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# **The New Zealand Railway Group**

**Their Contribution in the North  
African Campaign, 1940-1943.**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the degree  
of Master of Arts in History at Massey University.**

**Brendon Charles Judd**

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## Abbreviations

AFV - Armoured Fighting Vehicles.

AIF - Australian Imperial Force.

EFCA - Enginedrivers, Firemen and Cleaners Association.

ESR - Egyptian State Railways.

GHQ - General Headquarters.

GOC - General Officer Commanding.

LoC - Lines of Communication.

Lt.-Col. - Lieutenant Colonel.

ME - Middle East.

NZPD - New Zealand Parliamentary Debates.

2NZEF - Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force.

POL - Petrol, Oil and Lubrication.

RAF - Royal Air Force.

RMT - Reserve Mechanical Transport.

WAI - War Archives, Series Two.

WD - War Department.

## Introduction

This thesis examines the role of the New Zealand Railway Group and its associated problems during the North African Desert Campaign (1940-1943). It also assesses the Group's contribution to the defeat of the Axis forces in this theatre of the war and why it disbanded and returned to New Zealand in 1943.

The specialist Railway Group was formed at the behest of the British Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, Anthony Eden, on 19 November 1939<sup>1</sup>, following New Zealand's offer of assistance to Britain after the declaration of war against Nazi Germany. Britain requested New Zealand to form the following railway companies: one Headquarters Maintenance and Construction Group, one Railway Survey company and four Railway Construction companies, all of which were to be attached to the Royal Engineers<sup>2</sup>. The New Zealand Government responded positively, but only promised one construction company, and not four as asked. However, New Zealand eventually provided seven railway companies. The first three were 9 Railway Survey Company, comprised of seven officers and 66 other ranks; 10 and 13 Railway Construction and Maintenance Company, comprised of six officers and 273 other ranks respectively; and Headquarters, Railway Construction and Maintenance Group, comprised of three officers and 22 other ranks. These three companies were later joined by 16 and 17 Railway Operating Companies, comprised of seven officers and 355 other ranks respectively; and Headquarters Company, Railway Operating Group, comprised of four officers and 24 other ranks. The Railway Group's complement was 40 officers and 1,368 other ranks; 1,408 men in all.

Initially the Railway Group seemed destined for service in France. It duly arrived in Gourock, Scotland on 16 June 1940, and travelled

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from The Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs to the Governor-General of New Zealand, *Documents, Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War 1939-45, Volume I*, Wellington: War History Branch, 1949, p.212.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

on to Longmoor, England, for further training. The Railway Group's future had become uncertain due to the invasion of France in May 1940. However, as Italy became increasingly belligerent, Britain's interests in North Africa and the Middle East seemed threatened and the Railway Group sailed to Egypt. After the successful conclusion of the Middle East/North African campaign in May 1943, the Railway Group disbanded and returned to New Zealand.

Being classified as 'Non-Divisional' meant that, despite being a military formation comprised solely of New Zealand personnel with army ranks, the men were engaged in their civilian occupations, albeit in a war situation. The Railway Group was not directly under the jurisdiction of Headquarters, Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force (2NZEF). By arrangement between respective Headquarters, the railway companies came under the control of the Director General of Transportation, Middle East, a British establishment. This excluded 2NZEF's senior staff from having any real say in how the Railway Companies were utilised. While this system of 'general utilisation' did not give British authorities total *carte blanche* to use New Zealand troops as they saw fit, it did tend to isolate them from the main body of New Zealand troops in the Middle East.

This command structure resulted in the New Zealand fighting men not always being aware of the presence of their fellow countrymen in the Railway Companies. Troops were often surprised to find themselves being transported on Egyptian trains hauled by New Zealand-crewed locomotives, and being hailed by distinct 'Kiwi' accents while stopped at isolated railway stations in the Western Desert. Similarly, while fighting battalions were receiving wide, if censored, news coverage, railwaymen were often overlooked in the general war reports.

There has been very little written about the Railway Group as a corporate body. J.F. Cody's book '*New Zealand Engineers, Middle East*' discusses in a cursory fashion the Railway Group and its wartime tasks. There is no single official historical publication devoted solely to the Railway Group. This is possibly due to the unit's premature disbandment in 1943, with much of what they achieved being overshadowed by the fighting units.

The primary sources of information used throughout this thesis have been the various army unit diaries and relevant reports, combined with Railways Department files now held by National Archives. In addition, the official histories of the New Zealand Second Expeditionary Force have been examined for relevant data, as have general historical publications concerning New Zealand's involvement in the North African and Middle East Campaign. Furthermore, former Railway Group personnel have been contacted and have supplied the author with their personal memoirs, diaries and observations of life in the various railway companies.

This thesis unfolds in a generally chronological fashion. It first examines why and how the Railway Group was formed, and who got recruited. It then assesses the contribution the railway made to the defeat of the Axis powers in this campaign. Following this, it analyses both the general and particular problems faced by the railway companies in carrying out their duties. It finally examines how the worsening domestic railway situation pressured the New Zealand government into disbanding the Railway Group and returning the skilled railwaymen home following the defeat of the Axis forces in May 1943.

The Railway Group was formed to assist British railway units in the European Theatre, but later transferred to the Middle East, where its contribution was very significant in supplying the British Eighth Army in North Africa. Without the use of the Western Desert Railway, it is likely that the campaign would have lasted longer than it did, due to the shortage of lorry transport. Rapid transit of war material ensured that the front line troops were always well equipped and supplied. The Railway Group achieved tremendous results despite the numerous problems presented in operating a railway in such a hostile environment. The Railway Group's reputation may have grown had it later served on the European mainland, but needs in New Zealand meant the Railway Group was disbanded and returned home just as its prestige was at its peak. Without doubt, the New Zealand Railway Group played an important role in the Allied success in the North African theatre of the war.