, of a friendly type, [that] had developed.<sup>221</sup>

One of Freyberg's first post-war critics was Alan Clark, a former British Cabinet Minister, who believed Freyberg had not shown in Crete 'the vigour of command',<sup>222</sup> that he showed later in the desert. This view may have been the result of comments published by Evelyn Waugh, a commando during the last days on Crete who described a meeting with Freyberg which Cox discussed.<sup>223</sup>

Waugh describes Freyberg at this meeting as 'composed but obtuse'.

Whatever other adjectives might be applied to Freyberg 'obtuse' is not one of them. I saw him under great pressure, in conditions of exhaustion and strain on many occasions later in the war, but at no time were his wits other than alert or sharp. What Waugh observed was fatigue, the fatigue of a commander in the eighth day of a battle of a kind never before fought.<sup>224</sup>

Cox said 'vigor and immense strength' lay at the base of Freyberg's career and his achievements.<sup>225</sup> "There [Greece] and later on Crete this new division and its commander shared together the experiences of some of the ugliest fighting of the war. They had no aircraft support and they had to fight rear-guard actions which appeared to be the rear-guard actions not only of the Mediterranean campaign but of the whole

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<sup>220</sup> White, NAM, Tape 7, Side 2

<sup>221</sup> Ibid, Tape 34, Side 2

<sup>222</sup> Ibid

<sup>223</sup> Sir Geoffrey Cox, *A Tale of Two Battles*, *ibid*, p.91

<sup>224</sup> Ibid

<sup>225</sup> Geoffrey Cox, *Bernard Freyberg V.C.*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, April 1943, p.58

Allied war struggle. At that time Britain was the only country actually fighting against the Axis.”<sup>226</sup>

In so far as Freyberg’s capacity for command was concerned White responded,

Those who were in Crete and know General Freyberg know that his leadership and vigour were never in doubt. Indeed, the siting of the defences, and the plan of defence, and his tremendous energy made a great contribution to the near success of a campaign, which was fought under most difficult conditions. Only a part of the troops on the island had the cohesion and discipline of officers and men who had trained and fought together and those units remained throughout a match for Hitler’s paratroopers when they met on equal terms.<sup>227</sup>

Clark was also critical of the evacuation from Crete claiming it had crippled the Mediterranean Fleet and that it had only been undertaken because it involved Dominion troops. White refuted that view by pointing out that the Navy’s main losses had occurred to the north of the island where they came within range of German dive bombers. “It is perhaps worth adding that quite apart from New Zealand feelings in the matter, those Dominion troops were worth saving for those men and their General were a part of the New Zealand Division which, re-equipped and reinforced, played a decisive role in the battle for Tobruk later in that same hard year when Britain and the British Commonwealth stood alone against Germany and Italy.”<sup>228</sup>

White also believed another author Antony Beevor<sup>229</sup> was wrong in claiming Freyberg was more concerned about the assault from the sea than about the air. Beevor also claimed Freyberg misread a key message during the battle because ‘he lacked the analytical intellect and the scepticism necessary to identify inconsistencies’.<sup>230</sup> White was sure, as was Sir Geoffrey Cox, that Beevor was wrong in his assessment on the first point. Cox said Beevor’s case was ‘fallacious, and does

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<sup>226</sup> Ibid, p.60

<sup>227</sup> Cox, *Tale of Two Battles*, ibid

<sup>228</sup> White, Letter to Editor draft, undated, no address, Sir John White Papers, WFC, p.5,

<sup>229</sup> Antony Beevor, *Crete – The Battle and the Resistance*, Penguin, London, 1992, p.88

<sup>230</sup> Ibid, p.90

not stand up to scrutiny'.<sup>231</sup> Freyberg wrote in his Narrative on Crete that on 29 April 1941 he received a 'Most Secret and Most Immediate' cable. It said:

German attack Crete by simultaneous airborne reinforcements from seaborne expeditions believed imminent. Scale airborne attack estimated 3000-4000 parachutists or airborne troops in first sortie. Two or three sorties per day possible from Greece and three or four from Rhodes if Rhodes not used as dive bombers base. All above with fighter escort. Bombing attack to be expected some time prior to arrival air and seaborne troops... Estimated both troops and shipping ample for seaborne operations and lighters for transport tanks also believed available hence scale seaborne attack dependent on extent to which enemy can evade our naval force.<sup>232</sup>

Freyberg said he could scarcely believe his eyes and it hit home that if the appreciation was correct some reality needed to be introduced into calculations for the defence of Crete. He informed the Middle East HQ on 1 May that his forces were 'totally inadequate' to meet the attack. Fighter aircraft would be needed while naval forces would have to deal with the seaborne attack. Freyberg said he favoured the holding of Crete but wanted to ensure that higher command authorities knew of the shortages facing the men, and of the support needed from the Navy and Air Force. "I did not consider it was right that men armed only with rifles and light machine-guns should be set such an impossible task."<sup>233</sup>

Wavell told Freyberg at their meeting in Canea that he was at his 'wits end' regarding aircraft. Freyberg said: "I felt most anxious about the C-in-C. He was carrying a heavy load of responsibility; heavier than any other soldier had been asked to carry and, in spite of it all, he kept in personal touch with me all through."<sup>234</sup>

Freyberg wrote that it was clear from his appreciation that the aerodromes had to be guarded "as, of course, their loss would jeopardize our defence."<sup>235</sup> Cox said Beavor's evidence did not bear out his claims. The key message on which Freyberg had based his dispositions, Signal OI/2/302 estimated that 12,000 men would be landed by air,

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<sup>231</sup> Sir Geoffrey Cox, copy of Letter to Imperial War Museum, 26 May 1999, Sir John White Papers, NAM, p.1

<sup>232</sup> General Bernard Freyberg, Narrative on Crete, p.5-6, Sir John White Papers, NAM

<sup>233</sup> Ibid, p.7

<sup>234</sup> Ibid, p.10

<sup>235</sup> Ibid, p.13

and 8000 by sea. At no time did the other Ultra signals received offer a lower figure of seaborne numbers. Cox accused Beevor of distorting the situation.<sup>236</sup> However, Cox said the receipt of an Ultra message just after a planning meeting on the second day of the battle in relation to the forthcoming counterattack that night may have been mistaken by Freyberg. The message read, “On continuation of attack Colorado [code name for Crete], reliably reported that among operations planned for 21<sup>st</sup> May is air landing two battalions and attack Canea. Landing from echelon small ships depending on situation.”<sup>237</sup> Freyberg then messaged his commanders that an early seaborne attack on Canea was likely. Cox believed Beevor was correct that Freyberg had misread the message and had seized upon the words ‘Canea’ and ‘landing’ without recognising the fullstop between them.

Freyberg may well have gained the impression that the message indicated attack by sea. The phrasing of the Ultra message lays it open to such misinterpretation. Required to destroy it once he had read it, Freyberg would not have had it available for further checking. But even if we accept Beevor’s contention that the General made such a misreading, that merely poses another, and crucial question, Did it, as Beevor claims, have ‘disastrous and almost certainly decisive consequences?’<sup>238</sup>

Cox felt the answer was ‘No’. Whether Canea was under attack from sea or land was of ‘little, if any, significance’. The fact was a seaborne force was on its way and at that time there was no guarantee the Royal Navy would detect it. White agreed with Cox on the first point about the earliest message to Freyberg and the projected numbers in the invasion.

The short answer to that is that Beevor has made a mistake. Beevor has misled himself, or been misled naturally in the particular circumstances in not realising that the information which led Freyberg, on appointment, to warn both the Middle East and New Zealand that we couldn’t hope to do the job in the circumstances having got the information, and that information was the

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<sup>236</sup> Cox letter, *ibid*, p.2

<sup>237</sup> Cox letter, *ibid*

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid*

scale of attack for a simultaneous invasion from the air and the sea. The reason he made the error, I think, is that he had to have the release of the work when he wanted to look at the information which was released from secrecy after the ban. And the information he saw were the messages that came to the General after the original part of the information which had come from the War Office.

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Beevor also blamed Freyberg for failing to launch a counter-attack against Maleme but as White has pointed out, that failure rested with Hargest's failure to carry out the intended plan. "...neither Andrew nor Hargest – nor Puttick – appears to have appreciated that in the air age the pace of fighting had greatly increased, that counter-attacks in a battle in which the enemy can be supplied and supported from the air had to be swift and immediate."<sup>240</sup> Denis McLean said Kippenberger had a similar belief.<sup>241</sup>

The final answer on Crete may never be known. Whether Paul Freyberg's contention that there had been a cover-up at Middle East HQ over the misunderstanding from the War Office relating to the disposition of troops by overruling the Ultra requirements remains a theory, certainly until any documents on the dates concerned offer evidence of the cover-up, or whether Freyberg misread the May 21<sup>st</sup> Ultra advice it is clear that they were only small parts of an overall situation that was ultimately determined by lack of manpower and resource.

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<sup>239</sup> White, Oral History Project Interview, *ibid*, p.8

<sup>240</sup> Cox, *A Tale of Two Battles*, *ibid*, p.110

<sup>241</sup> Denis McLean, *Howard Kippenberger, Dauntless Spirit*, Random House, Auckland, 2008, p.173 said: "...as Kip saw things, poor decision-making, not by Freyberg but by the commanders on the spot, a precipitate withdrawal, and failure to arrange an immediate counter-attack caused the loss of Maleme airfield."

## CHAPTER FOUR - NORTH AFRICA

### Part One (1941-42)

The call to arms offered New Zealanders many things, not the least being an opportunity for travel while also doing the right thing by the country in fighting the forces of authoritarianism. If it is true that the Second World War cost Britain her Empire then it is also correct to say the war contributed to a change in attitude by New Zealanders towards Britain. John White and his contemporaries experienced this first hand in North Africa where the desert terrain represented more than just an open battlefield, unconstricted by the usual concerns of civilian populations. It was a location where the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Division could achieve a significant reputation as a force to be reckoned with. At the same time events offered a realisation that New Zealand's societal subservience to Britain was holding the country back. The insidious belief that Mother England knew best had been tested during the First World War without final resolution but it was exposed in the early days of the Second World War. The *laissez-fair* attitude of the Middle East High Command, best represented by the blatant untruth Wavell delivered to Freyberg that the New Zealand Government had been advised, and approved of, the Greek operation<sup>242</sup> yet with countless other examples from the top level through to the lowest, was evident almost from the time the 2<sup>nd</sup> NZEF set foot in Egypt. Efforts to pick off bits and pieces of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division frustrated Freyberg's efforts to develop the Division in the manner he wanted. And from the outset, Freyberg was aware of the requirements of desert warfare. While he had to adhere, initially, to the diktats of Middle East HQ in relation to Greece and Crete, it was a much more assured, and forthright, Freyberg who prepared for the North African campaigns. But even so, it was to be 18 months after the Greek and Cretan fiascos before he felt an empathy with those in command.

John White was not surprised by events. This was in spite of Freyberg's belief that New Zealanders were too hard on the English. "He thought we were a bit difficult in our criticisms of the British Army and things going wrong. He said we were the most critical people on the face of the Earth."<sup>243</sup> However, Dan Davin put it

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<sup>242</sup> Paul Freyberg, *Freyberg VC: Soldier of Two Nations*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1991, p.325-326

<sup>243</sup> White, NAM, Tape 2, Side 1

differently, “New Zealanders are by temperamental critical, censorious, alert, independent and above all interested.”<sup>244</sup> White understood from the outset that Africa’s vast open spaces represented the opportunity to pursue the mobile warfare the 2<sup>nd</sup> NZ Division was best suited for. It was not something those in superior positions appreciated immediately. Before that happened he had to overcome the arrogance which assumed, by right, that the armies of the Dominions would kow-tow to the ‘superior’ knowledge of the Middle East High Command – most of whom were eminently less-qualified to be setting strategy than Freyberg – as he had learned at New Zealand’s expense in Greece and Crete. White said Freyberg had a capacity to understand German intentions, long before they were obvious to others. He spent a lot of time, even during the First World War, thinking about ways to beat the Germans. “He was always able to answer what the enemy was likely to do, and what they might do, and every time, all those thoughts were met by methods of dealing with that situation and, as a result, he was able to make judgments in the circumstances that did arise.”<sup>245</sup>

Freyberg’s first belief of what Africa represented surfaced in Britain where he had flown from Egypt after the 2<sup>nd</sup> Echelon of the 2<sup>nd</sup> NZ Division was diverted there to assist should Germany invade. During his visit he dined with Churchill and impressed on him that Hitler would not succeed should he try to invade England but adding that if Churchill did not watch out he would lose Egypt.<sup>246</sup> Some days later he was summoned to the War Office to meet with the Secretary of State for War, Anthony Eden. Churchill had sent the Secretary a note: ‘Freyberg is home. Get him to write an appreciation of the situation in the Middle East. 27<sup>th</sup> June, W.S.C.’<sup>247</sup> Freyberg said in his appreciation that once Germany had defeated France it would look to North Africa. Freyberg warned that armour would be needed in the desert to take them on, and that air cover would be an essential exigency to contain German efforts. The subsequent failure to achieve air cover was reflected in the Greece and Crete campaigns. White said this understanding of where Germany would turn next demonstrated that Freyberg “had an enormous grasp of the situation in its worst state

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<sup>244</sup> Dan Davin, *The War Lords*, Ed. Lord Carver, Pen and Sword Military Classics, Barnsley, 2005, e-book, location 13325

<sup>245</sup> White, NAM, Tape 3 Side 1

<sup>246</sup> Sir Bernard Freyberg, *The World War* (unpublished), p.66, Sir John White Papers, NAM

<sup>247</sup> *ibid*

and in meeting the situation.”<sup>248</sup> White believed Freyberg’s opinion was not acted upon because the British were caught within the grip of their own system. They had not yet realised the need to change and they were unable to extricate themselves from the possibility of invasion precluding all considerations of other aspects of their war effort.

There was a tendency throughout to treat the Middle East as a sideshow and, indeed, some of the Australian historians have said just that. But he [Freyberg] realised, I suppose, that the Middle East was being made a battlefield, and it was never intended to. The British system didn’t expect that. Everybody who treated it as a sideshow was to be proved wrong, and somebody who saw that in advance [Freyberg] was ahead of his time.<sup>249</sup>

The relevance of North Africa was realised only days after the New Zealanders had been evacuated from Crete and the consequences would impact on their future in the desert. Wavell launched Operation Battleaxe on 15 June, 1941. It was an attempt to clear the German and Italian Axis forces from the Cyrenaica area and to open a path to besieged Tobruk. But on a disastrous first day the British lost half their tank force and by the third, and final, day were lucky to escape being surrounded and cut off from Egypt. That led Churchill to replace Wavell with Auchinleck. Freyberg was disappointed about Wavell’s transfer to India. There had been undoubted operational differences between the pair, who had been contemporaries, albeit quite different personalities, in the British Army after the First World War. But, in spite of, the Greek and Cretan fiascos, the early inability to accept the right of New Zealand to determine its own operational role, in accord with Freyberg’s Charter from the New Zealand Government, there had been no lingering animosity between them. Freyberg attended Wavell’s departure and was genuinely sad when he flew out to his new posting in India. ‘You could sense they were two men who understood one another,’ White said.<sup>250</sup> ‘It had probably been too much for him’,<sup>251</sup> White said.

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<sup>248</sup> White, NAM, Tape 3, Side 1,

<sup>249</sup> Ibid

<sup>250</sup> Ibid, Tape 4, Side 2

<sup>251</sup> Ibid, Tape 10, side 1

Auchinleck's arrival resulted in Freyberg having to go through the process of again restating the New Zealand Division's right to be regarded as a unique force and not one to be broken up and used by the British at a whim. In one dispute between the pair, White recalled Auchinleck telling Freyberg he was acting like a fifth columnist in preventing the use of New Zealand troops in pieces.<sup>252</sup> Auchinleck's approach was not appreciated by the New Zealanders. Yet, a year later, after recovering from a shrapnel wound to his neck suffered at Minqar Qaim, Freyberg said to White, who was taking notes during a car trip into Middle East HQ in Cairo, that the only General at Middle East (HQ) with personality among the British was Auchinleck. General William 'Strafer' Gott got respect and affection from those he worked with, but others had only one quality – they did their best. However, Freyberg believed Auchinleck had one significant problem when first appointed - he had not fought Germans and did not understand them.<sup>253</sup>

Auchinleck, and the first commander of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army, Lieutenant-General Alan Cunningham, believed that the most effective strategy against Afrika Korps Commander General Erwin Rommel's Axis forces was 'the Brigade Group System' using smaller formations to give manoeuvrability. This was the system under which the NZ Division was to take part in Operation Crusader in November 1941 to defeat the Axis Armies and to relieve Tobruk which Australian, Polish and British forces had held in the face of several attacks. Tobruk was a block to General Rommel claiming Egypt, and the Suez Canal, for Germany. Into autumn, both sides were building up their resources for the battle. With the rest of Libya within his grasp, Rommel was preparing for another assault on Tobruk. Freyberg had doubts about the Operation and discussed his thoughts, privately, with Cunningham. White learned later of Freyberg's disquiet which was based on the 'piecemeal' use of the Division in the Brigade Group System.<sup>254</sup> Freyberg, and his Australian counterpart General Blamey, believed they should fight as divisions, who were in charge of their own artillery – a method the Germans employed. The Auchinleck-Cunningham demands affected the method of training and fighting that Freyberg had developed with the Division. Cunningham told Freyberg it was a brigade group war to which Freyberg

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<sup>252</sup> Ibid, Tape 10, Side 1

<sup>253</sup> White, GOC Diary, 15 July 1942, NAM

<sup>254</sup> Ibid, p.5

replied: “Since when?”<sup>255</sup> Cunningham’s war so far had only been against Italians. His strategy was based on the success achieved against the Italians in East Africa in late-1940 and early-1941. “The General said it was different against the Germans. Recounting the incident, he said General Cunningham’s comment was, ‘I think you are unnecessarily jumpy’, and the interview ended with the General’s [Freyberg’s] comment – ‘I hope you are right, but I think you may be over-confident.’”<sup>256</sup> White emphasised that Freyberg had been senior to, and more experienced than, any of the Corps Commanders and Army Commanders who served in the Middle East. Neither Auchinleck nor Cunningham commanded formations in the First World War and neither had experience with large-scale artillery deployment.

There was nothing, however, in General Cunningham’s background, training or experience that particularly equipped him to lead a large armoured force in the desert. In this he was typical of most of the British commanders of his generation, including his Commander-in-Chief, brought up on the experience of the First World War and the small colonial campaigns that had succeeded it. Unlike their opponents the British had never fully grasped the nettle of conversion from horsed cavalry to armoured fighting vehicles.<sup>257</sup>

Auchinleck did not encourage criticism or comment from lower-ranked officers and any who did speak up were soon moved on. But Freyberg could not be moved. While correct in his deference to their rank that did not prevent him expressing his view. And at all times he had the security of his Charter with the New Zealand Government.

White, meanwhile, had been so influenced by his observations of Freyberg and the NZ Division in action, he started what became known as The GOC’s Diary at the beginning of September 1941. He chose that time because it was the second anniversary of war being declared. It had been his own idea and he thought he ought to write it because he felt he was witnessing something historic which needed to be recorded. “I had been extremely impressed, not only by the General but at all levels of military effort and, indeed, in the general behaviour and precision, and obviously the appreciation of people other than ourselves, of the New Zealand efforts.”<sup>258</sup> By the

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<sup>255</sup> General Freyberg, The GOC Diary, 22 November, 1941, Sir John White Papers NAM

<sup>256</sup> Ibid, p.5

<sup>257</sup> Michael Craster, *Cunningham, Ritchie and Leese* in Churchill’s Generals, ed. John Keegan, Abacus, London, 1999, p.203-204

<sup>258</sup> White, NAM, Tape 11, Side 1

time we finished on Crete I was extremely impressed by what he was doing, and how he was doing it.”<sup>259</sup> Freyberg had an appointments book as his own diary, ‘that he was, or wasn’t, keeping’,<sup>260</sup> White said.

I knew unit diaries were being kept, but no HQ diaries were being kept, I thought from the history point of view, and I suppose I had a sort of feel for history because history was one of my [school] subjects, and that it was really necessary if we were going to have a record. I didn’t tell him I was making a diary, or that I was about to start, but I started it and [then] explained what I was doing. And he was quite pleased. Freyberg played no part in it.<sup>261</sup>

The diary is quoted in many books studying New Zealand’s war effort. Historian Christopher Pugsley said White was always in the background for Freyberg’s consultations and while the diary was called the GOC’s Diary, it was in fact White’s Diary.<sup>262</sup> Pugsley said from his own experience in Britain when looking at the papers of Freyberg’s contemporaries like General Oliver Leese and Brigadier Sidney Kirkman there was nothing of the same detail. “All the discussions, everything you know, my colleagues at Sandhurst were enormously envious of the fact that this material existed. There is nothing like it for any of the other principles of the Second World War to that same degree, so that’s its quality.”<sup>263</sup> White’s timing may have been fortuitous as some key actions for the NZ Division lay ahead.

As the New Zealanders recovered from their Greek and Cretan experiences they spent 10 weeks training with the 8<sup>th</sup> Army for November’s Operation Crusader. The Division had been replenished as a mobile unit in keeping with Freyberg’s belief in what was necessary in desert conditions. The use of transport involved the ‘full scale’ principle. Normally, infantry divisions did not have their own transport to carry all their troops but the New Zealanders were fully motorised. This gave them the ability to travel in open formation by night and day on a wide front, utilising flag signals in daylight and shaded light signals at night. Eventually the New Zealand Division’s mobility became a strategic weapon in the desert. Freyberg explained the

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<sup>259</sup> White, NAM, Tape 1, Side 2

<sup>260</sup> Ibid, Tape 11, Side 1

<sup>261</sup> Ibid

<sup>262</sup> Christopher Pugsley, interview with Lynn McConnell, 9 October 2015

<sup>263</sup> Ibid

rationale later in the war – at the time of Crusader the NZ Division did not have command of their own armour and relied on support from British units:

We are a unique division. There is no other division of our kind in the Allied Armies or in the German Army. We can do all the jobs that are given usually to an armoured division and all the jobs that are given to an infantry division as well. We are stronger in weapons and equipment than an armoured division and stronger in weapons and equipment than the ordinary, honest to God, infantry division. We have an armoured brigade and two lorried infantry brigades (not motorised infantry brigades) and, in addition, we have the full equipment and services of the ordinary division. We have the same artillery with certain additions. The same sappers with certain additions. The whole of the force is put into fast-moving motor transport...When I move in my Tac HQ I can talk and give my orders on the move. This is very important...I tell you we are stronger in anti-tank guns than any formation in the world...each battalion has eight, the motor battalion has 16 and the anti-tank regiment has 64. We also have our own AA. Through our equipment and mobility we are admirably suited to making surprise appearances on the battlefield and that is what we are supposed to specialise in. We move out to a piece of ground of our own choosing which embarrasses the enemy and forces him to attack us.<sup>264</sup>

Freyberg likened the 'light division' the New Zealanders were, with the cavalry corps in the First World War. But there was a difference to the one-role cavalry. The NZ Division, like them, exploited gaps but were also able to carry out the functions of the infantry division. By having a light division capable of travelling long distances behind the enemy line, there was the opportunity to embarrass the enemy command forcing him to attack or withdraw. But as soon as ground possessed was no longer of assistance it was time to give it up and move somewhere else.

Throughout the Division's training there were many 'full scale' exercises as the General called them. He believed in doing rehearsals to find out

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<sup>264</sup> General Bernard Freyberg to Officers and NCOs of 4 NZ Armoured Brigade, 27 January 1944, Sir John White Papers, NAM, p.1

weaknesses. Live ammunition was always fired. He considered that casualties must be risked in training in order to save many lives when it came to the battle itself. The Corps Commander, General Goodwin Austin, was a keen observer and faithfully followed General Freyberg by night and day.”<sup>265</sup>

The New Zealanders made their move on Operation Crusader on 13 November. White believed there was a feeling of revenge among the New Zealanders as they set out. They believed they hadn't had a fair chance in Greece and Crete but now they had air support, they had tanks and they could see the tools of warfare that had been delivered from England, the United States and Canada on a railway through the desert built by New Zealand's engineers, and on the road, in a manner they hadn't seen before. The impact of the re-tooled New Zealand Division moving en masse across the desert made a significant impression on White.

Man can never change the vast endlessness of the desert but never before had we seen so much of it occupied; thousands of vehicles tenanted hundreds of acres of the desert plain...The first day move of the division westwards will be remembered by all who were in it. What everyone had been preparing for was beginning and there, spread out in one great group, covering many square miles, and moving as one group, was the Division in review order. The General drove from rear to front and then stopped on a rise and watched them pass. As he waved from the well-known car with the NZ Ensign flying, he was given many a wave and cheer. The spectacle at that moment was unforgettable. However wide the angle of its lense [sic], no camera could capture the impression of vastness. But it will always remain a vivid memory. The featureless desert stretched away on every side. Across it moved some three thousand petrol-driven vehicles, travelling 150 and 200 yards apart; guns, tanks, Bren carriers and trucks, and cars of all kinds, were peppered out over the desert plain.<sup>266</sup>

After New Zealand's engineers cut the border fence, set up by Mussolini's Italians, the Division moved into Libya. The New Zealanders then took up an all-round defensive position in readiness for any German move south with their armour.

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<sup>265</sup> White, "The Relief of Tobruk," Sir John White Papers, WFC, p.2

<sup>266</sup> Ibid pg.7

However, the Germans withdrew after their tanks had been contained, and retreated, and on 21 November the order was received to advance north as planned.

There was surprisingly little resistance to their advance. White related that so successful were the night operations, the enemy was taken by surprise and amazed to be attacked. Capuzzo which had been contested earlier in the war, was secured by 22 Battalion without a fight - 200 Germans and Italians were captured. The New Zealanders disconnected the telephone line and cut the water supply to Halfaya. In the morning the Germans sent out a party to deal with the issue only to be captured by walking straight into the New Zealanders. Then occurred one of the frustrations common when command of New Zealanders moved out of their hands. On the afternoon of the 22 November, Corps HQ sent orders that areas on the coast road to the north were to be cleared up but with sufficient forces left to cover Bardia. Freyberg was concerned because this would have meant more breaking up of the Division, as 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade had already passed from his command. White recounted that Freyberg doubted the validity of the order but before it could be clarified disquieting news was received from 30<sup>th</sup> Corps. Instead of success over Panzer divisions, there was news of British Armoured Brigades scattered and the New Zealand position on Sidi Rezegh was surrounded.

...these officers, first from the Corps and then from the Divisional Commander, had come to try and accelerate the move of the 6<sup>th</sup> New Zealand Infantry Brigade to the rescue. This news was distinctly disquieting. Our outflanking operation had been ordered only when it seemed clear from the reports of the 30<sup>th</sup> Corps that the enemy had been defeated. To advance into the open desert with a mass of thin-skinned transport when two German armoured divisions were at large, was not the most pleasant of prospects.<sup>267</sup>

Freyberg's fears were realised and the 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade was out of radio contact. The prospect was the 6<sup>th</sup> could run into a German Panzer Division and a third of New Zealand's Division would be destroyed by sheer weight of numbers and metal. Cunningham, when learning of the destruction of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army armoured brigades wanted to leave the battlefield and retreat behind the Egyptian border. However, his

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid, p.11

staff did not send that message while Freyberg and other commanders believed the battle had still to be fought. Auchinleck flew in from Cairo and after assessing the situation he ordered the operation to continue. He replaced Cunningham with Lieutenant-General Neil Ritchie three days later.

What happened was this: Rommel after breaking up the South Africans, and apparently feeling that his positions at Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk were secure, set off with the whole of his armoured forces to destroy our supply dumps and cut our lines of communication. This was a bold Marat-like move typical of the man. But unknown to him, fortunately, while he drove east through the desert to the south, our force was travelling west along parallel lines not many miles to the north. These things are possible in the desert, like fleets passing one another at sea.<sup>268</sup>



General Freyberg, rear, watches action with two All Blacks Captain Bill Carson (left) and ADC Jack Griffiths in North Africa. Sir John White Collection, National Army Museum (reproduced with permission of Sir John White).

<sup>268</sup> White, *The Relief of Tobruk*, *ibid*, Sir John White Papers, WFC, p.14

That allowed Rommel access to the British petrol, feed and water while the New Zealanders reciprocated with German supplies. The lack of a front resulted in strange events. White recounted his discussion with a medical orderly who had been captured and who later escaped. When the Germans drove into a Corps Headquarters the orderly still had time to phone his chief, the director of Medical Services. He reported the enemy's arrival. "What b...y rot you are talking, you are miles from the enemy," he was told. His reply was polite but compelling – "Well sir, one of them has now got a tommy gun at my other ear."<sup>269</sup> The Operation almost brought yet another disaster on the New Zealand Division. The lack of promised armoured support, from the British when the New Zealand brigades were used in piecemeal actions, resulted in 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade headquarters being over-run and Hargest being taken prisoner. But even worse, they came within an ace of losing Freyberg. Having moved Divisional HQ into Tobruk, Battle HQ was moved to near Belhamed. Freyberg's advice, after arrival, was to dig in because they would be shelled in the morning, 1 December. Slit trenches were dug and again Freyberg's prophecy was fulfilled.<sup>270</sup> Stationed about 400 yards in front of Division HQ was a battery of 25-pounders. As the enemy launched an assault on Belhamed at daylight the 25-pounders were called into action as White described the scene.

The air was rent by high velocity armour-piercing shot from the tank guns ripping through the air with a noise like the violent tearing of cloth. Then machine guns started, the bullets whistling above us. The General directed HQ personnel to 'take up fire positions' – a distinctly ominous order, I thought, as I took two photos of historical interest and returned to ground level. Meanwhile, the gun positions were obscured by dust and smoke of burning vehicles; along the whole of Belhamed Ridge black smoke was rising. The next development in the smoky haze ahead was not comforting. Tanks shepherded German infantry forward and in a hopeless position the gunners surrendered. This was evident enough to me with the naked eye. That supreme optimist the General, however, having viewed the scene through his glasses said, 'The Boche are surrendering'. The mistake was hastily put right by a staff officer who, like the rest of us, no doubt considered the time had come to

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<sup>269</sup> Ibid, p.15

<sup>270</sup> Ibid

beat a hasty retreat. But the General made no move. The Cipher staff had a tin of petrol ready to destroy their ciphers. Then, to my intense relief, Colonel Gentry said to the General, ‘Well, sir, if we are going at all I think we had better go now’. The General moved and got into his car... We piled briskly into the General’s second car and followed the racing cavalcade to Zaafran where the 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade was. Colonel Gentry’s driver was killed just as they were driving off and Brigadier Miles was wounded and captured near the guns. We just got moving in time.<sup>271</sup>

Having made good their escape, Freyberg moved to Belhamed where he firstly went forward in his staff car, and then on foot with some of 2<sup>nd</sup> NZ Division’s I tanks in an effort to discourage an enemy push in that direction. He took a small piece of shrapnel during the action. While the enemy held Belhamed, overran the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion and had cut off the 18<sup>th</sup> Battalion and part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Battalion, they did not advance. Instead they turned their attention to what remained of the 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade. At a decisive moment, when it appeared all was lost, 40 British tanks arrived with orders ‘to cover the withdrawal of the infantry’. It caused the enemy to waver and White related that it resulted in an opportunity lost that was all too typical of the Division’s poor relations with the British armoured forces. Brigadier Barrowclough sensed the opportunity was right to attack the enemy. “Every man left in the 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade was ready to go forward with them,”<sup>272</sup> Barrowclough said but the British commander refused as he had been ordered to not get involved. Barrowclough and his men withdrew to the 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade. “Tired and gaunt, the Brigadier met the General at Zaafran. He was bitter. His wonderfully battle worthy Brigade had been destroyed before his eyes by weight of metal after having achieved so much in their great assault.”<sup>273</sup> Cox added, “Though Cunningham had been sacked on 25 November, and replaced by General Ritchie, the generalship displayed at Eighth Army and 30<sup>th</sup> Corps remained lamentable.”<sup>274</sup> And McLean added that New Zealand doubts about the way the 8<sup>th</sup> Army was employed were confirmed.<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid, p.24

<sup>272</sup> Ibid, p.25

<sup>273</sup> Ibid, p.25

<sup>274</sup> Cox, *A Tale of Two Battles*, William Kimber, London, 1987, p.198-99

<sup>275</sup> McLean, *ibid*, p.211, “Until the arrival later in the year of General Montgomery as Commander-in-Chief, the New Zealanders would deplore – and be greatly damaged by – failures of coordination, especially as between infantry and armour, and the fondness of senior British commanders for splitting

With numbers depleted, only a few 2-pounder anti-tank guns and the last of the 'I' tanks still in action, a wedge having been driven through the corridor, the force surrounded and the ground overlooking the force occupied, the situation could not have been much worse. Strangely, the enemy did not seek to ram home the advantage, although bombardment continued into the afternoon. It appeared as if attacks were about to be launched only for them to break up. Then, as they prepared for an end of day assault from out of the sun, some British tanks emerged along the escarpment causing the Ariete Division to immediately withdraw. Instead it was the New Zealanders who would withdraw under cover from 30<sup>th</sup> Corps Commander General Willoughby Norrie's armour.

There was some nervousness as the vehicles closed in for the withdrawal and waited to get underway. White said once they started it was like Greece again. His view was supplemented by Gentry who said Operation Crusader was 'perhaps the most difficult campaign we ever did, even worse than Greece and Crete in a lot of ways'.<sup>276</sup> They moved out to the east and then headed for the escarpment not knowing who held it. It did not help when right in front of them a green flare burst caused the column to stop. No firing followed it and it was discovered it had been intended as a recognition light fired from a troop of British armoured cars sent to meet them.

It was the third withdrawal on a significant scale staged during the year and as they camped by the Libyan border wire, White, on 3 December, reflected on 1941. It had been a full year for the New Zealand Division involved in the campaigns in Greece, Crete and Cyrenaica, all of them ending in retreat. The German infantry units were so badly mauled that Rommel withdrew his forces west of Tobruk in order to recover. White's faith in Freyberg's operational understanding was enhanced as his predictions bore fruit.

Early in the New Year he was driven back, our 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade taking part in the operations, and the garrisons of Bardia and Halfaya were left to their fate. Both places surrendered later, and we got back a lot of our prisoners. Thus Tobruk was relieved. It was acknowledged in messages sent to the General by the Army Commander that the advance of the New Zealand Division from the

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units into smaller semi-independent commands. This was more than quibbles about tactics; these were issues of potentially grave consequence."

<sup>276</sup> Major General Bill Gentry, interview in background notes for *Freyberg* television documentary, Sir John White Papers, White Family

Bardia area, and the night attacks which broke the German infantry, were the decisive factors in the successful outcome of the campaign. It had been touch and go. Our armour had been outfought by two of the most experienced armoured divisions in the world, armed with better tanks. Early undue optimism on the part of the 30<sup>th</sup> Corps had very nearly resulted in the destruction piecemeal of all the infantry brigade groups which had been spread all over the desert. The General's criticism of splitting Divisions into Brigade Groups seemed to have been amply vindicated and at a heavy cost. We were still behind in the equipment race and German technique had to be learned in the hard school of experience. The German use of armour and anti-tank guns in tank battles, and in co-operation with infantry, had provided many object lessons.<sup>277</sup>

But the New Zealanders still believed, as they had on Crete, that when it came to hand-to-hand combat they were the match of the German infantry, their night attacks with the bayonet were an effective ploy. "The only formation in the Eighth Army in Crusader which made use of the cover of darkness both to move and to attack was the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Division – and that was because Freyberg had seen far enough ahead to train his troops in these tactics."<sup>278</sup> Freyberg noted this superiority was born of 'physical fitness and confidence in the weapons they used'.<sup>279</sup> That morale boost had been an important result of the campaign. Freyberg suggested that with adequate equipment all would be well; that the German infantryman was a 'tank follower' and without his tanks not formidable. Freyberg had made the point to Cunningham, "...it is impossible to stage an attack without full artillery bombardment and tanks, even 'I' tanks, cannot take on guns."<sup>280</sup> White said the equipment situation was improving. The 25-pounders had proven efficient field artillery pieces when employed as a 72-gun Divisional artillery. The use of transport was similarly proven for long desert moves and had made others aware of the effectiveness of Freyberg's belief on the possibilities and applications of mobility in desert warfare. "The General preached a doctrine that ground was usually unimportant, that the key to success in

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<sup>277</sup> Ibid, p.27-28

<sup>278</sup> Cox, *ibid*, p.197

<sup>279</sup> Ibid, p.28

<sup>280</sup> General Freyberg, GOC Diary, 27 November, 1941, Sir John White Papers, NAM

the desert was mobility and manoeuvre, and the ability to deploy and use the divisional artillery. The future was to show how this was developed.”<sup>281</sup>

Frustrated with Auchinleck’s policies, Freyberg sought some space for the New Zealand Division and arranged for it to be sent to Syria in 1942, ostensibly to relieve the Australian 9<sup>th</sup> Division allowing them to return to Australia, but also to recoup. The 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade were delayed having been made available, under Brigadier Howard Kippenberger’s command, to the 8<sup>th</sup> Army until they were relieved on 22 March, leaving for Syria a month later than the rest of the Division. Their stay was relatively short-lived.

When Rommel attacked the 8<sup>th</sup> Army on the Gazala-Bir Hacheim position west of Tobruk in early-June, he forced a British withdrawal through Sidi Rezegh, Belhamed, Acroma and to Tobruk. The NZ Division returned at haste from Syria and were sent to Minqar Qa’im where they moved into position on 26 June as units of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army withdrew through Matruh and reorganised at El Alamein. Contact with the Germans was almost immediate. Rested, restored and ready for action, the New Zealanders created some surprises for the enemy. It had been easy going for them to that point. The New Zealand field artillery engaged a German column before reinforcements looked to knock the New Zealanders out of their position but against the new six-pounder artillery, the German tanks were not so dominant.

Our own armour which had been fighting rearguards from Gazala eastwards intervened in our battle at an opportune moment at one stage and assisted in discouraging further advances by the Boche ironclads...the day went through without seeing the enemy make any real headway except that they got all round us and, at times, things looked threatening enough. Five separate attacks were repulsed by the combined efforts of the field artillery, anti-tank guns and infantry...Like the troops in the front trenches we spent the greater part of the day in the prone position below ground level – very like some days near Sidi Rezegh in November, 1941.<sup>282</sup>

It was during this action at Minqar Qa’im that Freyberg suffered another injury when hit by shrapnel. The New Zealanders were attacked five times by the

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<sup>281</sup> Ibid, p.27-29

<sup>282</sup> White, letter, 21 November 1942, p.3, Sir John White Papers, WFC

German 21<sup>st</sup> Armoured Division, under Rommel's direction, on June 28. Before they were encircled Freyberg spoke with two war correspondents, Matt Halton of the Toronto Star and Robert Macmillan of United Press. "They asked him: 'We understand you have no ammunition left. What will you do?' Freyberg replied, 'We will break out.' The journalists asked, 'But how can you if you have nothing left to shoot with?' Freyberg said grimly, 'I have 10,000 perfectly good bayonets!'"<sup>283</sup> Before the breakout however, Freyberg was injured. Jack Griffiths said Freyberg believed he must view everything himself. It could be an effective tactic and he had been with the General on start lines. "It was really quite a morale booster for the troops. For instance, you'd hear the chaps in their slit trenches say, 'God, there's Tiny [Freyberg]', and another voice said, 'Hell, if it's good enough for him, it's good enough for me' and that sort of thing."<sup>284</sup> On the day concerned a report came through that the coast road to Fuka had been cut which had consequences because it could potentially cut off the NZ Division's retreat. "So the General decided that he must have a look for himself. So here we were out in front of all our forward lines of defence, virtually crawling on our stomachs to try and get close to the road, when down came a barrage and he got badly wounded, with shrapnel through the back of his neck."<sup>285</sup> Griffiths got the car up to Freyberg, dressed his wound and gave him some morphine before taking him back to the HQ. White remembered the incident,

You can just imagine how I felt when I heard a car drive up and someone say, 'Get the ADMS [Assistant Director of Medical Services], the General has been hit'. He walked out of the car looking very shaken as well he might be, but still with his mind on the job, and instructed me to get Brigadier Inglis to come and take over command. One is apt to think of this wound [Freyberg's] as being slight in view of the way the General took it and recovered from it. It was only by the grace of Allah that the splinter which went in behind his ear and came out on the other side of his neck didn't cut something vital. As it was, the knock would have laid most mortals out for a much longer time.<sup>286</sup>

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<sup>283</sup> Cox, *General Freyberg V.C.*, The Atlantic Monthly, April 1943, p.61

<sup>284</sup> Jack Griffiths, interview for *Freyberg* documentary, Sir John White Papers, White family

<sup>285</sup> Ibid

<sup>286</sup> White, letter, 21 November 1942, p.3, Sir John White Papers, WFC

It had been realised the Division was in danger of being completely surrounded and Freyberg had issued orders, before his injury, for a breakout to be prepared for that evening. Freyberg still had time to dictate some letters to White while they waited for the breakout which began at nightfall when a silent infantry attack with bayonet, without the normal prelude of artillery fire, moved ahead of the Division. As soon as the enemy were aware of the New Zealanders' presence wildfire created some problems for the waiting columns of vehicles. They moved off with White's group running into a German tank harbour.

We were not a tank column, of course, and didn't stay to fight but wheeled behind the Brigadier [Inglis] leading in person and charged straight ahead in the new direction. Right at the outset three or four of our vehicles were hit and burst into flames. Then the fireworks started – tank gun shells which look like red hot meteors chasing one another, and tracer from machine guns, gave the lighting effects with burning vehicles for bonfires; and there was any amount of noise, gun fire, rattle of machine guns, and the express train roar of hundreds of vehicles at full speed. Our own anti-tank guns came into action and ramming tactics were adopted especially against German pedestrian traffic.<sup>287</sup>

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<sup>287</sup> Ibid

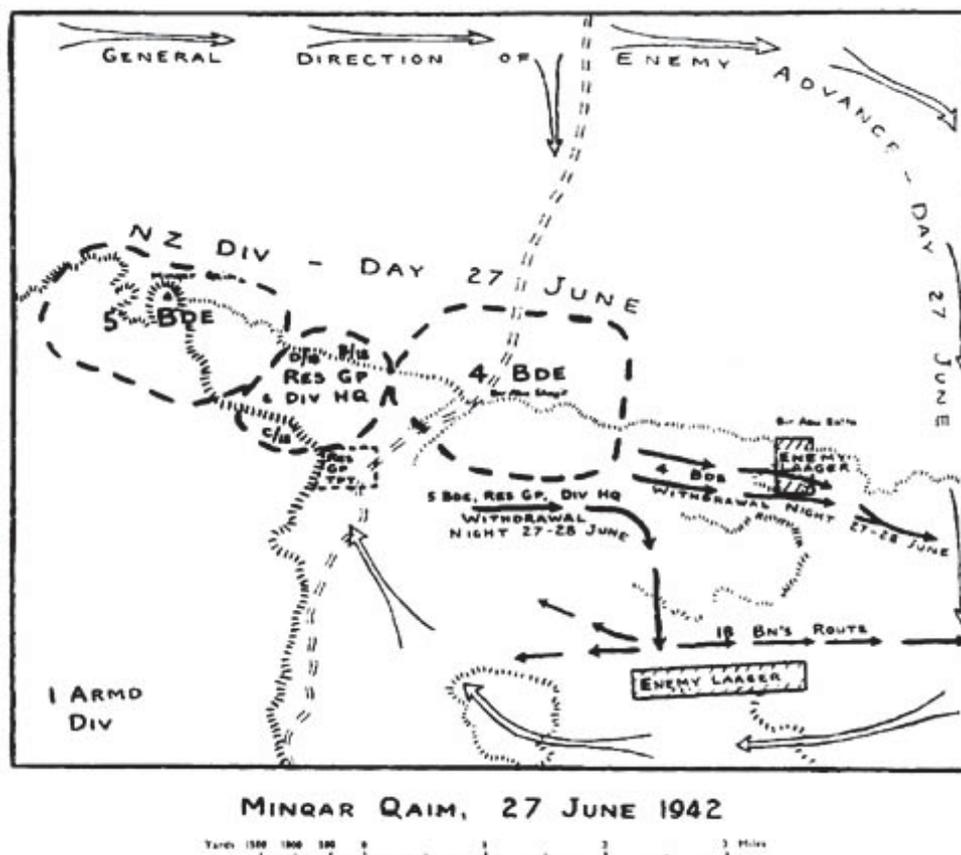


Figure 4: The breakout from Minqar Qaim, from *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*<sup>288</sup> (reproduced with the permission of the Ministry for Culture and Heritage)

German vehicles were immobilised by grenades thrown into them and the New Zealand vehicles rolled on through the night. Vehicles were spread all over the desert after making their way through the German lines and eventually, the next day reorganised themselves around Alamein. Freyberg had been flown immediately to hospital in Cairo. The following day Inglis and White located their position with Divisional HQ, dug slit trenches and bedded down for the night. The following day White flew to Cairo to change positions with Griffiths who had accompanied Freyberg to hospital. Freyberg insisted on being kept in touch with events and during his treatment White was impressed at Freyberg's ability to look at a situation map and grasp the situation.

Working with Inglis was to prove something of a watershed for White. Inglis had taken control without any fuss or bother as Freyberg had left everything in place

<sup>288</sup> W.D. Dawson, *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, Historical Publications Branch, Wellington, 1961

for him.<sup>289</sup> However, it was after the event, and when he returned from Cairo, that White had cause for some disquiet with Inglis in completing the GOC Diary noting some of the claims Inglis made for the Diary on the night and day after the breakout.

My only recollections were different from some of the things Inglis reported. I didn't realise that until years later when I read what he said. I am quite satisfied that a number of things, if they happened at the time while I was with Inglis, did not happen quite as he had portrayed them. I don't think I have ever put that view in writing. I was only with him [a day or two] but I drove out with him and I remained with him until we got back to the Kaponga Box.<sup>290</sup>

In conversation with Griffiths, White said Inglis did extraordinary things, compared with the way Freyberg operated, during the battles at Ruweisat Ridge and Alam Nayil. "His attitude was to hand everything over to the people concerned and not to interfere during an operation."<sup>291</sup> It was a policy open to criticism when promised armoured support did not arrive for the New Zealand infantry who had secured Ruweisat Ridge and Alam Nayil, who had dug in and then been over-run by German tanks the next morning when the British armour had not arrived. "To us it was astonishing that he literally drove himself away and was not at his HQ during the operations in the holding of the Alamein line."<sup>292</sup> McLean explained this further when Kippenberger was called to Divisional HQ to take over because Inglis had disappeared without telling his staff.<sup>293</sup> Glyn Harper made a further point about Inglis making a change of plan during the breakout.<sup>294</sup> Harper added that 'to abandon a plan in the middle of an action without telling anyone was a very dangerous practice for a military commander'.<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>289</sup> White, Letter to family, 21 November 1942, Sir John White Papers, WFC, p.4

<sup>290</sup> White, NAM, Tape 18, side 1

<sup>291</sup> Ibid, Tape 18, Side 2

<sup>292</sup> Ibid, Tape 9, Side 2

<sup>293</sup> McLean, *ibid*, p.220, "Auchinleck was thinking of abandoning the Alamein line and pulling back to the other side of the [Suez] Canal. Inglis, it turned out, had been called to Cairo to supervise arrangements for a general withdrawal."

<sup>294</sup> Glyn Harper, *Kippenberger*, HarperCollins, Auckland, 1997, p.144-145, quoting Kippenberger, "I was with Inglis when he decided to move. He gave no order other than to move and said nothing about his intentions...He had been continually cursing 4 Bde [Brigade] for delay, but firing had start when he moved. Actually what he did was to *abandon the plan* – of driving through the hole made by 4 Bde. He abandoned it after the attack had started and without waiting to see whether it had succeeded. I surmise that the time before daylight was getting too short."

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid*, p.145

In the six weeks after Minqar Qa'im, the Germans tried several times to break through but a significant gain for the 8<sup>th</sup> Army occurred when a New Zealand force knocked out, or captured, nearly all the artillery of the Ariete Division. That unbalanced the Axis front

The issue of the failure of the British armour to provide support continued again at Ruweisat Ridge and Alam Halfa. It was another blow to the British-New Zealand accord and one which highlighted the changing attitude towards Britain. This was clear through comments made not only by John White, but also by future Chief Justice of New Zealand and White's brother-in-law to be, Richard Wild, and Geoffrey Cox. All three, who would be knighted, had distinguished post-war careers, Wild and White in law and Cox in journalism, having been a foreign correspondent before the war after completing his Rhodes Scholarship. Their opinions were significant. Wild was attending the Middle East Staff College in Haifa in 1942 and revealed his feelings toward the British.

Have had an account from Brig. Kippenberger about two attacks the Div. was put into at Ruweisat on the Alamein Line. In the first, Kip's brigade did a night attack 'to be supported by the – Armoured Brigade'. The attack went well – our chaps reached their objective and began digging in to await the tank support which would enable them to hold it. The support didn't come. In the early dawn our chaps, unsupported by the tanks, were driven off by the German tanks. We lost a Battalion less one coy and half of two others. A fortnight later another night attack was arranged, by another Brigadier. Again with tank support. But again – precisely the same thing happened – the British tanks failed to arrive. Our losses are about the same. Kip, a mild, reasonable, fair-minded, understanding man and our best soldier, says he can't trust himself to write his feelings.<sup>296</sup>

Wild and a fellow New Zealander were walking in Haifa a Jewish civilian noticed their NZ shoulder tab and said: "I hear the British are in a tight spot at Alamein: the Germans won't let them go forward; the New Zealanders won't let them

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<sup>296</sup> Sir Richard Wild, H.R.C. Wild, "World War II Diaries" (Unpublished), 4 August, 1942, Sir John White Papers, WFC

go back.”<sup>297</sup> Wild said that while the British officers he was training with were highly intelligent there was a gulf between himself and them.

I can sit for an hour with them and they’ll never notice me, because, I suppose, they know I am not one of them. You see why they exasperate me? They can look such complete duds, and yet, apparently can be such experts; they can disdain to see you, and then suddenly one of them can be most warmly friendly and generous. But what a difference between them and ourselves! - between that particular class, I mean – and NZers generally. And I believe these fellows are fighting for a very different thing – for their stately homes and unearned incomes – for the rich days they have known, and their families too, with England as top nation and the British Empire owning the fruits of the earth. And I think they’ll have to be prepared to see a different world when we have won.<sup>298</sup>

White had his own concerns with the English and had detected the mood among the New Zealanders who had been let down again.

There was much more animosity than the British seem to have accepted. The way I thought of it was as far as the British were concerned, they were ordered to do something, but the principles under which they worked when the situation developed it was such that they were not able to carry out their orders in a way that would expose them to enormous casualties. They could only obey the general orders of being there to support the infantry on the counterattack, if they could get there.<sup>299</sup>

Major General Herbert Lumsden told the New Zealanders he did not believe the British tank commanders were laws unto themselves – it was still their duty to only take on an operation that was ‘on’. Lumsden said while his tank force might succeed it would be at the cost of enormous casualties. Eventually, the new Commander of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army, General Bernard Montgomery over-ruled Lumsden and

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<sup>297</sup> Ibid

<sup>298</sup> Ibid, 26 September, 1941

<sup>299</sup> White, NAM, Tape 13, Side 2

by taking the attack to the Germans, whose armour was weakened, the British were able to hold the battlefield.

Wild wrote the English were not as strong in body, brain and initiative as New Zealanders, but they would still be all right if they had good leaders. “There are too many silly, sappy ninnies and brainless fools wearing British officers’ uniforms and if they don’t wake up they’ll cost us the war. Already they have cost us the lives of too many good men. The Englishman is the most difficult problem I’ve ever tried to understand.”<sup>300</sup> White, who had seen British life during his pre-war visit, could also see problems in their system.

I try very hard to appreciate the English Army but I must admit that for all our faults I think our nation’s way of life is far above theirs. The stuff is there, for the good are very good. But it is the average [who are the problem] and the only inference to be drawn is that there is something wrong in their system. Many of their people have not had the opportunities we get – that is not their fault – the trouble in England is that their educational system is backward and merit does not get a proper chance. The age of ‘privilege’ has more than outlived its usefulness – it has become a menace. The passing of the English public school class and ruling caste cannot be done satisfactorily by the stroke of a pen, or a sword, for it works somehow, and the man in the street accepts as pre-ordained, the present order of things. But I think a spring-cleaning will be initiated by a few enlightened souls who have seen other nations and would see England made greater – I use the word greater, but in the sense of ‘mightier yet’. Surely vested interests will not survive this upheaval. They have great qualities – the nation is not effete – they need to wake up.<sup>301</sup>

Certainly one of their ‘few enlightened souls’ was about to make his presence felt in North Africa.

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<sup>300</sup> Ibid

<sup>301</sup> Ibid, p.10

## NORTH AFRICA

### Part Two (1942)

By the time General Montgomery took over as Commander of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army in August 1942, the New Zealanders were ready for his style of leadership, recognising that he would not be so defensive. It had been a period of great uncertainty for the 2<sup>nd</sup> NZEF, not only on the battlefield where they had suffered unnecessary frustrations due to lack of promised support from British Armoured Regiments, but on the home front where the Japanese were continuing their advance towards Australia and New Zealand. The Australians had recalled some of their forces and there was consideration given to New Zealand doing likewise but it was decided to stay in the Middle East while another Division, the 3<sup>rd</sup>, was raised to contribute to the Pacific war.

White reflected the feelings of many of the New Zealanders as Japan's advance continued through Asia and the Pacific.

I take a good deal of consolation from the knowledge that fronts can't be pushed forward indefinitely and that the further he comes the harder it is for him. I should think we are on the way to seeing rock bottom of this show this year, but not only rock bottom – we shall also see the way going up the other side. That's going to be something of a climb too!<sup>302</sup>

Freyberg messaged his troops to settle concerns about the Japanese stating that while he could not give specific details he was encouraged New Zealand's defence was much better prepared than when the Division had left home. Large supplies of equipment of all kinds from Britain and the United States had been received and further quantities were arriving.<sup>303</sup> Further, there were three divisions available which would be fully equipped while units of the US Pacific Fleet were operating in New Zealand waters.

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<sup>302</sup> Ibid, p.2

<sup>303</sup> General Freyberg, Notes on situation in New Zealand, Sir John White Papers, NAM, p.1

It is natural for us to want to be at home while there is a threat of any kind but even if the threat to New Zealand became much greater, the return of the NZEF might not be practicable. There are shipping problems which make the redistribution of forces only justifiable when absolutely necessary. We have also to realise the importance of the Middle East. Germany knows that she must win the War this year or be defeated. This spring she will without doubt launch an offensive against Russia and possibly against the Middle East with every man, gun, tanks and aeroplane she possesses. If we, and the Russians, hold her until the winter is upon her it is quite possible that Germany will crack. If our Division, which is trained and experienced in fighting Germans both in the desert and in hill country such as Syria, were to be moved from the Middle East at the present juncture we would be doing exactly what the German Higher Command wanted.<sup>304</sup>

Montgomery's appointment to command the 8<sup>th</sup> Army occurred after the death of original choice General Gott in an aircraft crash en route to Egypt. White believed Gott would not have improved the situation.<sup>305</sup> Montgomery offered a chance for a significant change in direction. When they first met, Freyberg eyed his new commander and said: "I feel terribly sorry for you. This is the grave of lieutenant-generals. None of them stay here more than a few months."<sup>306</sup> Moorehead noted that Freyberg, like most of the commanders Montgomery met, was gloomy about the situation.<sup>307</sup> But from that evening, when Montgomery outlined to his staff officers that there would be no retreat, as was being planned, previous orders were cancelled, a new policy was in place.

White saw more of Montgomery than most in the NZ Division as he was a frequent visitor to Freyberg.

I've got a copy of a letter written by [future Chief Justice of New Zealand Sir Richard] Wild who was at a staff college in Palestine when Monty arrived [and] took over. This was the time we'd had the first offensive battle which had been fought and Monty went up to talk to them.

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<sup>304</sup> Ibid, p.2

<sup>305</sup> White, NAM, Tape 10, Side 1

<sup>306</sup> Alan Moorehead, *Montgomery*, Hamish Hamilton Ltd, London, 1946, p.118-119

<sup>307</sup> Ibid

After he left, Wild wrote of his enthusiasm for Montgomery to White. "From anyone else this would have sounded arrogant but instead of that it left us completely confident that this would happen and what was going to happen with language we heard quite often later."<sup>308</sup> White passed the letter to Freyberg and to others in the Divisional HQ with the notation, "The comments on Monty are a striking example of the effect of his arrival in the Middle East."<sup>309</sup>

White acknowledged that while Freyberg and Montgomery were different types of commanders they shared the same attitude of what winning battles required. Freyberg was quick to point out the lack of promised tank support had consistently proven costly to the New Zealanders. Jack Griffiths recalled Freyberg speaking with Montgomery of one occasion when English tank commanders had refused to take orders from Freyberg. In the operation, the usual plan of having a barrage go down before the infantry advanced, sappers lifting mines and gaps being made ready for tanks to go through was achieved. But the tanks would not move because they had not had the word from their tank commander. Freyberg was frustrated because the tank commander's headquarters was so far to the rear that he had no chance of seeing the situation for himself. Freyberg had walked into the cleared minefield to show it was safe to advance but still the tank commander was unimpressed. "General Freyberg was very concerned about this attitude and strongly reported the situation to General Montgomery. All this, or course, led to the tank brigade known as the 9<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade being put under command of the New Zealand Division, and this was a very successful amalgamation."<sup>310</sup> Montgomery's approach fitted with that of Freyberg who believed bombardment from field artillery such as that the 2<sup>nd</sup> NZ Division had, backed by medium artillery in strength, would be far superior to that employed under the Brigade Group System so favoured by Auchinleck and Cunningham and which had never been big enough or strong enough to compete with the German

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<sup>308</sup> Sir Richard Wild, "World War II Diaries." Wild said: "I think his talk was the most inspiring and appealing example of leadership I have seen in any sphere – military or otherwise. The inspiration was not in the manner of his speaking – but in the sheer thought and logic and power in what he said... He talked about how to wage war – or rather how to win it – what each officer's job is – how to get the greatest power and force from all the men and weapons. Perhaps that is why it appealed so much to me, because here for the first time it seemed, was a man who kept the main object in view, who talked of winning as the one urgent, continuing, absorbing necessity – and who clearly had the brains and the mind to conceive and work out a plan to win."

<sup>309</sup> White, Copy of Wild letter, 30<sup>th</sup> September, 1942, Sir John White Papers, WFC

<sup>310</sup> Griffiths, *ibid*

concentrations. It was under Montgomery that they devised the tactics where the armour fought providing itself as a screen and did not make a target for itself. When the Germans attacked they stayed in held down positions under strict orders not to move and therefore they had the advantage. However, time had worked in the 8<sup>th</sup> Army's favour as they were being resourced with better quality tanks while the Air Force was much stronger. This allowed the application of patterned bombing which had its effect on the power of the German 88mm artillery and on the success, or lack of it, of the German tanks.

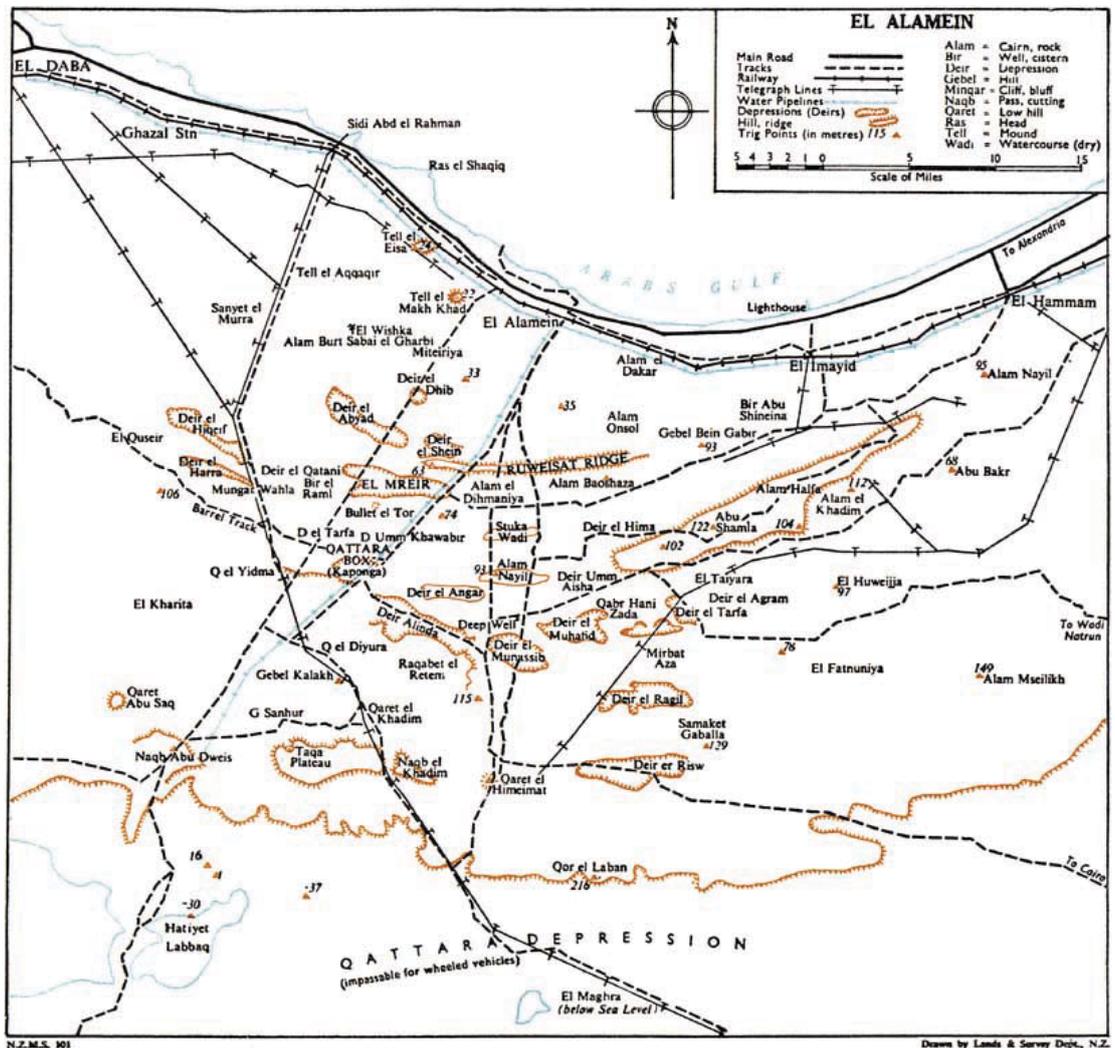


Figure 5: Alamein, from *Alam Halfa and Alamein*<sup>311</sup> (reproduced with the permission of the Ministry for Culture and Heritage)

<sup>311</sup> Ronald Walker, *Alam Halfa and Alamein*, Historical Publications Branch, Wellington, 1967

Plans continued apace for the 8<sup>th</sup> Army assault that would become known as the Second Battle of Alamein. On Wednesday, 21 October, Freyberg went to the new HQ from which the New Zealand Division's attack would be directed. During the lead-up to Alamein, White made what he said was his only military suggestion during the war, and it turned out to be successful. One of the problems that would be faced during the moonlight assault during the first night of the battle was marking a corridor through a minefield. The situation was exacerbated because much of the desert had already been pulverised by artillery fire leaving what was like a fine powder over a large area. When anything moved huge dust clouds rose and the lack of wind meant they did not disperse.

This question of seeing where the corridor was and keeping the direction arose, and they were talking about field guns firing coloured smoke and remembering what I had seen in Crete how the Germans used tracer to bring in their outposts, the people [parachutists] who had fallen in different areas and they were trying to get them together at night, - I didn't say a thing at the conference I was noting it – but just when they'd gone, I said to the General, 'Would it be a good idea to use Bofors ack-ack guns brought forward to fire tracer on the line of the corridor?' And I was ordered to send for the liaison officer and he [Freyberg] changed the note to that. And in the Battle of Alamein, and other operations, I had the pleasure of photographing tracer on the lines I had suggested. But in latter years I asked some Australians and they said they had used it and pretty well gave me the impression they had thought it up.<sup>312</sup>

White said by 23 October, the stage was gradually filling up for what he called 'Montgomery's Scene 1, Act 1' of the new British drama 'Attack'. All was in readiness with the artillery camouflaged, and then the movement forward at dusk of vehicles carrying infantry weapons like mortars and anti-tank guns, followed by American tanks manned by British crews. There was anxiety, not only of the pending battle but also of whether the German intelligence had detected the British preparations. There were no indications of awareness and it was what he called 'a nice

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<sup>312</sup> White, Law Society Interview, Side 8

quiet Alamein evening'. Freyberg had been busy all day at final planning conferences ahead of the 9.45pm start time.

I was not with my General in the exciting spots I expect he has been depicted in. For me, however, the quieter the battle area I am in, the better I like it! The General, of course, sniffs like a warhorse at the sound of shellfire – I believe his blood flows fuller and his brain works better in the crash of battle with plenty of excitement than when he is out of it! He is a terrific figure, especially in moments of action – his concentration on the battle never lets up – even in sleep. I do not enjoy battles at all, but I do get drawn into the tense excitement of watching things develop and keeping in touch with each move day by day, hour by hour and, when action is joined, minute by minute. My description therefore is that of an observer from the wings, and not that of a player on the bloody stage.<sup>313</sup>

The great military bombardment began on time.

The air was reverberating with the thumping explosions which tickle the eardrums, especially mine. Any slight pause of silence was almost immediately blocked out by a crash. It beggars description: This was to go on all night! A full moon smiled upon the 8<sup>th</sup> Army from a clear sky and young men's hearts did not turn to thoughts of home. The General with hands deep in the pockets of his British warm [unreadable] gazed grimly at the enemy lines. To the G1 he said, 'If there was ever any justice in a cause this is it...Rommel has never had this before'.<sup>314</sup>

They celebrated by drinking a toast to the Empire's gunners with a bottle of French burgundy Freyberg had been carrying for such an event. The unrelenting barrage continued as the infantry moved forward with only an hour-long pause at midnight to allow sappers to clear mines, while enemy strong points bypassed in the advance were cleaned up before the night erupted again. The all-important strategic point of Miteriya Ridge was captured allowing the situation to be reorganised to

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<sup>313</sup> White, letter to family, 21 November, 1942, Sir John White Papers, WFC, p.13,

<sup>314</sup> Ibid, p.14

prepare for the anticipated German counterattack. Infantry and anti-tank guns had to be dug in – tanks had to be brought forward. It was done. White said routes were cleared through the most extensive minefields ever laid in Africa and the Ridge was ready to deal with the German armour should it attack. Along the whole front, the Germans and Italians had been thrown back, but that was not the end of the battle. Their defence was in great depth, more minefields and anti-tank guns were ahead and the enemy armour had not been engaged. The British tank forces could not yet manoeuvre.<sup>315</sup>

However, the ability of the RAF in keeping the Luftwaffe away was a great boost to the 8<sup>th</sup> Army's progress. The New Zealanders were moved to the north towards where the Australians had forced a wedge. That move allowed a decisive attack which gave the British Armoured Divisions a decent crack at the German flank. Scots and English infantry were backed in their attack by the greatest artillery bombardment of the campaign which allowed the stated objectives to be attained. The 8<sup>th</sup> Army armour overcame the enemy guns and the breach was made. The American Sherman tank had surprised the Germans who lost a lot of their tanks, and a General who was captured. The New Zealanders motored out into the desert to attack the enemy rear.

It was good to get into open desert again, out of the dust and congestion of the Alamein Line. Going through one of the gaps in the morning, the jeep stopped because of dust choking it. I got out into fine dust-like coal ash up to my knees. Each vehicle as it went past doused us with a cloud of it and it poured into the jeep. A lovely spot! In the open desert we motored along in good style and it was satisfactory to see smashed German equipment and large bands of Italians being herded along with one armoured car to do the shepherding – I doubt they needed even that. We drove through one of their infantry positions – it was like the *Marie Celeste*, everything appeared to be in working order but there were no men to press the triggers!<sup>316</sup>

In the aftermath of the initial battle, the New Zealand Division's execution of what became its famed 'left hook' was unleashed. The left hook became so effective

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<sup>315</sup> Ibid, p.15-16

<sup>316</sup> White letter, 21 Nov 1942, Sir John White Papers, WFC, p.16-17

because, “they were a highly-skilled division with tremendous powers of initiative and resource and enterprise and I think they were probably better qualified to achieve those left hooks with success than any other formation available at that time. They are outstandingly enterprising and forceful and determined to achieve success.”<sup>317</sup> White said the appearance of a fast-moving force of all arms to south of the German line of retreat would have been an unpleasant surprise for Rommel, yet he managed to get away quickly. His strategy was much the same as that of the New Zealanders in Crete, White said. He formed strong rearguards at threatened points and retired behind them with mines laid in a bid to delay any following force. The enemy also learned what it was like to be strafed from the air during retreat, something the New Zealanders were well acquainted with in Greece. Rain slowed the chase on 6-7 November and certainly reduced the harm suffered by the Germans. On the 9<sup>th</sup>, Freyberg took a tank to visit an HQ on the coast road. “He found some transport held up by a few enemy who refused to surrender and were said to be sniping the road so with Jack [Griffiths] at the gun and himself brandishing a revolver they dashed into the fray. The enemy surrendered.”<sup>318</sup>

Soon all that stood before the clearance of Egypt was Halfaya Pass. But any resistance was ended when 21 Battalion sent up 100 men to catch the defenders by surprise and netting 600 prisoners at a cost of two casualties, to effectively end the war in Egypt. Montgomery stated the only Germans or Italians left in Egypt were prisoners. As he reviewed an eventful 1942 for the New Zealanders, White said,

The pendulum has swung in our favour – the aim is to push it so far over it cannot swing back. However tired the nations may be of it all, it is easy to see that no effort can be slackened. Russia of the Allied nations alone has really fought so far. The Armies (in the plural) of the Empire and of the United States will have to fight and fight hard before we pass from this lunatic form of self-destruction to what by the grace of God shall be a better and a fairer and a brighter world.<sup>319</sup>

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<sup>317</sup> Lord Harding, interviewed for *Freyberg* Television documentary, Sir John White Papers, White Family

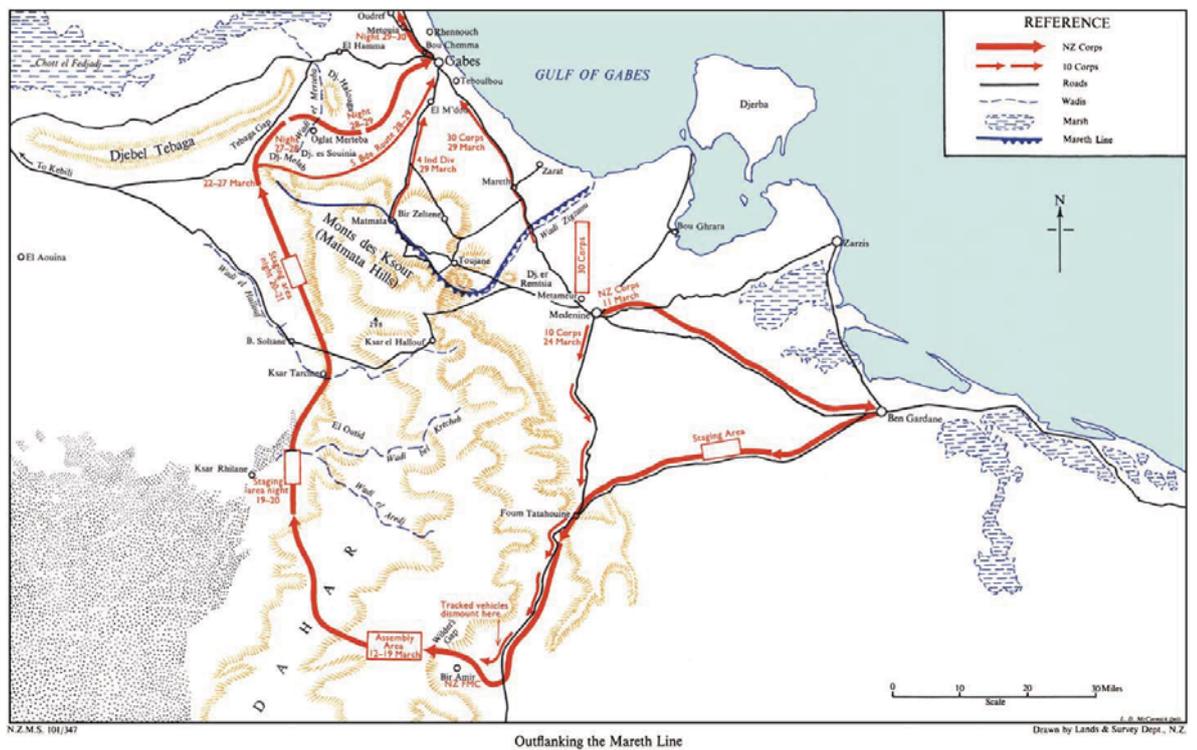
<sup>318</sup> *Ibid*, p.18

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid*, p.20

## NORTH AFRICA

### Part Three (1942-43)

The New Zealanders' consistent flanking movements (left-hooks) dominated the remainder of their North African campaign. Griffiths said the left hook, according to Freyberg, meant never going to the front door in attack, instead you went to the side windows or the back door. "You outflank your opponent, and this proved most successful right through from Alamein to Tunis."<sup>320</sup> But when Montgomery's plan to deliver Tunisia to the 8<sup>th</sup> Army met unexpected resistance at the intended breakthrough point on the Mareth Line, Montgomery turned to Freyberg again. Freyberg had always been dubious of Montgomery's plan due to the narrow front on which the key engagement was to take place. With 30<sup>th</sup> Corps contained by the Germans at Wadi Zigzaou, Montgomery decided to exploit the opening NZ Corps was on the verge of achieving to the south at the Tebaga Gap. He sent the 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Division, under General Brian Horrocks, to hurry the New Zealanders along resulting in another of the controversies involving Freyberg.



<sup>320</sup> Griffiths, *ibid*

Figure 6: The ‘left hook’ at Mareth, from *Bardia to Enfidaville* <sup>321</sup>(reproduced with the permission of the Ministry for Culture and Heritage)

In the original plan, the NZ Corps were accompanied by 150 tanks when moving 150 miles to the south of the remaining 450 British tanks which were stationed and ready for action nearer the coast for the intended main push to bridge the line. It was hoped the NZ Corps would achieve surprise and claim the Tebaga Gap on the morning of 21<sup>st</sup> March. But on the night of 19/20 March, Montgomery believed the column had been discovered and felt it should speed all day on the 20<sup>th</sup> and forget about concealing their move. One view was that on the eve of the main assault on the line, at Wadi Zigzaou, Montgomery wanted to place enemy intentions under greater pressure than earlier intended. But if Freyberg’s column was unobserved until late on the 20<sup>th</sup>, Montgomery’s aim would not occur. The 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade, under the command of Brigadier Bill Gentry secured a key point in the Gap, Point 201. Gentry believed the issue could have been forced with the 8<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade – Freyberg gave the tank commander the choice but he chose not to advance. There was a belief that a push through the gap could have been made. But Freyberg did not force the issue as he was concerned with what could happen if the New Zealanders achieved a breakthrough at Tebaga Gap while the 30<sup>th</sup> Corps became contained at Wadi Zigzaou. That would leave the New Zealanders vulnerable, and exposed once again without armoured support, if quick reinforcement were needed in the face of assault from the Afrika Korps. Critics, including General Kippenberger, claimed Freyberg was guilty of “a paralysing lethargy”.<sup>322</sup> Stevens wrote after the war that Freyberg played his hand badly, a claim which inflamed the controversy from the battlefield into the public domain.<sup>323</sup> This was exacerbated when a reviewer of Stevens’ official history, Cedric Mentiplay wrote in the Returned Servicemen’s newspaper, the RSA Review, that Montgomery had sent Horrocks to oust Freyberg. White and Jack Griffiths wrote to the editor of the newspaper. They contended, the NZ Corps had not been intended to achieve the decisive breakthrough. If that had been the case an armoured division would have been sent from the outset.

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<sup>321</sup> Major-General W.G. Stevens, *Bardia to Enfidaville*, Historical Publications Branch, Wellington, 1962

<sup>322</sup> Christopher Pugsley, *A Bloody Road Home*, Penguin, Auckland, 2014, p.374

<sup>323</sup> General Stevens, *Bardia to Enfidaville*, War History Branch

I suggest that the facts and figures of the time make this wisdom after the event. I claim that the verdict of history on the operation should be that taking into account the 8<sup>th</sup> Army intelligence reports and the lack of success of the frontal assault on the Mareth Line, the operations of the New Zealand Corps were bridled by sensible caution, not ‘over insurance’.<sup>324</sup>

The only armour available was one armoured brigade, not an armoured division and they were facing the 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer Division as well as 88 millimetre anti-tank guns. There was also a chance that the 10<sup>th</sup> Panzer Division could be encountered because the Germans were waiting to assess where their main threat was situated. Horrocks later likened the area they were attempting to breakthrough as being like Balaclava when the Charge of the Light Brigade in the Crimean War was made.<sup>325</sup> The topography occupied Freyberg’s mind.

He had studied and experienced Rommel’s tactics and knew better than any other Commander in Africa, at that time, the capabilities of a British Armoured Brigade of Sherman tanks. At the Tebaga battle, the NZ Corps was alone at this stage, miles out on a flank, and its paramount role was to seize the bridgehead and cause the enemy to commit, and keep committed, formations which would otherwise be available on the Mareth front.<sup>326</sup>

The enemy did move the 164<sup>th</sup> Light Division towards Tebaga, while the XXI Panzer group at Gabes, just beyond Tebaga, were warned that they needed to move to the gap as well. When 30<sup>th</sup> Corps couldn’t break through at their front, Montgomery then decided to reinforce the NZ Corps with Horrocks’ 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Division and the 10<sup>th</sup> Corps HQ. It was realised this move would cause some reaction from Freyberg and his New Zealanders. There had been disagreement between Freyberg and Horrocks resulting from Operation Beresford six months earlier in early September 1942. Horrocks had only been in the desert two weeks and in spite of Freyberg’s knowledge of what was required against Rommel in the desert, Horrocks tried to involve New Zealand’s infantry in the action. With memories of the fate New Zealand troops suffered at Ruweisat and El Mreir, where expected tank support had not arrived, Freyberg and several brigadiers were unwilling to take part. Horrocks took a

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<sup>324</sup> White letter to RSA Review, *ibid*, Sir John White Papers, WFC, p.3

<sup>325</sup> General Brian Horrocks, *A Full Life*, Leo Cooper, London, 1974, p.153

<sup>326</sup> White letter *ibid*, p4

British unit, 132 British Infantry Brigade, and when they were subjected to extensive German fire, the New Zealanders tried to extricate them but not before a thousand British casualties had been sustained for no gain. Brigadier Clifton was taken prisoner in the action and two colonels, Russell and Peart, were killed.

When Freyberg saw that the operation was degenerating into a shambles he called it off without consulting Horrocks. It was not just that he had forecast the 'Beresford' operation would end in disaster that caused Freyberg to mistrust Horrocks' military judgment; he resented the unnecessary casualties which his insistence on the action had caused.<sup>327</sup> Once Horrocks reached NZ Corps, he found Freyberg in prickly mood at the intervention by Montgomery.

When General Horrocks and his staff arrived at the Tebaga front and made it clear that they were not there to interfere, any 'frigidity' or grimness on the part of those fighting the battle was soon gone. Even in the midst of a battle, tact is a quality worth having and General Horrocks had that quality and also a full appreciation of the worth of the New Zealand Division and its Commander.<sup>328</sup>

Further, Horrocks said Freyberg was 'much too good a soldier to allow personal feeling to interfere with his handling of the battle, and whatever he may have felt inwardly at the arrival of a comparatively unknown, skinny corps commander, he co-operated most nobly'. Horrocks made this comment in his autobiography in 1974 after Stevens' volume of the war history had been published.<sup>329</sup> The pair worked on their best chances of success and set their operation for 26 March, which was later than Montgomery desired but was due to 1 Armoured Division not being ready until then. The operation, known as Supercharge, would have support from the RAF who were to operate a low strafing operation for the first time. NZ Corps was set for a 4pm start and Freyberg's only concern was whether the tanks of 1 Armoured Division would follow the Corps through the gap. At the conference where he raised the point, Horrocks responded, "They will go through, and I am going with them."<sup>330</sup> The plan

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<sup>327</sup> Paul Freyberg, *Freyberg VC: Soldier of Two Nations* ibid, p.392-393

<sup>328</sup> White, letter to RSA Review, undated, NAM, White Papers

<sup>329</sup> Sir Brian Horrocks, *A Full Life*, Leo Cooper, London, 1974

<sup>330</sup> General Horrocks, letter to General Stevens, 3 September 1958, quoted by Stevens in *Bardia to Enfidaville*, NZ War Histories, Dept of Internal Affairs, Wellington, p.204

for the attack was sent to Montgomery who responded with delight sending Freyberg and Horrocks a bottle of brandy each. Such was the success of the combined operation that Stevens said it was ‘the most perfect example of united action between ground and air that any army, British or German, had yet seen’.<sup>331</sup> White’s observation was the Horrocks was ‘very impressed’ by the Freyberg and wanted to co-operate.

I thought Horrocks was very good. When Horrocks arrived we had succeeded in getting in there and holding, having captured the Gap. Freyberg and Horrocks took charge together. I think differences of opinion between Freyberg and Horrocks were built up in the story as told by...no doubt in the thinking of the General after the event, but at the time they just made it work. He [Horrocks] wasn’t there for the break-in, nor was he around when the General turned down the idea of going forward.<sup>332</sup>

The victory at Tebaga Gap was achieved with Horrocks pushing forward with his tanks and the New Zealand infantry following. “The New Zealanders emerged from their trenches where they had been lying up all day and swarmed forward. What magnificent troops they were.”<sup>333</sup> While Freyberg did not work as well with Horrocks as with General Leese from 30<sup>th</sup> Corps, they still managed successfully.<sup>334</sup> Further, White said at no stage had Montgomery ordered Freyberg to take ‘unjustifiable risks’.<sup>335</sup> Freyberg, he said, was always quick to take the chance to exploit success but he was too experienced to risk an armoured brigade in the dark for what had been planned for first light. While Horrocks had gone through at night, it was, by comparison, a moonlit night.

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<sup>331</sup> General Stevens, *Bardia to Enfidaville*, NZ War Histories, Dept of Internal Affairs, Wellington, p.383

<sup>332</sup> White, NAM, Tape 27, Side 1

<sup>333</sup> Ibid, p.153

<sup>334</sup> General Robert Horrocks, *A Full Life*, Leo Cooper, London, 1974, p.151 noted that Freyberg ‘would have every right to feel aggrieved. After all, he was a world-famous figure and a most courageous general who had forgotten more about soldiering than I was ever likely to know’. Montgomery told Horrocks that the battle was the turning point in the North African campaign. Before he left Montgomery’s HQ, Horrocks was taken aside by Freddy de Guingand, Montgomery’s Chief of Staff, and told that he was worried about the reception Horrocks would receive because the NZ Corps had done all the fighting while Horrocks would arrive at the last minute, take over and achieve a spectacular victory. As a compromise Horrocks suggested to de Guingand that all messages and orders should be sent to them both so they would work out the battle together. Thus de Guingand referred to the pair as Hindenburg and Ludendorf in future messages.

<sup>335</sup> White, letter to RSA Review, undated, White Papers, NAM

White believed no commander in the field made a greater contribution in the war in North Africa than General Freyberg.

He played at times a decisive part and this was such a time, the final left hook of the remarkable series across North Africa, almost from Alamein to Mareth...the triumph should remain untarnished and the final test is General Montgomery's opinion at that time. Of the warmth and sincerity of his praise in person to General Freyberg there could be no doubt. There were no qualifications then, and there have been no qualifications since by the man responsible for the direction of the Mareth battle.<sup>336</sup>

However, Kippenberger believed Freyberg saw the left hook as an alternative to fighting.<sup>337</sup> Although, in his biography of Kippenberger, McLean made no mention of the controversy adding that it had been Montgomery's deliberate battle plan that allowed Rommel's forces to slip away in retreat.<sup>338</sup>

But Freyberg, in his comments on the narrative forwarded to him on the Tunisian campaign by Kippenberger after the War in his role as series editor of the Official New Zealand War History, started by asking why Montgomery had changed command during a successful operation, while, in the process superseding a Commander who was succeeding in an operation that only he understood? In answering his own question, he said Montgomery was faced with the failure of his main plan which had been reliant on the front attack, and not the thrust being made by the NZ Corps on the enemy's flank. But at the Conference preceding the battle, the senior officers of the NZ Corps met after Montgomery's address and said the plan was all-wrong. 'No-one could support the policy as laid down at that Conference,' Freyberg said. "I said to 30 Corps Commander [General Leese] as we parted, when we wished each other luck, 'I only ask you one thing – Let me know quickly if you

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<sup>336</sup> Ibid, p.6

<sup>337</sup> Glyn Harper, *Kippenberger*, ibid, p.196, "Freyberg's concept of the left hook was not shared by many other commanders, including Kippenberger and Montgomery. Freyberg's excessive caution in implementing the left hooks would see opportunities to capture the majority of Afrika Korps missed on at least two significant occasions. These lost opportunities frustrated his infantry brigadiers, Kippenberger and Gentry, and later foiled Montgomery's plan for a swift penetration of the formidable Mareth Line to the point where an exasperated Montgomery replaced Freyberg as the commander on the spot."

<sup>338</sup> McLean, ibid, p.242

fail'. When the frontal attack failed, and it did completely, we had success in our hands."<sup>339</sup>

Freyberg said he believed Montgomery, after the failure on the original front, wanted to take charge of the turning movement. Freyberg insisted on commanding his own force. But to command a force in a turning movement the Commander had to understand how it was organised and trained.

Neither the 8<sup>th</sup> Army Commander [Montgomery] nor General Horrocks understood the way the New Zealand forces were organised.<sup>340</sup> From his communications and orders, it is obvious that the Army Commander never realised the position from start to finish. That is not to be wondered at. It was a most complicated manoeuvre, and he was not in on the planning. To change command during this operation was equivalent to saying you are not doing your job. I did not mind that so much, but I was determined not to have all our work sabotaged.<sup>341</sup>

Freyberg said it was not possible to command a force and make tactical decisions when not on the battlefield. The man on the spot should be allowed to command. Freyberg cited the instances of the Commander-in-Chief Middle East in the earlier years of the war being based in Cairo and trying to control the desert fighting. He cited Hitler's order to hold on, at all cost, to his forces in Stalingrad first, and then on the Senio, in Italy, in 1945. All of those commands ended in disaster and Freyberg said the exercise of remote control did more to defeat the German Army than any enemy action.<sup>342</sup> Carver noted the attack on the Mareth Line 'was not a battle of which Montgomery could be proud'.<sup>343</sup> "Neither in concept nor, initially, in execution did it follow any of the principles by which he maintained that battles should be fought. He himself was not consistent on that issue...He underestimated both the enemy and the difficulty of attacking across a wet watercourse, and did not allot sufficient strength to either of the widely separated attacking forces."<sup>344</sup>

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<sup>339</sup> General Freyberg, Comments on the Campaign Narrative of the Tunisian Campaign, 11 July, 1950, Sir John White Papers, NWM, p.4

<sup>340</sup> Ibid, p.4

<sup>341</sup> Ibid, p.10

<sup>342</sup> Ibid, p.4

<sup>343</sup> Michael Carver, Montgomery, *Churchill's Generals*, Ed. John Keegan, Abacus, London, 1999, p.156

<sup>344</sup> Ibid

Freyberg added further that Montgomery's decision was the 'most extraordinary' of the whole Desert campaign. The 10<sup>th</sup> Corps Headquarters, although desert worthy, had always been associated with failure during its existence. It was also the very organisation that was fatal to a turning movement. It was too big. It had to split up. The Corps Commander and his Chief Staff Officers were often thirty miles apart. They issued orders which had to be cancelled. The NZ Corps Headquarters was stream-lined and came with the attack and could control the battle and the administration. Further, General Horrocks was new to this class of battle. "He appeared not to realise the great tactical limitations of an armoured division. The 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Division, a desert worthy fighting formation, was helpless in a position such as we were in at the Tebaga Gap, and would be helpless, as it turned out it was when sealed in at the El Hamma Gap."<sup>345</sup> Further, the decision allowed the Afrika Korps to escape from the net the New Zealand Division had cast around them. Freyberg said he couldn't argue with Montgomery over a high-grade cipher when he was 100 miles away, as he remembered from his own experience at Tobruk. Freyberg had estimated 1000 casualties if the Division was successful, but 3000 if it failed. That was why he would allow no alteration to his plans. Freyberg was significantly at odds with Montgomery. He had received a message to surprise the enemy by attacking by day. And another followed suggesting an hour's preliminary bombardment.

How can you effect tactical surprise if you give a preliminary bombardment? Further, where was the ammunition coming for a preliminary bombardment of one hour for 200 guns? We were counting the rounds. It is this sort of instruction that makes for lack of confidence. Naturally we went our own way.<sup>346</sup>

Freyberg said Montgomery was not at his best in the pursuit. That might have improved with more experience in the desert but he always wanted a 'firm base'. "The 10<sup>th</sup> Corps Commander, whatever he may have developed later, had had no fighting experience in this class of warfare in the desert. Why did General Montgomery send him to take over? That is the question we all ask ourselves. He

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<sup>345</sup> Ibid, p.11

<sup>346</sup> Ibid, p.12

could not have thought we were failing. There was no case administratively, because we had to feed and maintain the 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Division from our Field Maintenance Centre.”<sup>347</sup> Freyberg believed Montgomery had realised his plans had gone completely wrong. At the outset he said the turning movement was secondary but when he saw what happened on his main front he wanted to be associated with the turning of the Mareth Line achieved by the New Zealanders.

When reading the account provided in *Bardia to Enfidaville*,<sup>348</sup> White contacted the editor of the War History Branch, Brigadier Monty Fairbrother, who had taken over the role after Kippenberger’s death, and said he had to agree to differ with the History Branch. “Maybe it is as well to avoid further controversy in public but you will realize that I could not let it pass in the Review when I believe it is wrong. To think that my diaries could have been used to help bring about the War History conclusion sickens me because in a way I have recorded things which I suppose could be misinterpreted.”<sup>349</sup>

Fairbrother replied on 18 July 1962, “I expect many others will feel as you do over *Bardia to Enfidaville* as indeed I did myself at first, years ago, when all the sources were first assembled. These sources go well beyond the papers of 2NZ Div and GOC’s diary and reluctantly the conclusions in the book had to be faced, especially as other opinions which I sought supported them.”<sup>350</sup> On the same day, Stevens acknowledged receipt of an advance copy of White’s and Griffiths’ letter. He said he had read the Mentiplay article which he thought ‘far-fetched and silly’. “There are always bound to be differences of opinion, in this particular case even more than usual. What now appears in the book was the result of long discussions with War History Branch, and much thought, and much heart-searching, on my own part. It all led to at least six months delay in finishing my draft.”<sup>351</sup>

White felt Paul Freyberg got ‘carried away’ writing about the incident at Tebaga Gap in his biography of his father<sup>352</sup> and he put that down to Freyberg’s failing health in his later years. White said he had compiled a file on Alamein and its aftermath in the hope that it would be available for historians. But there was no record

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<sup>347</sup> Ibid, p.14

<sup>348</sup> General Stevens, *Bardia to Enfidaville*, NZ War Histories, Dept of Internal Affairs, Wellington

<sup>349</sup> White, letter to Monty Fairbrother, 9 July 1962, Alexander Turnbull Library MS Papers 4428

<sup>350</sup> Monty Fairbrother, letter to John White, 18 July 1962, ATL MS Papers 4428

<sup>351</sup> General Stevens, letter to John White, 18 July 1962, ATL MS Papers 4428

<sup>352</sup> Paul Freyberg, *Bernard Freyberg VC: Soldier of Two Nations*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1991, p.424-425

of the file in the National Archives and he believed it may be among some papers that General Freyberg had assembled while serving as Governor-General with the intent of writing his autobiography. However, they were now with the Freyberg family in England and White believed they should be brought back to New Zealand, because the work he had done was not intended to be for the General, but for wider public use.

While Stevens had been critical of the failure to push on with 8<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade, he acknowledged that it was the only occasion Freyberg employed his personal feeling in the plan, and in the overall operation his co-operation with Montgomery, and his execution of plans into results through battle sense and leadership, meant that his name would always be linked with Montgomery's in North Africa.<sup>353</sup>

With the campaign almost over in North Africa, White was concerned when an assault was made on the heights of Takrouna. A bloody three-day battle resulted in 46 deaths, 404 wounded and 86 missing. While regarded as an outstanding piece of arms White felt it was "...a shame we were having injuries when the battle was almost over. In my mind it was the attack of the whole of German position, the attack in the north was so successful we had done our job by taking part...we didn't need to go to lengths to capture Takrouna. The battle was over according to the situation reports coming in from the north. I thought Takrouna would have surrendered in the end without having to fight for it."<sup>354</sup> But he added it was his own opinion and he would not have expressed a view at the time.

Whatever the dispute over the action at Tebaga Gap, the success did hasten the end of the North African campaign, an end which occurred when the German Commander asked that he surrender to Freyberg. While he was the temporary commander of 10 Corps, Freyberg conveyed to New Zealand Prime Minister Peter Fraser that he wanted to remain as GOC of 2<sup>nd</sup> NZEF for the duration of the war. Freyberg, who has been depicted by numerous historians as a good divisional commander but not suitable for higher rank, told the House of Lords after the war that he had three times, in fact, been offered command of a corps, but he had stayed consistent to the agreement he made to the New Zealand Government when taking on the role of GOC 2<sup>nd</sup> NZ Division that he would not accept promotion.<sup>355</sup>

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<sup>353</sup> General Stevens, *ibid*

<sup>354</sup> White, NAM, Tape 27, Side 2

<sup>355</sup> Sir Bernard Freyberg, Speech to the House of Lords, 15 April, 1953,

## CHAPTER FIVE – ITALY 1943-45

Italy represented the final challenge for the 2<sup>nd</sup> NZ Division, its mobility chastened by the mountainous topography with high peaks and low river valleys, and by a miserable winter in 1943-44 where mud made movement nearly impossible. It would also provide two significant challenges for Freyberg's military legacy. As the New Zealanders completed the war in North Africa, and headed back to their base in Maadi, Freyberg told them that after three years fighting, they had helped to dispel the myth of German superiority adding the manner in which the Germans 'chucked' in their hand in Tunisia had been 'deplorable'. "If it had been a British Army that was fighting there, they would be fighting on the hills even now so long as they had ammunition, water and food."<sup>356</sup> A total of 225,000 German prisoners were taken at a cost of 1000 casualties for the 8<sup>th</sup> Army. In the finish the confidence that had grown in the NZ Division was evident in their final left hook at Tebaga Gap. "We took 27,000 men and 6000 vehicles right to the Boche's line and gave him a tremendous hiding, and that is, I think, an achievement that will always stand to our credit."<sup>357</sup>

Freyberg and White completed a flying trip to New Zealand and while returning via London on 26 July, Freyberg noted in his diary that he called on Winston Churchill at 11.30a.m. and 'talked to him for a couple of hours'. This may have been significant factor a year later when Freyberg was not prepared to have Inglis take over as GOC during his absence after his plane crash in Italy. There is no reference by White, who did not attend the meeting, and none added to the GOC Diary by Freyberg. But given the long-standing relationship Churchill had with Freyberg it would be a reasonable suspicion that they discussed Inglis' post-Crete comments, if they had not already raised the issue in their desert meeting after the fall of Tunisia. Upon returning to the Division, and having had the agreement of the New Zealand Government that the Division should remain in Europe, the New Zealanders prepared to take part in the Italian campaign. From 5 October until 20 November, the massive task of moving the 2<sup>nd</sup> NZ Division and its 5199 vehicles, from Alexandria to the Italian military harbour of Taranto, took place. During that time, on 13 October,

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<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/people/mr-bernard-freyberg/1953>

<sup>356</sup> General Freyberg, Address to 2 NZ Division, Maadi, 3 June 1943, Sir John White Papers, White Family

<sup>357</sup> Ibid

Italy declared war on Germany. The NZ Division, was under Montgomery's command as part of the 15<sup>th</sup> Army Group, comprising the 8<sup>th</sup> Army on the eastern coast of Italy and the American Fifth Army, under General Mark Clark, on the western coast. Overall command was held by General Alexander. The New Zealanders begin operations at Atessa with the aim of working up the mountainous terrain to push towards Rome. But the difficult topography and the early onset of winter made movement difficult for the mobile division.

In mid-January 1944, the 2<sup>nd</sup> NZ Division was brought across from the Eighth Army front to go into Fifth Army Reserve. This was to have it ready for a mobile role in the event of a breakthrough on the Cassino front by the Americans. On 3 February the NZ Corps was formed comprising 2 NZ Div and 4 India Division. Initially it was intended NZ Corps would support 2 US Corps in attacking Cassino. Should the breakthrough not occur by 12 February, the breakthrough would be the responsibility of the NZ Corps. On 4 February, 5 NZ Infantry Brigade took over the river line south of Cassino from the Americans. There was ongoing frustration over the way the Germans were able to pin Allied forces down. No movement was possible without a response from the defenders and the monastery overlooking the township came under suspicion as a watching post. 2 NZ Division intelligence officer Robin Bell recalled Freyberg speaking with the American Corps Commander and asking him, "Have the Germans got any troops up there above us?" The American replied, "We have an assurance from the Vatican that there are no German troops there." And Freyberg's reply was: "We've fought the Germans longer than you have, and if there's any advantage in it, they'll be there."<sup>358</sup> German defenders were well dug in around the region in pillboxes built by the German Todt Organisation, the Third Reich's engineering arm who had been responsible for the creation of the German autobahn system before the war, and many other engineering works during the war. The decision to bomb the monastery was controversial, and is discussed below, while the follow-up bombing of the township of Cassino a month later was similarly questionable; not for the moral reasons associated with the Abbey but for practical responses. The British commander of the Indian Division, Major General Francis Tuker, was insistent that the Abbey should be bombed. Bell's fellow intelligence officer Dan Davin said,

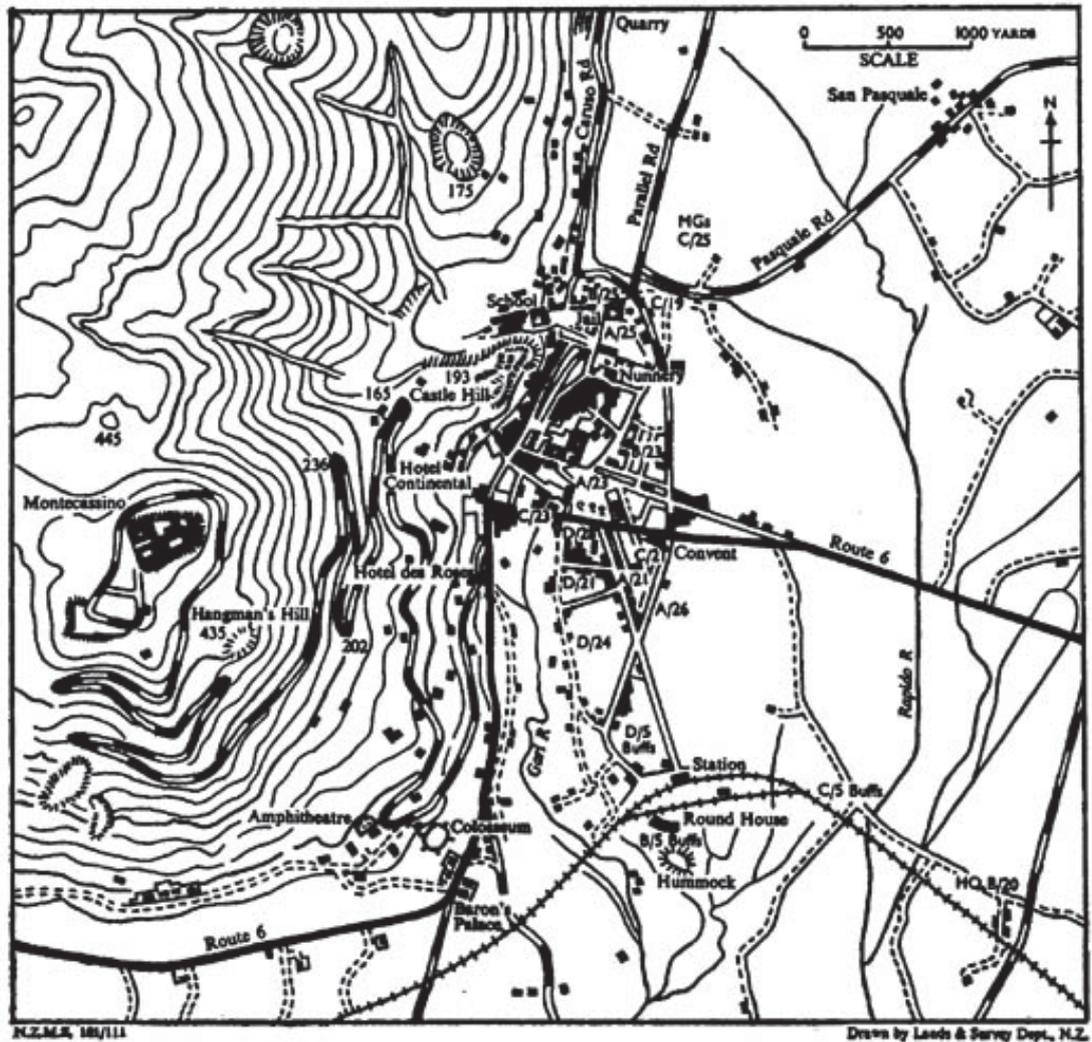
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<sup>358</sup> Robin Bell, interviewed for *Freyberg* television series, Sir John White Papers, White family

Cassino was an impossibly difficult task which we inherited from the Americans and the Americans, with characteristic dexterity have contrived to give the impression that we were responsible for the bombing of the Abbey, where I consider that, a) they were responsible in the sense that we were serving under their command and they could have stopped it, and b) that it was largely due to their screams of agony and general journalistic excitement that it came to be believed that there were Germans in the Abbey at all. I, myself, don't think there were any Germans in the Abbey. I didn't think there were then, but there is always a chance, and the American G2 reports (they are the equivalent of an intelligence summary) were full of tales of gallant GIs being shot at from the million windows of the Abbey and sentimental crap of that kind, so it was not surprising that Freyberg said if we are going to have a go at this we have got to knock the Abbey out and the town as well.<sup>359</sup>

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<sup>359</sup> Dan Davin, Interviewed for *Freyberg* Television documentary, Sir John White Papers, White Family



CASSINO, NIGHT 23–24 MARCH

Figure 7: Cassino, from *The Sangro to Cassino*<sup>360</sup> (reproduced with the permission of the Ministry for Culture and Heritage)

Ultimately, the responsibility for bombing the monastery fell on Alexander who believed the lives and success of the troops were more important than the monastery.<sup>361</sup> General Sir John Harding, who commanded XIII Corps in Italy, said he believed Clark had discussed the possibility of bombing the monastery with some of his commanders and was non-committal and while Harding said his memory was weakened after the passing of the years, he did not remember Clark ever lodging any ‘formal or official objection’.<sup>362</sup> Brigadier Jim Burrows said the New Zealanders were

<sup>360</sup> N. Phillips, *The Sangro to Cassino*, Historical Publications Branch, Wellington, 1957

<sup>361</sup> Ibid

<sup>362</sup> Lord Sir John Harding, interviewed for *Freyberg* television documentary, Sir John White Papers, White family

certain they were being observed from the top of Mt Cassino.<sup>363</sup> 28 (Maori) Battalion commander James Henare went further and said Maori Battalion soldiers, who were on the front line for two weeks, could see tracers coming down on them from the Abbey. “I would say the right decision was made, because every night we could see tracers coming out of it. Perhaps during the day they might have moved out, but we certainly saw tracers coming out of the monastery every night.”<sup>364</sup> Bell recalled further that after the capture of Rome, and the return of Freyberg’s son Paul, who had been taken prisoner at Anzio before escaping to the safety of the Vatican City, Freyberg had gone to thank the Pope and while some of the Vatican officials had been against the New Zealanders, Pope Pius had sent one of his papal staff running after the party to arrange a photograph with the Pope. Bell said when they were asked where they would have it taken, all but Freyberg looked away from a tapestry of Cassino on the wall. Freyberg turned around and said, pointing to the Cassino tapestry, ‘In front of that one’.<sup>365</sup>

The monastery was bombed on 15 February by a force of 350 Fortresses and Liberators of the Strategic Air Force which dropped between 380 and 400 tons of bombs. White supported the bombing.

I saw Fortresses and Liberators bomb the monastery – it was a terrific spectacle – smoke and dust made Monastery Hill look like a volcano in full eruption, and when the last smoke had cleared away you could see through the glasses that the buildings had disintegrated: As I said to you in another letter I don’t think it matters two hoots about smashing an ancient monument if it saves lives or helps the war. The Boche was using it all right. If they kept civilians there they must bear the blame for letting loose upon them a greater concentration of high explosive than has ever been dropped on one spot at one time by a raid on Germany. This sector of the Gustav Line, of which Cassino is a bastion, is a very tough nut as the heavy fighting has shown. The main road and railway run through Cassino, the high ground dominates the approaches and covers the river obstacle and the enemy has flooded large parts

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<sup>363</sup> Brigadier Jim Burrows, interviewed for *Freyberg* television documentary, Sir John White Papers, White family

<sup>364</sup> Sir James Henare, interviewed for *Freyberg* television documentary, Sir John White Papers, White family

<sup>365</sup> Bell, *ibid*

of the plain. We hold some of the hills to the north and west, but there are deep valleys, steep slopes and strong enemy positions. It is freezing cold up there at this time of year and there are no hot meals three times a day. History records other occasions when armies were held up here and Rome has never yet been captured from the South. But we shall see.<sup>366</sup>



The Abbey at Cassino after bombing. McDermott family collection (with permission)

Another view was offered by American platoon commander Harold Bond: “The Abbey at Monte Cassino was the creation of one of man’s noblest dreams and that day it was to be shattered by the nightmare of modern war....The terrible necessities of the present were too much with us....This morning, tired infantrymen, fighting for their lives nears its slopes, were to cry for joy as bomb after bomb crumbled it into dust.”<sup>367</sup> While 28 Battalion captured the Cassino Railway Station on 17-18 February it could not be held in the face of intense German fire. Considerable frustration followed as a breakthrough was necessary to assisting the Anzio landing further up the coast. A plan to take the town was devised but three weeks of rain delayed the planned bombing which preceded the attempt. In that time, on 2 March, Acting GOC of the 2<sup>nd</sup> NZ Division, General Kippenberger lost both his feet when stepping on a mine. Artillery specialist Major General Graham Parkinson, who was

<sup>366</sup> White, Letter to family, 12 March, 1944, Sir John White Papers, WFC

<sup>367</sup> Harold Bond, *Return to Cassino*, J.M. Dent, London, 1964, p.113-114, quoted by Denis McLean in *Howard Kippenberger Dauntless Spirit*, Random House, Auckland, 2008, p.269

familiar with Kippenberger's plan to swamp the town with infantry after the bombing assault, replaced him. Around 500 planes dropped 1000 tons of bombs in, and around, the township but the bombing did not have the desired effect as so much debris was strewn around the township meaning access for tanks, which were vital to the operation, was difficult. The wait in the rain had taken its toll and White summed up his own frustration saying he was looking forward to the battle's end. "I do not like battles any more now than before; but we would all like to see the present stalemate ended and I dare to hope that the great odds in air and artillery and tanks which we possess will burst a way through and throw the enemy into retreat."<sup>368</sup> The bombing of the township was 'stupendous', White said.

From 15-23 March, the New Zealanders attempted to take the town but Parkinson failed to apply Kippenberger's plan. Instead of flooding the town with troops, Parkinson sent them in in dribs and drabs. Against the well-protected German defenders, that was insufficient. Freyberg hounded Parkinson to secure the town but he refused to commit the required forces. Kippenberger later commented: "It really was unfortunate that I was wounded when I was. My orders and the copy of my remarks at the Corps Conference a few hours earlier show very clearly that I intended to swamp the town with our infantry as fast as they could be put on the three routes."<sup>369</sup> While blaming Parkinson, Kippenberger also criticised Freyberg for letting 'precious hours pass'. However, Pugsley said Kippenberger was wrong. The GOC Diary showed he had prompted Parkinson every day because he knew Kippenberger's plan offered the only chance of success. However, with no-one prepared to follow the plan, it failed and Freyberg, in the manner he had from earlier in the war, accepted the blame.<sup>370</sup> On 26 March, New Zealand Corps was disbanded and Freyberg resumed command of the Division while Parkinson returned to command of 6 Brigade. By that time White was drained and said he could no longer write about Cassino. For once readers of the diary would have to be content "with the General's official account unsupplemented unofficially by his PA."<sup>371</sup>

The decision to bomb the Monastery loomed as large in post-war history as the structure had over the valley during the operation.

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<sup>368</sup> White, A note on the Battle of Cassino, 14 March, 1944, Sir John White Papers, WFC

<sup>369</sup> General Howard Kippenberger, quoted by Chris Pugsley, *A Bloody Road Home*, Penguin, Auckland, 2014, p.468-469

<sup>370</sup> Pugsley, *A Bloody Road Home*, *ibid*, p.469

<sup>371</sup> White, Letter to family, 13 March, 1944, Sir John White Papers, WFC

What we wanted to do was not destroy the monastery as such but bring it into the battlefield so that it was a dangerous place to be and it could be bombed if the Germans were occupying it. The argument was were they using it? The movement of vehicles that could only be seen from the monastery had drawn fire and everyone was quite sure. It stood like a portent, one infantryman from Dunedin I knew said. That was the attitude of everybody. Kippenberger said if he had been in the area defending he would certainly have had people in the monastery to watch what was happening in the plain below. I think they were in the monastery before the bombing. I took Kippenberger's view they would be negligent not to use it. Men's lives are much more important than bricks and mortar.<sup>372</sup>

All Freyberg had expected was that the monastery should be bombed but he had never advocated its complete destruction.<sup>373</sup> In the post-war debate, it was revealed American General Mark Clark had noted in his diary that 'Freyberg is sort of a bull in a china closet'.<sup>374</sup> He further added that the British had been "exceedingly careful" in the handling of the New Zealand forces because they were territorial troops responsible only to their home Government and he noted to his commanders that he wanted them to make every effort to work in harmony with them. "I was proud to have them come under my command, for they were experienced fighters with many glorious deeds to their credit."<sup>375</sup> Yet, further into the operation at Cassino he dictated to his diary, "Freyberg may be an extremely courageous individual but he has no brains, has been spoiled [by the British], demands everything in sight, and altogether is most difficult to handle."<sup>376</sup> After the war Clark led the way in attempting to shift

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<sup>372</sup> White, NAM, Tape 36, Side 1

<sup>373</sup> Glyn Harper, John Tonkin-Covell, *The Battles of Monte Cassino*, Allen & Unwin, Auckland, 2013, p.12, section 3 in e-book, said the Allied commanders had had to demonstrate the men's lives counted 'infinitely more than historic buildings'. The Abbey had been attacked three times before and was evidence that monuments could be rebuilt. "A fighting soldier, however, risks everything; and it is a commander's paramount duty to give this irreplaceable individual every chance of achieving the assigned mission and surviving. This is something Alexander, Freyberg, Kippenberger, Tucker and most allied senior commanders clearly recognised as their paramount duty. Surprisingly, Mark Clark never seemed to recognise this fact: he regarded giving infantry soldiers the maximum air support as a sight of weakness."

<sup>374</sup> General Mark Clark, quoted by Martin Blumenson, in *Mark Clark*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1984, p.181

<sup>375</sup> *Ibid*, p.284

<sup>376</sup> Blumenson, *ibid*, p.192

blame for the bombing of the monastery to Freyberg. In a US State Department communication to the Vatican's under-secretary of State he said, "There was unquestionable evidence in the possession of the Allied commanders in the field that the Abbey of Monte Cassino formed part of the German defensive system. I was one of the Allied commanders in the field, and the one in command at Cassino, and I said then that there was no evidence that the Germans were using the Abbey for military purposes."<sup>377</sup> Majdalany went further when he said Clark suffered an inferiority complex to the British and in writing about Alexander, Montgomery, Freyberg and others, he revealed "a curious chip on his shoulder."<sup>378</sup> Blumenson noted, "The British supervised the Mediterranean theatre after 1943, and Italy was supposed to be their arena. Instead, the weight of American resources and Clark's tenacity overwhelmed them. Earlier heroic deeds by the British – the evacuation from Dunkirk, the battle of Britain, the victory at El Alamein (which Montgomery added to his title, calling himself Lord Montgomery of Alamein), the entry into Tunis (Alexander of Tunis) – dimmed and faded in the light of later Allied triumphs, which were, in large part, produced by the American partner."<sup>379</sup> A clash of cultures suggests Blumenson did not understand the nature of British honours and the practice of affixing titles representative of the honour.



Cassino township after it was bombed. (McDermott family collection with permission)

<sup>377</sup> General Mark Clark, *Calculated Risk*, George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd, London, 1951, p.296

<sup>378</sup> Fred Majdalany, *Cassino: Portrait of a Battle*, Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd, London, 1957, p.46

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid*, p.287

The manner in which the American treatment of history reflected on Freyberg, and others, resulted in White being drawn to Freyberg's defence as a second wave of history books hit the market in the 1980s. "I had no idea Clark was critical of Freyberg. All this blew up after the war. I was quite astounded that my General had been talking to a man who believed that it shouldn't have been bombed at all."<sup>380</sup> White said the allegation came out of the blue and he recounted that during his term as Governor-General of New Zealand Freyberg had invited Clark to be his guest in New Zealand. Clark had appeared honoured to have been asked, then suddenly changed his mind.

The approach to eternity probably got on his nerves. On thinking it over he wanted to put the blame on Freyberg. Alexander appeared to take the proper view and to say that the laws of war indicated that if it were being occupied, if there was evidence, then it could be bombed. As soon as I read it [Clark's book] I was horrified. I think others at higher levels castigated Clark for daring to think that Freyberg was responsible.<sup>381</sup>

In 1980, New Zealand Herald journalist Iain Macdonald wrote to several New Zealand participants seeking a response to a booklet by Harvard University professor Herbert Bloch being sold at Cassino as an authoritative account of the battle. Bloch claimed:

The commanders of the New Zealand Corps, and especially General Freyberg, were patently maladroit in military strategy. Although they came into an unfamiliar situation with no adequate preparation they controlled with an unwonted arrogance...No-one will ever dispute General Freyberg's incredible personal bravery. He deserves every honour he received on those grounds and as an inspiring and beloved leader of men. But he was not cut out to be a military tactician.

In fact, author Fred Majdalany's description (in his book on Cassino) of the New Zealand Division as 'the great amateur division from New Zealand' is

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<sup>380</sup> White, NAM, Tape 36, Side 2

<sup>381</sup> Ibid

only too woefully apt. It is a pity that these troops were facing an enemy commanded by generals of the highest military skill. For General Alexander to abdicate his responsibility in favour of a general who proved, from the outset, thoroughly unqualified for the task which he was asked to perform was an error which gravely blemished General Alexander's record.<sup>382</sup>

It should be noted that Bloch misquoted Majdalany who had said: "The NZ Division was in the best sense a great amateur combination – a gifted civilian body that had learned the craft of war the hard way, and now excelled at it."<sup>383</sup> A different context to that Bloch gave it. Majdalany made the comment when referring to the unique nature of democratic decision-making by New Zealand's commanders known as 'the Cabinet'. The booklet resulted in outrage in New Zealand but, as often happens, the revision of history meant blame continued to fall on Freyberg in subsequent American books. In October 1983, another American writer, David Hapgood, who only made contact with White after his book had been published, continued the assault on Freyberg's reputation. While unable to provide information sought regarding the date of bombing of the Monastery which had been moved forward a day from that intended because of the unavailability of aircraft on the later date, White said Hapgood and his co-writer David Richardson had failed to understand both Freyberg's character and his relationship with the British.<sup>384</sup> Freyberg had always been ready to share the blame for the bombing of the Monastery.

I am sure he saw himself as much a prisoner of circumstance in that regard as was Gen. Clark or any other participant in those sad events. He was under pressure from Gen. Taker (and shortly Dimoline) to agree, just as the latter were under pressure from their brigadiers, they from their colonels, and so on down the chain...He [Gen. Clark] should, I think, be prepared to live with that over-riding compulsion and not seek to shift the 'blame' for its consequences on to one man. Looking back on the situation from this distance, I am convinced that the situation offered no real alternative. Clark either had to

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<sup>382</sup> Iain Macdonald, letter to Sir John White, undated, Sir John White Papers, White Family

<sup>383</sup> Fred Majdalany, *Cassino: Portrait of a Battle*, Longmans, Green and Co., Ltd, London, 1957, p.102

<sup>384</sup> David Hapgood, letter to Sir John White, 31 May, 1984, Sir John White Papers, National Army Museum.

abandon his own plan to break through at Cassino, or he had to agree to the bombing of the Monastery.<sup>385</sup>

In reference to the comments on Freyberg's qualities, White said by the time of Cassino he had spent almost three years continuously leading men into battle in the Second World War alone. At the same time he was responsible for the control and administration of the 2<sup>nd</sup> NZEF which required constant contact with the New Zealand Government. "Survival in such roles for five years of virtually continuous operations indicates something more than 'bravery'."<sup>386</sup>

To the British, we were often troublesome, and they occasionally fell into the error of seeing Gen. Freyberg as a relatively 'ordinary' British commander. Their senior officers would have treated us as their own if they had been allowed to do so. It was a complicated relationship with, I think, respect on both sides. But there was no question of our Division being treated with kid gloves, nor of the NZ government constantly dangling a threat of 'withdrawal' before the anxious gaze of the British command. The record is clear enough to read.<sup>387</sup>

A more recent criticism was made by Richard Holmes who claimed Freyberg was affected by presence of the German paratroopers defending Cassino who had 'bundled him humiliatingly out of Crete in May 1941'<sup>388</sup> Holmes is not the first historian to fail to recognise the injury done to the paratroops on Crete by the New Zealanders. German commander General Kurt Student said, "The infantry, mostly New Zealanders, put up a stiff fight, though taken by surprise. The Fuhrer was very upset by the heavy losses suffered by the parachute units, and come to the conclusion that their surprise value had passed. After that he often said to me: 'The day of parachute troops is over'."<sup>389</sup> As Pugsley said, "The soldiers who fought on Crete are

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<sup>385</sup> White, copy of draft to Hapgood and Richardson, undated, Sir John White Papers, NAM, p.2

<sup>386</sup> Ibid

<sup>387</sup> Ibid, p.3

<sup>388</sup> Richard Holmes, *Battlefields of the Second World War*, London BBC Worldwide, 2001, quoted by Glyn Harper and John Tonkin-Covell, *The Battles of Monte Cassino*, Allen&Unwin, Auckland, 2013 (e-book, page 18, section 6)

<sup>389</sup> General Kurt Student, interviewed by B.H. Liddell Hart, *The Other Side of the Hill*, Panther, London, 1948, p.176

conscious that they individually bested some of the finest soldiers in the German Army but they have still been defeated.”<sup>390</sup>

It was around this time that Montgomery sought to have the 2<sup>nd</sup> NZ Division involved in the D-Day operations where he felt its mobility would be an asset in the less mountainous parts of France. White said the request wasn't in the records but he was aware the request had been made.<sup>391</sup> After their break following Cassino, the NZ Division was pressed back into action in the race to Rome, and then was heavily involved in the battle to secure Florence. White described the nature of the battle as the Division moved northward. “It is a case of slowly getting forward, infantry and tanks going for feature after feature under heavy artillery support...By holding the ridges, however, and counter-attacking every gain made against him, the enemy has had to expose a lot of troops to the heavy ‘stonks’ of a lot of guns, and he has suffered casualties accordingly.”<sup>392</sup>

‘The red hot rake of war’, I think it was that [that] Winston promised the Italians, has assuredly burnt its way through their towns, villages and hamlets. Bombs, shells, dynamite and the sadistic arson of the enemy in villages of no military importance have left a trail of destruction and desolation which Italy will remember. Hillsides pockmarked with shell craters have already been covered by Nature, blasted woods have dead trees but bullets and shell fragments do not usually kill trees. It is the destruction of man-made Italy that will take many years to rebuild – bridges, railways, electric power lines, factories, all have been systematically and ruthlessly ‘scorched’ if they weren't already knocked out by allied bombs.<sup>393</sup>

As the battle for Florence progressed White said Freyberg was ‘wound up’ and he detected the ‘buccaneer spirit’ in Freyberg one August morning. As the General drove off in a jeep White sounded a note of caution. “Remember Ravenstein, Sir.” [The German General captured by the New Zealanders during the North African campaign when he had been out on reconnaissance]. “Who is Ravenstein?” he asked,

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<sup>390</sup> Pugsley, *ibid*, p.184

<sup>391</sup> White, NAM, Tape 2, Side 1

<sup>392</sup> White, Letter 31 August, 1944, Sir John White Papers, NAM, p.1

<sup>393</sup> White, Letter to family, 20 July 1944, Sir John White Papers, WFC

to which I replied, “A General in the Afrika Korps who drove into Sidi Rezegh a day too soon – and there is also Brigadier Stewart.”<sup>394</sup> Freyberg laughed. Stewart had been captured when making a reconnaissance of forward positions near Florence and was held until March 1945. Even after five years of association White admitted to being intrigued by Freyberg.

I am, of course, used to the General now, but I still find his character and personality well worth study; he is a stimulating person! During operations his ruthless determination and tireless planning and thinking of ways to beat the Boche are truly remarkable. Take his conferences – they are never dull. Both the broad view and the important points of detail are bound out – the General’s mind roves from the Russian front back to Italy and along the whole German and Allied front – and then settles on the Division’s sector with a powerful grip. He always sees for himself, gets his data and advisers’ views and then the plans evolve. As things begin to happen modifications and developments flow out to meet the changing circumstances with the speed of a born opportunist, but speed of thought, tempered by long experience, and that extra thing which is either luck or special military sense. Always there is action, optimism, and relentless, obstinate determination.<sup>395</sup>

On 3 September, when the Division was having a rare period in reserve, Freyberg decided to make one of his regular visits to 8<sup>th</sup> Army HQ and having taken seven-and-a-half hours by road on 29 August he decided to fly in a two-man Auster. Thornton flew with him, but in a separate plane. High winds made landing difficult and Freyberg was injured by a strut that broke through the side of the plane and into his abdomen. He was hospitalised in No.1 NZ General Hospital in Senigallia. He was operated on and was likely to be out of action for six to eight weeks. This resulted in one of the more unseemly scrambles to replace him and finally brought the issue of Inglis to the forefront. Inglis, and Parkinson, survived among those who had most recently led the Division and each considered themselves the likely appointment. Freyberg did not help the situation by vacillating over the decision, not wanting to offend those who missed out. White recalled that both Inglis and Parkinson had

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<sup>394</sup> Ibid

<sup>395</sup> Ibid, p.3

stormed past him at the hospital one evening each putting their own case to Freyberg. Inglis then wrote to Freyberg to state why he should be considered and that he was ‘a lap or two’ ahead of Parkinson in rank and seniority while Steve Weir, ‘an excellent fellow’ had no experience of command of the Division or of anything other than artillery. In his letter Inglis said his non-appointment would be a reflection of no-confidence in him and he would ask to be released.<sup>396</sup> But Leese had hounded Lieutenant Colonel Leonard Thornton, who was GSO 1 at the time, to suggest Weir as the obvious replacement before Leese visited Freyberg and made the recommendation himself.<sup>397</sup> Freyberg finally contacted the Government recommending Weir which was accepted. White said, “Parkinson and Inglis had not had great success and I think General Freyberg was disappointed in Parkinson because of wanting him to get on and push in Cassino.”<sup>398</sup> Inglis had almost destroyed the Division at Ruweisat and El Mreir and his policy of removing himself from the picture to leave his battalion officers to command during battles also had its effect, making the decision to appoint Weir all the more understandable.<sup>399</sup>

As a result of the decision, Freyberg agreed to send Inglis home ‘for a rest’. However, Inglis began criticising Freyberg in New Zealand. “He preached a doctrine of the inability of the NZ Division to plan...to win the Battle of Cassino.”<sup>400</sup> Weir showed the required generalship and after Freyberg returned to command, Weir was given command of the British 46 Infantry Division in the 8<sup>th</sup> Army from 4 November, 1944 until war’s end – only the second New Zealander to command a British division in war.

White was starting to think of home. He had looked to opportunities in England after the war, and even made contact with Sir Stafford Cripps enquiring what legal opportunities might be available. But his experiences with the English (see Chapter Four) during the war made New Zealand a more enticing prospect.

It [England] has no appeal to try and make a place for myself there. I cannot accept their way of life and would always be fighting for change. There are

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<sup>396</sup> Pugsley, quoting Inglis letter to Freyberg in *A Bloody Road Home*, 5 September 1944, ATL, MS Papers – 0421-67

<sup>397</sup> Lieutenant General Sir Leonard Thornton, *Marking Time*, Unpublished, Sir John White Papers, White Family, p.115

<sup>398</sup> White, NAM, Tape 3, Side 2.

<sup>399</sup> Ibid

<sup>400</sup> Ibid

Englishmen I like a lot but they can be very annoying to those who are not of them. I despise their slowness and the huge amount of dead wood inefficiency which seems to be heaped on their organisations. I know we are not a nation of paragons but at least I am a NZer. In London, I would be forced to ‘do as Rome does’ – in New Zealand that would not be so.<sup>401</sup>

White said he and his wife felt they could be useful members of the community and be happy in New Zealand. It was their nation, he said, and ‘probably our generation will cease to call Britain ‘home’.<sup>402</sup> White’s war ended in February 1945, the result of plans made at the end of 1944 to discharge long-serving personnel. White had married Dora Wild at the end of 1943 in the church at Maadi just before the Division went to Italy. They returned to New Zealand together. Having trained as a schoolteacher Dora had switched to nursing after the war broke out and went to Egypt. Her hospital moved to Italy later in the war. They learned that Dora was pregnant when they reached Wellington. Freyberg acknowledged White’s service in a letter and said he had given ‘five years of most devoted service’ White had been a ‘very great comfort and help’ during what had often been anxious times.

At times the load was very heavy, you have kept the show going in a way that was truly admirable. Speaking from my own point of view, I shall miss you for a long time. It seems hard for me to understand that you are not in the lean-to at the side of my caravan.<sup>403</sup>

Freyberg said White was entitled to feel ‘justifiable pride’ at the way he had carried him through the difficult years. He said it was extraordinary the amount the human body and mind could stand. So much had happened during the war years that there had been little room for anything else and Freyberg said he found his memory growing dim of peacetime events before the war.<sup>404</sup>

The end here is in sight. In the next few months we shall have the satisfaction of seeing the worst men in the world done down. I trust nobody will want

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<sup>401</sup> White, Letter, 30 August 1944, Sir John White Papers, WFC, p.3

<sup>402</sup> Ibid

<sup>403</sup> Ibid

<sup>404</sup> Ibid

otherwise. We must then concentrate on doing all we can to get the ex-servicemen placed in life.<sup>405</sup>

That message was borne out during the remainder of White's life in which his service saw him serve as a vice president of the NZ Returned Servicemen's Association and take an active role in the welfare of servicemen. That was not unusual at that time and the contribution that John White, who would go on to a distinguished career in law becoming Solicitor General and then a Supreme Court Judge, made was clear. A future Solicitor-General Sir John McGrath said,

For those of us in the next generation in the law, people like Sir John White were an example of the importance of public service as part of our philosophy in life. They showed us that you had a wider responsibility to the community beyond the interests of your clients and your legal firm. This is where life isn't quite the same now. The idea the professional serves the community was I think very much a feature of those in all the professions who were returned soldiers. Their military careers and experiences were complemented by the way they later contributed to the wider public interest in their chosen careers. They came back from the war where they had been through that terrible experience which, however, built the realisation that they could not responsibly lead selfish lives thereafter. Rather, they had to contribute more widely for the benefit of their country. Sir John White during the whole of his distinguished career epitomises this.<sup>406</sup>

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<sup>405</sup> Ibid

<sup>406</sup> Sir John McGrath, interview with Lynn McConnell, 10 August 2015

## CONCLUSION

Sir John White's voluminous personal papers, official documents and oral interviews offer a unique perspective of the New Zealand 2<sup>nd</sup> Division's involvement in the Second World War. White enjoyed an unparalleled level of access to the decision-making, implementation and consequences of all the significant aspects of New Zealand's war effort in the field. The Commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> NZ Division, General Freyberg, had a significant impact on White's life.

Three questions were posed for this thesis: what fresh perspective did Sir John White's writings lend to our understanding of New Zealand's war effort and the criticisms made of Freyberg; how much does White increase our understanding of the impact of General Freyberg on the leadership of the New Zealand Division; and how did White show that the war shaped attitudes towards Britain? The decision to diary the General's activities from the second year of the war meant on that basis alone White's contribution to understanding the mechanics of the war effort, the tactics and thinking, the characters and their failures and successes, was weighty. Dr Pugsley confirmed the significance of the GOC's Diary not only to the 2<sup>nd</sup> NZ Division's war, but in post-war study.<sup>407</sup> White's perception lends fresh understanding to both the war effort and Freyberg's contribution to it. As others in the 2<sup>nd</sup> NZ Division Headquarters structure have said, none got as close to Freyberg as they might have liked, but no-one got closer than White. Freyberg was wary, no doubt through experience in the First World War where he lost close friends, including the poet Rupert Brooke, of forming close social relationships. This distance was an important factor in potential criticism that White was too close to Freyberg. The General's comment after White's departure for home in 1945 that it was difficult to believe he was not 'within calling distance' demonstrated the type of partnership they enjoyed – professional yet appreciative.

Why then should White prove to be such an acute observer of Freyberg? White said he was not a soldier. His only military experience was the same as most of his generation in the secondary school Cadets system. He did have interest in history – something borne out in his schooling, and which he applied to his experiences in Europe before the outbreak of the Second World War. His writings, whether in formalised essays written up after the event from notes taken at the time, or in letters

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<sup>407</sup> Christopher Pugsley, interview with Lynn McConnell, 9 October, 2015

to family, reflect an everyman's view of warfare and of leadership – a view that captures events, the colour, the sounds, the damage that war can do - without the military jargon so abstruse to the non-military public. His descriptions of being under fire from fighter planes in Greece, of the advance of NZ Division to the Libyan border in 1941, of the bombardment starting the second Battle of Alamein and the bombing at Cassino are vivid, yet readable by non-military readers. He provides pictures of events many soldiers preferred not to relate to family and friends because they did not think those people would comprehend. Testament to White's astute observational abilities, and his capacity for impartiality and objectivity, was his postwar career. His appointment as Solicitor-General of New Zealand in 1965 preceded his taking a place as a Supreme Court Judge in 1970. For 39 years after the war he served as Judge Advocate General for the Army. He was also Judge Advocate of the Fleet and the Air Force before the three positions were coalesced into Judge Advocate General of the Armed Forces. Aspects of his legal career could not be presented within the word limits of this thesis.

White's descriptions, observations and lucid defences of Freyberg are useful in addressing revisionist works critical of Freyberg's leadership. Considering the criticisms of him it was interesting that Kippenberger held the view, while on active service, that, 'in the army you have to take what comes, and move on.' His biographer Denis McLean said Kippenberger believed that in war emotions became callused over. "Similarly, recriminations and regrets about what might have been must be left to the historians – whose ranks Kip himself would eventually join."<sup>408</sup> Retrospection on Kippenberger's part often resulted in changed feelings and some criticism of events during the war that make White's more observation-based assessments a useful balance in reaching historical understanding. White's comments on New Zealand officers, Brigadiers Hargest and Inglis, are relevant in the still controversial Crete campaign and beyond. White highlighted the depth of ill-feeling created as well as the sometimes one-sided application of opponents' comments, against Freyberg's methods. Hargest's attempt to deflect criticism from his own shortcomings on Crete, most notably the failure to counter-attack at Maleme, was destroyed by White when he claimed Hargest may have been 'deranged' by what was happening during the Battle for Crete. The Inglis situation is interesting after his comments to Churchill on

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<sup>408</sup> Denis McLean, Howard Kippenberger *Dauntless Spirit*, Random House, Auckland, 2008, p.211

the Battle for Crete and then his own involvement in leading the Division in Freyberg's absence following his injury at Minqar Qaim and through the battles at El Mreir and Alam Halfa. Inglis' method was less involved than Freyberg's. His reaction when overlooked for command of the Division in Italy revealed he had learned little from the experience.

Freyberg's leadership was characterised by his belief that he needed to be on the spot to aid decision-making at vital times in battles. This was evident several times throughout White's work. So often the New Zealand Division was left exposed due to decisions made by others far removed from the action and for which the experience and understanding of Freyberg was more than once responsible for ensuring the Division remained intact and able to contribute to the war effort rather than spending years behind wire in Prisoner of War Camps. His regard for his men in Greece and Crete proved superior to the commanders of other nations. Twice he was ordered to evacuate by aircraft, but in both instances remained with his men. In marked contrast, General Henry Maitland 'Jumbo' Wilson, the Commander-in-Chief, and General Blamey (the Australian) both flew out. Freyberg was the last man off Greece. ADC Jack Griffiths also highlighted to White the impact among soldiers when seeing Freyberg close to the front lines.

In regard to the question of the impact of the Second World War on New Zealand attitudes towards Britain, White cites new examples of frustration with the British command structure and officer class system to the point where it demonstrated the fraying of the bonds of Empire. Initially, it was the British failure to comprehend the thrust of Freyberg's Charter and the right to self-determination in how New Zealand's forces would be deployed. Latterly, it was the failure of leadership both at Middle East High Command level and in Divisional structures, when decisions relating to armoured support for New Zealand actions were promised but not delivered, that contributed to frustrations. Personal feelings engendered as a result of these acts impacted on White deciding not to pursue a legal career in Britain post-war believing he would be better served helping his countrymen. His observation that New Zealanders would soon stop referring to Britain as 'Home' was prescient. It was a view backed by Kippenberger who said, "I believe that the one effect of this war, and the greatest effect, will be that we will graduate along the stages of colony and

dominion to that of nation as a result of our experiences and common sacrifice in this war.’<sup>409</sup>

White’s appreciation of key aspects of the war was evident in his retention of Freyberg’s address to the 4<sup>th</sup> NZ Armoured Brigade on 27 January, 1944<sup>410</sup> regarding the philosophy of the New Zealand Division’s method, in North Africa – a philosophy completely Freyberg’s own work and which proved so effective after Alamein. This vital summation of the Division appears to have eluded other historians. With this in mind it is frustrating that the file White developed on the Alamein campaign is retained, wrongly, in the Freyberg personal files having been mistakenly taken to England when Freyberg’s term as Governor-General ended in 1952. What further information may still not be accessible to historians can only be wondered.

It is doubtful a better personal collection of war documents exists in New Zealand than those White amassed. He was ideally placed to collect relevant information and free to make his observations of the highest levels of command. Apart from the comings and goings of key characters in the respective theatres of war recorded in The GOC’s Diary, he contributed to the writing, editing and production of vital campaign reports, messages, documents and letters to the Government and other high-ranked officials among the Allies. That work gave White unprecedented knowledge of Freyberg’s thinking and decision-making.

The full story about Crete can only be open to conjecture. Much of the early criticism of Freyberg on Crete was made before details of Ultra were released. Its existence was significant historically. Although, until all the information is accessible, including the document Paul Freyberg highlighted from Middle East HQ, finality on whether Freyberg was prevented from altering the positioning of forces around Maleme remains unproven.

White’s everyman descriptions of Greece and Crete, the campaigns of North Africa and of Italy, including Cassino, supplement the command profile to provide an, until now, unrecognised contribution to New Zealand’s war literature. His compilation of historic material is a reminder that there is still much to be understood about the forces at play in the 2<sup>nd</sup> NZ Division but there can be no doubting that John White, amateur soldier and amateur archivist, was a unique witness to history.

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<sup>409</sup> General Howard Kippenberger, quoted by Denis McLean in, *Howard Kippenberger Dauntless Spirit*, Random House, Auckland, 2008, p.252

<sup>410</sup> General Bernard Freyberg, Address to Officers and NCOs of 4 NZ Armoured Brigade, 27 June, 1944, Sir John White Papers, Kippenberger Research Library, NAM, Waiouru

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