

**‘As a matter of fact I’ve just about had enough’;¹
Battle weariness and the 2nd New Zealand Division
during the Italian Campaign, 1943-45.**

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

of

Master of Arts

in

History

at

Massey University

New Zealand.

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2015

¹ Unknown private, 24 Battalion, 2nd New Zealand Division. Censorship summaries, DA 508/2 - DA 508/3, (ANZ), Censorship Report No 6/45, 4 Feb to 10 Feb 45, part 2, p.1.

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Abstract

By the time that the 2nd New Zealand Division reached Italy in late 1943, many of the soldiers within it had been overseas since early 1941. Most had fought across North Africa during 1942/43 – some had even seen combat earlier, in Greece and Crete in 1941. The strain of combat was beginning to show, a fact recognised by the division's commanding officer, Lieutenant-General Bernard Freyberg. Freyberg used the term 'battle weary' to describe both the division and the men within it on a number of occasions throughout 1944, suggesting at one stage the New Zealanders be withdrawn from operations completely.

This study examines key factors that drove battle weariness within the division: issues around manpower, the operational difficulties faced by the division in Italy, the skill and tenacity of their German opponent, and the realities of modern combat. Critical to understanding the links between these factors and the weariness that manifested itself within the division are the words of the participating soldiers themselves.

Three key outcomes of battle weariness are examined in some detail. Exposure to long periods of combat meant that a large number of the New Zealanders were at risk of becoming psychological casualties. Indeed, casualties diagnosed and recorded as exhaustion and neurosis, consistently reached over 20% of those wounded during the period in Italy. Declining morale became an issue for the leadership of 2nd New Zealand Division. Internal censorship of outgoing letters within the division was summarised at the time and these summaries provide an insight into a widespread gloomy outlook that featured throughout 1944. Not only did the letter writers reflect on the poor conditions they faced in Italy, but news from home appears as a significant driver of frontline morale. Lack of discipline – both in and out of the line – caused real concern to senior officers, and at times reached levels that appear to have become institutionalised. Three topics are explored: looting, the use of alcohol, and cases of combat refusal.

This work then examines how the underlying issues driving weariness were addressed through the restructuring of the division, the replacement of long serving men, the use of new technologies, and a period of relief out of the line with an extensive training programme. Finally, the division's performance during the final offensive in Italy in April 1945, is examined, to gauge the success of the changes made.

Dedication

To those New Zealanders, especially the ‘Poor Bloody Infantry’, who served in Italy during the campaign of 1943-1945 – the unsung, the unknown, the lost, and the forgotten.

They marched along the roadside, ten to fifteen yards apart, moving swiftly. Each man carried his pack, with the white enamel mug tied under the strap and a shovel on top. The gear caught your eye more than the man himself. Some carried, some wore their steel helmets. Their rifles or Tommy-guns were slung over their shoulders.... Here a man carried a stretcher; there the red cross of a first-aid haversack showed up against the khaki; yet another man held the barrel of a heavy machine-gun over his shoulder like a log. Behind him strode a corporal with mortar ammunition, carrying the holder with its three containers in his hand like a suitcase, grotesquely, for all the world as if he were a week-ender hurrying to the train on Saturday afternoon.

Their faces had the set, silent, apart, almost hypnotised appearance of men about to go into battle. Already these men moved in another world, in the world of absorption in the fight and in personal survival which started just over the river, ahead there in the mist where the flat, crunching bursts of incoming mortar shells sounded clearly. It was a world from which we in the jeeps and the passing trucks were separated by no great distance on the ground, but by an immensity in life.... They were not individuals in the ordinary civilian sense, but soldiers caught up in a something as wide and unchecked as an ocean wave. Yet amidst this each remained, at this moment, alone in himself. No one else now could carry the burden of responsibility which rested on his shoulders like these weapons, this impedimenta, the dual responsibility for doing his task and if possible preserving his own life.¹



(Alexander Turnbull Library: DA-07825-F)

¹ Geoffrey Cox, *The Race for Trieste*, London: William Kimber, 1977, pp.106-107.

Acknowledgements

I have been privileged to have as my supervisors for this thesis academics of the calibre of Glyn Harper, Professor of War Studies, Massey University, and Dr Adam Classen, senior lecturer at Massey University's Albany campus. Both have brought subject knowledge and academic rigor to this project; both have kept me on my toes. Professor Harper's knowledge of the 2nd New Zealand Division, its actions and its personalities, and of the Italian campaign itself, have been invaluable.

Staff at the various New Zealand and overseas archives that I have used during my research for this work have, without exception, been professional, helpful, and interested. In particular I acknowledge the Alexander Turnbull Library, Archives New Zealand, and the Auckland War Memorial Museum Library staff.

I am grateful to have received assistance in the form of the Max Chapple Memorial Scholarship, in both 2014 and 2015.

To my family – Lynda, Jordan, Josh – sincere thanks for your support, encouragement, and tolerance during the last two years as the Italian campaign has been refought on the dining table, couches, corners, and bookshelves of our home.

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Glossary

B Echelon	Generally part of a unit left out of battle to rest soldiers, or to form a cadre for reformation if losses were high. The term could also be used to refer to rear areas.
Bivy	Temporary shelter; could be used for hours or weeks. Bivys used for longer periods could utilise building materials scavenger from the local area.
Bofor	Allied light anti-aircraft gun.
Bren	Allied – typically British or Commonwealth – light machine gun. Normally one Bren gun per section (8-10 men).
Bren Gun Carrier	Also, Universal Carrier. Small, lightly armoured, multipurpose tracked vehicle.
Bully	Bully Beef - tinned meat, corned beef.
Cabrank	Codename for close air support.
<i>Casa</i>	Italian for house, used by New Zealand soldiers, especially farmhouses.
Clefti / Clifti	Slang based on an Egyptian word; to steal.
Combat day	A day on which an infantry company, or similar operational unit, suffers a casualty as a result of enemy action.
Cooler	Detention.
Cordite	Propellant used for artillery shells.
Dear John letter	A letter from girlfriend, fiancée, or wife, ending a relationship.
Field Ambulance	A medical unit, part of the casualty handling chain.
Fritz	Slang. German.
Furlough draft	Large selection of longer serving troops who were to be returned back to New Zealand on leave.
Gun tractor/tractor	Vehicle used to tow an artillery piece.
Itie, Ity	Slang. Italian.
Jake	Slang. OK – ‘you’ll be jake’.

Jeep post	Collection point for casualties immediately behind the frontline.
Jerry	Slang. German.
Kapok bridge	Pedestrian bridge consisting of a walkway supported on Kapok filled floats. Kapok fibre was found within the seed pods of the tropical Kapok tree and was very buoyant.
<i>Landser</i>	German slang, soldier.
Luger	German pistol. Prized as loot.
Marg.	Margarine.
Munga	Slang, from an Egyptian word for food. Typically breakfast in New Zealand usage.
<i>Nebelwerfer</i>	German multi barrelled rocket launcher.
Neuropsychiatric Casualty	Abbreviated to NP. Wounding of a person's mental wellbeing through exposure to stress. In Second World War described as nervous exhaustion, previously Shell Shock (World War One), now termed Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. 'a condition which can develop following exposure to an extremely stressful situation or series of events outside the usual range of human experience, which may manifest itself in recurrent nightmares or intrusive vivid memories and flashbacks of the traumatic event, and in withdrawal, sleep disturbance, and other symptoms associated with prolonged stress or anxiety.' ² Monthly reports regarding 2 NZEF casualties and sickness, categorise these types of casualties under a heading of 'Nervous' as either 'Anxiety Neurosis', 'Mental', or 'Nervous and Physical exhaustion'. ³
NZEF Times	Locally produced newspaper.
One Pipper	Slang, second Lieutenant. From the single rank pip on the shoulder.
<i>Panzerarmee</i>	German mechanised armoured force in North Africa. Contained both German and Italian units.
<i>Piquet</i>	A group of sentries.
Pongo	Slang, British soldier, typically not an officer.

² Definition of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder; from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, www.oed.com.

³ See, Reports to Director General Medical Services - Jan 1940 - Dec 1945, WAI4/1/1 – 7/7. Particularly those 1943-1945.

Priest Kangaroo	Armoured infantry carrier based on a Priest self-propelled gun carriage with gun and associated equipment removed.
Provost	Military police.
Sortie	One distinct mission flown by one plane.
Stonk	Slang, artillery or mortar bombardment.
<i>Tedeschi</i>	Italian for German (pl.). Shortened to ‘Ted’ by New Zealand soldiers.
the ras	The raspberry. Poking good natured fun at someone.
Tommy, Tommie	Slang, British soldier.
Tote	A board displaying betting odds.
Tracer	Ammunition containing a pyrotechnic charge. The charge ignites once the round is fired making the flight of the bullet visible to the naked eye.
Turf club	A play on words – the new member of the ‘turf club’ had been turfed (thrown) out of a relationship with a woman. Normally a turf club was a club involved in horse racing.
<i>Wadi</i>	Arabic term for valley. Adopted by New Zealand troops in North Africa and used in Italy.
War establishment	Government approved structure and manning levels of division and units.
<i>Wehrmacht</i>	German armed forces.
White tape	Used by mine clearing units to denote cleared paths through mined areas.

Abbreviations

3.7	3.7 inch calibre artillery gun.
25 pdr	25 pounder artillery gun.
155	155mm artillery gun.
A4, E5	Designation for artillery gun crews.
AA	Anti-aircraft.

ADS	Advanced dressing station.
ARC, Ark	Armoured Ramp Carrier.
AVRE	Armoured Vehicle Royal Engineers.
AWOL	Absent without leave.
Batt., Bn	Battalion. Four rifle companies plus headquarters and support make up a battalion.
Bde	Brigade. Three battalions comprise a brigade.
Brig.	Brigadier.
Capt.	Captain.
CO	Commanding Officer.
Coy	Company. Four platoons and headquarters make up a company.
Cpl	Corporal.
ENT	Ear, Nose, and Throat. Medical category for sickness.
FDL	Forward Defence Lines.
GOC	General Officer Commanding.
KO	Knock Out.
MG	Machine Gun.
MTO	Mediterranean Theatre of Operations.
NAAFI	Navy, Army, Air Force Institutes. Civilian based canteens that provided basic goods to the armed forces.
NCO	Non Commissioned Officer.
NP	Neuropsychiatric.
NYD	Not Yet Diagnosed. Medical sickness category.
NZGH	New Zealand General Hospital.
OC	Officer Commanding.
PaK	<i>Panzerabwehrkanone</i> – anti-tank gun.
PIAT	Projector Infantry Anti-Tank. A one-man anti-tank weapon.
POW	Prisoner of war.

RAP	Regimental Aid Post. Generally attached to battalions, RAPs provided triage and basic treatment for casualties.
Reinf.	Reinforcements.
RPM	Rounds per minute.
SA	South African.
VD	Venereal Disease

Institutional Abbreviations

ANZ	Archives New Zealand
ATL	Alexander Turnbull Library
AWMM	Auckland War Memorial Museum
TNA	The National Archives (UK)

Operational Codenames

<i>Buckland</i>	British Eighth Army offensive in Northern Italy, April 1945.
<i>Crusader</i>	British/Commonwealth operation in eastern Libya 18 November – 30 December 1941.
<i>Dragoon</i>	Allied invasion of southern France, 15 August 1944.
<i>Diadem</i>	Allied attack against the <i>Gustav</i> Line, May 1944.
<i>Dickens</i>	The New Zealand Corps attack in March 1944, against German positions in the town of Cassino, and the Monte Cassino monastery.
<i>Epsom</i>	British tactical offensive during the Normandy campaign, 26-30 June 1944.
<i>Ulysses</i>	A 2 nd New Zealand Division tactical operation near Orsogna, 24 December 1943.

Organisational Nomenclature

The Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force (2 NZEF) was the title given to the force that went overseas from New Zealand during the Second World War. The force contained four elements: the 2nd New Zealand Division (the combat element), non-divisional units – typically engineering such as forestry and railway management, and line of communication units, such as hospitals and personnel clubs. The last section of 2 NZEF was the base units – administration, pay, personnel, records, training.⁴

The 2nd New Zealand Division was the fighting arm of the 2 NZEF. During the Italian campaign its manning levels were around 20,000, ending the war with an unusual structure of four infantry Brigades (one attached) and one armoured Regiment. I have used a number of terms for this unit – ‘2nd New Zealand Division’, which is the unit’s formal title, as well as the ‘New Zealand Division’ or simply ‘the division’, for example – to provide variety, avoid repetition, and to make the narrative more readable.⁵

Allied Armies in Italy

15th Army Group. Responsible for overseeing the campaign. Comprised of two component armies.

US 5th Army. Responsible for operations on the western flank of the advance up the Italian peninsula. The 2nd New Zealand Division, as well as the New Zealand Corps, was subordinate to the 5th Army during the Cassino battles.

British Eighth Army. Responsible for the eastern flank operations. 2nd New Zealand Division was part of the Eighth Army for operations at the end of 1943, then from mid-1944 through to the end of the war.

⁴ See, Ian McGibbon, (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Military History*, Auckland: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp.367-368. It should also be noted that 2 NZEF had a presence in the Pacific, the 3rd New Zealand Division with line of communication and base personnel.

⁵ Ian McGibbon, *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Military History*, p.148.

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