

**‘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.**

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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division and the men within it on a number of occasions throughout 1944, suggesting at one stage the New Zealanders be withdrawn from operations completely.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-end 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.

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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, WAII4/1/1 – 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 Line</i> , 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

15 th Army Group.	Responsible for overseeing the campaign. Comprised of two component armies.
US 5 th Army.	Responsible for operations on the western flank of the advance up the Italian peninsula. The 2 nd New Zealand Division, as well as the New Zealand Corps, was subordinate to the 5 th Army during the Cassino battles.
British Eighth Army.	Responsible for the eastern flank operations. 2 nd 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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Introduction

The apex of British supremacy was the victory of the Eighth Army in Africa. Later, their strength dwindled until in the Italian campaign some units wouldn't fight.... They had simply lost all their fight. We didn't blame them a bit, because they were completely exhausted and under strength.

General George C. Marshall, US Army
Chief of Staff.¹

... the more I go into details the more certain I become that we shall have to replace at an early date all officers and other ranks who have taken part in the fighting up to and including the Battle of Alamein. Battle-weariness is by no means confined to junior ranks. We must consider up to lieutenant-colonels.

Lieutenant-General Bernard Freyberg,
GOC 2nd New Zealand Division.²

As part of the Eighth Army campaigns in North Africa during 1942 and 1943, the 2nd New Zealand Division fought with distinction in a number of critical actions. Recalled with urgency from Syria in June 1942, the division was instrumental in halting the German offensive that threatened the collapse of the British hold on the Middle East. At El Alamein in early November, the New Zealanders formed a spearhead in the attack that broke into the Axis defensive line, and then regrouped to participate in the breakout, beginning the advance to Tunisia. Once in Tripolitania, the mobility and aggressiveness of the New Zealand Division was used to turn strong positions in a series of signature 'left hooks'. The division then produced a number of tactical victories, notably at Takrouna, Tunisia, before the surrender of the German and Italian forces at Enfidaville, and final victory in North Africa. Within six months, the New Zealand Division was in southern Italy, and by November 1943 was taking part in the Sangro River offensive on Italy's Adriatic coast.

¹ Quoted in Andrew Roberts, *Masters and Commanders: The Military Geniuses who led the West to Victory in World War II*, London: Penguin, 2009, p.291.

² Freyberg to the Minister of Defence, 8 October 1944, *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War 1939-45: Volume II*, Wellington: War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, 1951, p.366.

Lieutenant-General Bernard Freyberg, as the division's commander, was positive about the New Zealander's battle-worthiness following the campaign in Tunisia. 'We have been fighting continuously for almost a year' he wrote at the time,

battle after battle, with little respite, on hard rations and short of supplies of indifferent water. The endurance and courage of all ranks under my command under conditions of great discomfort and peril have been beyond praise and their resource, good humour, and wisdom have made them ideal material for a fast moving, hard-hitting force such as ours.³

However, by the middle of 1944 the Division was in Italy, and after it participated in fierce battles on the Sangro and at Cassino, there was concern surrounding the weariness of the division, and the looming issues surrounding manpower replacement. In June 1944, Freyberg wrote that 'the inevitable effect of fierce fighting over a long period... is becoming apparent' and that 'signs are not lacking now that many of the old hands require a prolonged rest.'⁴ It is at this time that Freyberg suggested, in a letter to the New Zealand Prime Minister Peter Fraser, that 'I have come to the conclusion that the time may well be opportune for the complete withdrawal of the 2nd NZEF.'⁵

A number of prominent historians since the Second World War have also written that, during the first part of the Italian campaign and through to the end of 1944, the New Zealand Division was indeed facing a crisis. Christopher Pugsley describes the division at the start of 1944 – even before the Cassino battles – as emerging from a 'winter of discontent... combat weary and with low morale'.⁶ Matthew Wright suggests that the months of hard fighting around Cassino were 'the last blow for a division still well leavened with long serving and battle-weary men'.⁷ Wright continues, saying that the New Zealand Division after Cassino was 'under-strength and the men were physically and spiritually exhausted'.⁸ In his book exploring the New Zealand soldier during the Second World War, historian John McLeod argues that, 'in Italy, the New Zealander's discipline out of the line fell away, paralleling the decline in their morale and battle discipline.... It was a state of affairs that the New Zealand officers seemed

³ Freyberg to the Prime Minister, 27 May 1943, *Documents*, Vol. II, p.181.

⁴ Freyberg to the Prime Minister, 9 June 1944, *Documents*, Vol. II, pp.348-349.

⁵ Freyberg to the Prime Minister, 9 June 1944, *Documents*, Vol. II, p.349.

⁶ Christopher Pugsley, 'The Second New Zealand Division: A Comparison with its 1918 Predecessor', in, *Kia Kaha: New Zealand in the Second World War*, ed. John Crawford, South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2002, p.94.

⁷ Matthew Wright, *Freyberg's War; The Man, the Legend and Reality*, Auckland: Penguin Books, 2005, p.203.

⁸ Matthew Wright, *Freyberg's War*, p.204.

powerless to stop.⁹ Nothing during 1944 altered the ongoing issues within the division, in fact fighting continued to be as difficult and as hard as ever, with periods of fierce fighting before Florence and a difficult campaign from Rimini to Faenza at the end of the year. Pugsley suggests that by the end of 1944 the division was listless, war-tired, wracked by growing discontent, and facing ‘a manpower situation that was parlous at the very least.’¹⁰ In addition, McLeod argues that the division’s lack of battle worthiness – its battle weariness – drove a decline in discipline within it, and that ‘this decline in discipline led to a deterioration in the men’s effectiveness as soldiers.’¹¹ This suggests that by mid-1944 the New Zealand Division was locked into a downward spiral, where both diminishing efficiency and discipline acted negatively on each other.

So, what occurred in the months between the conclusion of the successful campaign in Africa in May 1943, and the middle of the following year when the divisional commander advocated withdrawal of a weary division?

This study will take the position that Freyberg was correct and that there were significant issues with battle weariness and discipline within the division during the Italian campaign. In doing so it will address three questions. First, what factors caused battle weariness within the 2nd New Zealand Division? Second, how did battle weariness manifest itself within the division? Finally, through examination of the final major battle in which the New Zealand Division participated in – the advance to the Po River during April 1945 – the concluding section will answer a third question; what solutions were used to address the division’s problems, and how successful were they?

This thesis will focus on the 2nd New Zealand Division during the Italian campaign. The research for it will build on, be complementary to, and will draw from, studies of the New Zealand soldier in World War II. It will utilise evidence from official documents, and will draw widely on the ever expanding body of available personal accounts to buttress the case that there were issues within 2nd New Zealand Division throughout the campaigning in Italy.

The first section of this research will investigate the key concept of battle weariness. It will look at the operations in which the division was engaged in following its entry onto the Italian mainland and through to the end of 1944. It will suggest that there were a number of influences that threatened the core abilities of the division as a fighting entity. These influences

⁹ John McLeod, *Myth and Reality: The New Zealand Soldier in World War II*, Auckland: Reed Methuen, 1986, p.132.

¹⁰ Pugsley, ‘The Second New Zealand Division’, pp.94 & 97.

¹¹ McLeod, p.136.

include factors such as terrain and weather, and the qualities, abilities and tactics of their German opponent. Each will be explored and will lead on to a study of how the campaign was fought at the frontline – with a focus on the New Zealand soldier’s experiences of combat. The narratives of the soldiers themselves that are presented in some depth are important for understanding not only the impact of combat but also to reveal combat’s concentrated extent across time and space, as well as its emotional intensity. The organisational battle worthiness of the division will also be woven into the narrative, through examination of areas such as the manpower issue, the impact of strategy and leadership, propaganda, and losses through medical casualties. The position that will then be taken is that during 1944 the influences discussed were of such a nature that they had worked to erode the quality of 2nd New Zealand Division, and had reduced it to a formation that was in danger of being withdrawn from operations entirely.

The second part of this exercise will look specifically at key outcomes of battle weariness, exploring several issues that faced the division: mounting casualties, the psychological impact of combat, and declining morale and discipline. The examination of the theory surrounding these subjects will be superficial, as an in-depth study is outside both the scope and the capacity of this work. This examination will be both analytical and anecdotal, with official records and the personal accounts of the men themselves being key to this process. These accounts from the soldiers themselves will form a framework of thematic narrative that will both support the official material, and give a human face to the problems that confronted the division.

Lastly, part three will identify how the battle weariness issues within the division were addressed prior to the final battles in Italy during the spring of 1945. Strands that will be explored include training, organisation, and weapons. Key to solving the issues facing the New Zealanders were the solutions developed to counter the manpower issues that had become critical during 1944; specifically, the replacement scheme, and the restructuring of the division. Finally, the success of these measures will be examined as the division participates in the final offensive of the Italian campaign.

The historiography dealing with the operations of the 2nd New Zealand Division is both rich and varied, and includes a number of official histories; modern and contemporary accounts of campaigns, battles, units and events; biography and memoirs from all rank levels; and higher level works that place the Italian battles and campaigns into a broader context.

The relevant official histories fall into several categories. The first being a number of campaign histories, of which the most important are the two that deal with Italy. These are *The*

Sangro to Cassino written by Neville Phillips, and Robin Kay's work – *From Cassino to Trieste*.¹² Unit histories, of which there are twenty, will also allow a drilling down into small scale actions and activities, and will also provide information on unit casualties. Several other volumes within the series provide important evidence. *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War 1939–45: Volume II*, is a collection of correspondence relating to 2 NZEF's operations in the Mediterranean theatre during 1943–45; importantly it contains many items relating to issues in Italy, especially Freyberg's concerns about manpower.¹³ The other volume that is useful is *Problems of 2 NZEF*.¹⁴ This is the second official history volume written by Major-General William Stevens, and covers in some detail the manpower issue as well as misdemeanours within the force.¹⁵

Published accounts of the campaign, and of the actions that formed it, include, Christopher Pugsley's recent study of the division during the Second World War, *A Bloody Road Home: World War Two and New Zealand's Heroic Second Division*, Jeffrey Plowman's publication, *Orsogna*, which details the division's first battles of their Italian campaign; *To the Gates of Florence*, edited by Stefano Fusi, examines the New Zealander's passage through Tuscany during the autumn of 1944; and *Rampant Dragons*, which covers the New Zealand's Armoured Regiment's contribution to the campaign.¹⁶ Innovations and solutions that were put in place towards the end of the Italian campaign, and the impact that these had on the battle worthiness of the division will be supported by accounts such as Geoffrey Cox's book, *The Road to Trieste, One More River*, written by Gordon Slatter, and John Tonkin-Covell's essay, 'The Salamander's Last Offensive'.¹⁷ The now numerous written memoirs of other New Zealand veterans, published and unpublished, are equally important. Additionally, the Cassino battles, possibly the key event in the division's time in Italy, have had a steady succession of

¹² N.C. Phillips, *Italy Volume I: The Sangro to Cassino*, Wellington: War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, 1957; Robin Kay, *Italy Volume II: From Cassino to Trieste*, Wellington: War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, 1967.

¹³ *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War 1939–45: Volume II*, Wellington: War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, 1951.

¹⁴ W.G. Stevens, *Problems of 2 NZEF*, Wellington: War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, 1962.

¹⁵ Stevens was the Officer in Charge of Administration of HQ 2 NZEF, and then succeeded Freyberg as commander of 2 NZEF in late 1945.

¹⁶ Christopher Pugsley, *A Bloody Road Home: World War Two and New Zealand's Heroic Second Division*, Auckland: Penguin Books, 2014; Jeffrey Plowman, *Orsogna: New Zealand's First Italian Battle*, Christchurch: Wilsonscott Publishing, 2010; Stephano Fusi, (ed.), *To the Gateways of Florence: New Zealand Forces in Tuscany, 1944*, Auckland: Libro International, 2011; Jeffrey Plowman, *Rampant Dragons: New Zealanders in Armour in World War II*, Christchurch: Kiwi Armour, 2002.

¹⁷ Geoffrey Cox, *The Race for Trieste*, London: William Kimber, 1977; Gordon Slatter, *One More River: The Final Campaign of the Second New Zealand Division in Italy*, Auckland: David Ling Publishing, 1995; John Tonkin-Covell, 'The Salamander's Last Offensive', in, *Kia Kaha: New Zealand in the Second World War*, John Crawford, (ed.), South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2002.

books written about them since the war, for example, Majdalany 1957, Connell 1963, Smith 1975, Ellis 1984, Williams 2002, Parker 2004, and Harper and Tonkin-Covell 2013. Not only does this progression provide different perspectives, but also reflects changing attitudes and understandings, as well as availability of new source materials.¹⁸

It is also important to appreciate that the historiography of New Zealand's co-belligerents can also yield important evidence. These will include, for instance, accounts of forces fighting alongside the New Zealanders, US Army intelligence documents, and a raft of broad campaign publications such as *The War North of Rome* written by American veteran Thomas Brooks, Rick Atkinson's second volume in the Liberation Trilogy, *The Day of Battle*. Richard Doherty's series of books on the Eighth Army, and Bryn Evans biography of the East Surrey Regiment.¹⁹ German sources include memoirs of senior officers, as well as those written by frontline field veterans themselves.²⁰ Importantly too, a wide range of material will provide technical information that will provide a broad understanding of life and events during the campaign including subjects that include landmines, variants of the Sherman tank, German field fortifications, orders of battle, airpower, and mud.²¹

Of critical relevance are works that explore and link the impact of combat with the issues of discipline, morale, and battle weariness. These will assist with understanding what was occurring within 2nd New Zealand Division during the period in question. These would include works such as Richard Holmes' book *Acts of War*, Jonathan Fennell's recent work

¹⁸ Fred Majdalany, *Cassino: Portrait of a Battle*, London: Longmans Green & Co, 1957; Charles Connell, *Monte Cassino: The Historic Battle*, London: Elek Books, 1963; E.D. Smith, *The Battles for Cassino*, Newton Abbott, England: David & Charles, 1989; John Ellis, *Cassino, The Hollow Victory: The Battle for Rome, January-June 1944*, London: Andre Deutsch, 1984; Tony Williams, *Cassino: New Zealand Soldiers in the Battle for Italy*, Auckland: Penguin, 2002; Matthew Parker, *Monte Cassino: The Hardest Fought Battle of World War II*, New York: Doubleday, 2004; Glyn Harper, & John Tonkin Covell, *The Battles of Monte Cassino: The Campaign and its Controversies*, Auckland: Allen & Unwin, 2013.

¹⁹ Thomas R. Brooks, *The War North of Rome: June 1944-May 1945*, New York: Sarpedon, 1996; Rick Atkinson, *The Day of Battle: The War in Sicily and Italy, 1943-1944*, New York: Henry Holt, 2007; Richard Doherty, *The History of Eighth Army 1941 to 1945*, Staplehurst: Spellmount, 1999; Richard Doherty, *Eighth Army in Italy: The Long Hard Slog*, Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2007; Richard Doherty, *Victory in Italy: 15th Army Group's Final Campaign 1945*, Barnsley: Pen and Sword Military, 2014.

Evans, Bryn, *With the East Surreys in Tunisia, Sicily and Italy 1942-1943: Fighting for Every River and Mountain*, Barnsley: Pen and Sword Military, 2012. Also see: Ian Gooderson, *A Hard Way to Make a War: The Allied Campaign in Italy in the Second World War*, London: Conway, 2008; Dominick Graham, & Shelford Bidwell, *Tug of War: The Battle for Italy: 1943-45*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1986; Eric Morris, *Circles of Hell: The War in Italy 1943-45*, New York: Crown Publishers, 1993.

²⁰ German sources used include: Rudolf Bohmler, *Monte Cassino: A German View*, (trans.), London: Cassell, 1964; General Frido von Senger und Etterlin, *Neither Hope nor Fear: The Wartime Career of General Frido Von Senger und Etterlin Defender of Cassino*, (trans. George Malcolm), Novato, California: Presidio, 1989; Otto W. Renger, *My War Diary: July 1943 – April 1945, and as a POW in Italy & Egypt April 1945 – September 1948*, Sydney: self-published, 1996.

²¹ C.E. Wood, *Mud: A Military History*, Washington, D.C: Potomac Books, 2006.

investigating Eighth Army morale in North Africa, and also John Ellis' study of Second World War combat – *The Sharp End*.²² Christine Bielecki's 2012 thesis, exploring British infantry morale in Italy during the campaign, provides an excellent insight into the drivers of morale at the time.²³

Also important are books that record and assess the psychological experiences of frontline soldiers, and that are able to go some way to understanding the impact of those experiences. These include both edited collections, and analytical works. For example, Stephen Fritz's book, *Frontsoldaten*, which examines the experiences of German soldiers in combat during the Second World War through letters, diaries, and memoirs falls into the first category.²⁴ Several excellent texts are at the vanguard of the second category: Terry Copp and Bill McAndrew's, *Battle Exhaustion: Soldiers and Psychiatrists in the Canadian Army, 1939-1945*, is both enlightening and, given the similar role of the Canadians in Italy, extremely relevant, while *Fighting Spirit*, by F.M. Richardson draws together a number of pertinent threads.²⁵ From a New Zealand point of view, Alison Parr's book, *Silent Witnesses*, examines the psychological impact of war on a number of Kiwi veterans, and goes some way to helping understand behaviours that occurred within 2nd New Zealand Division in Italy.²⁶

The investigation into the outcomes of battle weariness which forms the second section of this thesis will rely heavily on documents generated as part of the management of the division during the Mediterranean campaign. These records are to be found principally at Archives New Zealand. Of prime interest are files relating to discipline and morale during the period in question. Postal censorship was carried out by the Field Censor Section, one of whose tasks was to sample and summarise outgoing mail from New Zealander soldiers in the field, and the weekly reports that were produced provide a valuable insight to the drivers of morale. Freyberg's war diary (GOC's diary) also provides valuable information about both events and how they were handled.

²² Richard Holmes, *Acts of War: The Behaviour of Men in Battle*, London: Cassell, 2003; Jonathan Fennell, *Combat and Morale in the North African Campaign: The Eighth Army and the Path to El Alamein*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011; John Ellis, *The Sharp End: The Fighting Man in World War II*, London: Pimlico, 1990.

²³ Christine Ann Bielecki, 'British Infantry Morale during the Italian Campaign, 1943-1945', Ph.D. in History, University College London, 2012.

²⁴ Stephen G. Fritz, *Frontsoldaten: The German Soldier in World War II*, Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1995.

²⁵ Terry Copp, & Bill McAndrew, *Battle Exhaustion: Soldiers and Psychiatrists in the Canadian Army, 1939-1945*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990; Major-General F.M. Richardson, *Fighting Spirit: Psychological Factors in War*, London: Leo Cooper, 1978.

²⁶ Alison Parr, *Silent Casualties: New Zealand's Unspoken Legacy of the Second World War*, North Shore City, Auckland, 1995.

If official records provide a somewhat sterile and impersonal analytical approach to understanding the issues faced by 2nd New Zealand Division, then personal accounts provide a counter point through frank and colourful accounts written by the soldiers themselves. There are numerous sources that can provide material for this part. Letters, while influenced by censorship, remain a valuable and vital source of information. Diaries often provide candid accounts of a soldier's or his immediate unit's involvement in activities both military and otherwise. The daily record that diaries provide will also allow an assessment of frequency of these activities, and aid in understanding the culture with the division and its sub units. Importantly, diaries are not subjected to the modification of external censorship – threatened or actual.

This examination into the 2nd New Zealand Division in Italy focuses on the decline in battle worthiness of the Division. While previous studies have focussed on the early fighting in Italy – particularly Cassino – this work uses the final advance from the Senio river to the Po river during April 1945, as its significant battle. Importantly, it thematically explores and draws together the key areas of combat, psychological casualties, morale, and discipline, examining each in some detail, and through the experiences of the participants, subjects that have previously only been broadly touched on. It charts the decline and rebirth of the division, from a unit that appears to be battering itself into destruction and in danger of being removed from operations, to a fighting force that achieved a high degree of operational balance and efficiency, spearheading the British Eighth Army's final offensive in northern Italy.

Part One. Origins: 2nd New Zealand Division in Italy and the influences on battle weariness.

Battle Weariness Defined.

men who have been engaged for a long continuance of time are more or less like burnt-out cinders; their ammunition is consumed; they have melted away to a certain extent; physical and moral energies are exhausted, perhaps their courage is broken as well. Such a force, irrespective of the diminution in its number, if viewed as an organic whole, is very different from what it was before the combat.

Clausewitz.¹

‘I know the great stress of battle which large numbers of men have been through, and we cannot disregard its effect, especially on battle-weary leaders. Signs are not lacking that many of the old hands require a prolonged rest’, wrote Freyberg in a cable to the New Zealand Prime Minister, Peter Fraser, dated 9 June 1944.² In September the same year, he wrote of ‘battle-weary leaders’, that, ‘a large number of our battle-weary officers... require relief’,³ and that the division had ‘battle-worn combatant officers and NCOs’.⁴ Then in early October 1944, he wrote a little more generally on the issue, mentioning ‘the battle-weary condition of the force’,⁵ and that ‘a large proportion of [the] Division was battle-weary’.⁶ Even as the campaign was about to draw to a close, in February 1945, and as the *Tongariro* draft of furlough men were about to depart, Freyberg still used the term to describe the veterans who were about to leave. He wrote that ‘I have been looking at the men on parade and many of them show signs of battle-weariness.’⁷

¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, (ed.) Anatol Rapoport, Trans. Col. J.J. Graham, Penguin: Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1982, pp.309-310.

² Freyberg to the Prime Minister, 9 June 1944, *Documents, Volume II*, pp.348-349.

³ Freyberg to the Prime Minister, 21 September 1944, *Documents, Volume II*, p.359.

⁴ Freyberg to the Prime Minister, 30 September 1944, *Documents, Volume II*, p.364.

⁵ Freyberg to the Prime Minister, 8 October 1944, *Documents, Volume II*, p.366.

⁶ Freyberg to the Minister of Defence, 8 October 1944, *Documents, Volume II*, p.366.

⁷ Quoted in Paul Freyberg, *Bernard Freyberg, VC: Soldier of Two Nations*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1991, p.484.

So, just what did Freyberg mean when he spoke of battle weariness? Key to understanding this term is an examination of its military opposite – battle worthiness. A formation’s battle worthiness is at its height as it departs its depot on its way to the front. It is fully manned, it has an intact and robust command structure, its equipment is fit for task – maintained to a high standard, repaired if needed, if not new. Its men have been trained, rested, and entertained; logistical support has been planned and activated, reserves and supplies have been stockpiled – orderly, and in sufficient quantity. Plans have been made with the luxury of time and clear information; orders have been issued. The unit in question is at the peak of its fighting ability. Therefore, battle weariness is the degradation of military ability through participation in combat. Battle weariness can effect an individual – of any rank, a sub unit, or the entire entity. Degradation can be mild, or it can be extreme. Typically, the components that impact on battle weariness are: conditions, combat, casualties, leadership, equipment and supplies, and morale. Regardless of the extent of battle weariness, unit abilities will be impaired; in extreme cases the unit will cease to function as a worthwhile fighting force.

Even before the New Zealand Division left through the depot gates at Maadi on the journey to Italy, some degradation of its battle-worthiness had occurred. Most importantly in this respect, many soldiers within the division had experienced combat across northern Africa, and this can be considered a mixed blessing. These men were seasoned campaigners with the confidence, martial skills and knowledge that their experiences could provide. However, they had also been exposed to the darker side of combat, and had, as Lord Moran suggests, been drawing on their bank account of courage, through the ‘daily drain of the front line’.⁸

Once at the front, and then into action, there begins ‘a strain of operations that begins a wearing down process, which if not arrested, leaves the unit impotent’ shifting the boundary between battle worthiness and ineffectiveness.⁹ To some degree, a loss of those factors that makes a unit battle worthy – order, comfort, confidence, the physical robustness or fitness of the troops themselves, the functional integrity of command and supply, the freshness of manpower, equipment, leaders and experience - work both individually and combined to push a formation towards weariness. The more adverse the conditions, and the more intense the combat, the faster that this decline occurs.

During the campaign in Italy, Freyberg himself alluded to the reasons for the battle weariness within his division. In his correspondence which mentions battle weariness he talks

⁸ Holmes, *Acts of War*, p.213.

⁹ Copp & McAndrew, p.63.

of ‘the inevitable effect of fierce fighting over a long period.... the great stress of battle’¹⁰, that ‘the infantry divisions here are overworked’¹¹, and that the division’s battle weariness had occurred due to ‘fighting hard for a longer period and after suffering greater casualties than any other division’.¹² In several letters Freyberg mentions the tiredness of the troops, as well as the persistent underlying problems of weather and terrain: ‘the obvious geographical difficulties of the country have been increased greatly by heavy rain and snow.... snow is lying on the whole of our front and cross-country ‘going’ is impassable.... mud is a very bad obstacle’;¹³ on the Sangro ‘heavy rain fell again, brought the river to flood level, and delayed our attack.’¹⁴ Freyberg also identifies the difficulties posed by the retreating Germans, neatly summing up the opposition in one passage:

fighting rearguard actions, to which the German Army is now well accustomed, the enemy contested each river valley and hilltop village through which the Italian roads wend their way. Not only had enemy rearguards to be dislodged but demolitions on a grand scale had to be bridged.¹⁵

Terrain, weather, and the German tactics produced a situation which led Freyberg to conclude that: ‘conditions which always favoured defence are now ideal from the enemy’s point of view.’¹⁶

The following chapters will study the main influences on battle weariness, as well as providing an overview of the 2nd New Zealand Division’s place in the campaign.

¹⁰ Freyberg to the Prime Minister, 9 June 1944, *Documents, Volume II*, p.348.

¹¹ Freyberg to Puttick, 7 April 1944, *Documents, Volume II*, p.348.

¹² Freyberg to the Minister of Defence, 8 October 1944, *Documents, Volume II*, p.366.

¹³ Freyberg to the Minister of Defence, 11 January 1944, *Documents, Volume II*, pp.281-282.

¹⁴ Freyberg to the Minister of Defence, 15 December 1943, *Documents, Volume II*, p.279.

¹⁵ Freyberg to the Minister of Defence, 15 December 1943, *Documents, Volume II*, p.279.

¹⁶ Freyberg to the Minister of Defence, 11 January 1944, *Documents, Volume II*, p.281.

Chapter One. The Allies in Italy.

Their war was not a crusade but, in almost every respect, an old fashioned one of strategic diversion on the maritime flank of a continental enemy, the ‘Peninsular War’ of 1939-45.

John Keegan.¹

In many ways, Italy was second-rate war making – a non-strategic theatre, limited opportunities for manoeuvre, no sense of the backs being towards the wall, two forces fighting over someone else’s home.

Robert M. Citino.²

The Allies embarked on the campaign in Italy with no clear ongoing strategic plan. By the middle of 1943, with a large and well-equipped force in North Africa and a desire to use it, momentum carried the ground war across the Mediterranean. The invasion and capture of Sicily was strategically sound, not only securing the important shipping routes through the Mediterranean, but also providing bases for air operations against the Italian mainland. However, as a number of historians have pointed out, once started, a military campaign can be difficult to halt, and the Allied efforts in the Mediterranean during 1942/43 were no different; the same momentum that carried the Allies from Africa to Sicily, carried them across the Straits of Messina, onto the mainland and then kept the Allies embroiled on the Italian peninsula. The invasion of the Italian mainland was justified on the premise of knocking Italy from the war and the capture of the strategically important airfield complex at Foggia on the Adriatic coast.³ Once these aims had been achieved early on in the campaign – Italy surrendered on 8 September and Foggia had fallen by the first days of October – justification for the continuation of an aggressive campaign in Italy rested on several points. Allied leaders believed that a front

¹ John Keegan, *The Second World War*, London: Hutchinson, 1989, p.368.

² Robert M. Citino, *The Wehrmacht Retreats: Fighting a Lost War, 1943*, Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2012, p.265.

³ See, for example, Gooderson, Chapter One, *Strategic Intent of the Italian Campaign*, pp19-38; Graham & Bidwell, pp.19 & 404; John Ellis, *Brute Force: Allied Strategy and Tactics in the Second World War*, London: Andre Deutsch, 1990, pp.289-293, 306-307. Also, Roberts, pp.367-370, 385-387, and pp.298-398 for a summary of Allied strategy at the time, which puts the campaign into a higher level strategic and political context.



(Author)

Map 1, location of places named in the text.

in Italy would attract German divisions from either or both North Western Europe, and the Eastern Front, easing the cross channel invasion planned for May 1944, and going some way to meeting the demands of Stalin for a Second Front. As well as this, Italy was the only readily

available place where Anglo-American forces would be able to be in direct contact with German troops until the invasion of North-west Europe; this was an important public relations consideration. Along the same lines, the capture of Rome would be an important factor, both a signal event, and a huge propaganda coup. The Americans were less attracted to ongoing operations in Italy than the British, and pushed for a cross channel invasion of France at the earliest opportunity; the British held on to their perceived potential for the Italian campaign, and pressed for its continuation. The senior British warlords, led by Churchill, eyed Italy as a springboard for an attack on the Balkans, and then further into Austria, the upper Danube, and eventually southern Germany, Churchill's 'under-belly of the Axis'.⁴

If the Allies were confused as to what their ongoing reasons for being in Italy were, the Germans were initially just as divided as to how any Allied move onto the mainland would be countered. German forces in Italy at the beginning of September 1943 were divided into two groups. In the north, *Generalfeldmarschall* Erwin Rommel commanded Army Group B; while *Generalfeldmarschall* Albert Kesselring, commanding the 10th Army, was responsible for operations in southern Italy. Planning for the strategic handling of any defensive campaign was divided along these same lines.

Rommel proposed a quick withdrawal of all forces to the north where a firm defensive barrier would screen the industrial centres in the Po valley; a strategy which would go some way to negating the Allied naval, amphibious, and aerial strengths. Importantly though, it went against Hitler's demands for not conceding territory. Kesselring, however, advocated holding and fighting in the south, based around a series of fortified defensive lines. Not only did this strategy meet Hitler's philosophy of not giving ground, but events unfolding within Italy during mid-September also helped decide which of these pathways would be taken.

The relatively quick and clean disposal of the Italian armed forces following the Italian surrender left an intact, untroubled, and confident *Wehrmact*, as an army of occupation fighting on the soil of an ex-ally who had betrayed it. In addition, the slow progress made by the British after landing on the Italian mainland opposite Messina, and the closeness of the battle at the Salerno landings, encouraged the Germans to believe that Kesselring's strategy was the correct one. The German Army was set to force the Allies to fight to gain ground on the mainland, standing at a number of defensive lines all the way up the Italian boot, fighting a war of delay and attrition. Across the Apennines, on the Adriatic coast, following further Eighth Army

⁴ Roberts, p.299.

landings on the heel of Italy and a strong advance up the coast, German forces fell back to prepared positions along the Sangro River. It was into this situation that the 2nd New Zealand Division entered the Italian campaign.

In May 1943, following the Axis surrender in Tunisia, the New Zealanders had returned to Maadi camp near Cairo, where there followed a period of rest, refitting, restructuring, and training.

The division was leaving for Italy with a high reputation. At the time those who had the opportunity to interact with the New Zealanders in North Africa were almost poetic in their praise: 15th Army Group commander General Harold Alexander, described them as soldiers ‘par excellence, the exploiters of a favourable opening on the battlefield’, and as his ‘*Corps de Chasse*... a great fighting formation which played an outstanding role in the Western Desert campaign’.⁵ Dan Davin, author and member of the division, described the New Zealand Division as, ‘an engine of war with enormous striking power’, and described it as ‘a superb instrument’.⁶ War correspondent and historian Alan Moorehead, said they were ‘by common consent the finest infantry formation in the Middle East’, that they were ‘the finest troops of their kind in the world... the most resilient and practised fighter of the Anglo-Saxon armies’, and that they were ‘the elite of the British Army’.⁷ Fellow North African correspondent Alexander Clifford believed the New Zealanders to be ‘one of the best 3 divisions in the British Army.’⁸

Opponents too, rated the New Zealanders highly. Rommel, commanding the Axis forces in North Africa at the time, ‘had a great and lasting admiration for the New Zealanders’ calling them ‘the finest troops’ that the Allies had in North Africa,⁹ and ‘among the elite of the British Army.’¹⁰ He regretted their escape at Minqar Qaim in 1942 saying ‘I should have been very much happier if [the New Zealand Division] had been safely tucked away in our prison camps instead of facing us.’¹¹ Research indicates that the Germans always expected aggression from

⁵ John North, (ed.), *The Alexander Memoirs, 1940-1945*, London: Cassell, 1962, pp.140 & 154.

⁶ Dan Davin, in Michael Carver (ed.), *The Warlords*, Barnsley: Pen and Sword Military Classics, 2005, pp.589-590.

⁷ Alan Moorehead, *African Trilogy*, Melbourne: Text Publishing, 1997, pp.381, 576, & 632.

⁸ Martyn Uren, *Diamond Trails of Italy*, Auckland: Collins, 1945, p.102.

⁹ Young, p.147.

¹⁰ B.H. Liddell-Hart, (ed.), *The Rommel Papers*, New York: Da Capo Press, 1953, p.240.

¹¹ Liddell-Hart, p.240.

the New Zealanders, and that their presence at the front was significant,¹² with one German intelligence report alluding to expecting an attack from the ‘crack NZ Division.’¹³

Modern historians are also praiseworthy of 2nd New Zealand Division. Parker believes they were ‘considered one of the best divisions on either side’,¹⁴ while Morris rates them as both excellent and superb.¹⁵ Their experience and level and quality of training has also been highlighted.¹⁶

In early October 1943, the division, numbering over 20,000 men and containing almost 4500 vehicles, disembarked at Taranto. On 14 November, after a short period reassembling and acclimatising, the division was moved into the line on the Sangro River, and began operations on 18 November. On the night of 27/28 November, New Zealand infantry assaulted across the river with the objective of capturing the strategically important town of Orsogna. Within a matter of days however, German resistance, poor weather, and the difficult terrain broke up the attack. The division was forced into making a number of direct and costly frontal assaults over the following six weeks as it attempted to occupy ridgelines and villages around Orsogna. During the two months in the line at the Sangro, casualties within the division reached 1634 men.¹⁷ During early January 1944, the decision was made to move the New Zealanders from the Adriatic coast across the Apennines, to commence operations against the Gustav line at Cassino.

Even after their experiences at Orsogna, Cassino would have come as a shock to the New Zealand troops. It was vastly different to the manoeuvre warfare that had been experienced in the wide open spaces of North Africa. Seen as the key to unlocking the Liri Valley with its highway leading to Rome, the area around the town of Cassino was strategically important to defender and attacker alike, and it was for this reason that so much effort was expended to possess the town and the surrounding heights. The battles for Cassino, of which there were four, resembled a Western Front campaign from a quarter of a century previous, typified by frontal assaults, bombardment and barrage, close quarter combat, and heavy casualties. It did not help that the battles for Cassino occurred in atrocious weather conditions. Small wonder then that a number of participants commented on the similarities to the Western Front of a generation earlier; not just the conditions and outlook, but also tactics and operational

¹² Graham and Bidwell, p.183, Doherty, *Eighth Army in Italy*, p.81.

¹³ Freyberg, pp.484-485, captured intelligence summary, German 278th Division.

¹⁴ Parker, p.153.

¹⁵ Morris, pp.204 & 273.

¹⁶ Graham and Bidwell, p.183.

¹⁷ Phillips, p.355.

conditions.¹⁸ Leadership at senior levels too, has also, on occasion, been compared to that of the Western Front. John Ellis suggests that the commander of the US 5th Army, General Mark Clark, lived up to the best traditions of the Somme and Passchendaele during the first Cassino battle when he ‘drove [US] II Corps to the very limits of human endurance’ hoping that “just one more push” would do the trick.¹⁹

It took four months’ effort, an outflanking assault at Anzio, and an eventual attack across the entire 5th Army Front, to unlock the Liri Valley. The cost in casualties was also high, little wonder then that the battle for Cassino has been referred to as the Stalingrad of the south, or ‘Little Stalingrad’.²⁰

The New Zealand Division, now part of a New Zealand Corps, entered the line at Cassino on 5 February 1944, relieving US II Corps which had suffered heavily during January in a number of actions aimed at an early capture of the town, monastery, and surrounding high points. Especially hard hit had been the US 36th ‘Texas’ Division, which had launched a frontal assault across the Rapido River to the south of Cassino township. The difficulties that this division encountered during these operations should have flagged the need for care and planning for future operations in this area. Wet and muddy conditions, a network of drains and ditches, flooded areas and swollen rivers, all hampered movement and combined to close out avenues of approach funnelling attackers into areas that were easily defended. Strong and determined defence added to these problems. Firmly entrenched, with artillery and mortars pre-registered on likely target zones, heavy machine guns firing on fixed and interlocking lines, and with the advantage of overlooking the battlefield, the German defenders proved almost impossible to dislodge. Repeatedly, elements of the New Zealand Division attacked the town and surrounding areas, but met with little success. Fighting in the town itself was difficult and at close quarters, casualties in the infantry battalions were high. In the period that the New Zealanders were engaged at Cassino, the division suffered a further 1596 casualties.²¹

The sequence of battles at Cassino, four over the first five months of 1944, were a horror for all involved; poor weather, inhospitable and constricting terrain, the almost impenetrable

¹⁸ Freyberg at Cassino remarked: ‘reminds you of Passchendaele, doesn’t it?’ Stevens, *Freyberg, V.C.: The Man*, p.92; von Senger, ‘the conflict here resembled the static fighting of the First World War’, and, ‘what I saw took me back across twenty-eight years, [to] the battlefields of the Somme.’, pp.188 & 215. Morris suggests that at Cassino, ‘conditions in Italy [mirrored] those of the Western Front more than anywhere else in the Second World War.’ p.272; Also, E.B. ‘Scotch’ Paterson, *Cassino to Trieste: A Soldier’s Story*, Wellington: Steele Roberts, 2006, p.43; Brooks, p.3; Doherty, *Eighth Army in Italy*, p.182.

¹⁹ Ellis, *Cassino*, p.161.

²⁰ Atkinson, p.467.

²¹ Phillips, p.356.

ruins of the town, a well-entrenched defender, limited opportunities to utilise the Allied superiorities in air and armour, congested avenues of attack, and limited tactical imagination shown by the Allied leaders, all meant that the battle for the strategic heights above the town, and with them the right to enter the Liri Valley and advance on Rome, became a slogging match. This battle of attrition, as one historian states, ‘caused four very fine Allied divisions, two American, one Indian and one New Zealand, to be all but fought into the ground.’²² Another confirms that at the time, ‘the elite New Zealand Division was on the brink of falling apart for the only time in the war.’²³

A number of historians believe that the New Zealand Division’s – and Freyberg’s – efforts at Cassino, were the low point in the division’s time in Italy and it is worth revisiting some of the opinions, recorded above, concerning the state of the New Zealand Division throughout 1944. Christopher Pugsley describes the division at the start of 1944 as emerging from a ‘winter of discontent... combat weary and with low morale’.²⁴ The Cassino battles were, suggests Matthew Wright, ‘the last blow for a division still well leavened with long serving and battle-weary men’,²⁵ and that the New Zealand Division at that time was ‘under-strength and the men were physically and spiritually exhausted’.²⁶ John McLeod suggests that, ‘in Italy, the New Zealander’s discipline out of the line fell away, paralleling the decline in their morale and battle discipline.... It was a state of affairs that the New Zealand officers seemed powerless to stop.’²⁷ Pugsley also makes the suggestion that by the end of 1944 the division was, listless, war-tired, wracked by growing discontent, and facing ‘a manpower situation that was parlous at the very least.’²⁸ Tellingly, it is Freyberg who charts the lows of the division throughout 1944 with his progression of comments on the division’s battle weariness, conceding that his division was ‘at the end of its tether.’²⁹

It was shortly after this point that Freyberg suggested that the time had come to consider withdrawing the New Zealand Division entirely.³⁰ Details are vague as to whether this is removal from the line into a rest area, which is what occurred, or a return to Maadi where a fuller rest and possible restructure might have occurred.

²² Gooderson, p.325.

²³ Parker, p.244.

²⁴ Pugsley, ‘The Second New Zealand Division’, p.94.

²⁵ Wright, *Freyberg’s War*, p.203.

²⁶ Wright, *Freyberg’s War*, p.204.

²⁷ McLeod, p.132.

²⁸ Pugsley, ‘The Second New Zealand Division’, pp.94 & 97.

²⁹ Phillips, p.328.

³⁰ Freyberg to the Prime Minister, 9 June 1944, *Documents, Volume II*, p.348.

Battle weariness was not confined to the ranks, or to the divisional organisation as a whole; the Commander himself was suffering under the pressures of the campaign. For Freyberg, the disruption to his command structure was one problem among many that he had to contend with at the time. He was well aware of the difficult conditions that the division faced at Cassino, comparing them at one stage with those encountered on the Passchendaele battlefield.³¹ He would have also been aware of the tactical difficulties that any further attempts to overcome the positions around Monte Cassino presented. The impact on the already weary division would have been obvious to him. Working within the structure of the US 5th Army where there was ‘a totally different mindset and way of doing business’, with pressure from senior theatre commanders to make headway at Cassino, and ‘caught within the politics and personalities of the Anglo-American offensive’ Freyberg is put under enormous pressure during March and April 1944.³² To make things worse, his son Paul, serving with the Grenadier Guards in the beachhead at Anzio, had been reported missing at this time.

Tonkin-Covell suggests that at Cassino, Freyberg was cornered between the pressures from above to generate a victory, and from his subordinates who wished to limit casualties.³³ Freyberg’s frustration uncharacteristically boiled over when approached by Kippenberger and Dimoline; he refused to see his subordinate commanders, saying that he was not going to have any soviet of divisional commanders.³⁴ As the third Cassino battle ground on, and the division’s casualties topped 1000, Freyberg invoked his ability to unilaterally decide to remove the division, and by extension the other units of the corps; with ‘his own morale in tatters, he was compelled to quit’ argues Tonkin-Covell.³⁵

In his work on Cassino, historian Peter Caddick-Adams lists the possible reasons for Freyberg’s poor performance during the battle – a sense of frustration, the need to limit casualties, the battle was too complex, an element of hubris, political pressure for success in Italy; he also suggests that the plan for Operation *Dickens* shows the limitations of Freyberg’s tactical and operational planning.³⁶ Military theorist J.C. Fuller agrees, saying that at Cassino

³¹ Major-General W.G. Stevens, *Freyberg, V.C.: The Man, 1939-45*, Wellington: A.H. & A.W. Reed, 1965, p.92

³² Pugsley, *A Bloody Road Home*, pp.428, 430-432 & 439.

³³ John Tonkin-Covell, ‘Lieutenant General Bernard Freyberg: A Necessary Commander?’, in, *Born to Lead? Portraits of New Zealand Commanders*, Glyn Harper, & Joel Hayward, (eds.), Auckland: Exisle Publishing, 2003, pp.108.

³⁴ Major-General Sir H. Kippenberger, KBE, CB, DSO and Bar, ED, *Infantry Brigadier*, London: Oxford University Press, 1949, p.356.

³⁵ Tonkin-Covell, ‘Lieutenant General Bernard Freyberg: A Necessary Commander?’, pp.108-109.

³⁶ Peter Caddick-Adams, *Monte Cassino: Ten Armies in Hell*, London: Preface Publishing, 2012, pp.158, 202-203.

‘as in 1915-17 tactical imagination was petrified.’³⁷ Others also cast poor opinion of Freyberg’s attitude at this time: New Zealand author Tony Williams suggests he had become ‘vague’;³⁸ British historian Richard Holmes – ‘obsessive’;³⁹ Harper and Tonkin-Covell – ‘exhausted’ and ‘far from brilliant’.⁴⁰ American Edwin Hoyt, himself a Second World War veteran, is very critical of Freyberg. ‘The task [to break through to the Liri Valley] was turned over to the New Zealand Corps under General Freyberg, the officer who commanded the British troops on Crete with so little success’⁴¹ he wrote, and then continued,

The Third battle of Cassino concluded on 25 March having cost the New Zealand Corps 4,000 men and accomplished nothing. It seems to have been a problem of inept leadership. The New Zealand Corps was disbanded and its battered units were posted to other corps. Instead of winning the war, General Freyberg was relegated to obscurity.⁴²

If, as has been suggested earlier, the campaign in Italy lacked robust strategic objectives, it also suffered from issues within the Allied leadership, from the highest level through to middle management within the New Zealand Division. In his book examining the Cassino battles, historian Matthew Parker maintains that in Italy the Allies fielded ‘a coalition riddled at the highest level with distrust and jealousy... in large part badly led and poorly equipped’⁴³ The American leaders are often presented as Anglophobic and insensitive to suffering heavy casualties; the British are similarly portrayed as stuffy, condescending, and reluctant to take risks. Common in the historiography of the campaign are claim and counter claim as to the ineffectiveness of each of the main participants and their respective units. Mark Clark’s comments regarding Freyberg and the New Zealand Division have been well documented, but are worth repeating. ‘Freyberg was a prima donna,’ Clark said ‘and he had to be handled with kid gloves, very adroitly, very carefully’;⁴⁴ and of the division itself: ‘These are Dominion troops who are very jealous of their prerogatives. The British have found them difficult to handle. They have always been given special considerations which we would not give to our

³⁷ Atkinson, p.441.

³⁸ Williams, p.241.

³⁹ Caddick-Adams, p.203

⁴⁰ Harper & Tonkin-Covell, pp.127 & 129.

⁴¹ Edwin P. Hoyt, *Backwater War, The Allied Campaign in Italy, 1943-45*, Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2007, p.158.

⁴² Hoyt, p.164.

⁴³ Parker, p.x.

⁴⁴ Raleigh Trevelyan, *Rome '44: The Battle for the Eternal City*, London: Book Club Associates, 1981, p.84. Trevelyan adds that ‘It was indeed hard for a would-be prima donna to be put in command of an already established prima donna.’

own troops.⁴⁵ Needless to say, opinions concerning coalition partners would have percolated down through the ranks – adding to the morale burden of many units.

From a military standpoint, the early campaign in Italy was conducted poorly. The unclear strategic objectives led on to lacklustre application. Battles such as those at Anzio and Cassino, and to a certain extent the Eighth Army's Adriatic offensive of November/December 1943 – which one historian terms as ‘particularly ponderous’⁴⁶ – rapidly degenerated into attritional slogging matches more akin to those in Flanders a generation before. The tactical sterility of the Allied leadership in Italy – throughout 1943 and 1944 – failed to deliver, as one historian suggests, anything other than brute force, through attempts to overwhelm the opposition through simple weight of firepower and material superiority.⁴⁷ In the confines of the Italian countryside, this strategy rarely worked. When it did, as occurred during Operation *Diadem*, or when the Germans were caught off balance, as immediately following the Anzio landing, the Allied leadership failed to grasp the opportunities and simply prolonged the status quo.⁴⁸

How did the New Zealand Division go from a unit near the peak of its fighting ability at the conclusion of the North African campaign in May 1943, to one that was in imminent danger of collapse just twelve months later, after only six months of combat in Italy? It is appropriate now to turn to the elements of the campaign which helped drive this decline, and which were the major influences on the battle worthiness of the division. The following chapters will examine in some detail the manpower issues, the impact of terrain and weather, the quality and tactics of the German opposition, and will explore the New Zealand soldier’s experience of combat in Italy.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Martin Blumenson, *Salerno to Cassino*, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1969, p.402.

⁴⁶ Ellis, *Brute Force*, p.331.

⁴⁷ Morris, p.435.

⁴⁸ Mark Clark’s focus on the capture of Rome and the diversion of force in that direction following the breakout from the Anzio bridgehead, allowed the bulk of the threatened German 10th Army to escape certain destruction; US VI Corps commander – Major General John Lucas, who had achieved some measure of surprise after landing at Anzio, failed to quickly push out from the landing area, allowing the Germans to throw a cordon around the beachhead. The battle for the Anzio bridgehead would then last for over four months.

Chapter Two. Manpower.

Most fighting in World War II was done by a remarkably small proportion of troops whose casualties were very high.

John Ellis.¹

The Italian campaign... consumed infantry at a rate comparable to the worst fighting on the Western Front during 1916 and 1917.

Ian Wood.²

Since the beginning of their time in the Mediterranean in 1940 through until their arrival in Taranto in October 1943, 2nd New Zealand Division suffered over 20,000 casualties (see Table 1). Of these just under 4000 occurred during the hard fighting across North Africa between October 1942 and May 1943, as the division took part in the offensive at El Alamein, the pursuit across Libya, and the Tunisian battles. This was just prior to the division's move to Italy.

The losses incurred by the New Zealand Division during their service in the Middle East can be broken down into three distinct periods, each with its own pattern of loss and impact.³ During 1941 the division fought three short sharp campaigns in Greece, Crete, and Libya, lasting 35, 12, and 92 days respectively. Each of these actions was costly in terms of casualties, and seriously affected the fighting efficiency of the division. In Greece, during April 1941, the division suffered over 2400 casualties: 272 killed, 391 wounded, 33 missing, 1793 taken prisoner. The next month, in Crete, in a more intense battle, total casualties approached 4000. In two months the division had lost almost 6500 men. As well as this, much of its heavy weaponry and vehicles had been abandoned in Greece, and those men that were evacuated to Egypt were exhausted. At the end of 1941, during Operation *Crusader*, the division shouldered much of Eighth Army's infantry work and suffered accordingly. Although the New Zealanders

¹ Ellis, *The Sharp End*, p.162.

² Ian S. Wood, "'Twas England Bade Our Wild Geese Go': Soldiers of Ireland in the Second World War, in, *Time to Kill: The Soldier's Experience of War in the West, 1939-1945*, Paul Addison & Angus Calder, (eds.), London: Pimlico, 1997, p.86.

³ See table 1 for the base casualty data for the following pages.

remained in the Libyan desert until the end of January 1942, the bulk of the fighting during *Crusader* occurred between 25 November and 1 December 1941, and losses within the division during these seven days were very heavy. During this period a further 4600 men were lost. At the beginning of 1942 the division was withdrawn from Egypt for rest, refitting, and reinforcement in Syria.

Four months later, in June, the division was rushed to Egypt as the German and Italian *Panzerarmee* attacked and advanced towards Cairo. In a series of engagements lasting two months, in which the German offensive to capture Egypt was halted, the New Zealand Division narrowly avoided being destroyed – most notably at Minqar Qaim. Casualties reached 4990 men before the division was relieved from the line in August, and allowed two months to rest and refurbish, and prepare for the Eighth Army's offensive at El Alamein.

From Alamein through to the conclusion of the campaign in Tunisia, fighting changed from typically defensive orientated, short, intense, with a concentration of casualties, to an offensive campaign in which there were less men lost as prisoners, a higher proportion of wounded, and casualties were less concentrated, occurring over longer periods.

There are a number of examples where elements of 2nd New Zealand Division suffered heavily at company or battalion level during its campaigning in the Mediterranean. During Operation *Crusader* for example, 20 Battalion was all but destroyed, losing 548 men, roughly 73% of its establishment strength. The following year, between the beginning of July and the end of the year, a period that included fighting at Minqar Qaim, Ruweisat Ridge, Alam Halfa and El Alamein, 28 (Maori) Battalion lost 502 men - 67% of its establishment strength - all but 25 of which were killed or wounded. In Tunisia, during a period of combat operations that lasted 119 days, the division lost 1774 men, over 350 of whom were killed. Not only did these have to be replaced or rehabilitated, but the return to New Zealand of the 6087 men of the first furlough draft also put pressure on an already straining manpower situation.

In addition, the division was restructuring at the time, with the 4th Brigade – 18, 19, and 20 Infantry Battalions – becoming 18, 19, and 20 Armoured Regiments. Thus the division changed from one based around three mobile infantry brigades, to one lighter in infantry – now only 2 brigades – but containing its own armour. This mechanised configuration ideally reflected the conditions and operational role that the division had been employed in during its time in North Africa – to exploit breakthroughs, but would prove to be problematic in Italy, where the mobile armoured warfare that the division was now designed for was, to a large extent, negated by terrain and weather, and where infantry and artillery played a prime role. A

decrease in its infantry capability to two brigades from three meant that the remaining infantry battalions shouldered a disproportionate burden operationally, and therefore suffered a heavier toll with regard to casualties. This point was not lost on Freyberg, whose thoughts on the matter were recorded during the fighting at Cassino: ‘we have to face the fact that the morale of the division is dropping because we are hammering our front-line troops with only 2 infantry bdes. If we are to carry out the role of infantry attack and exploitation it will be necessary to have another brigade.’⁴

In fact, the issue had already become apparent in Tunisia, where the two infantry brigades – 5th and 6th – employed during this time, bore the brunt of the division’s losses, losing 1290 men – 66% of divisional casualties.⁵ When the losses from other divisional combat units – artillery, divisional cavalry, and engineers – are added, combat unit losses approach 90% of the division’s casualties, while fatalities from these units exceed 97% of the divisional total. In the last year in Africa, following the division’s return from Syria, almost 9500 men were either killed, wounded or captured. Most of these, almost 6000, were infantry, with additional heavy losses – 1013 men – in the divisional artillery. It is little wonder that the division’s ability to maintain its fighting efficiency was being questioned prior to being sent to Italy.⁶

What also needs to be recognised is the impact that these campaigns and the resulting losses had on the division, and especially on the infantry companies: the loss of experienced soldiers, particularly NCOs and junior officers, the breakup of numerous primary groups, and the cumulative psychological impact of the hard fighting on the surviving men.⁷

Once in Italy, losses continued to mount steadily. In just over a month, from mid-November 1943, with the New Zealanders fighting in appalling winter conditions near the Sangro River, the division lost a further 1634 men. Between February and May 1944, 1596 more casualties were added to the tally over the 69 days of the battles at Cassino.

Meanwhile, Freyberg was engaged with the New Zealand Prime Minister, attempting between them to steer a course through New Zealand’s deepening manpower issues that were

⁴ General Officer Commanding's Diary - Part IV, September 1943 - October 1944, WAI18/6/46 (ANZ), 18 April 1944.

⁵ The 4th Brigade – 18, 19 and 20 Battalions - remained in Egypt where it converted to an Armoured Regiment.

⁶ The various official histories give a casualty breakdown by battalion or function; see, for example, J.F. Cody, *21 Battalion*, Wellington: War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, 1953, p.462; Murphy, W.E., *2nd New Zealand Divisional Artillery*, Wellington: War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, 1966, p.767.

⁷ Most of the men who took part in the battle of El Alamein and the campaign in Tunisia were veterans of the Battle for Egypt (1942), and Operation Crusader (1941). There would also have been a significant number that had fought as early as Greece and Crete. See pages 96 - 97 for narration regarding the relationship between the length of combat exposure and its psychological impact.

Table 1: Casualties, 2nd New Zealand Division, 1941-1945.⁸

	<i>Date</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Killed</i>	<i>Wounded</i>	<i>POW</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i># days</i>	<i>Per Day</i>	<i>W/day</i>	<i>P/day</i>	<i>Tot/day</i>
Greece	6 /04/1941- 28/04/1941	305	391	1793	2489	23	13.3	17.0	78.0	108.2	
Crete	20/05/1941 - 02/06/1941	750	980	2123	3853	13	57.7	75.4	163.3	296.4	
Crusader	1/11/1941 - 1/2/1942	1052	1619	1932	4603	93	11.3	17.4	20.8	49.5	
Totals 1941		2107	2990	5848	10945	129	16.3	23.2	45.3	84.8	
<i>Egypt 1942</i>	<i>20/6/1942 - 14/1/1943</i>	<i>1542</i>	<i>4210</i>	<i>1767</i>	<i>7519</i>	<i>208</i>	<i>7.4</i>	<i>20.2</i>	<i>8.5</i>	<i>36.1</i>	
<i>Tripolitania & Tunisia</i>	<i>15/1/1943 - 13/5/1943</i>	<i>407</i>	<i>1520</i>	<i>29</i>	<i>1956</i>	<i>119</i>	<i>3.4</i>	<i>12.8</i>	<i>0.2</i>	<i>16.4</i>	
Sangro	18/11/1943 - 05/1/1944	419	1243	88	1750	49	8.6	25.4	1.8	35.7	
Cassino	17/2/1944 - 10/4/1944	352	1249	48	1649	53	6.6	23.6	0.9	31.1	
<i>Diadem/Tuscany</i>	<i>11/04/1944 - 24/08/1944</i>	<i>408</i>	<i>1487</i>	<i>31</i>	<i>1926</i>	<i>135</i>	<i>3.0</i>	<i>11.0</i>	<i>0.2</i>	<i>14.3</i>	
Northern Italy	20/09/1944 - 10/3/1945	414	1674	41	2129	134	3.1	12.5	0.3	15.9	
Po Valley/Trieste	9/4/1945 - 2/5/1945	243	1142	0	1385	24	10.1	47.6	0.0	57.7	
<i>Italian Campaign</i>		<i>1836</i>	<i>6795</i>	<i>208</i>	<i>8839</i>	<i>395</i>	<i>4.6</i>	<i>17.2</i>	<i>0.5</i>	<i>22.4</i>	
Middle East/Italy 1941-45		5892	15515	7852	29259	851	6.9	18.2	9.2	34.4	

Killed include Missing, Died of Wounds, Died POW.

Figures exclude Western Desert Dec 1940 - Jan 1941, Aegean Campaign, & Misc.

Days do not accurately reflect days exposed to combat. For example, rest periods occurred during Egypt 1942, and throughout Italy.

⁸ Data sourced from Stevens, *Problems of 2 NZEF*, Appendix V, p.292.

rapidly coming to a head.⁹ By 1943, the need to furnish reinforcements for the 2nd Division in the Mediterranean, as well as the 3rd Division engaged at that time in the Solomon Islands, the rapidly expanding Air Force, and the increasing pressure to ramp up agricultural production, were all drawing from a limited pool of manpower. To make matters worse, it was becoming obvious that a large number of the 2nd Division's personnel needed a prolonged rest – some had been overseas since the beginning of 1940, and involved in operations since Greece, over two years previously. To address these issues the furlough scheme was initiated. This was planned to be a series of 'drafts' whereby long serving men within the 2nd Division would be returned to New Zealand for several months' home leave. The first of these drafts – the *Ruapehu Draft* of over 6000 men – proved problematic; only 662 men agreed to return once the time came to re-embark for Italy in early 1944.

For the New Zealand Division itself, the furlough drafts presented a number of problems. First, the drafts removed a large quantity of experience, regardless of how weary these troops were. The plan had been to return them to the division once their furlough had finished, but for a variety of reasons, the bulk of their experience was lost. Second, as men in Italy learnt of their position in the returning drafts, their contribution to their primary unit fell away. In some cases, they became a liability to that group. Third, the withdrawal of a large number of men from the division required the delivery of a large number of fresh replacements in their place. These replacements were very different from the men who had filled the division during the period from 1940 through until 1943. They were more likely to be older, and married with a family, an inducement to take less risk in combat, and to be more considered in their actions. The fourth issue, and a key difference between those in the first few echelons which manned the division in Africa, and those on the ground in Italy, was that later arrivals were likely to be conscripts, whereas those at the start of the war were more likely volunteers or career soldiers.¹⁰ It was while the proportional mix between volunteer and conscript was changing from mainly volunteer based around the early echelons, to mainly conscript, that problems occurred; this period coincided with the early operations in Italy – the Sangro River, Cassino, and the advance through Tuscany.

The impact of these issues can be seen in the evidence from accounts written at the time. Martyn Uren wrote on the furlough draft that he felt that he could,

⁹ The official history, *Documents, Volume II*, covers this issue in some detail in the section 'Maintenance of the 2nd New Zealand Division; the Replacement Scheme', pp.328-395.

¹⁰ Paul A.H. Morris, 'Attitudes Towards Psychological Casualties in the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force, 1939 to 1945', MA Thesis, University of Canterbury, 2013, pp.70, 82, 83 & 86.

say without fear of contradiction, that the scheme which had brought joy to so many hearts at home... had taken from our force a little of the spirit. Men had, to use an expression dear to the heart of every long-service soldier, ‘one foot on the boat.’¹¹

Uren goes on to explain:

if you knew that within a week or a month you were going home to that wife you had not seen for four years, and to the son you had never seen, would you grip your bayonet with the same spirit as before? Would you volunteer for a special raiding party? Blow up a bridge exposed to fire?¹²

Freyberg himself recognised that the effect on those chosen to return home was detrimental to the battle worthiness of the division. At the end of 1943 he signalled to the Defence Minister, Frederick Jones that, ‘[t]here is one more factor that I want War Cabinet to realise, viz., the psychological effect upon the men as the leave period approaches. In dealing with this factor we have to face the fact that once a man knows his turn is coming he ceases to be a good soldier.’ Freyberg then quantified the impact that this ‘factor’ had had on operations at the Sangro River; ‘For this reason 2700 Wakatipu [furlough draft] men could not be used on operational duty.’¹³

Freyberg expressed some concern over the impact of the furlough scheme on the ongoing efficiency of the division as early as November 1943. This concern was based around the ongoing manpower accounting exercise that had been conducted by cable between Freyberg and the Government during the second half of 1943.¹⁴ In a letter dated 23 November 1943 Freyberg warned Jones of the impact of the late return of the *Ruapehu* draft, the delay of which, he wrote ‘will have a serious effect on the fighting efficiency of the Division during the ensuing year’.¹⁵ Writing again to Jones on 14 December, Freyberg expressed concern that the delays in the timetable for the movement and return of the first two furlough drafts would cause a ‘delay

¹¹ Uren, p.103.

¹² Uren, pp.103-104.

¹³ Freyberg to the Minister of Defence, 28 December 1943, *Documents, Volume II*, p.262.

¹⁴ Freyberg had balanced the numerical requirements of the division’s units with losses due to possible combat and the planned furlough draft programme, against additions through new batches of reinforcements and the returning furlough draftees. Underpinning this was the availability of suitable shipping, which proved problematic.

¹⁵ Freyberg to the Minister of Defence, 23 November 1943, *Documents, Volume II*, p.256.

in making the men battle-worthy and will cause a shortage of reinforcements during the campaigning season in 1944.¹⁶

Two weeks later, Freyberg once more highlighted the impact of delays in returning the *Ruapehu* men to Italy. Again, Freyberg was less concerned with the makeup of the division as it stood on the Sangro River, but more so with his forecast for the division's manpower position towards the middle of 1944. He wrote:

I am concerned by the slow build-up of our reinforcement pool and, in particular by the shortage of trained, battle-experienced personnel.... from April until the Wakatipu personnel return in July our reinforcement position has been greatly weakened. As a result, the Division may have to fight during the summer of 1944 below War Establishment.¹⁷

What Freyberg could not know at this time, was that the bulk of the trained and experienced men that he was counting on to leaven the division in the first six months of 1944 – the *Ruapehu* draft men – would not return from furlough.¹⁸ This failure to return the furlough men to Italy created problems in the ability to maintain the division at full strength, and created a situation whereby 'the reinforcement position became erratic, and [the Division] had to become accustomed to a sort of hand-to-mouth existence.'¹⁹

Two other features of the Italian campaign are worth noting for the impact on the efficiency of the 15th Army Group, the way in which the campaign was fought, and the resulting pressure placed upon the more experienced units – including the 2nd New Zealand Division.

The first is the loss of veteran Allied formations to other fronts. The situation that faced the Allies in Italy during late 1943 and throughout 1944 – an inability to grasp strategic opportunities – was made worse by the numerical parity in combat troops fielded by both sides. The rule of thumb is that to mount a successful offensive, the attacker requires at least a 3:1 numerical advantage for the attack to succeed. On a gross, strategic level this was difficult for the Allies in Italy to achieve as both sides fielded roughly even numbers of combat divisions. (see Table 2).

¹⁶ Freyberg to the Minister of Defence, 14 December 1943, *Documents, Volume II*, p.260.

¹⁷ Freyberg to the Minister of Defence, 28 December 1943, *Documents, Volume II*, pp.261-262.

¹⁸ Shipping delays, repatriation of Maori and married men, sickness, secondment to essential industries, and even refusal to return, are the main reasons why such a large part of the first furlough draft remained in New Zealand, and also why those who did return arrived months after the planned return date.

¹⁹ Stevens, *Problems of 2 NZEF*, p.69.

	Allies	Germans	Germans		Allies	Germans	Germans
		Combat	All			Combat	All
1943							
Sept.	13	7	18	July	30	22	25
Oct.	14	9	18	Aug.	22	21	24
Nov.	17	13	20	Sept.	23	21	25
Dec.	20	14	17	Oct.	23	23	27
				Nov.	23	22	26
1944				Dec.	22	22	26
Jan.	21	19	21				
Feb.	24	19	23	1944			
March	28	19	23	Jan.	21	20	24
April	28	19	23	Feb.	22	21	25
May	29	21	23	March	19	19	22
June	28	23	25	April	20	19	22

(Author)

Table 2. Opposing divisions throughout the Italian campaign.²²

Following the fall of Rome in June 1944, in what Ellis terms a ‘chronic bleeding of formations’,²³ seven divisions of the US 5th Army – from an Allied order of battle of 25 – were removed from Italy to provide manpower for Operation *Dragoon*, the invasion of southern France.²⁴ On the Adriatic side of the peninsula, where the Eighth Army was operating, three divisions and the Greek Mountain Brigade were taken to Greece between October 1944 and January 1945.²⁵ The 1944/45 New Year also saw the transfer of I Canadian Corps – one infantry and one armoured division – to North-west Europe. Similarly, during the middle of 1944, many support functions, including air support, were also relocated out of Italy to support both *Dragoon* and operations in North-west Europe.²⁶

Additionally, another problem that confronted the Allied armies in Italy – and one of their own making – was the cosmopolitan nature of the force – called ‘a polyglot army with

²² See Ellis, *Brute Force*, p.319, also Graham & Bidwell, p.401. The Germans required a number of divisions to be stationed away from the frontline in order to combat both the growing threats of partisan activity and Allied amphibious outflanking moves. Ellis, *Cassino*, p.537 provides a comparative indication of divisional strengths by each of the major combatants: British – 18,347, American – 14,253, German 12,772. These are establishment strength and would be considerably lower after prolonged campaigning.

²³ Ellis, *Brute Force*, pp.322-323.

²⁴ US VI Corps, (3 Divisions) plus the CEF (*Corps Expeditionnaire Francais*) – 4 Divisions, plus supporting troops.

²⁵ Greek Mountain Brigade – October, Indian 4th Division & British 4th Infantry Division shortly after that. 46th Division in January 1945, Brooks, p.309.

²⁶ Mark Zuehke, *The Gothic Line: Canada's Month of Hell in World War II Italy*, Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2003, p.103. See also, Eric Linklater, *The Campaign in Italy*, London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1951, pp.418-419.

distinct tribal characteristics' by one historian.²⁷ The multitude of different nationalities within the order of battle provided levels of complexity that proved difficult to manage. For example, different weapons and supply requirements meant that sub units were not readily interchangeable; language provided operational problems in the distribution and understanding of instructions; cultural differences led to many misunderstandings. As Mark Clark explained, with some frustration, in a letter at the end of 1944, as he took command of 15th Army Group and all allied ground operations in Italy,

I certainly have a hodge-podge outfit – every nationality in the world. It is not like having all Americans like the other commanders in France have. The transportation and all the weapons and ammunition of the British are entirely different from the American. They can't be switched around. The German divisions opposite me are all the same – all German with the same equipment.... There has never been one so complex as my Army Group.²⁸

Unfortunately, the replacements for the transferred units were, at least initially, less than acceptable. The newly formed US 92nd Division suffered low morale, poor officers and a lack of pride.²⁹ Targeted by a small German offensive as they first took their place at the front, 'the great majority fled the battlefield leaving a wide gap' in the 5th Army line. Subsequently given responsibility for a small local attack themselves, the results of this were also disappointing.³⁰ Clark had a low opinion of them, reporting that they were deficient in combat, poorly led by junior officers, and misbehaved in front of the enemy, while Alexander's assessment was that they were 'unsuited to modern combat conditions.'³¹

Also arriving in Italy in late 1944 was a Brazilian division who were 'poorly trained and suffered from the cold', and of whom Clark opined 'had much to learn, particularly the officers who had little understanding of their responsibilities.'³² The British also began to receive second rate replacements – notably Italian formations late in 1944. These too suffered problems, leading the Eighth Army commander Lieutenant-General Richard McCreery, to

²⁷ Morris, p.240.

²⁸ Martin Blumenson, *Mark Clark*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1984, p.239.

²⁹ Graham & Bidwell, p.383.

³⁰ Graham & Bidwell, pp.383-384.

³¹ Blumenson, *Mark Clark*, pp.236-237; John Grehan, & Martin Mace, *The War in Italy 1943-1945: Despatches from the Front, The Commanding Officers' Reports from the Field and at Sea*, Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2014, p.223. The 92nd Division was reformed in early 1945. The best troops were grouped in one regiment with the remainder sent to service battalions. The other two regiments in the division were a Nisei regiment – Japanese Americans – and a third regiment made up of men combed out of anti-aircraft units, Graham & Bidwell, p.384.

³² Graham & Bidwell, pp.383-384; Blumenson, *Mark Clark*, p.226, also, pp.236-237, Brooks, pp.344-345.

question their quality, as they had ‘Little equipment and even less will to fight’³³ For the New Zealanders these changes in the order of battle meant that a heavier share of the combat burden fell onto them, increasing pressure on an already unsteady organisation.

Within the Eighth Army, where 2nd New Zealand spend most of its time, the promotion out of Italy of two successive commanding Generals – Montgomery in December 1943, and Leese in October 1944 – also had considerable impact; both removed their ablest staff officers with them as they went, installing them in their new commands.³⁴ Conducting a war with poor strategic direction, bickering leadership, and a conglomerate of nationalities was proving hard enough, but removing the best planners and organisers within the Eighth Army placed additional pressure on corps and divisional staffs.

One consistent feature of the New Zealand Division’s campaign in Italy is the use of ‘add-on’ formations to bolster strength and make up the ongoing deficiencies in divisional infantry. On the Sangro, for example, the British 2nd Parachute Brigade was attached, while at Rimini use was made of a Greek Brigade. Also, a New Zealand Corps was formed during the Cassino battles, with the division providing, by extension, a limited corps staff, and having under its control two extra divisions.³⁵ Unfortunately, the loss of three divisional commanders within the corps in quick succession, and the knowledge and experience that they had of both their units and the Cassino battlefield, meant that the already stretched New Zealand Corps command structure was stressed even further.³⁶

Most critical of all for the New Zealand Division was the loss of the acting divisional commander in Freyberg’s absence – acting Major-General Howard Kippenberger. Described

³³ Brooks, p.310. Freyberg also had viewed Italian support troops in May 1944 and had been ‘not impressed’ by what he saw; General Officer Commanding’s Diary - Part IV, September 1943 - October 1944, WAIIS/6/46 (ANZ), 5 May 1944.

³⁴ Noted in Williams, p.68 - Montgomery, Commander Eighth Army, to Commander 21st Army Group in North-west Europe, ‘The experienced corps of staff officers who had devised victories in the desert also went.’; Morris, p.240 - ‘Montgomery continued to pilfer the best and the brightest amongst staff and commanders to feed the needs of Twenty-first Army Group.’; Doherty, *Eighth Army in Italy*, p.62 - ‘This removal of commanders and HQ staff [by Montgomery] did Eighth Army no good’; Doherty, *Eighth Army in Italy*, p.152 – on Leese, Commander Eighth Army, to Commander Allied Land Forces South-East Asia, ‘Leese imitated [Montgomery] by taking with him to India many of Eighth Army’s best staff’; Simon Ball, *The Bitter Sea*, London: HarperPress, 2009, p.254 - on Eisenhower, Commander Mediterranean Theatre of Operations moved to Supreme Allied Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force, Eisenhower, ‘began to cherry pick the most effective commanders and staff officers for transfer back to England.’

³⁵ British 78th Division & Indian 4th Division. Caddick-Adams describes the New Zealand Corps as having ‘a string and sealing wax nature’, Caddick-Adams, p.135; Pugsley also identifies command and control issues around the stripped out divisional staff, Pugsley, *A Bloody Road Home*, pp.422-424, & 467.

³⁶ The Commander of 4th Indian Division, Major-General Francis Tucker, was invalidated out of the line early in February; his replacement, Brigadier Harry Dimoline, was then himself replaced just prior to the third Cassino battle. Fourth Indian Division was then commanded by Major-General Alexander Galloway, most recently an Eighth Army Staff Officer who had been overseeing the training of an armoured division in Tunisia.

by one historian as ‘enormously capable’ and a ‘vital cog in Freyberg’s trusted command team’, Kippenberger was seriously wounded when, on 2 March, he trod on a mine, losing both feet.³⁷ The pressure to cover Freyberg’s and Kippenberger’s positions within the division, coupled with the absence of experienced officers and NCOs to the furlough draft, as well as combat losses over the previous months, meant quick promotions and personnel reshuffles. Kippenberger is recorded as having doubts during this period as to the ability of a division in which ‘too many units and sub-units... were commanded by understudies and that the 5th Infantry Brigade had a poor lot of battalion commanders.’³⁸ The troops themselves, many veterans of North Africa, began to question the competence of higher command. ‘Had they the faintest conception of what they are asking flesh and blood to do?’ asked one soldier, ‘Had they never heard of the winter climate in the Apennines? If they had, they must have had maps without contours.’³⁹

One other factor that had an impact on the manning levels within the division was sickness and disease. In the long run, sickness and disease have generally taken a greater toll on military manpower than have battle casualties, and the manpower wastage rates in 2 NZEF in Italy bear this out. During 1944, the percentage of the New Zealand forces being attended in medical units and classified as battle casualties averaged 2.0% per month, while during the same period, those classified as sick averaged 6.3%, (see Table 3).⁴⁰ The figures were similar in 2nd New Zealand Division itself; of the 19045 admissions to medical units between 18 November 1943 and 17 November 1944, only 4833 were due to a wound sustained during battle (see Table 4 for a breakdown of these figures). Of the remaining 14212 cases, 1933 were classified as accidental injuries, and 603 classed as physical exhaustion. Sickness and disease comprise the remaining 11676 admissions. The main contributors within the sickness and disease category are undiagnosed fever (2039 cases), infective hepatitis (1924), venereal disease (1028), ear, nose and throat issues (892), and Diarrhoea (750).⁴¹ The official history makes the point that once the division moved to Italy there was a rise in infective hepatitis, pneumonia, diarrhoea, areolar disease, venereal disease and *nervous disease* (my emphasis).⁴²

³⁷ Caddick-Adams, p.181. The loss of Kippenberger – a well-respected leader – also had a detrimental effect on the morale within the division.

³⁸ Graham & Bidwell, p.218.

³⁹ Tomlinson, personal account, Imperial War Museum, quoted in Richard Holmes, ‘The Italian Job: Five Armies in Italy, 1943-45’, in Addison & Calder, p.219.

⁴⁰ Figures based on the official history: T. Duncan M Stout., *War Surgery and Medicine*, Wellington: War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, 1954, p.756.

⁴¹ Stout, p.755.

⁴² Stout, p.749. The rise in ‘nervous disease’ is particularly relevant to Chapter 6.

Losses due to infective hepatitis were particularly severe within the division, with an epidemic during the autumn of 1944 infecting almost 8% of its strength.⁴³ Each man who caught infective hepatitis, or jaundice as it was more commonly called in the field, was hospitalised for around six weeks.⁴⁴ It was these long periods of hospitalisation, coupled with its high incidence, that made jaundice so destructive in terms of man days lost to the division. One statistic that cannot be overlooked is that of the 6042 men who were invalided back to New Zealand from 2 NZEF during the war, 1927 (32%) were evacuated due to ‘nervous disease’, a hint at the scale and impact of psychological problems within the division.⁴⁵

It is important that the broader manpower issues, both potential and actual, loss and supply, which faced the division throughout 1943 and 1944 should be considered alongside the more obvious operational factors when considering the battle weariness of the division as an organic entity. The various threads within the impacting on manpower – overuse, loss through casualties and sickness, failing leadership, an unbalanced divisional structure, and problems with the furlough drafts – would have been powerfully detrimental forces individually, but in combination, and coming to a head during the bitter fighting at Cassino, they drove the battle worthiness of the 2nd New Zealand Division to a low point during 1944.

⁴³ Stout, p.500.

⁴⁴ Two of the diarists whose work is used for this study succumbed to jaundice during the campaign. Laurie Birks was hospitalised and then in a convalescent camp, from 22 August 1944 until 13 October 1944; Des Davis spent 2 months recovering – 20 November 1944 until 18 January 1945.

⁴⁵ Stout, p.757.

Table3: Hospital Admissions, 2 NZEF, Italy, 1943-45.

Figure is percentage of complement in medical units at end of each month, Italy only.⁴⁶

		Total	Sick	Battle Casualties
1943	Nov.	3.29	3.14	0.15
	Dec.	6.00	3.74	2.26
1944	Jan.	5.89	4.55	1.34
	Feb.	7.77	6.13	1.64
	March	9.05	5.74	3.31
	April	7.71	5.46	2.25
	May	7.49	5.79	1.7
	June	5.96	5.08	0.88
	July	8.25	5.98	2.27
	Aug.	7.69	5.64	2.05
	Sept.	10.62	7.84	2.78
	Oct.	9.96	7.84	2.12
	Nov.	9.81	8.38	1.43
	Dec.	9.75	6.98	2.77
1944	Average		6.3	2.0
1945	Jan.	7.36	5.91	1.45
	Feb.	5.77	4.67	1.1
	March	5.78	5.00	0.78
	April	9.18	4.77	4.41
	May	4.69	3.43	1.26
1945	Average		4.8	1.8

(Author)

Note peak of sick cases during autumn of 1944 due to an infective hepatitis epidemic.

⁴⁶ Data from Stout, p.756.

Table 4: Medical Cases, 2nd New Zealand Division, 18 November 1943 – 30 September 1945.

Cases admitted to Medical Units, Italy.⁴⁷

		18 November 1943- 17 November 1944		18 November 1944 - 30 September 1945	
		Cases	% of total cases	Cases	% of total cases
		% of Non-Battle cases		% of Non-Battle cases	
Dysentery	272	1.8%	2.6%	53	0.6%
Diarrhoea	750	4.9%	7.2%	234	2.4%
Infective Hepatitis	1924	12.6%	18.4%	494	5.2%
Malaria	60	0.4%	0.6%	47	0.5%
NYD Fever	2039	13.3%	19.5%	949	9.9%
Respiratory	439	2.9%	4.2%	175	1.8%
Pneumonia	32	0.2%	0.3%	38	0.4%
ENT	892	5.8%	8.5%	797	8.3%
Scabies	228	1.5%	2.2%	847	8.8%
Pediculosis	186	1.2%	1.8%	356	3.7%
VD	1028	6.7%	9.8%	1428	14.9%
Physical Exhaustion	603	3.9%	5.8%	160	1.7%
Accidental Injuries	1933	12.6%	18.5%	1507	15.7%
Other Diseases	86	0.6%	0.8%	50	0.5%
Total Non-Battle	10472	68.4%		7135	74.5%
Battle Casualties	4833	31.6%		2441	25.5%
Total	15305			9576	

(Author)

⁴⁷ Stout, p.755.

Chapter Three. The Impact of Terrain and Weather

Sat. 30 [October 1943]... [We had a] lecture that stressed the difficulties & discomforts of the coming campaign. Promised rain, snow, mud & extreme cold; probably have frequently to turn in wet & cold & stay that way all night. Even now mud above knees in places up there. Not very cheery, seems this is not going to be any picnic.

Clarrie Ingham, 14th L.A.A Regt.¹

The physical conditions in which the Eighth Army had to live and to fight... would have tried the spirit of Polar explorers

Eric Linklater, on the winter of 1943/44.²

Italy is a mountainous and rugged country, the main range – the Apennines – runs almost the length of the country. Reaching out from this central spine like wrinkled fingers are an almost endless procession of ridges, valleys, gullies, spurs and re-entrants; some are steep, some are rolling, many reach almost to the sea. Within this physical structure run numerous rivers, streams and other watercourses. Generally running east-west, these serried ridges and watercourses present obstacle upon obstacle for advancing armies. Entering action for the first time on 18 November 1943, in an attack on the village of Perano, the Shermans of the 19th Armoured Regiment immediately found the going tough. In a passage that neatly sums up typical terrain for much of the campaign, the official history records that when the tanks advanced they found that, ‘the mile long route westwards from the start line to the objective was a rough, winding track softened by rain. The tanks had to cross a gully, climb a spur, drop down to ford a stream, and deploy in troops for the actual assault up a steep, wooded hill.’³

¹ Clarence Raymond Ingham, ‘Diaries of a Soldier and a Gentleman’, uncatalogued manuscript. (AWMM), (Ingham Diary), 30 October 1943. Ingham’s gun battery had a further lecture three days later: ‘Tues. 2 [November 1943]. Lecture by Batt[ery] Capt[ain] again stressing hardships up in line, mainly due weather & terrain & bad roads.’

² Linklater, p.136.

³ Phillips, p.53.



(Alexander Turnbull Library: DA-09548-F)

Figure 2. Mule teams near Monte Cassino. Steep and rocky, little cover.



(US National Archives; 111-SC-186685)

Figure 3. British soldiers hugging side of hill, Monte Camino. Steep, and rocky, with little cover.

As well as being tough to advance over, the nature of this terrain funnels movement into natural choke points – winding roads, passes, defiles, bridges, fords – which provide defenders with numerous opportunities for ambush and delay. In addition, the alignment, profile, and solid material composition of the Italian ridge and valley systems are an ideal foundation for robust fixed defensive lines.

Not all of Italy is steep though. Coastal areas frequently contain plains and flat valley floors which can extend inland for some distance. The main roading network during the war was sparse and based around accessible valleys; sealed roads were scarce. Route 6, the *Via Casilina*, lies between Cassino in the south and Rome in the north, and runs along the Liri valley. It was the need to secure this strategic line of advance, that the battles for Cassino were fought in early 1944.

Many of the coastal areas, such as that around Anzio, south of Rome, and Rimini, on the Adriatic coast, had undergone reclamation from marsh and swampland to arable farmland during the 1920s and 30s as part of Mussolini's programme of economic growth. Throughout the campaign the extensive networks of drains, ditches and irrigation channels, destroyed culverts, and blown stopbanks, as well as the underlying boggy nature of the ground – soaked by heavy rains or deliberate flooding, and exacerbated by concentrations of men and machines churning the soil into a morass – provided further impediments to a swift advance, and further advantage to the retreating German's strategy of delay and attrition.⁴

Described by one historian as ‘the most intrusive condition of the combat soldier’s world’,⁵ the weather played an important role in the Italian campaign. A common perception of the weather in Italy is a Mediterranean climate typified by sunshine, heat and limited rainfall. While this may be true during the summer months, during winter, and at altitude, the weather can be atrocious.

Anti-aircraft gunner Laurie Birks wondered how the members of his unit would remain comfortable during the winter. ‘Getting hard to keep warm at night’ he wrote on 24 November 1943,

⁴ General Alexander termed the Romagna – the southeastern portion of the Lombardy plain - ‘nothing but a reclaimed swamp – and not wholly reclaimed in some parts... Even in the best drained areas the soil remembers its marshy origin, and when rained on forms the richest mud known to the Italian theatre’. Quoted in Ellis, *Brute Force*, p.339.

⁵ John C. McManus, *The Deadly Brotherhood: The American Combat Soldier in World War II*, New York: Presidio Press, 1998, p.56.

even with a thickness of blanket above & below, plus most of clothes etc on top feet are usually cold by morning. Some speculation as to how bivys and general living conditions will stand up to greater cold in next few months... seems to me they'll have to put us in something more adequate buildings or dugouts. Hope I'm correct.⁶

For most infantrymen at the front, much of their time was spent outside, in a slit trench, or a sangar,⁷ with limited protection from the elements. Living indoors – in a village, farmstead, barn, or even something more substantial – was rare and to be shared with many others, or only to be found once out of the line. Conditions during the winter of 1943-44 were typically wet and cold, with snow blanketing the countryside throughout the New Year period. A New Zealander participating in the Sangro attack recorded that ‘the snowfall was the heaviest for years’, with ‘drifts 6 feet high’, so deep in places that artillery emplacements had been buried.⁸

Some found delight in the picturesque winter scenes; ‘Mts and hills covered in snow and very beautiful’ wrote signalman K.J. Smith, while Scotch Paterson remembers that, after a heavy fall of snow, ‘the countryside is like an old fashioned Christmas card.’⁹ For most though, the period on the Sangro was one of continual poor weather and poor conditions. Diary entries written by gunner Clarrie Ingham, during early January 1944, focus on the deteriorating weather as his crew attempted to reposition their gun:

Saturday 1 January. This morning we found about six inches of snow all over the place. It started to thaw a little. The gun pit filled up with slush. It rained a lot more during the day.

Sun. 2 January. Last night it froze.... After breakfast we bailed the pit out. After a lot of trouble we got the gun up onto the ground. Very

⁶ Thomas Lawrence Birks, Papers, 1941 - 1945. MS 1413 (AWMM), (Birks Diary), 24 Nov 1943.

⁷ A sangar is a simple stone hut erected by troops as front line cover. Typically housing only one or two men and often not high enough to stand up in. Infantryman Peter McDermott describes the sangars along Terelle Ridge near Cassino, where due to the rocky nature of the soil slit trenches could not be dug. ‘They were simply rocks and stones piled on one another to make rock walls – back, sides and front with an opening. This created a stone hut long enough to lie down in, wide enough to just about move in and high enough to get around on hands and knees or bottom. A groundsheet was tossed over the top to keep rain and weather out, but not direct hits by mortar.... the Germans would be domiciled a few hundred (or less) yards away on their side of the ridge.’ Phillip Martin McDermott, War Memoir entitled ‘And so to...’, MS 2006/41 (AWMM), p.26. Sometimes, a sangar could be even more austere: ‘During the day they lay or crouched in such sangars, which were little more than scooped-out depressions, with surrounds of loose stones and rocks scrabbles together to give a gesture of cover. Only at night could they dare to stand.’ Evans, p.144.

⁸ Henry Senior, *War Tales: Reflections Fifty Years On*, Rotorua: Henry Senior, 1995, p.7.

⁹ Paterson, p.24.



(Alexander Turnbull Library: DA-04987-F)

Figure 4. New Zealanders on the Italian Front clear their bivvies of snow. ‘The Italians say this is the heaviest fall of snow in living memory.’¹⁰

slushy. Packed the jacks up with logs. Got boots filled with mud and slush....

Mon. 3 January. This morning we found it had frozen again.... built a foundation on the track for our gun. [in preparation for moving positions]....

Tues. 4 January.... The boys after a lot of trouble got the gun across the drain and onto the foundation on the road....

Wed. 5 January.... It was a very cold day and there was two or three light falls of snow and a very cold wind....

Thurs. 6 January. This morning we tried to get the gun and truck across the snow to the [new] gun pit. However we got bogged down and broke our winch drive shaft.¹¹

¹⁰ General Officer Commanding's Diary - Part IV, September 1943 - October 1944, WAI18/6/46 (ANZ), 1 January 1944.

¹¹ Ingham Diary, 1-6 January 1944.

A breakdown truck had to be used to winch the gun tractor back onto level ground. The gun then had to be manhandled into the new pit. These efforts to move heavy equipment around the Italian countryside are typical, occurring regularly in many accounts.

The wet and cold took its toll on the soldier's health. Weather induced conditions such as frostbite, trench-foot, and hypothermia were not uncommon.¹² Ingham records that he became unwell during the bad New Year's weather. 'Mon. 10 January 1944. Can feel a cold coming on today.... Tues. 11 January. I've got a beaut cold.'¹³ The heavy snowfall during the New Year period added to the exhaustion. K.J. Smith recorded in his diary entry of 1 January 1944 that he woke to find it 'snowing heavily and blizzard blowing. Phone line out ... and [radio] set under water ... forced my way about 2 mile



(Alexander Turnbull Library DA-07876-F)

Figure 5. New Zealand gun crew, Forli area. 'The mild Mediterranean climate of tourist literature does not survive the test of statistics or year-round experience.'¹⁴

¹² Richard Doherty, *The History of Eighth Army 1941 to 1945*, p.57.

¹³ Ingham Diary, 10-11 January 1944.

¹⁴ Frank Rennie, *Regular Soldier; A Life in the New Zealand Army*, Auckland: Endeavour Press, 1986, p.60.

up wadi to ... [phone] exchange. Could hardly walk against blizzard... fell into shell holes and slitties covered over in snow.' Smith concluded his diary entry recording that he was 'very tired after trudging around in snow and mud all day.'¹⁵ However, he was unable to get much rest that night as 'about 2am awakened by Jerry shelling our area. About a doz. fell all around the house where I am sleeping. Building rocking and swaying from concussion of blast. Very tired so turned over and went to sleep.'¹⁶ Freyberg himself commented that on the Sangro 'conditions were for a little while quite Arctic.'¹⁷ For the New Zealanders in positions on the Sangro River and during the subsequent attack on the Orsogna area, these condition were the rule, not the exception, and they would toil through them for days on end, and suffer accordingly. The poor weather also impacted on the more technical aspects of the war. Alf Voss, an officer in 21 Battalion recalled that:

the winter messed up the Artillery.... the cordite froze in the cold, making some shells fall short by as much as 800 yards. In our carefully planned stonks there were only 200 yards between the edge of the barrage and our own advancing troops. More than once, we found we took casualties after shells from just one gun fell short into the middle of our own troops.¹⁸

Similarly, Ron Tanner, a machine gunner in 27 (MG) Battalion, describes how the extreme cold caused the firing pins of the Vickers machine guns to become brittle; the only way to guard against the pins snapping was to remove the lock of the gun and cuddle it inside his jacket.¹⁹

By themselves, terrain or climate would have provided difficulties, but in combination they worked to make physical conditions appalling and progress painfully slow. In his introduction to 15th Army Group's comprehensive summary of the campaign, Army Group Commander General Mark Clark concludes that:

Military operations in Italy were influenced by the natural mountainous characteristics of the country. In general its topography, climate, road-net, the construction of its buildings and the location of its villages favored the defence and confronted any attacking force with a series of obstacles, formidable in themselves and, in combination, well nigh insurmountable.²⁰

¹⁵ K.J. Smith, War Diary 1943-1945, MS 1301(AWMM), (Smith Diary), 1 January 1944.

¹⁶ Smith Diary, 2 January 1944.

¹⁷ Quoted in Freyberg, p.453.

¹⁸ Alf Voss, 'The Hard Slog', in, *Mates and Mayhem, World War II: Frontline Kiwis Remember*, Lawrence Watt (ed.), Auckland: HarperCollins, 1996, p.119.

¹⁹ Ron Tanner, *The Trigger and the Finger*, Whangaparaoa, Auckland: self-published, 2006, p.103.

²⁰ A Military Encyclopedia Based on Operations in the Italian Campaigns 1943 – 1945, Italy: 15 Army Group, 1945, p.xxii.

The broken country channelled the frequent downpours into streams that became torrents in a matter of minutes; rivers swelled to many times their normal size, bolstered by meltwaters, frustrating and breaking down operations. Once they had moved up to the Sangro River in November 1943, the New Zealanders began a regime of patrolling across the river which, ‘on different nights... varied in level from knee to neck high’. Continuous rain caused the torrent to get worse until ‘the speed of the current made it impossible to stand up in water up to the hips.’ One patrol was forced to retire with the river uncrossed due to ‘a current which in places foamed neck-high and swept men off their feet’; one man was swept across the river onto the enemy held bank.²¹ In the inclement autumn weather, all who patrolled across the Sangro returned cold, wet and frustrated.

While the conditions in Italy were similar to those in which many of the New Zealanders would have grown up with in the South Island high country, or the back blocks of Taranaki or Hawkes Bay, they would have come as a shock to those men from the cities, and they were very different from those experienced in North Africa over the previous two years. When combined, difficult terrain and poor weather wore away at military efficiency; the concentration and activities of the static units on the Sangro compounded these issues. Camps, supply dumps, road intersections, gunpits, approaches to bridges, and areas around billets, were churned into bogs; mud stuck to everything and accumulated on clothes, personal items, medical equipment, tents, tools, weapons, vehicles, and men. For the individual soldiers, operating in these conditions became an ordeal: ‘Everything is filthy’ wrote one ‘the mud clings in cakes to your hands, boots, pants, and coat, as a heavy weight to your shoes. For the past 5 days I have not had dry feet.’²² Dry boots were also a problem for gunner K.J. Smith: ‘all my gear dry now’ he wrote ‘except boots, only have one pr at present & they are wet all the time.’²³ Relatively simple tasks such as digging a slit trench or setting up a bivvy could, in typically atrocious conditions, become time-consuming, herculean tasks. Near Orsogna, Roger Smith describes how:

on a night that was as black as pitch, the rain poured down We split into two-man units in a double line along the terrace, and just dug. The ground was half cultivated and a quagmire underfoot – it was like digging in an unpaved stockyard where a hundred cows had been milked all winter. As we shovelled the mud off, the surrounding ground oozed into the depression made, like a

²¹ Phillips, pp.54-57.

²² Fritz, p.107.

²³ Smith Diary, 22 November 1943.

shallow duckpond.... we gradually built a bank around us to stop the natural drainage into the hole. We smashed off some olive branches with the pick to give the sides some solidarity and threw the brush and leaves into the bottom to soak up some of the water. Dawn was just breaking when we pulled the bivvy upright over our horrible looking home.

We spread our groundsheets in the bottom, tossed our soaking greatcoats and blankets on top, then crawled in ourselves.²⁴

Vehicle movement was also problematic. The rural Italian roads were not engineered for even occasional heavy vehicle use, let alone tracked vehicles, heavy guns and their tractors, and long and often repeated supply convoys. As the official history records:

the repair and maintenance of roads in the Division's area was a continuous labour. The surfaces were damaged at the outset by demolitions and shell holes and then by streaming rain and incessant traffic, which churned wet roads into mud and scarred them with deep ruts, especially at the many bends; heavy steel-shod tanks were harsh abrasives, and under their weight and that of ditched trucks the edges crumbled.²⁵

Travelling on anything less than a formed and surfaced road was never anything but difficult; movement off of a formed carriageway though, became close to impossible as the combination of rain, damaged drainage structure, heavily cultivated soils, and concentrations of men and machines, all combined to create a thick muddy soup of any likely route. Artillery units, which regularly left the road to disperse, and then dug to create gun pits, were some of the worst affected by the mud. Concentrated activity around gun pits meant that extracting the guns when the time came to move became an exercise that combined physics, brute strength, perseverance and patience. Diary entries written by Clarrie Ingham, provide a record of the efforts that his gun crew had to go through to manoeuvre their gun between positions, as they supported the assault across the Sangro River at the end of 1943:

Mon 15th November. It rained a little last night. First thing in the morning we received word to pack up. We had to winch the gun across the field and onto the road. We went just up the road and winched the gun up a steep hillside near to a farm house

Fri 19th Nov.... The truck slid off the road

Sat 20th.... It started raining as we set off.... The road was slippery mud. A4's tractor slid off the road and we winched them back. Further on while negotiating a corner our gun and tractor both went off the road. Our winch cable broke when we were trying to

²⁴ Roger Smith, *Up the Blue; A Kiwi Private's view of the Second World War*, Wellington: Ngaio Press, 2000, p.113.

²⁵ Phillips, p.59.

winch the truck back onto the road. It stopped raining about now. A4's tractor winched both gun and tractor back onto the road....

Tuesday Nov 23rd 1943. At 4am this morning it started to rain.... It kept on raining but the Major said we had to move.... By 3.30pm we had gone about 250 yards. We had to winch ourselves along. The truck by this time was skidding on its belly so we knocked off for the night. Uprooted 3 olive trees today.

Wed 24th.... We dug until 3pm and then had the gun and truck ready to winch out.²⁶



(US National Archives; 111-SC-196137)

Figure 6. Pack mule on a road in the Apennines.

Another gunner, K.J. Smith also recorded the difficulty of moving vehicles around during the Italian winter,

Sun. 26th [December 1943]: Took 5 of us 5 hours to push 2 trucks out. Never seen so much mud in all my life. Never done so much digging or pushing before either. Trucks

²⁶ Ingham diary, 15-24 November 1943.

uncontrollable when being driven – slide everywhere.... 7 hours to go 5 miles.²⁷



(Alexander Turnbull Library: DA-04694-F)

Figure 7. Soldiers of New Zealand Divisional Artillery winching a gun into a new position on the Sangro River front.

Not only did Ingham's and Smith's gun crews suffer the frustration of moving their truck and gun around in the Italian mud, but they did it while subjected to the incessant rain, bitter cold, sleeping in hastily dug slit trenches, and ongoing German shelling. Senior officers were not immune from the hassle and frustration of the Italian mud. During his travels, K.J. Smith 'passed Tiny Freyberg... also Brig. Weir who was stuck in bog, gave him the 'ras', & then we got stuck ourselves.²⁸

The conditions that were faced frustrated the soldiers at the front; all tasks, even the simplest could become impossible. Having to live and fight in wet, cold surroundings, not able to be dry, and where mud was a constant companion and stuck to everything, impacted on the basic needs of the men: it wore away at military efficiency, and was a significant factor in declining morale. Although the Germans would have struggled with the conditions as much as

²⁷ Smith diary, 26 December 1943.

²⁸ Smith diary, 29 November 1943.

the Allies, weather and terrain were great levellers, and somewhat negated the Allies superiority in numbers and equipment. When these factors combined with the military skill of the *Wehrmacht*, the struggle in Italy became much more of an even contest.

Chapter Four. The Enemy

[The Italian Campaign] developed the features that have characterised it ever since: slow, painful advance through difficult terrain against a determined and resourceful enemy, skilled in the exploitation of natural obstacles by mines and demolitions.

General Henry Maitland Wilson, Supreme Allied Commander, Mediterranean Theatre.¹

[If] it weren't rain or bloody mountains held up advance, it were bloody Jerry sitting down behind spandau going blurp-blurp.

Anonymous British infantryman.²

The German forces in Italy presented the New Zealand Division with an able and skilful adversary. Well equipped, well led, well trained, and determined, the Germans used all of their attributes to the fullest. Their military skills and performance when conducting operations have been recognised by military professional and lay person alike. ‘There is no doubt’ wrote Michael Carver, who had served as a commander of an armoured battalion in Italy,

that the Germans, of all ranks, were more highly professional soldiers than the British. Their knowledge and practical application of the weapons available to them was in almost all cases superior.... They were tough, skilful, determined, and well-disciplined soldiers.... Their standard was reached, in a few cases exceeded, by some of the British: but a large proportion of the 8th Army’s troops never attained it.³

¹ Report by The Supreme Allied Commander Mediterranean to the Combined Chiefs of Staff on The Italian Campaign, 8th January 1944 to 10th May 1944, London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1946, p.1.

² S.P. Llewellyn, Journey Towards Christmas: Official History of the 1st Ammunition Company Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force 1939-45, Wellington: War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, 1949, p.373.

³ Michael Carver, Tobruk, London: B.T. Batsford, 1964, p.255.

During the 1970s, extensive analysis and modelling of German military performance during World War II was carried out in the United States. These studies concluded that the Germans,

consistently outfought the far more numerous Allied armies.... In 1943-44 the German combat effectiveness superiority over the Western Allies (Americans and British) was in the order of 20-30 percent. On a man-for-man basis, the German ground soldiers consistently inflicted casualties at about a 50 percent higher rate than they incurred from the opposing British and American troops under all circumstances. This was true when they were attacking and when they were defending, when they had a local numerical superiority and when, as was usually the case, they were outnumbered, when they had local air superiority and when they did not, when they won and when they lost.⁴

One military commentator has pointed out that one of the Allies most fundamental errors throughout the war was the underestimation of the German's speed of reaction. The Germans, he wrote, had an 'astonishing ability... regardless of the punishment they might have taken, to be "quicker on the draw", in the tactical and operational sense' than most of their opponents.⁵

The New Zealand soldier also saw his German opposite as a challenging adversary. 'With all his faults he's a good soldier,' wrote one man, 'tenacious, and courageous and we don't underrate him.'⁶ Another recorded that 'in my opinion he's the best soldier in the world.'⁷

Early in the campaign the Germans looked to combine their strategy of slow staged withdrawal with a grinding down of the attacking forces. With this they had the assistance of the terrain which on both strategic and local levels, funnelled Allied forces into choke points which allowed the defenders to concentrate their efforts, and at the same time made outflanking moves difficult. It was this German strategy of slow, sometimes painstaking withdrawal, from one defensive position to another, their utilisation of terrain features, their ability to throw

⁴ T.N. Dupuy, *A Genius for War: The German Army and General Staff, 1807-1945*, Macdonald and Jane's, 1977, pp.253-254. As an example, naval historian Angus Konstam points out that Allied casualties at Salerno were 6908, while the Germans suffered 3472, a situation that, Konstam suggests 'speaks volumes – despite the horrendous artillery, naval gunnery and air bombardment... and the launching of a major counter-attack, they still managed to inflict a casualty rate of two to one on the Allies.' See, Angus Konstam, *Salerno 1943: The Allied Invasion of Italy*, Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2007, p.157.

⁵ Julian Thompson, in, David Rolf, *The Bloody Road to Tunis, Destruction of the Axis Forces in North Africa: November 1942 – May 1942*, London: Greenhill Books, 2001, p.8.

⁶ Censorship summaries, DA 508/2 - DA 508/3, (ANZ), Censorship Report No 14, 20 Feb to 26 Feb 1944, part 2, p.2.

⁷ Censorship summaries, DA 508/2 - DA 508/3, (ANZ), Censorship Report No 43, 10 Sept to 16 Sept 44, part 2, p.2.

together defensive screens around Allied offensives at all levels, to rapidly counter attack, and wear down the attackers, that turned the war in Italy into a nineteen-month fight of attrition more akin to the Western Front of 1917, than the fast flowing campaign of North Africa that the New Zealanders were accustomed to.



(Bundesarchiv, Bild 146-1974-006-62 / Hermann Czernich)

Figure 8. German soldier surveying the area below Monte Cassino. Retreating through the Italian mountains allowed the Germans to retain local initiative in many local areas. As one soldier remarked ‘We are always on the bottom, the Germans always on top.’⁸

At a strategic level the German defences rested on a series of defensive lines. Some were hastily prepared with little or no fixed defences, while still others were designed as intermediate measure to delay advances and provide time for subsequent construction of main lines. Two main defensive zones were constructed by the Germans in Italy, the first of which was south of Rome and ran roughly along the Gargliano and Sangro rivers.⁹ This broad defensive area consisted of a number of individual lines code named the Barbara, Bernhardt,

⁸ Atkinson, p.535.

⁹ When the Sangro River portion of the *Bernhardt* line was breached in November 1943 a fall-back position was developed along the Foro River. See Neil Short, & Chris Taylor, *German Defences in Italy in World War II*, Oxford: Osprey, 2006, p.9.



(Osprey Publishing)

Map 2: German Defensive lines, southern Italy.¹⁰

¹⁰ Neil Short, & Chris Taylor, *German Defences in Italy in World War II*, Oxford: Osprey, 2006, p.11.



(Osprey Publishing)

Map 3: German Defensive lines, northern Italy.¹¹

Dora, and Hitler (*Fuherriegel*) lines, which as a group were collectively referred to as the Gustav, or Winter Line, and included the formidable defences around Cassino and the entrance

¹¹ Short & Taylor, p.15.

to the Liri valley.¹² To the north of Rome, a second strong defensive line had begun to be prepared shortly after the Italian surrender; this ran broadly from Pisa in the west to Rimini on the Adriatic. Again, there were a number of individual lines with a variety of functions that made up this fortress zone, termed the Gothic Line by the Allies, and the *Grüne Linie* (Green Line) by the Germans.

An important point to understand with regards to German strategy and the use of their progression of defensive lines is that they did not simply retire from one fixed line to the next, abandoning the area in between. At all points, Allied advances were held up by a combination of demolitions, and active defence, and local counter-attack; progress was not a matter of swiftly advancing to assault the next major fortress line, but a stop-start journey of delay, loss and attrition. As they retreated, the Germans identified potential sites where men would gather; wells, village squares, camps, and likely gun sites, as well as areas of roads where traffic would be concentrated or constricted, for example in villages, crossroads, defiles, passes, and typically, around bridges; these were registered for later bombardment at a time when likely to be occupied by Allied troops. The broken terrain meant that roads were limited, stream and river crossings frequent, and the opportunity for delays at blown culverts and bridges, almost unlimited. Typically, demolitions and roadblocks would take advantage of both natural and military features. Rows of trees extending hundreds of metres, for example, would be felled, falling interlocked, providing an obstruction that, under normal conditions would be time consuming and hazardous, but to add to the delays and danger, the obstacle would be mined, booby-trapped, and targeted by artillery or mortars. It would take time and a steady flow of casualties before progress could resume. Significantly, roadblocks like this were but part of a continuous progression of similar obstructions.¹³ Geoffrey Cox, the Divisional Intelligence Officer, succinctly summarises the problems that such a strategy presented when he wrote that:

the war in Italy was an engineer's war, a war of lifting minefields, building approach roads, filling craters, clearing demolitions, and above all of building bridges. The Germans' most valuable weapon in Italy was not the field-gun or the 'plane or the machine-gun, but the demolition charge which could block a ravine or blow a bridge and hold up an entire army.¹⁴

¹² In January 1944, the Hitler Line was renamed *Sengerriegel*, after the German commander General Fridolin von Senger und Etterlin, to avoid any embarrassment if a feature bearing the Führer's name should fall.

¹³ Ellis, *The Sharp End*, p.78; Morris, p.196.

¹⁴ Cox, p.39.



(Alexander Turnbull Library: DA-04629-F)

Figure 9. Motor ambulances on their way to the Italian Front cross a deviation necessitated by demolitions of the bridge seen in the background. Each demolition disrupted the advance by hours if not days. Note the white tape denoting the boundary between cleared and mined areas.



(Alexander Turnbull Library: DA-04888-F)

Figure 10. German bridge demolition, Sangro region. German engineers were thorough and methodical in their work.

Most of the German divisions that fought in Italy contained a wealth of experience.¹⁵ Many of the senior officers had fought on the Eastern Front and understood the situations that they faced, and how to deal with them.¹⁶ The logistical system that supplied the troops at the front was robust, and although heavily targeted by Allied air forces, continued to function through to the last weeks of the war. Personal equipment was suitable for the Italian climate and at times the envy of Allied soldiers. ‘The German soldiers were appropriately clothed in white suits and snowshoes’ wrote one New Zealander, ‘The Russians had taught them well. As usual our army had nothing. Our boots rotted in the snow, we were totally ill equipped.’¹⁷

The German *landser* was also well armed with modern, high quality weapons, and the New Zealand infantry found themselves confronted by weapons that were easily equal to, and in many cases superior to, their own. The standard German heavy machine gun by 1943 was the MG42, commonly referred to by Allied troops as the Spandau.¹⁸ The Spandau was a versatile, modern, machine gun able to be used in both a portable role with a bipod, or mounted on a tripod, with an optical sight, to provide a heavier weapon for sustained or indirect fire. It was a robust, forgiving weapon, somewhat insensitive to dirt, dust, moisture, heat and cold. Each infantry section carried one MG42.¹⁹ With an effective range of 1500m (maximum 4000m) and a rate of fire of 1300 rpm, it outperformed its standard New Zealand opponents – the section-based Bren gun – which had an effective range of around 1000m and a rate of fire

¹⁵ While the men themselves might have been experienced, many of the divisions themselves were relatively new. Many had only been reformed at the start of 1943 – around reserve cadres - as replacements for units lost at Stalingrad or in Tunisia. There were some divisions though that were battle seasoned: I Parachute Division, 26 Panzer Division, 5th Mountain Division, for example. See, Samuel Mitcham, *Hitler's Legions: The German Order of Battle, World War II*, London: Leo Cooper, & Secker & Warburg, 1985, for example, for details.

¹⁶ For example: *General der Panzertruppe* Joachim Lemelsen – Eastern Front 1941-43, then commanded, alternatively both the 10th and 14th Armies in Italy; *General der Panzertruppe* Traugott Herr – served on Eastern Front 1941-42, then commanded LXXVI Panzer Corps in Italy; *Generalmajor* Rudolf Sieckenius – Eastern Front 1941-43, then commanded 16th Panzer Division at Salerno; *General der Fallschirmtruppe* Richard Heidrich – Eastern Front 1942-43, commanded 1st Parachute Division at Cassino, then I Parachute Corps in northern Italy; *General der Panzertruppe* Fridolin von Senger und Etterlin – Eastern Front 1942-43 then commanded XIV Panzer Corps in Italy, notably at Cassino.

¹⁷ Tanner, p.77.

¹⁸ The Spandau was also known by various other nicknames which enlighten to both its sound and effect: ‘Hitler’s Buzzsaw’, ‘Die Schnellspritz’ (the Fast Sprayer), ‘Knochensäge’ (Bone Saw), ‘Linoleum Ripper’. Chris McNab, *MG34 and MG42 Machine Guns*, Osprey: Oxford, 2012, p.62.

¹⁹ Alex Buchner, *The German Infantry Handbook 1939-45*, trans. Dr. Edward Force, Atalen, Pennsylvania: Schiffer Military History, 1991, pp.22; ‘German gunners were noted for their ability to use a group of tripod-mounted machine guns to saturate a target area from distance. With about 13 machine guns in its complement, a German infantry company could send out well over 2,000 rounds every minute against enemy formations.... Allied troops forming up for an attack were particularly vulnerable; the first they would know of the enemy machine guns would be the crack of rounds splitting the air, observed bullet impacts and soldiers dropped to the floor, dead or wounded.’ McNab, pp.51-52.

of 500rpm, and, as one veteran remembers, ‘sounded like pop-guns compared to Spandaus’.²⁰ The New Zealanders also used the heavier Vickers machine gun, which, while still an excellent weapon, was being superseded by the more compact guns especially on the offensive.²¹ The fearsome sound of the Spandau firing was recalled even many years later by veterans; ‘A machine gun was in [a rubble pile].... It was one of those MG42s, and they just started grrrrrrrrrrr, they just growl’;²² ‘the whip-lash crack [of Spandau bullets] made me shiver’²³ remembers one, while another likened the sound to ‘tearing calico’²⁴

Mortars played an important role in Italy, and were a continual problem for the New Zealanders in Italy. They were easier to move than standard artillery, requiring less manpower, easier to conceal from Allied air superiority, and suited to the broken terrain by being able to lob bombs onto reverse slopes. The standard German mortars had a range from two to six kilometres.²⁵ Without the distinctive whistle of an artillery shell, mortar bombs arrived with little warning, allowing little time for men to take cover.

One weapon which had a fearsome reputation, was the *nebelwerfer* (see figure 11). Originally designed as a smoke projector, it was found to be suitable for firing rockets filled with high explosive. Multiple barrels – commonly six – were fitted onto a carriage about the size of a large wheelbarrow, and its tubes could be fired individually or in salvo. Its small size meant that it was easy to move and easy to conceal; unlike larger artillery guns, *nebelwerfers* were difficult to locate and destroy. See pages 72 & 73 for accounts of this weapon in action.

The New Zealand Division’s newly formed 4th Armoured Brigade quickly discovered that their adversary’s tanks and anti-tank weapons were significantly superior in both firepower and armour. The medium anti-tank gun used was the PaK 40. Also used in an anti-tank role throughout the Italian campaign, but in small numbers, was the formidable 88mm gun.

²⁰ Alex Bowlby, *The Recollections of Rifleman Bowlby*, London: Cassell, 1999, p.70. The rate of fire of the Spandau was so great that individual shots could not be distinguished, and blended together to form one constant sound, Buchner, p.148.

²¹ McNab, p.20; Neil Grant, *The Bren Gun*, Osprey: Oxford, 2013, p.14; *Small Arms Training, Vol. 1, Pamphlet No. 4 – Light Machine Gun 1942*, London: War Office, 1942, p.1. Additionally, the Vickers (maximum range 4000m/600rpm) was expensive, time consuming to maintain, and required considerable training for its crews to become efficient. One other operational shortcoming was that it was water cooled requiring a continual supply of water – difficult to maintain in periods of sustained combat. Martin Pegler, Osprey: *The Vickers-Maxim Machine Gun*, Oxford, 2013, pp. 49 & 68.

²² Lance Goddard, *Hell & High Water: Canada and the Italian Campaign*, Dundern Press: Toronto, 2007, p.189.

²³ Bowlby, p.65.

²⁴ McNab, p.62.

²⁵ Buchner, pp.47-49, 57, 59-60, 148-149. Also, Bruce Quarrie, *Encyclopaedia of the German Army in the 20th Century*, Wellingborough, Northamptonshire: Patrick Stephens, 1989, pp.149-150.

Originally designed as a heavy anti-aircraft gun, it had been adapted to the anti-tank role in the North African campaign, where it performed superbly against British armour.²⁶



(Bundesarchiv/ Bild 101I-582-2121-22)

Figure 11, *Nebelwerfer* and crew. This weapon's compact size meant that it was easy to move and conceal.

The German armoured vehicles were constantly being redesigned and deployed during the war. In 1939/40 the backbone of the armoured *blitzkrieg* had been the *Panzer* II: 7.6 tonnes, crewed by three men, mounting a 20mm gun, and with 13mm frontal armour. Three years later German tank design had advanced to the *Panzer* VI ‘Tiger’: 55 tonnes, with a crew of five, mounting the 88mm gun, and sporting 100mm of frontal armour. Conversely, Anglo-American tank design lagged behind throughout the middle part of the war. The standard Allied tank in the west throughout this period, and the mainstay of the New Zealand armoured regiment – the M4 Sherman – was a product of pre-war design and thinking (see figure 12).²⁷ The Sherman had been designed in early 1941 to withstand contemporary anti-tank weapons, mainly the

²⁶ The 88mm was also used as an anti-infantry weapon where high velocity and flat trajectory meant that the shell arrived without warning, a disconcerting situation for infantry under fire.

²⁷ As with most weapons systems there were a number of versions used during the war. Most Shermans used by the New Zealanders were the M4A2 (US designation)/ Sherman III (British designation).

Wehrmacht's standard carriage mounted anti-tank gun of the time, the 37mm PaK 36. By 1943, the PaK 36 was obsolete, and had been replaced in most units with much heavier 50 and 75mm guns, both capable of penetrating the armour of the Sherman at combat ranges.²⁸



(Alexander Turnbull Library: DA-06507B-F)

Figure 12. A Sherman of the New Zealand Armoured Brigade (right) next to a *Panzer* VI Tiger, La Romola, Tuscany. At 55 tonnes the Tiger was almost twice the weight of the Sherman. Apparent in the photograph, apart from the Tiger's larger dimensions, are the extremely wide tracks which provided a ground pressure almost equal to that of the lighter Sherman.

German tank mounted guns were also superior to those of the Allies, with the most common German tank type in Italy in 1943/44, the *Panzer* IV, well armoured and mounting a high velocity 75mm gun. The *Panzer* VI 'Tiger', which was frequently encountered in Italy, mounted the even more formidable 88mm gun. The New Zealand tank crews were at a distinct disadvantage: the armour on their Shermans could be penetrated at most combat ranges by their opponent's standard tank or anti-tank guns, while with their 75mm gun they were unable to

²⁸ Steven Zagola, & Peter Sarson, *Sherman Medium Tank, 1942-45*, London: Osprey, 1993, p.14.

knock out German tanks except through the side or rear, and at very low ranges.²⁹ Even worse was the typical result of a Sherman being hit with an armoured piercing round; the Sherman was nicknamed the ‘Ronson’ by the Allied troops, after a brand of lighter, and ‘Tommy Cooker’ by the Germans, for its propensity to catch fire when hit.³⁰ The battlefields around the Sangro River, at Cassino, and throughout Tuscany, were littered with knocked out or immobilised New Zealand tanks.

The physical environment, the strategy of delay and attrition, and the tactics employed to meet this strategy, meant that explosive mines were an ideal defensive weapon. The physical nature of the countryside with its broken terrain, the concentration of roads and tracks to valley floors and other flat areas, the limited assembly areas and routes of attack, all meant that the advancing Allies, at all levels of operations, were channelled into certain routes. Roads, assembly areas, promising artillery sites, as well as buildings and bridges, were regularly and heavily mined.

Typically, mines aimed at vehicles were laid close to or on roads, around crossroads or intersections, airfields, railways, and telegraph lines. Efforts were made to catch vehicles where they pulled off of roads, for example where they left the road to let oncoming vehicles pass, or where, because of speed, they cut corners or left the roadway. Every effort was made to evade detection: mines would be placed in dips in the carriageway where oncoming vehicles could not see disturbed ground, in heavily rutted areas, deep into the soil so that it would take a number of vehicle passes to compact and detonate the mine, and camouflaged by running light single wheels over the mined area leaving tyre imprints on the surface to provide an appearance of normality. An analysis of 671 British tank losses throughout the Italian campaign suggests that of the total, 30% were attributable to mines, a figure significantly higher than other theatres.³¹

²⁹ The 75mm gun on the *Panzer IV* could penetrate the frontal armour of the Sherman at greater than 2000m, and the side armour at more than 4500m. Zagola, & Sarson, p.14. Additionally, US manufactured tank guns had only fixed magnification gun sights, while German gunsights had variable magnification and anti-glare filters. See, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M4_Sherman, also, Zagola, & Sarson, p.10.

³⁰ At the time, crews blamed the engine fuel igniting, but this was later proved to be incorrect. German armoured piercing shells contained a small charge which ignited when the shell breached the hull. This regularly set off ammunition charges that were generally stowed in the transoms above the tracks. Once this issue had been identified, ammunition storage was moved to the floor of the tanks and ‘wet’ lockers were installed – a bladder containing water with a glycerine anti-freeze and corrosion inhibitor mix, surrounded the shells helping to extinguish any hot splinters or small ignitions; Zagola, & Sarson p.14, Steven J. Zagola, *Panther vs Sherman: Battle of the Bulge 1944*, Oxford: Osprey, 2008, p.20, George Forty, *World War Two Tanks*, London: Osprey Automotive, 1995, p.126.

³¹ H.G. Gee, *The Comparative Performance of German Anti-Tank Weapons During World War II*, 5th ed., Merriam Press: Bennington, Vermont, 2007, p.12.



(Alexander Turnbull Library: DA-07938-F)

Figure 13. New Zealand soldiers sweep for mines on a street in Faenza.

Anti-personnel mines – *Schrapnellmine*, *Springmine* or *Splittermine*, (S-mines) - were also deployed with some ingenuity. They would be sown around demolitions - especially bridges that required repair or by-passing; next to purposely obscured sign posts where drivers would need to get out to read them, around crossing points along fences, in ditches, haystacks, even under puddles and amongst standing crops, and mixed amongst anti-tank mines to injure tank crews as they left their vehicles. S-mines were also favourites to use in booby traps. A pull fuse could be fitted to the S-mine so that a trip wire could be attached. A typical tactic was for a German patrol to cut communication wires and sow the area around the break with mines, booby trapping the cut wire ends as well, to catch the signallers sent to carry out repairs.³² An S-mine could also be buried beneath another mine, for example under an anti-vehicle *Tellermine*, thus rigged to catch engineers involved in mine clearing operations. New Zealand engineer Pat Sheehan gives some impression of the stress that was faced by the engineers when they were lifting mines:

You'd very gently rub your hand up underneath the mine [to see] that it wasn't booby trapped underneath so that when you'd lift it up it would go. You'd have to be very careful and sweep underneath as well. ... During a night you might lift

³² Gordon L. Rottman, & Peter Dennis, *World War II Axis Booby Traps and Sabotage Tactics*, Oxford: Osprey, 2009, p.40.

forty or fifty mines. Every time that was forty or fifty challenges. And you weren't too sure that the [man on the detector] might have missed one.³³



(Author)

Figure 14. Even after the front had moved on the dangers from mines and booby traps remained.

Intelligence bulletins, aimed at publicising information on the enemy continually reminded readers of the basic rule ‘everything moveable and seemingly harmless must be suspected and treated with caution.’³⁴ Warnings continued at regular intervals; one US pamphlet released in June 1943 warned that:

To date the Germans have booby-trapped almost every conceivable type of movable object — especially doors, windows, steps, floors, pictures, furniture (especially the drawers), cupboards, water taps, telephones, light switches, rugs, mats, documents, flashlights, cigarette cases, fountain pens, and even the bodies of their own dead. In fact, the list has included virtually everything that the perverted imagination of the enemy could encompass.³⁵

³³ Parr, p.51.

³⁴ *Intelligence Bulletin*, Vol.1 No.10, June 1943, Washington: Military Intelligence Service, War Department, 1943, p.11.

³⁵ *Intelligence Bulletin*, Vol.1 No.10, June 1943, p.10.

The dead of both sides were regularly booby trapped,³⁶ as was abandoned equipment and loot to catch unwary souvenir hunters.³⁷

The German army made exceptional use of choke points throughout the Italian campaign. Artillery was pre-registered on targets, machine guns positioned to fire on fixed lines, likely approaches and cover mined. Once the attacking infantry was pinned down it took time to bring up armour to force the issue. Furthermore, to enable support and supply units to advance, replacement bridging or deviations had to be constructed to replace destroyed bridges or culverts; engineers and engineering equipment, such as bulldozers and bridging equipment, were sought after targets.³⁸ Not only were key route features targeted but also assembly and observation areas and potential artillery positions. Having the advantage of being able to prepare as they withdrew, German artillery would register these prime targets, which would also be heavily mined and booby trapped. As part of carrying out denial of resources to the Allies, wells, foodstuffs, feed, livestock, and draught animals were also destroyed as the Germans retreated, as witnessed near Rimini by Divisional Cavalry member Ian Bunny. Bunny wrote that the Germans ‘had burnt houses over the Rigossa, wrung fowls necks and left them in piles and He had only just withdrawn from these places. Country’s dotted with dead white bullocks, horses, mules, pigs, rabbits and fowls around the houses.’³⁹

The Allied troops were also subjected to ongoing German propaganda efforts aimed at weakening morale, or encouraging troops to desert or surrender. Millions, of leaflets were distributed by both sides during the campaign.⁴⁰ The physical conditions that were encountered and the weariness of the troops was emphasised by the Germans in their leaflets. One example played on the attrition and slow progress of the Allied advance, (see figure 15). In this leaflet from 1944, the Reaper’s fingers point to the Anzio beachhead and Cassino, the two areas that

³⁶ *Intelligence Bulletin, Vol.3 No.7, March 1945*, Washington: Military Intelligence Service, War Department, 1945, p.16.

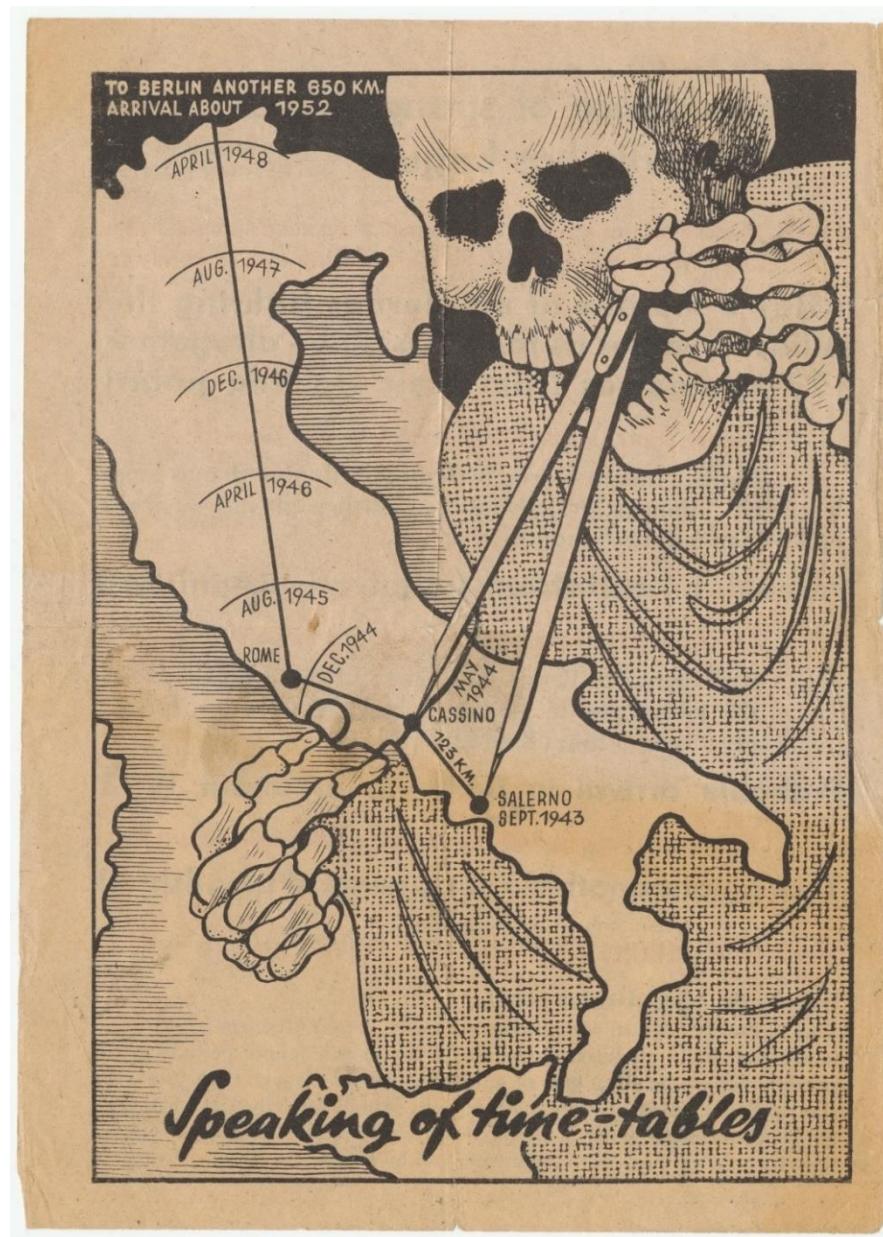
³⁷ See, Rottman & Dennis, pp.27-28. On a brighter note, machine gunner Des Davis records that his group used mines for fishing: ‘Swimming this afternoon. Threw a mine in & got three big fish. Carp, about 10lbs’. D.H. Davis, Letters and Diaries, 1941 - 1945. MS 2002/75, (AWMM), diary, 3 July 1944.

³⁸ To give some indication of the scale of the German demolition programme during the campaign, the engineers of the 15th Army Group built the following: fixed span Bailey bridges built – 2832 (45 miles in total length), floating Bailey bridges – 19, treadway bridges – 101, permanent bridges – 430, Railway bridges and viaducts – 490 reconstructed. The Allies were forced to carry out a substantial bridge reconstruction programme in rear areas to free up the temporary bridging material that had been used. J.H. Joiner, *One More River to Cross: The Story of British Military Bridging*, Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 2001, pp.215 & 225.

³⁹ Philip Deed (ed.), *2nd New Zealand Divisional Cavalry; Men with No 1 Troop and B Squadron, 1943-1945, Italy*, Matamata: self-published, 2013, p.121.

⁴⁰ During the period 11 February 1945 until 10 March 1945, a total of 48,746,675 leaflets were disseminated by the Allied forces in Italy, *A Military Encyclopedia Based on Operations in the Italian Campaigns 1943 – 1945*, p.87.

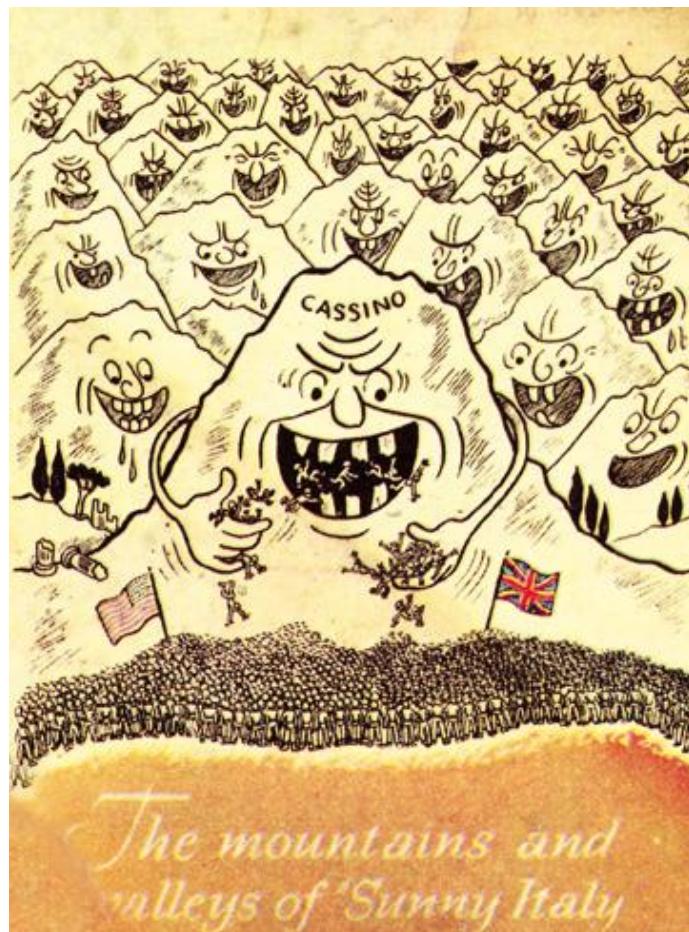
were, at the time, areas of costly stalemate. The insinuation is that the Allied time-table for the advance up the Italian boot would be painfully slow; the current rate of progress would mean that the Allied forces would not reach Berlin until 1952.



(Cornell University)

Figure 15. German propaganda leaflet. 'Speaking of time-tables'

Another German leaflet showed the mountains of Italy in cartoon form (see figure 16). The underlying suggestion that this leaflet makes is that there will be many more well defended hilltop fortresses – similar to Monte Cassino – encountered as the advance moves north, and similarly the casualty toll can be expected to be just as high at each as it was at Cassino.



(State Library of Berlin: Einbl. 1939/45, 1807. M9.)

Figure 16. German propaganda leaflet, 'The mountains and valleys of Sunny Italy'.

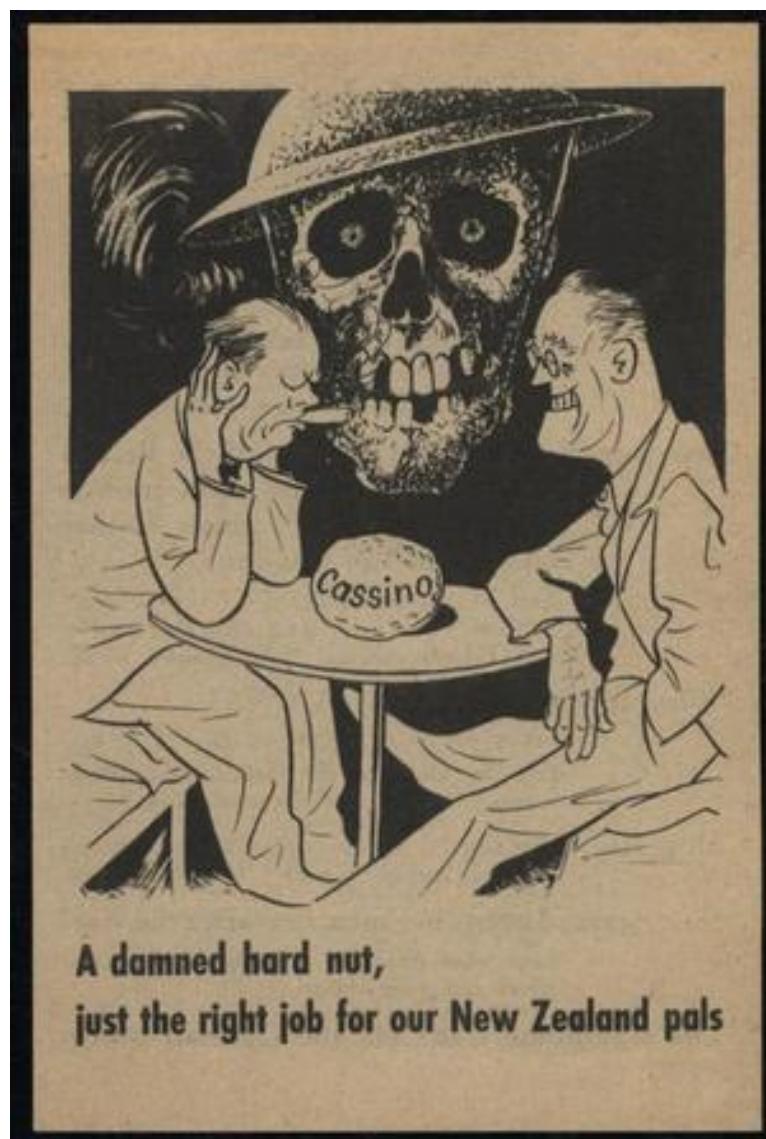
The feelings and fears that this leaflet is aimed at can be seen surfacing at the time in the accounts of New Zealand soldiers. Artilleryman Martyn Uren ponders the implications of the Cassino battles and records in his journal ‘what if there are a hundred Cassinos, or a thousand?’ On the same subject a few days later he writes of his fear that there might be ‘a hundred Cassinos! Five hundred Cassinos before we reach Berlin.’⁴¹

The New Zealand Division was recognised as one of the better and more experienced Allied formations in Italy, as it had been in North Africa. German propaganda used this to advantage by suggesting that the New Zealand troops – ‘the pluckiest soldiers of the British Empire’⁴² – were being used for tasks that were deemed too difficult for US or British divisions,

⁴¹ Uren, pp.53 & 57.

⁴² Propaganda leaflet – ‘Hello, Boys of the N.Z.E.F!’

and that all that was happening was ‘A few yards of ground gained – soaked with precious New Zealand blood.’⁴³



(Alexander Turnbull Library: Eph-A-WAR-WII-German-propaganda-1944-01.)

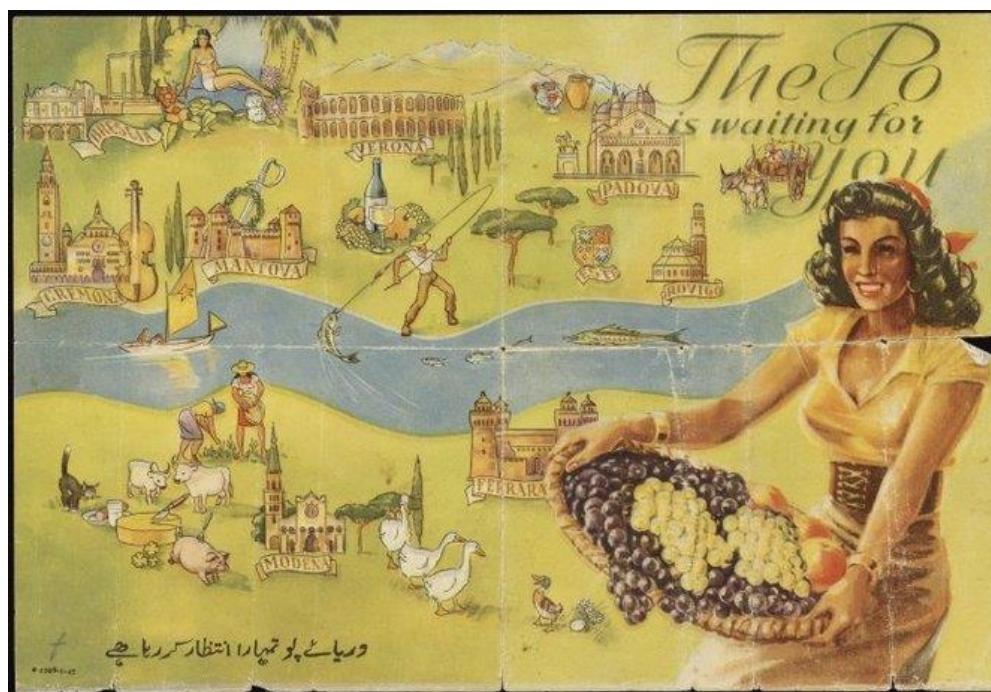
Figure 19. German propaganda leaflet. ‘Hello, Boys of the N.Z.E.F.!’.

Soldier’s safety was another standard theme targeted by German leaflets.⁴⁴ One leaflet that was aimed at Allied troops shows the perception of a picturesque scene of the Po valley, with a welcoming maiden, a green and tranquil countryside, with an abundance of food and fish

⁴³ Propaganda leaflet – ‘Hello, Boys of the N.Z.E.F!’

⁴⁴ Randell Bytwerk, *Paper war: Nazi propaganda in one battle, on a single day Cassino, Italy, May 11, 1944*, West New York: Mary Batty, 2005, p.15.

in the Po river. The reverse of the leaflet though depicts another, possible outcome for the Allies in the Po valley, the spectre of an opposed river crossing and the possibility of heavy casualties.



(Alexander Turnbull Library: Eph-B-WAR-WII-Propaganda-Italy-1945-01-1)

Figure 18. German propaganda leaflet, 'The Po is waiting for you', (front).



(Alexander Turnbull Library: Eph-B-WAR-WII-Propaganda-Italy-1945-01-1)

Figure 19. German propaganda leaflet, 'The Po is waiting for you', (reverse).

The ability of German propaganda to undermine morale should not be underestimated. In a number of surveys, many men acknowledged that German propaganda efforts had an impact on the soldiers at the front.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Francis C. Steckel, ‘Morale and Men: A Study of the American Soldier in World War II. (Volumes I and II)’. Ph.D. Dissertation, Temple University, Philadelphia, 1990, pp.259-260.

Chapter Five. Combat

The battlefield was by no means the sanitized, organised rational place often portrayed in movies or described in history books.... the brutal reality was that [it] was a dirty, cruel, ruthless world filled with horror and tragedy. No one who was ever part of it could ever forget it.

John C. McManus.¹

Combat was a lethal race to understand how to survive in a world organised for... death.

Roger J. Spiller.²

Historian Stephen Fritz concludes that combat during the Second World War was typically ‘a war not of open combat but of waiting, hiding, creeping, brawling – a contest between small groups of men, each group trying to kill the other before they in turn were killed.’³ Another author describes the intense stress involved with carrying out one of the common activities that occurred on the Italian front:

A patrol means long hours of listening in the dark, often in cramped cover, crawling considerable distances through the freezing mud, negotiating trip wires strung among the innocent cordage of the grape trellises, making one’s way along paths or roads sown with mines which gave no response to the sweeps. Every ridge, every rubble pile, every reverse slope, offered hiding places to enemies who did not make many mistakes. It was terrain on which a careless step, an accidental noise, might spell disaster – in which the first error of judgement was apt to be the last.⁴

For the members of the New Zealand Division, especially those in the infantry units, combat conditions were as brutal and shocking as these historians have suggested. Death or injury was ever present during combat, as well as during apparent ‘safe’ periods out of the line.

¹ McManus, p.88.

² Roger J. Spiller, quoted in Copp & McAndrew, p.59.

³ Fritz, p.87.

⁴ Copp & McAndrew, p.64.

Soldiers witnessed many horrific incidents, as they occurred, and the resulting outcomes in the aftermath. Many had to witness death and injury to those closest to them, adding stress to an already stressful situation. Around them there were constant reminders of the brutality of war: painfully wounded men and unburied bodies, the pervasive smell of corpses, civilian casualties, and the threat of mines and unexploded ordnance. The words and memories of those who took part in the campaign provides both a critical insight into just what the men went through, and a key understanding of the link between the stress of combat and the key outcomes of psychological casualties, declining morale, and an increase and institutionalisation of poor discipline.

Gordon Slatter remembers his experience as his infantry battalion went into an attack near Faenza:

In the ghastly glow of the artificial moonlight I sat down beside the ditch but soon got down into the water when enemy mortars sought us out, guided by the bofors tracer on our boundaries giving away our position. The frightening explosions sparkled and flashed just ahead and I said, ‘Christ, we can’t go through that.’

Then somebody slapped me on the shoulder, I got up and went through it, not knowing how, not knowing why. Perhaps I had to go with the others, there was no other choice, nowhere else I could run to. Men on either side, bowed under equipment and hunched under terror, men round-shouldered under the bellow of the barrage, the twenty-five pounder shells screaming over our heads and exploding just ahead. We were supposed to keep so close to the creeping barrage we could lean on it. We feared a gun firing short and lagged a bit but were hounded on. We dreaded the Spandaus lashing at us and the mortars and shells raining down and the mines that would maim us if we jumped into a ditch.... We searched each place, wary of booby-traps, and went on. Some German stragglers were sent to the rear. So was The Baron. I heard him grunt when shrapnel slammed into his leg and I knew I would be next. The RAP Bloke tended to him while I shambled forward amidst all that pandemonium, chanting the 23rd Psalm in the valley of the shadow of death, trying to keep Guds, or someone in view, trying to keep up with the advance.⁵

Lindsay Good, an infantryman in 22 Battalion, recalls wondering during the advance towards the Sillaro River in northern Italy whether the Germans had observed their advance.

The answer came in seconds in the whistling, then detonating all around us, of an incoming salvo. This, indeed, proved to be the start of a relentless counter-

⁵ Slatter, pp.74-75.

barrage, the enemy using the path of our barrage to train their deadly 88mm guns on the exposed attacking infantry.

We dived into a channel, not twelve inches deep, but it saved our lives. German shells continued to burst all about our tiny cocoon. More than one failed to explode and thudded into the ground perilously close....

This was after I had contemplated the position I had reached in my life. Just twenty-two years, I thought, and now it is going to be snuffed out. We were caught in a cauldron of flying metal and deafening explosions. Our doom was inevitable.... Nothing could save us and nothing could be done.⁶

Nowhere was the brutality of combat demonstrated better than at Cassino. Like all of the battles during the Italian campaign, Cassino was an infantryman's battle. The unit of currency was not the division, brigade, or battalion, nor was it the company; the battle was fought by small groups of men, by sections, frequently the remnants of platoons, often cut off and isolated. They fought over the ruin of a house, a cellar, a ditch, a wall, a mound of rubble.

Elements of the New Zealand Division attacked into the town on 15 March 1944 after an intensive air attack and follow-up artillery bombardment that had reduced the town to one massive ruin. The landscape inside the town was, as Roger Smith describes, a

ghost world that lacked all colour; a world sometimes lit for minutes by a brilliant flare which made the ensuing darkness seem all the blacker. A world of crumbling ruins, twisted concrete and gaunt tentacles of exposed reinforcing iron. A world of dust and water, of insecure footholds and rattling rocks, a world where a Spandau lashed at your every mistake.⁷

Smith continues, describing the ruins of the town as 'the environment of primitive man,' where the New Zealanders could be found 'lurking stealthily among the ruins, nerves taut with a constant watchfulness.'⁸ The enemy was never far away – often in the same building, occasionally occupying the same pile of rubble. 'We climbed into the shell of a building' recalls Smith:

that had no roof and two gaping holes in the front wall. These holes looked on to what had been a small courtyard, now blocked off on its open side by a collapsed building. The only exit in the yard was a small wrought-iron wicket gate.... On the other side of this lurked the enemy. Through the left hole we stepped through onto a sloping pile of rubble that walled that side of the yard up to first floor

⁶ Lindsay Good, *Mussolini, Bella Maria & Tojo: A Kiwi soldier's memoir*, Wellington: Steele Roberts, 2003, pp.70-71.

⁷ Roger Smith, p.229.

⁸ Roger Smith, p.229.

height. Two Bren posts had been established on top of this rubble [which] could only be manned at night, as they were completely overlooked by a Hun building less than a chain away.

Sometime later Smith discovered that ‘the Hun actually had a very safe dugout underneath a pile of rubble on which our forward Brens were mounted.... It was a terrible post, for we and the enemy were right in each other’s pocket.’⁹

Ernest Graves, an infantryman in 25 Battalion, experienced close quarter combat along the lower slopes of Monte Cassino as his platoon took part in the March assault. The principal weapons used by both sides during this fighting were automatic weapons and grenades:

We got into a house on the hillside and found enemy in the lower storey looking down on the town away from us. The section leader and I killed four with a grenade and Thompson Machine Gun.... Found another house from which the enemy was pinning down B Company men. We got round the house and killed three with [the Thompson].... My section leader stepped out from behind a wall to fire into [dugouts] and was shot through the head by sniper.... We tried to move round the other side of the wall and a Spandau opened up so we were held on two sides. We waited for two hours.

The battered platoon then moved up to the Keep where ‘two of us moved through the archway but a Spandau round the corner got the corporal section commander. I moved back and found a hole through which to throw grenades down into the Keep.’¹⁰

In the rubble of Cassino, friend and foe were often separated simply by a wall. No area was secure, much was under observation and covered by mortars or heavy machine guns; snipers were a constant problem. Sam Donald, a trooper in the 19th Armoured Regiment, points out that ‘there was no real front line, with German and Allied troops on different floors of the same building’.¹¹ Roger Smith adds that, during the fighting within Cassino, it became ‘impossible to define any area as safe as the Hun was constantly infiltrating our line’.¹² Buildings and other features were constantly changing hands, often several times during the course of a day.

⁹ Roger Smith, pp.228-230.

¹⁰ Lieutenant-General Sir Edward Puttick, KCB, DSO and bar, MC (Greek), Legion of Merit (US), 25 Battalion, Wellington: War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, 1960, pp.401-402.

¹¹ Sam (G.L.A.) Donald, *Mangaheia to Monfalcone: A Tolaga Bay Soldier’s Memoir 1941 – 1946*, Tolaga Bay, New Zealand: Rakopu Press, 2004, p.49.

¹² Roger Smith, p.198.

For the individual soldier, Cassino was a vision of hell. One German wrote in his diary that ‘we have nothing here but terror and horror, death and damnation’,¹³ while another compared the Cassino battlefield to his experiences on the Eastern Front: ‘What we are going through here is beyond description. I never experienced anything like this in Russia.’¹⁴ For one New Zealander with the 25th Battalion, it was simply ‘a vision of the end of the world’.¹⁵

Life and death throughout most of the Italian campaign, was played out amongst a stage of terrible weather, miserable conditions, and squalor, during which there was a frequent and continual assault on the senses which played upon already faltering mental and emotional strength. If anything it was the mechanics of industrialised twentieth century warfare that provided that impact. John Shinnick recalls the deadly beauty of being under fire at night:

From the dark smudge of the river bank ahead of us spurted burst upon burst of tracer bullets out over [our] lines, some passing directly over our heads. It was pretty to see the three or four tracer lights sailing through the air one behind the other, but when they appeared to be coming directly for us, I found myself doing a fantastic movement of dodging from side to side, ducking my head as the lights came closer, seemingly almost right at me, till they cracked viciously by a few feet above me. They definitely caused momentary palpitations of the heart!¹⁶

Darkness provided the opportunity for spectacular, if not deadly, light shows. A German infantryman describes his first experience of a *nebelwerfer* attack being launched from near his position:

The night was dark but clear.... Three batteries of *Nebelwerfers* opened fire.... The sight was awe-inspiring as the sound was nerve shattering. A low-pitched howling rose quickly to a screaming crescendo and then huge gouts of flame erupted, firing the rockets and sending them like huge comets hurtling through the air.... Lines of flames escorted by trailing clouds of red-lined smoke marked their route as they streaked across the sky.¹⁷

¹³ Quoted in Atkinson, p.503.

¹⁴ Parker, p.254. One German soldier captured in northern Italy in 1945 suggested something similar: ‘I was talking to a Jerry prisoner a couple of days ago. He said he’d fought in Africa, Italy and Russia, and that Italy was the worst of the lot’, Censorship summaries, DA 508/2 - DA 508/3, Censorship Report No 17/45 (ANZ), 22 - 28 Apr 1945, part 2, p.2.

¹⁵ Trevelyan, p.201.

¹⁶ Shinnick, J.M., *Forgotten Front*, self-published, 1997, p.178.

¹⁷ Fritz, p.149.

For the New Zealanders on the receiving end, the sight was possibly not so awe-inspiring, but it was just as spectacular:

After last light we moved down the road towards the Maori F.D.Ls, but we had only gone half way when the sky ahead was flushed with six successive flashes from the centre of each rising a bright pin-point of light. Nebelwerfer rockets were on the way!.... Several seconds later the nerve-wracking noise of the rockets being released reached us. I could stand the noise of mortars, the blast and crunching of shells, and the crackling of small arms fire, but the groan of ‘Moaning Minnie’ I had never accustomed myself to take.¹⁸

One New Zealander remembers that they ‘gave off a prolonged and cacophonous type of growl’,¹⁹ while another recorded in his diary that they sounded like ‘lions roaring in distance with whining note in it, [an] unmistakable sound’;²⁰ John Blythe describes the sound as like ‘gigantic moaning elephants.’²¹ For infantryman Peter McDermott the sound of these weapons was simply ‘demoralising’.²²

Modern industrial combat generates a vast cacophony of sound, the roar of which alone, one soldier states, ‘was enough to shatter a soldier’s will.’²³ The firing of artillery, and the violent crash of explosions, were constant companions of the combat soldier, providing ‘not even a second’s peace,’ claimed one German soldier at Cassino, where there was, ‘only the dreadful thunder of guns and mortars’²⁴ One of the features of a number of the soldier’s diaries from Italy is the constant presence of artillery and mortar fire. If the writer was on the frontline, it is the frequent incoming German shells, whether in a concentrated ‘stonk’, or piecemeal as harassing fire. If further from the line then the sounds of Allied guns firing throughout the day and night, was noted. The unlucky, camped among or servicing the New Zealand field artillery, were subjected to both outgoing, and incoming counter-battery fire, much of which was heavy calibre shells.

John Blythe was fascinated by the sounds made by shells in flight; ‘strange whirring noises were made by the driving bands on the shells, some sounding if they were in level flight,

¹⁸ Shinnick, p.192.

¹⁹ McDermott, p.53.

²⁰ Birks diary, 22 March 1944.

²¹ John Blythe, *Soldiering on: A Soldier’s War in North Africa and Italy*, Auckland: Century Hutchinson, 1989, p.136.

²² McDermott, p.53.

²³ Siegfried Knapp, & Ted Brusaw, *Soldat: Reflections of a German Soldier, 1936-1949*, New York: Dell, 1993, pp.199-200.

²⁴ Parker, p.254.

others going lazily end over end. One or two... sound[ed] as if they were not going to clear the hill but land and explode in our laps.²⁵ The individual types had their own trademark sounds: the ‘slap of 25 pdr, smash of 155, snap of Bofors and crack of 3.7’.²⁶ Pat Kane, an NCO serving in 24 Battalion, describes the passage of a massive American shell as being ‘like the sound of the night limited express thundering through a King Country railway yard’²⁷, while another soldier at Cassino likened the flight of shells from a nearby battery to ‘a sound like the tires on a fleet of high-powered motor cars disappearing down a long, wet highway.’²⁸ As Roger Smith returned to the front near Cassino, he could hear the ‘sullen bark of gunfire, the long-drawn closing wail, the muffled thud of explosions – and I thought with returning weariness how it seemed to go on and on and on.’²⁹

Studies carried out during the war concluded that soldier’s fear of weapons was related much more to the noise they made than to their lethality; soldiers equated the purely psychological effect of loud weapons with their killing power.³⁰ However, it was not necessarily the loud noises that were the deadliest; the almost benign whistle of bullets and the hum of slivers of shrapnel, were just as efficient at killing.³¹

Many accounts note the smell of the battlefield, and nowhere was this worse than in and around the town of Cassino. Months of human waste left behind by the thousands who fought in the area, the churned up mud, countless shell holes filled with stagnant water, collapsed and burnt buildings, and dead pack animals, all combined to leave an impact on the men who fought there. But one smell stayed with the veterans; ‘the stench of rotting bodies’ wrote Scotch Paterson ‘would live in the minds of all... for the rest of their lives’.³² For Roger Smith it was that the ‘many pieces of men that could not be salvaged smelt with a vomit-making purulence’³³ For the combat soldier, the smells lingering in the air, clothes and equipment, and on the senses, made it harder to escape the impact and memories of combat.

²⁵ Blythe, p.120.

²⁶ W.G. McClymont, as quoted in, Matthew Wright, *Italian Odyssey: New Zealanders in the Battle for Italy 1943-45*, Auckland: Reed Books, 2003, p.152.

²⁷ Pat Kane, *A Soldier’s Story: A Mediterranean Odyssey*, Wellington: Quality Publications, 1995, p.92.

²⁸ Thomas Hale, Letter, 28 September 1995, in, Colin John Arroll, Papers, 1941-1998, MS 2000/3 (AWMM).

²⁹ Roger Smith, p.248.

³⁰ Ellis, *The Sharp End*, p.89.

³¹ Fritz, p.150.

³² Paterson, p.43.

³³ Roger Smith, p.244.

The smell of the dead left a legacy on the battlefield and in the memory long after the fighting had moved on. Passing through a liberated Cassino at the end of May 1944, Englishman Alex Bowlby was struck by:

the smell – the sour-sweet stench of rotting flesh.... I realized I was smelling my own kind, and not animals. I understood what they must feel in a slaughter-house. These dead were under the rubble. If we could have seen their bodies it would have helped. The unseen, unconsecrated dead assumed a most terrifying power.³⁴

Even months later Scotch Paterson noted that there was still an ‘unforgettable stench of unburied bodies’ in the town, while Sam Donald remembers that ‘parties worked for months to get the whole battlefield cleaned up.’³⁵

In analysing the relationships linking combat and fatigue, analyst Dave Grossman identifies four factors that combine to produce what he describes as a ‘great weight of fatigue.’ He lists them as: physiological exhaustion, loss of sleep, reduction in caloric intake, and the toll of the elements (rain, cold, darkness, vermin, disease).³⁶

Physical exhaustion exacts a toll on the combat soldier; carrying equipment, operating weapons, manhandling supplies, moving through various terrain types and living in the open, all act on physical health. It is little different during times of relief to the immediate rear of the front. The nature of the Italian countryside during the campaign, typically broken and steep, underdeveloped, subjected to the destruction of infrastructure, meant that manpower not machinery was key in moving goods and equipment, recovering casualties, supplying the frontline, and repair and construction. Not only was the nature of the work itself hard, but it was made much more difficult by the physical nature of the countryside, which poor weather, and resulting poor underfoot conditions, worked to significantly worsen.

Sleep, so important in recharging the body and healing fatigue, is a commodity that is commonly lacking in the life of a frontline soldier, where, Holmes suggests, ‘tremendous periods of sleep loss are the norm.’³⁷ In one study, 31% of American soldiers in Italy were found to have averaged less than four hours sleep per night; a further 54% averaged less than

³⁴ Bowlby, p.20.

³⁵ Paterson, p.43; Sam Donald, p.65.

³⁶ Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of learning to Kill in War and Society*, New York: Back Bay Books, 1995, pp.69-73.

³⁷ Richard Holmes, quoted in Grossman, p.71.

six.³⁸ Modern warfare, with its dispersed nature and improved technology, did nothing but exacerbate the lack of sleep. The battlefield could be illuminated through flares and searchlights, artillery operated through the night – if only as a means of harassment – and operations such as patrolling and raiding, more common on a thinly held battlefield, were typically carried out during darkness, impacting on participants and weary frontlines alike. Men struggled to get quality sleep, even out of the line. ‘Not much sleep last night’ wrote Laurie Birks, who then added that ‘if we kept to the letter of orders we couldn’t get much more than 5 1/2 hrs sleep per night.’³⁹ Men attempting to sleep might be under German shellfire which could be occasional, constant, sometimes for days on end, and sometimes very frightening, as this selection of diary entries indicate:

9 February 1944: Last night our guns fired until 12:30 and then Jerry’s Nebelwerfer kept me awake until about 3. Up at 7.⁴⁰

18 March 1944: Not much sleep last night. Jerry shelled and mortared Cassino all night. M.G.s fired all night. Hell of a row.⁴¹

5 October 1944: Very rudely awakened about half past 11 last night when Jerry put down heavy stonk on us. 3 hours on end.⁴²

6 October 1944: woken up by Jerry shelling us last night, every night for week now.⁴³

5 December 1944: Jerry’s usual night shelling begins at dark. In addition to mortars he has a big gun which actually straddles our house and then switches further right. He gives us a few anxious moments.⁴⁴

8 December 1944: rather a trying time last night. Just getting to sleep at 1am. when several mortars around the house and then a crash - as one landed on the roof of the room next to ours. Sounds of falling debris and the chaps out smartly. A few minutes later and another landed. Got down stairs quickly. Several more near house but gradually things died down and back to bed.⁴⁵

³⁸ Samuel A. Stouffer, Arthur A., Lumsdaine, Marion Harper Lumsdaine, Robin M., Williams jr, M. Brewster Smith, Irving L. Janis, et al., *The American Soldier: Combat and its Aftermath, Volume II*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1949, p.78.

³⁹ Birks diary, 12 June 1944.

⁴⁰ Smith diary, 9 February 1944.

⁴¹ Smith diary, 18 March 1944.

⁴² Smith diary, 5 October 1944.

⁴³ Smith diary, 6 October 1944.

⁴⁴ Clarence James Moss, 'Circus Days: the war diaries of Pte C.J. Moss', 1940 - 1945. MS 93/134, (AWMM), (Clarence Moss diary), 5 December 1944.

⁴⁵ Clarence Moss diary, 8 December 1944.

The general himself was not immune, recording in the GOC's diary that a barrage one night was 'not a very impressive spectacle, but all the noise required was provided by the battery of 3.7s a hundred yards away which kept us awake most of the night and almost blew one out of bed.'⁴⁶

The shell fire, from both sides, could seem unending, as recorded by British infantryman Leonard Melling: 'As I lay in my trench at night I could hear the shells screaming wickedly over in quick succession – hardly had one passed over when another was on its way.'⁴⁷ Similarly, K.J. Smith records in his diary that '[last night] fairly active both Jerry and us very lights, mortars, M.G.s, & big guns.'⁴⁸ Alcohol was often resorted to as an aid for sleeping. 'Sleep under such conditions was a problem' wrote John Blythe, 'but there was plenty of rough red wine.... drinking and talking until sodden with wine we would go to bed on the floor and fall asleep.... The only way to insensibility was through soggy drunkenness. It certainly helped.'⁴⁹

Another element that is critical to the morale and fighting ability of armies is food. An American study immediately after the war concluded that over 50% of infantrymen did not get as much to eat as they needed.⁵⁰ K.J. Smith's diary records that the Kiwis' diet could be pretty tough; 'On Tommy ration' writes Smith, 'which is more meagre than NZ. Biscuit porridge & bully [corned beef], or soya links [sausages made from soya bean], biscuits, also marg.'⁵¹ Similarly, Des Ball writes:

No fresh fruit or vege's unless we traded our canned meat for vege's and eggs with the Italians. All our vege's were new dehydrated product and not very appetizing. No fresh meat just the canned bully beef, tins of M&V [meat and vege], plenty of jam.... Army biscuits which we could make into porridge by pounding up with powdered milk, or fry in margarine or eat just plain with jam. Soya links were often on the menu.... We were issued with very tight rations and always felt a little on the hungry side.⁵²

The situation was worse for those in or near the frontline. Diary entries written by Fritz Harris document grim times near Cassino:

⁴⁶ General Officer Commanding's Diary - Part IV, September 1943 - October 1944, WAIIS/6/46, (ANZ), 11 May 1944.

⁴⁷ Leonard Melling, *With the Eighth in Italy*, Manchester: Torch Publishing; 1955, p.69.

⁴⁸ Smith diary, 15 April 1944.

⁴⁹ Blythe, pp.136-137.

⁵⁰ Stouffer, et al., p.79.

⁵¹ Smith diary, 21 November, 1943.

⁵² Des Ball, 'Field Ambulance. The Italian Campaign. Recollections of a Ambulance Driver'. 1941-1946. MS 99/54, (AWMM), p.20.

April 21 Friday 1944: Ration truck never arrived today.

Saturday 29 April 1944: Rations getting very light we're getting mighty hungry.

Saturday 10 June 1944: Rations are as tight as hell, no sugar a fatty bit of meat a couple of wizened up cabbages.⁵³

It is small wonder that members of the division supplemented, or even made up the majority of, their rations from local produce and livestock – often to the detriment of a population that was in many cases, close to starvation (see chapter 8).⁵⁴

The elements worked to enhance the impact of fatigue caused by the other three factors. Poor weather, a constant companion during the campaign, and adverse terrain, both explored above, worked as multipliers. Tired, poorly fed troops would struggle even more as they carried heavy loads along steep, muddy tracks in driving rain, in temperatures close to freezing. Fred Majdalany, a veteran of Cassino, described a group of infantry as they retired from the line at Cassino:

They marched back from the battle in the way of the infantry, their feet scarcely leaving the ground, their bodies rocking mechanically from side to side as if it was the only way they could move their legs. You could see that it required the last ounce of their mental and physical energy to move their legs at all.⁵⁵

Once the New Zealanders joined the campaign in November 1943, it was not long before fatigue set in. Kippenberger described his men at the end of December by saying that he ‘had not seen men so exhausted since Flanders. Their faces are grey.’⁵⁶ The impact of battle on the New Zealanders was also obvious to reinforcements arriving at the division. Artilleryman Martyn Uren records that he had ‘the intensely humiliating experience of listening to... a recent reinforcement tell a group of six of us... that the New Zealand Division had “had it”.... What is hard to swallow is that in some small respect, and at the time of speaking, he was

⁵³ Clunie Oliver (Fritz) Harris, War diary, 1942 - 1945. MS 2012/3, (Harris diary), 21 & 29 April, 10 June, 1944.

⁵⁴ In a survey of US infantrymen serving in Italy, only 36 percent of respondents answered positively to the question ‘When you were last on active combat duty, did you get as much to eat as you needed?’ Survey conducted in April 1945 across members of four veteran infantry divisions. Via, Kevin Kane, ‘Morale maintenance in World War II US Army ground combat units: European theater of operations, 1944-45’, Honors Thesis. University of Richmond, 2013, p.17fn.

⁵⁵ Fred Majdalany, quoted in, Holmes, *Acts of War*, p.117.

⁵⁶ Kippenberger, p.344.

right.⁵⁷ ‘You could recognise the old desert digs by their eyes’ said another soldier, ‘They were tired eyes looking into the distance, looking right through you, rather than at you.’⁵⁸ Uren defined the exhaustion that he saw after the early battles in Italy; ‘I had known that dog-tired feeling in the desert days, and before in Greece, later in Italy, when you are working on the dregs of your strength and the tattered remains of your nerves.’⁵⁹ Importantly here, Uren identifies not just the impact of physical fatigue, but also alludes to the mental toll that was beginning to eat away at the New Zealanders.

A soldier’s close comrades, his primary group, had a positive role in his ability to perform and cope, but ongoing, and especially heavy losses, within the group, could have a severe impact on performance and psychology. A constant theme throughout various accounts of the campaign in Italy is the steady loss of men as the German strategy of delay and attrition bit into units of all sizes. After attacking the village of Castlefrantano in late November 1944, Pat Kane wrote of his platoon that of ‘the thirty men who had crossed the Sangro a few days before, no more than thirteen remained.’⁶⁰ During the period prior to the March attack on Cassino, 25 Battalion suffered what the official history describes as ‘a period of steady attrition’, losing not only eight killed and 62 wounded, but also ‘many more [who] were evacuated sick.’⁶¹ During the actual assault between 14 and 18 of March, the same battalion’s losses occurred at such a rate that its component company’s strengths were summarised as ‘very low; A Company had 51 [men], B Company 49, C Company 40, and D company 42.’ These numbers were well under establishment strength.⁶² In D Company’s 18 Platoon, Private Ernest Graves records that at the commencement of the attack on Cassino on 15 March, his platoon numbered 24 men, but by the time they were relieved on the morning of the 18th, there were only four men left.⁶³

Similarly, John Shinnick, another member of 25 Battalion, records in his diary that, again, even before the attack on Cassino, his platoon was under strength ‘Our strength was depleted, and when the attack finally eventuated, we commenced with twenty-one men in the platoon, having suffered twelve casualties during the preceding three weeks’; these twelve casualties occurred while out of the line waiting to attack during a period that featured patrol

⁵⁷ Uren, p.104.

⁵⁸ Paterson, p.14.

⁵⁹ Uren, p.176.

⁶⁰ Pat Kane, p.84.

⁶¹ Puttick, p.391.

⁶² Puttick, p.412. Normally, a rifle company would number between 120 and 150 men.

⁶³ Puttick, p.412; Graham & Bidwell, p.215.

and counter patrol, enemy mortars, long range machine gun fire, and snipers. When the battalion was withdrawn from the Cassino battle in May, Shinnick's platoon consisted of a replacement officer, a corporal, and three riflemen. Shinnick points out that 'of the original 117 soldiers [in his company] who went up to Cassino on the night of 21st February, there were but 31 left.'⁶⁴

In the period after Cassino, and having been through two major engagements since arriving in Italy, men took stock of the situation, tallying comings and goings; the results could be shocking. Edward 'Scotch' Paterson, a Lieutenant in 22 Battalion 'compared notes on the number of men who had passed through his platoon in the first six months in Italy. With a platoon strength of 21, a total of 106 had actually passed through, either killed or sent home as permanently disabled.'⁶⁵

Even after the Battle for Rome had been concluded, the New Zealanders found, as they advanced through Tuscany, that the Germans were far from finished. There was no let up from the strategy – and human cost – of delay and attrition; mines, mortars, and artillery continued to extract a toll. From time to time, especially at night, the New Zealanders would be subjected to heavy bombardments. Just south of Florence, in early August 1944, one New Zealand infantry company was subjected to an intense bombardment by mortars and artillery suffering in the region of 50% casualties.⁶⁶

Not only were sums being done on arrivals and departures, but as the campaign dragged on into late 1944, and with the approach of a second Italian winter, men began to wonder how the division could keep functioning. Cecil Coughlan recorded in his diary north of Rimini in late September that 'casualties are heavy from both battalions and conditions are rotten for attack.... Every inch of ground taken was too costly in men. Can't keep this pace up too many men getting lost.'⁶⁷

As he witnesses the steady progression of dead and wounded at his aid post, medic Cecil Coughlan contemplated the impact of the losses in his diary:

Saturday 3 [June 1944]: Our boys have got knocked about a lot lately.

Monday 5: Won't be many Kiwis left at this rate.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Shinnick, pp. 45 & 65.

⁶⁵ Paterson, pp.23-24.

⁶⁶ Shinnick, p.139.

⁶⁷ Cecil Coughlan & Garrie Coughlan, (eds.), *Diary of a Kiwi Soldier in World War II*, Auckland: Reed Publishing, 2006, (Coughlan diary), Friday 29 September 1944.

⁶⁸ Coughlan diary, Saturday 3 & Monday 5 June 1944.

These would have been sentiments shared by many New Zealanders in Italy, for those whose units were closer to the front line they would have been accompanied by a sense of not if, but when.

Throughout the Italian campaign, the majority of battle casualties were caused by artillery fire.⁶⁹ For the man at the front, in combat, casualties amongst his immediate group – his section or platoon – could occur unexpectedly, violently, and with shocking results. Infantryman Roger Smith recalls an episode on the mountains above Cassino:

we got a nasty plaster.... Very bad taste as far as we were concerned – it was from our rear. It was flat trajectory stuff, probably from self propelled guns in the high country. The shells came screaming and crashing in with no warning. Because we were on a slope, all our holes opened on the lower side, which faced the gunfire.⁷⁰

One of the positions near Smith suffered a direct hit; ‘A shell had landed right in the entrance of one of the platoon’s sangars. One of the boys was unconscious on his back, blood streaming from his face and nostrils. Bending over him was his cobber Jacko [who] was bleeding profusely himself’. Smith and the rest of his platoon took cover in a nearby gully. The bombardment stopped and men began returning to their positions, however:

the guns opened up again, shells crashing and smashing into them before they could scatter. Men were thrown down and heaved, buffeted, tossed and flopped about by the fierce detonations. We dashed up to see if we could help, but by the time we got there the fire had ceased again, the living had scattered and only the dead remained. Most were bashed into hideous broken carnage. I turned over one lad whose heart still beat, to find only a mush of brains where his face should have been.⁷¹

Bad weather, which negated Allied air cover, and fog and mist – common during the Italian winter – allowed the Germans to carry out unrestricted artillery bombardments with some degree of safety. As they moved northwards towards the Po valley, New Zealand units were subjected to some terrific bombardments. On the Senio River, in December 1944,

⁶⁹ Caddick-Adams gives a figure of ‘around 75%’ casualties caused by mortars and artillery, p.87.

⁷⁰ Roger Smith, p.182.

⁷¹ Roger Smith, p.183.

Geoffrey Duff witnessed a group of New Zealand infantrymen caught in artillery fire as he took cover in a stone farmhouse:

No sooner had we settled in than Jerry commenced a terrific bombardment of our area. Our house was hit several times and we lost two men wounded.... cries were heard from outside and in through the doorway surged a desperate group of 25th Bn infantry who had been caught in the stonk.... they had two men killed and about twenty wounded several severely burned when a phosphorus grenade exploded while being carried in a pouch.⁷²

It was not only the enemy that inflicted losses on the New Zealand infantry. Shinnick relates his company's unfortunate experience when attacking towards Faenza; 'The few hours of the Advance had taken a fearful toll, probably the heaviest the Company experienced in such a short time. The objective was reached with a complement of forty-five, while forty-one had been killed or wounded over the three thousand five hundred yard advance.' As Shinnick records, it was the supporting artillery that had done the damage. 'At the commencement of the [supporting] barrage, almost 50% of the company had been wiped out in those horrific few moments when for some unknown reason the barrage had swept back over us.'⁷³

Shinnick's rebuilt platoon suffered again later in the campaign when they were caught in a heavy German bombardment. Taking cover in a large drainage ditch the platoon was subjected to 'all of the unleashed fury of the enemy artillery.... shells, mortars, *nebelwerfer* rockets, small arms – in fact everything of every calibre that would go bang. The air was hideous with crunching explosions and whining shrapnel, the choking dust and acrid fumes of burnt cordite.' Within minutes a shell landed in the drain, amongst the platoon. Shinnick recalls that he first heard the 'bang of the gun... then the swish of the approaching projectile, followed by a deafening explosion in the middle of the drain. A great blob of black smoke commenced to drift lazily into the air – there was a momentary great silence.' The result, Shinnick records, 'was real carnage.... of the twenty-three chaps who had climbed into the drain, only seven were unhurt.' Six were dead, ten wounded; of the wounded only three returned fit for duty.⁷⁴

The reach of artillery – especially the super heavy guns – meant that supposedly quiet areas well behind the lines were not immune to the sudden, occasional, horror of an unexpected bombardment. Henry Senior recalls one such event: 'about 6am, just showing daybreak, Jerry

⁷² G.P. Duff, *Army Days*, Christchurch: Cadsonbury Publications, 2003, p.141.

⁷³ Shinnick, p.201.

⁷⁴ Shinnick, pp.186-187.

loosed off one of his occasional stonks – three or four 210mm shells aimed at random. One of these landed with a shattering blast in the middle of our area’ On investigating, Senior found ‘one of our boys hanging, minus a number of parts, in a tree about ten feet from the ground. The shell had hit dead centre of his dugout.’⁷⁵ The physical results of combat would often linger after the event. Geoffrey Duff recalls one morning after an artillery barrage as he walked out of the *casa* in which he was sheltering in. He ‘stirred with my foot a lump of greyish matter which lay at my feet; when I realised that it was a human brain I felt quite sick.’⁷⁶

Mines and booby traps were a constant source of casualties throughout the campaign. Not only did they kill and maim without warning, but undetected they also caused casualties in rear echelon units, after the front had moved on. For the fatigued soldier, the fear and anticipation associated with mines and explosive traps were a large drain on concentration, courage, and morale. Casualties caused by mines and traps could occur in the most everyday, benign, situations. Cecil Coughlan recounts an incident where ‘One chap went into the bush for a motion and blew himself up with an “S” mine laid by Jerry.... Couldn’t find all of him, poor chap.’⁷⁷ Typically though, mines were less likely to kill, but produced horrific injuries; loss of limbs was common. Coughlan’s diary records:

Wednesday 26 [July 1944]: Two chaps brought in with limbs off through stepping on a box mine while looking through a building.

Tuesday 8 [August 1944]: Maori blown up by mine. Was up a tree & he set one off, while he was crawling away he set another off, & was blown in half.⁷⁸

Special schools were set up in an effort to train mine detection and removal skills. Pat Sheehan, an engineer who had been trained in mine removal, remembers the hazards as well as the results when other engineers made mistakes:

I witnessed a lot that stood on anti-personnel mines which just automatically blew their leg off. If you pulled up a Teller Mine and forgot about the fuse, you were gone, just blown to bits. When you buried Engineers... you’d just rake up the bits.... There wouldn’t be much left.... you’d see it happening.... You had the shock of the blast.... The flash, the shock, you’d be blown off the ground, and

⁷⁵ Senior, p.13.

⁷⁶ Duff, p.142.

⁷⁷ Coughlan diary, Wednesday 5th July 1944.

⁷⁸ Coughlan diary, Wednesday 26th July 1944, & Tuesday 8th August 1944.

then you'd only see what's left.... Each time you went out detecting, you had the sense that it could be you.⁷⁹

Dealing with the wounded and dead behind the lines could be just as traumatic; nor was life in support units free of the dangers of combat. Cecil Coughlan, a medic with 5th Field Ambulance, recorded in his diary a sequence of days filled with the shocking aftermath of battle.

Wednesday 24 [May 1944].... One of our chaps hit in chest with shrapnel.

Thursday 25: One more of our chaps killed with shellfire. I brought in 3 dead Maoris and one from the 23rd. Helped to bury the three. Had to tie them up with wire. Awful mess they were in.

Friday 26: Brought in a one-pipper today. All his left side completely gone....

Sunday 28: Casualties still coming in. Awful cases.

Monday 29: Buried 4 Kiwis, 2 S.A.s & 4 Tommies from the Essex Reg. Blown nearly to bits. One Kiwi had no head at all. On our way again through Liri Valley.... Truck in front of us blown up.

Tuesday 30.... Bomb[ed] by Hun. 9 Maoris in truck blown up. One died on op. Table. Others lost limbs.

Saturday 3 [June].... G. Hart the All Black died in our A.D.S., 32 injured came through last night.⁸⁰

Deaths occurred out of the line as well: K.J. Smith records two jeep accidents in his diary where men are killed and injured,⁸¹ while Laurie Birks writes of the death of one of his friends who was killed while returning from leave in Rome, when a 'branch of [a] tree came through canopy of truck as it pulled off road to let another truck past.'⁸²

Often, the introduction to the front line for many young men could be the sight of their first dead body. Ron Tanner, a member of 27 Battalion recalls moving up to forward positions near the Sillaro River. His platoon had to 'pass through a narrow gap in a hedgerow. There was a body partially blocking our way. We stepped over it. His shoulder insignia identified him to be a member of 25 Battalion. I recall the clean-cut, youthful features. There were others who

⁷⁹ Parr, pp.51-52.

⁸⁰ Coughlan diary, Wednesday 24 May 1944 - Monday 5 June 1944.

⁸¹ Smith diary, 4 & 5 November 1943.

⁸² Birks diary, 29 June 1944.

lay where they fell.' Leading a number of fresh reinforcements at the time, Tanner goes on to add that 'this did little to boost the morale of green untried troops'.⁸³ Infantryman Gordan Slatter also recalls the uneasiness he felt during one attack when,

before we could reach the designated casa another mortar stonk killed one of our men outside. I could not bear to look at his body either but had to when, in spite of my protests, I was brusquely ordered outside to get the Bren magazines from his pouches. The shovel thrust down behind his pack was shredded with shrapnel and I said sorry Dig when I had to turn him over to take the mags we needed. I had never touched a dead person before.⁸⁴

Sometimes, the dead were not immediately obvious and could remain unburied for some time. Norman Lewis' encounter was on a road near Salerno where he

felt something uneven under one foot, shifted my position and then glanced down [and] realised that what had at first seemed to be a mass of sacking was in fact the charred and flattened corpse of a German soldier.⁸⁵

The sight of the dead could have a profound impact: 'My first sight of a dead soldier was an unexpected shock.' wrote one soldier,

The word "killed" still had a clinical connotation about it compared to its meaning when you saw lying on the ground before you a bloodied, mutilated, foul smelling corpse that had previously been a vital, living human being.⁸⁶

Another wrote that 'the heart is overwhelmed to believe that the rotten smell of dead bodies is the beginning and end of life and the final purpose and meaning of our existence,' it is, he wrote 'unbearable to me.'⁸⁷

However, it was not just the raw numbers, or the unknown, or the nameless, that had the biggest impact. Regardless of how experienced a man was, the death of someone who was known was a shocking and emotional occurrence. Historian Alison Parr has used case studies of seven New Zealand servicemen to explore the hidden psychological impact of combat. 'Death became part of each soldier's existence' she concludes, and 'the closeness which

⁸³ Tanner, p.108.

⁸⁴ Slatter, p.76.

⁸⁵ Norman Lewis, *Naples '44: An Intelligence Officer in the Italian Labyrinth*, London: Eland, 2002, p.23.

⁸⁶ Fritz, p.34.

⁸⁷ Fritz, pp.137 & 156.

developed among men made that inevitability hard to take.⁸⁸ Given the critical importance of the small, primary group, to the morale and mental wellbeing of the frontline soldiers, it is easy to appreciate the impact of the death on a group's members.



(© Imperial War Museum/ NA 20879)

Figure 20. A soldier of 2nd New Zealand Division looks at a dead German at the foot of a smashed road sign at Celle, near Faenza, 20 December 1944. ‘On the road itself by the truck were the severed remains of two or three Germans: legs encased in trousers and jackboots, the odd arm or two, pieces of jacket, indescribable lumps, stick bombs and a couple of coal-scuttle steel helmets.’⁸⁹

Sometimes the inevitability of death at the front involved acquaintances from earlier in the war, or even pre-war life. ‘I was involved in a drama that really knocked the stuffing out of me’ remembers Henry Senior, ‘at the jeep Post I helped move a body brought in from the line somewhere behind the Post. It was on a stretcher in a corner of the room, with a blanket over it.... as I casually glanced at the identity card I read “Murray D ---- “. The name wandered in my mind for a moment or two, then Shock! – I lifted the corner of the blanket and there he was

⁸⁸ Parr, p.53.

⁸⁹ Blythe, p.119.

– the boy I had sat next to for most of my four High School years.... He had been killed by a grenade.⁹⁰ One of Cecil Coughlan's diary entries during the middle of July records the impact when he received the news that there had been 'heavy casualties from the 23rd Batt. Lot of 11th Reinf. who came over with me were wiped out in their first action. I took this very bad. Cobbers of mine.'⁹¹. During a relief changeover at the frontline, Ron Tanner recounts meeting with someone he had known in New Zealand:

We mingled with fresh troops moving up front. A young soldier who recognised me approached. He was Ga Ga Chapman, one of my caddy friends from the Middlemore Golf Club days. We spoke briefly. There was no time to engage in a real conversation, so we parted with the usual "See you later". I watched him walk away. He had gone about twenty metres when I heard the wretched hiss of a mortar coming in.... Ga Ga seemed to evaporate into thin air as I saw the mortar land on his backpack. My young mate of days gone by vanished before my eyes.⁹²

Knowledge of losses could also come from outside of the soldier's immediate environment. Communication with soldiers in other units, as well as letters from home, would often feature news of common acquaintances; often the news was bad.⁹³ Another source of casualty information was the NZEF Times. This newspaper was produced locally for the New Zealanders, and it published casualty lists which were regularly perused, especially following heavy engagements.

After breakfast this morning I got all the back NZEF Times and went through the casualty lists: got a bad shock. Old Reg Romans died of wounds. I went out to the hospital in the afternoon and spent a very busy time looking up chaps – Athol Lightfoot is very badly wounded. Monty McClymont not so bad. Griff and half of No 7 [Platoon] were there ... full of chaps I know. Heard that Mick Tithers had been killed – Dan Davis too. Felt pretty bad.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Senior, p.14.

⁹¹ Coughlan diary, Tuesday 18 July 1944.

⁹² Tanner, p.114.

⁹³ See, Ian Appleton, "A Most Important Collection"; Stan Kirk and the letters from the members of the College Rifles Rugby Club, 1939-45', Research Exercise, Massey University, 2012, chapter 3, pp.22-34. This work outlines the roles played by letter writing as wartime communication within a social group.

⁹⁴ Mary Sutherland, (ed.), *Please Send Home; The War Diaries and Letters of Jack Bickley, 1941-1945*, Owaka, Otago: Catlins Wildlife Trackers, 2013, p.87. Reg Romans was commander of 23 Battalion until he died of wounds after Orsogna.

For most soldiers, even those who had had little time to bond with their immediate group, combat usually meant the loss of those closest to them at that time.⁹⁵ A machine gunner with 27 Battalion, John Watson, remembers the trauma of dealing with the deaths of friends: ‘You had to bury them too. Friend burying friend ... it’s awful, especially when they’re mutilated.... the sights you see are certainly not very nice.... And you do become hardened. But not when they’re your friends. For strangers it’s just another corpse.’⁹⁶ Gordan Slatter also recalls the impact of watching a friend die:

The war had never seemed so dreadful than when I had to stand beside the RAP stretcher in A Coy HQ and tell a good friend badly wounded that he was going to be alright when everybody knew he was not. That was the brutal truth of war, no glamour, no heroics, just a young man cut down in his prime on the banks of some creek nobody had ever [heard] of, struck down in an advance nobody would ever remember. “You’ll be jake,” I lied.⁹⁷

Even veterans, with knowledge of what combat offered, suffered through the accumulation of stress. Roger Smith, an infantry veteran of the North African campaign, observed his unit advancing into Cassino:

We marched with our shoulders hunched against the raw wind, half crouched with stomachs drawn in to try and compress the disquiet of fear that seemed to knot intestines like a balled fist. Fear, fear of fear, and the shame of feeling afraid. That merciless enemy borne of memory and imagination that can twist your mind until your body shrinks with the tingle of apprehension. Your palms sweat. Your arm involuntarily flinches at a remembered vision, flashed on your inner retina, of a gory arm with a severed arm beside it still twitching on the sand. Is any man immune? Can anyone face the imminent danger of violent death or deformity with complacency? To be disembowelled by a clamouring blast of shellfire, to be chopped in half by [a] streaming squirt of Spandau, to be maimed and torn by a bayonet through your groin or grenade between your legs, to be blinded, to be hunted, to be shot at – and to hunt and shoot in return, to suddenly find yourself a raging beserk crouched over a lashing tommy gun, mad with the desire to kill. That is the worst of all – where lies the glory in such horror?⁹⁸

⁹⁵ A US Army survey conducted in April 1945 found that 87 % of the men questioned reported having seen a close friend killed or wounded in action. Paul M. Johnson, ‘Every Man has his Breaking Point, The Attitudes of American Infantrymen Towards Combat Fatigue in World War II’. Research Seminar, University of Wisconsin, 2006, p.9fn.

⁹⁶ Parr, p.54.

⁹⁷ Slatter, p.114.

⁹⁸ Roger Smith, p.192.

As the campaign ground on, the conditions, the pressures of combat, and the impact of losses around them, many soldiers within the division began to suffer emotions that ranged through melancholy, resignation, depression, hopelessness, fear, and panic. Les Cleveland, a noted New Zealand writer and an infantryman in the division, summed up the feelings that coalesced within the division as the campaign progressed.

There was an overarching sense that the Italian campaign... was a kind of destructive nightmare and if it just kept going the way it was it would chew the lot of us up.... there was a kind of gruesome resignation to it all ... that one was locked inside a juggernaut.... We were just hacking away there, more or less committing suicide.... The Division was being used as a sort of great big battering ram... if you happen to be right up at the tip of the battering ram, it's a somewhat exposed position to be in.⁹⁹

Reflecting on the level of fear that was felt throughout his unit, tanker Tom May makes the point that ‘the fear is always there. I’m afraid it was always there especially when they were getting close. I used to think, hell I hope no one sees me. But you could see other people were facing it just the same.’ Another tank man, trooper Sam Donald, remembers the relief that he felt surviving the fighting at Cassino; ‘Everyone has their moment, and it is only a couple of days later when there is time that you realise that you are one of the lucky ones.’¹⁰⁰

The diary of John Rist, a member of 25 Battalion, provides a valuable insight into the impact of combat on its writer, and his subsequent removal from the frontline as a result of the psychological effect of his experiences. Significantly, the constant consumption of significant amounts of alcohol occurs during Rist’s decline. Early indications of his decline are found in his diary entry for 20 December 1943 where he notes the impact of falling bombs falling nearby: ‘Our little mud house shook violently’ Rist writes, ‘but not half as violently as me!’¹⁰¹ Over the next three months Rist details the pressures and fears that he faced. The situation for Rist comes to a head during March at Cassino, when following the accidental bombing of his position by American bombers, he leaves the front and walks towards the rear where he is arrested. Examined at a medical dressing station, Rist’s condition is described as ‘exhaustion’ and he is given a sleeping tablet. The next day he is escorted forward under guard – presumably to re-enter the line with his unit, but an officer intervenes and Rist is returned to the B Echelon

⁹⁹ Parr, p.62.

¹⁰⁰ Sam Donald, p.49.

¹⁰¹ Jack Charles Rist, ‘Papers relating to war service, 1940 – 1994’, MS 2002/166, (AWMM), (Rist diary), 20 Dec 1943.

area. A week later he has been admitted to 2NZGH, and then subsequently transferred to 3NZGH at Bari.¹⁰² An indication of how widespread psychological problems were throughout the frontline units is offered by Fritz Harris. ‘Syd is not too good’ wrote Harris during the advance northwards from Cassino, ‘most likely his nerves affecting him. We’re all pretty much the same but it’s best not to give it a thought.’¹⁰³

It was one thing to be subjected to events and actions that could kill or maim oneself, or those around, and to witness death and destruction, but it was something else to be the architect of that death and destruction. The impact could be severe, especially on young men who only months earlier had been working in an office, factory or farm in New Zealand. The act of killing another man in combat had a significant impact.

The Artillery, the Mortars and the Aerial Bombing have no way of seeing the chilling fulfilment of their works. The Infantry and Machine Gunners have to live with the awful knowledge of close combat. They become hardened soldiers. What has war done to them? If they survive, some say they are lucky. What about the guilt and nausea that eats away into the very soul of friend and foe alike?¹⁰⁴

For Roger Smith, the cumulative impact of months of combat manifested itself in the form of nightmares;

I shuddered awake, throwing off a chill that stroked the nape of my neck frozen with fear. I wondered how many other of the forms about me, seemingly still and peaceful, were actually fighting similar battles. Fighting memories that threatened to engulf them. Memories of friends that were and are no more. Memories of sights and sounds unbelievable in terror. Memories of deeds done with... viciousness undreamed of.¹⁰⁵

Cecil Coughlan was another for whom sleep brought no escape: ‘awful sights I’m seeing. Dead men haunt me at night. War is awful.’¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Rist diary, 18-30 March 1944.

¹⁰³ Harris diary, 4 June 1944.

¹⁰⁴ Tanner, p.81.

¹⁰⁵ Roger Smith, p.223.

¹⁰⁶ Coughlan diary, Friday 26 May 1944.

Part Two. Outcomes: Battle Exhaustion, Morale, Discipline.

Chapter Six. The psychological Impact of Combat: Neuropsychiatric Casualties.

Psychiatric casualties are as inevitable as gun shot or shrapnel wounds

US Army report.¹

In war there is perhaps no general condition which is more likely to produce a large crop of nervous and mental disorders than a state of prolonged and great fatigue.

Sir Frederic Bartlett, psychologist.²

I've watched men in combat gradually lose their nerve and senses till they went berserk or reduced to a gibbering hulk. We couldn't do anything about it because they needed manpower desperately. We also knew these men weren't cowards. In my own case – I tried to keep absolute control over my nerves. I was just as afraid for my life as anyone else. I just refused to worry about what was going to happen on the next assault or the next hill. Even so toward the end of the war I was worthless as a fighting man. I was starting to lose my grip over my nerves – another six months in the line I would have probably been cutting paper dolls.

Anonymous US infantryman.³

In combination, physical fatigue and the mental impact of combat produced a raft of psychological problems in the frontline troops. ‘War’ writes one analyst, is ‘one of the most horrifying and traumatic acts a human can participate in’;⁴ it is an environment that will psychologically affect nearly all who participate in it for any length of time.⁵ Lord Moran

¹ John W. Appel, ‘Prevention of Manpower Loss ...’, quoted in, Steckel, p.296.

² Quoted in Holmes, *Acts of War*, p.115.

³ Gilbert W. Beebe, & John W. Appel, *Variation in Psychological Tolerance to Ground Combat in World War II*, Washington D.C.: National Academy of Sciences, 1958, p.59.

⁴ Grossman, p.50.

⁵ Grossman, p.50.

suggested that during combat ‘a man’s courage is his capital and he is always spending’,⁶ while military historian Richard Holmes suggests that ‘sudden and traumatic shocks might drain the well dry in a single draught.’⁷

After the war, through a series of testing and interviews, research mapped the relationship between the length of time spent in combat, as an aggregate figure, and the degree of efficiency. British studies estimated that a man could perform for up to 400 days in combat before no longer being able to function, the US put this period at between 200 and 240 days.⁸ Other studies have led to the conclusion that after 30 days of combat, psychological casualties exceed battle casualties, and after 60 days most unit personnel became ineffective.⁹

In a ground-breaking study following World War Two, researchers Beebe and Appel explored the statistical data around the occurrence of NP casualties in US infantry divisions. A number of their findings are relevant to this work. First, most men – in excess of 98% – exposed to the stress of modern warfare would break down, becoming neuropsychiatric (NP) casualties.¹⁰ Second, if it were not for the intervention of other forms of battlefield attrition far more than the typical 10-15% of men – 16% in the MTO – would become NP casualties, perhaps as high as 50%, or even higher, during a long campaign. Within a combat unit, attrition – from all causes – occurs at a fast, fairly even rate”: 50% of original men are lost by combat day 18, 75% by day 34, 83-92% by day 50, 98% by day 110.¹¹ Third, peak combat efficiency is reached between 30 – 60 combat days; a decline follows as fear increases, a function of increasing time in combat.¹² Fourth, every man joining a combat unit has his breaking point. If NP losses were the sole reason for loss within a unit under combat conditions, 47% of men would become NP casualties by day 80, 75% by day 140, and 90% by day 210. The breaking point of the average US infantryman in the Mediterranean was 88 combat days.¹³

Towards the end of the Second World War, US medical doctors Roy Swank and Walter Marchand studied the effects of combat on American soldiers in Normandy. They mapped the

⁶ Holmes, *Acts of War*, p.213.

⁷ Holmes, *Acts of War*, p.216.

⁸ Holmes suggests that the difference between British and US figures relate to the differing rotation policies between the US and British/Dominion commands and the resulting periods between duty at the frontline and relief away from it. Holmes, *Acts of War*, p.215.

⁹ Holmes, *Acts of War*, p.265.

¹⁰ Beebe & Appel, pp.1&152. Neuropsychiatric casualty - wounding of a person’s mental wellbeing through exposure to stress, in the context of this study that stress occurs due to exposure to combat conditions.

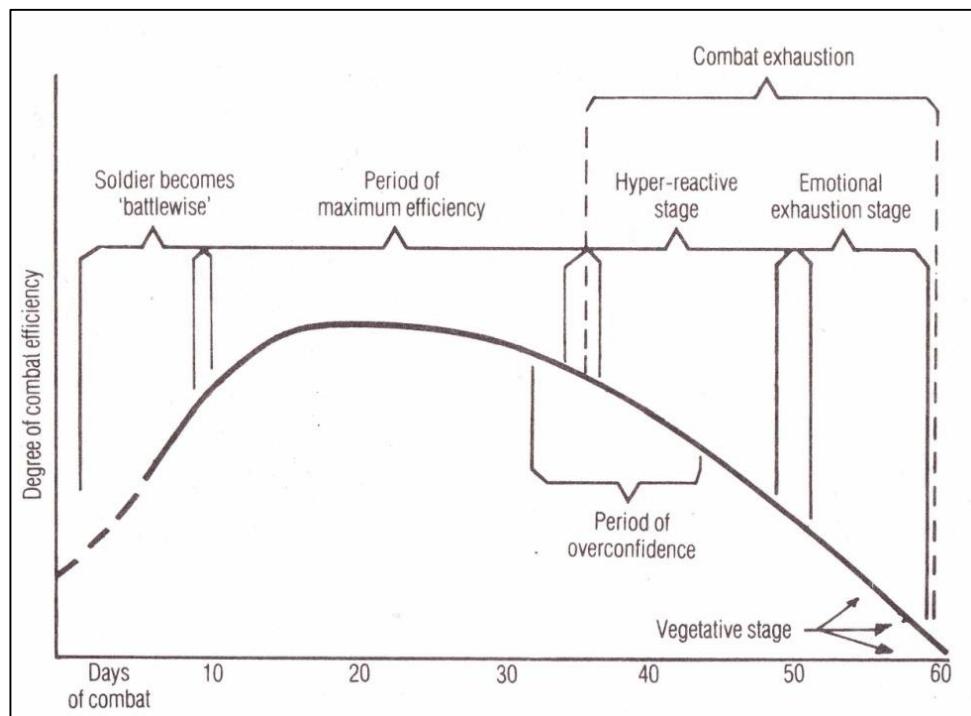
Grossman, p.50, suggests that the remaining 2% are already psychologically disposed – tending towards aggressive psychopaths – before they arrived on the battlefield.¹⁰

¹¹ Beebe & Appel, pp.92,143 & 152.

¹² Beebe & Appel, p.153.

¹³ Beebe & Appel, pp.92 & 163.

relationship between exposure to combat, combat efficiency, and progressive psychological stages, (graph 1). Their results are similar to the findings of Beebe and Appel, and are presented in graphical form as graph 2.



(Orion Books/ American Medical Association)

Graph 1. Towards the end of the war, US medical doctors Roy Swank and Walter Marchand studied the effects of combat on American soldiers in Normandy. They mapped the relationship between exposure to combat, combat efficiency, and progressive psychological stages.¹⁴

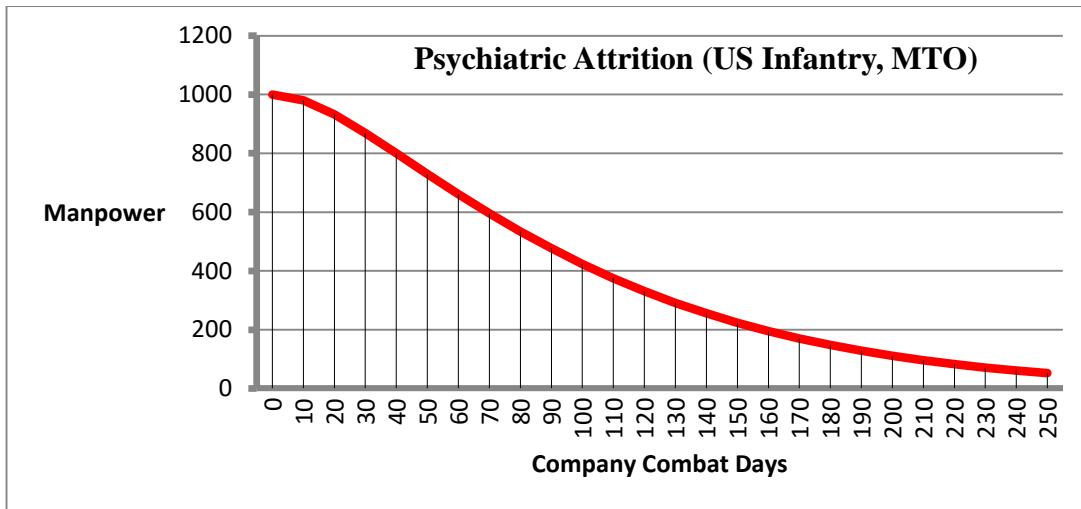
Whereas the first exposure to combat had helped men grow in confidence and improve tactical ability, peaking between combat days 30-60, subsequent actions tended to have the reverse effect. Surveys carried out by the military also indicated that there was a cumulative impact of combat, with one US study indicating that 74% of US infantrymen found that combat became “more frightening”¹⁵ As fear of combat increases, the probability of NP breakdown becomes more likely.¹⁶

Tellingly, for the New Zealanders, it was during the fighting in Tunisia that it was observed that long-service men – those with two to three and a half years’ service – were

¹⁴ Swank and Marchand, via Holmes, *Acts of War*, p.214.

¹⁵ Ellis, *The Sharp End*, p.101.

¹⁶ Holmes, *Acts of War*, p.218.



(Author)

Graph 2. Graphed data generated as part of Beebe and Appel's study demonstrates that, with no other attritional factors present, psychiatric factors will almost completely erode manpower within 250 combat days.¹⁷

comprising a significant number of cases, and that they had, as a group, been gradually deteriorating for some time.¹⁸ Artilleryman John Blythe concurs with this, writing that:

some may consider battle experience provides greater confidence and that with this fear diminishes but I did not find this so. The reverse was true in fact. Earlier ignorance made fewer demands upon one's stock of courage. Repeated doses of action provided fuller comprehension of its nastiness. This was apparent amongst some around who had suffered wounds in earlier engagements. What experience did give was ability to distinguish real danger from the apparent, but with this came a diminished capability to go on absorbing stress.¹⁹

The New Zealand Division went into the line in Italy at the Sangro River, on November 18, and was withdrawn on 5 June, following the Cassino battles, when most of the division was moved into rest areas. The number of combat days during this period varies between units, however of these 230 days, around 120 were spent by component units in combat, or close enough to the frontline to be impacted by artillery and air activity. The situation worsens for those men of earlier drafts who had already seen action in North Africa. The men of the 7th reinforcements had already spent 154 days in combat areas in North Africa; for those of the 5th and 6th reinforcements whose operational service began during Operation *Crusader* in late

¹⁷ Beebe & Appel, p.93. A combat day is defined as one where the soldier's company suffers at least one casualty.

¹⁸ Stout, p.636.

¹⁹ Blythe, pp.144-145.

1941, their North African combat service was 246 days. By far the most significant were those of the original three 1940 echelons and the 4th draft. Those men from these groups who reached Italy had most likely already been involved in a number of significant combat events stretching as far back as Greece and Crete in April/May 1941, over two years previous. Operationally their pre Italy experience could be as high as 283 days. It stands to reason then, that when placed on the graphs presented above, many of the men of 2nd New Zealand Division disembarking in Italy in October 1943 were already psychologically well on the way to becoming NP casualties, if not already there (See tables 5 – 8).

The men from the 4th reinforcements, who had arrived in the Middle East in January 1941 and had not been able to be part of the *Ruapehu* furlough draft, were particularly close to complete exhaustion. An engineer wrote in August 1944 that:

Maybe it won't be too long before the 4th Reinf.[orcements] are pulled out cause we have had it properly. Guess my nerves are starting to crack up now, which sure is a bad sign. Most of this outfit are the same too. We have been front line troops too flaming long and a chap can't stand it forever no matter how strong a will power he possesses.²⁰

The symptoms and manifestations presented by psychological casualties could vary widely. In general, exhaustion on the battlefield produced a general slowing down of mental processes, coupled with chronic exhaustion and a loss of enthusiasm, as well as mild depression and apathy.²¹ Exposure to intense combat intensified the reaction quickly producing a ‘parasympathetic backlash – a powerful weariness and sleepiness’.²² Soldiers who suffered severe psychological reactions were liable to exhibit acute clinical symptoms, such as exhaustion states, stuporous states, manic states, and acute terror reactions.²³ Research both at the time and throughout the post war period indicates that there was more chance of becoming a psychiatric casualty than being killed by enemy fire, the outcome of this is that there was a tremendous number of soldiers who were lost through non-physical wounds.²⁴

²⁰ Censorship summaries, DA 508/2 - DA 508/3, (ANZ); Censorship Report No 37, 30 Jul 44 to 5 Aug 44, part 2, p.1.

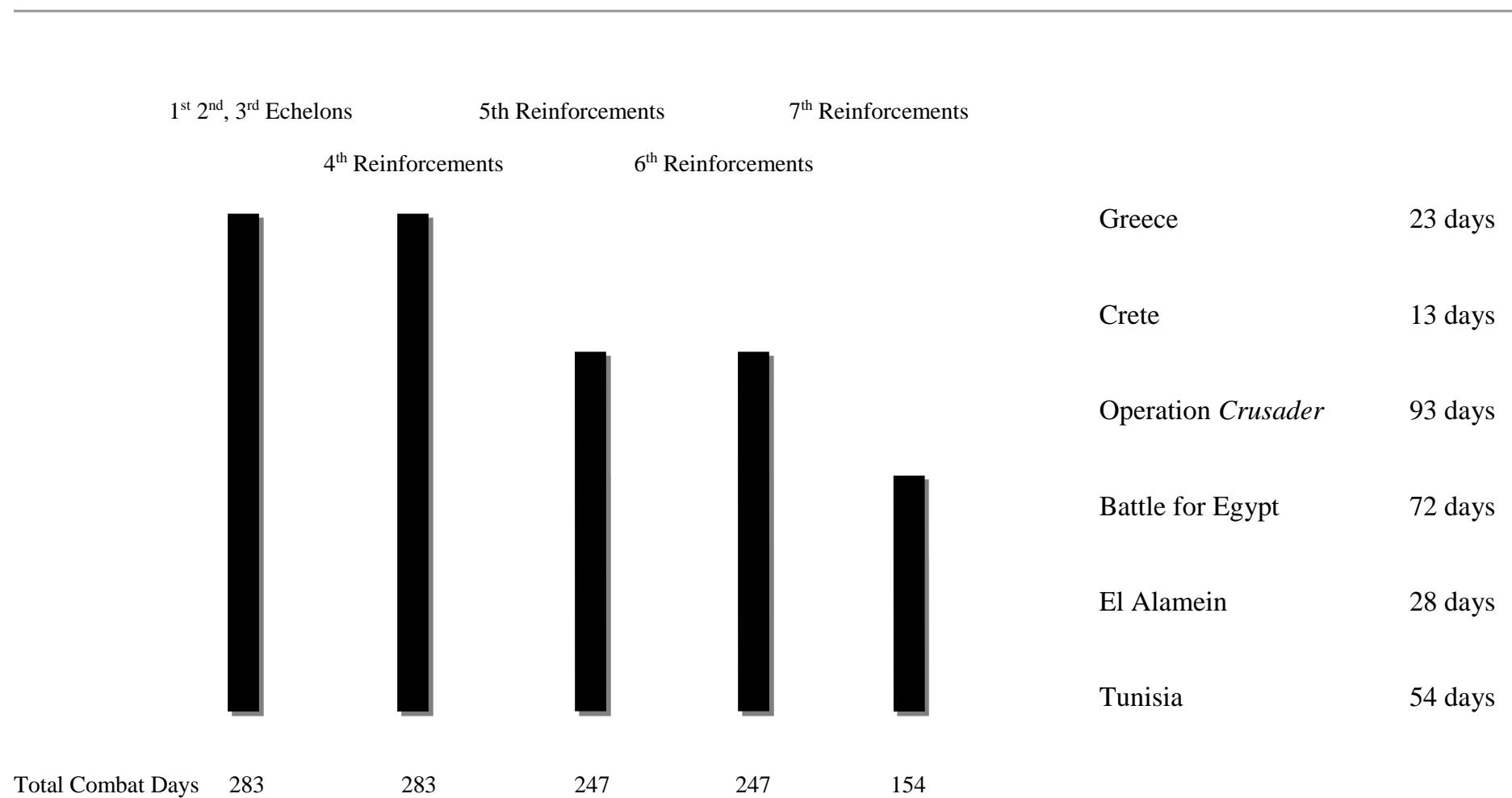
²¹ Grossman, p.84.

²² Grossman, pp.69-70, 85.

²³ Copp & McAndrew, p.46.

²⁴ Richard Gabriel, in Grossman, p.43. The suggested rate of psychological casualties lies around 8% of all battle casualties: Holmes, *Acts of War*, p.259.

Table 5. Combat Days: 1st Echelon to 7th Reinforcements, April 1941 – May 1943.²⁵



²⁵ Data based on Stevens, *Problems of 2 NZEF*, Appendix V, p.292.

(Author)

Tables 6, 7, & 8. Combat Days: 21, 25, 28 Battalions, November 1943 – March 1945.²⁶

Table 6. 21 Battalion

Date into combat situation	Date out of combat situation	Days in combat	Days not in combat
25 November 1943	18 January 1944	54	18
5 February 1944	11 February 1944	6	48
20 March 1944	7 April 1944	18	14
21 April 1944	5 June 1944	46	50
25 July 1944	16 August 1944	22	36
21 September 1944	18 October 1944	27	38
25 November 1944	30 December 1944	35	10
9 January 1945	23 January 1945	14	
Total days	436	222	214

(Author)

Table 7. 25 Battalion

Date into combat situation	Date out of combat situation	Days in combat	Days not in combat
20 November 1943	2 January 1944	43	50
21 February 1944	1 April 1944	39	8
9 April 1944	18 April 1944	9	13
1 May 1944	18 May 1944	17	17
4 June 1944	15 June 1944	11	28
13 July 1944	16 July 1944	4	

²⁶ Data based on unit official histories: Cody, 21 Battalion; Puttick, 25 Battalion; J.F. Cody, 28 Battalion, Wellington: War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, 1956.

			12
28 July 1944	15 August 1944	18	
			28
12 September 1944	27 September 1944	15	
			8
5 October 1944	9 October 1944	4	
			8
17 October 1944	22 October 1944	5	
			53
14 December 1944	28 December 1944	14	
			3
1 January 1945	4 February 1945	34	
			6
10 February 1945	24 February 1945	14	
Total days	461	227	234

(Author)

Table 8. 28 Battalion

Date into combat situation	Date out of combat situation	Days in combat	Days not in combat
1 December 1943	15 January 1944	46	
			21
5 February 1944	26 March 1944	50	
			15
10 April 1944	30 April 1944	20	
			28
28 May 1944	5 June 1944	8	
			47
22 July 1944	15 August 1944	24	
			37
21 September 1944	23 September 1944	2	
			7
1 October 1944	2 October 1944	2	
			7
10 October 1944	14 October 1944	4	
			57
10 December 1944	20 December 1944	10	
			6
26 December 1944	9 January 1945	14	
			14
23 January 1945	5 March 1945	41	
Total days	460	221	239

(Author)

Given the impact of combat and the conditions that it occurred in, it is not surprising that accounts of the psychological effects on men within the division are not uncommon. Arriving at the Cassino battle, medic Cecil Coughlan writes: ‘Can’t get out of here quick enough.... Only at the side of Monastery Hill, & can see Cassino at the top of the hill. Got out at night & thank God.’ He then observes that ‘one of our chaps cracked up. Don’t blame him. Not a good start for us new chaps.’²⁷ This is followed several days later by the observation of an increase in the congregation at the Sunday service: ‘everybody at church. [They] must have the wind up.’²⁸ There were those men, however, for whom the limit of endurance had been reached. ‘[F]ellows used to bolt’ recalls Tom May, ‘one fellow got out of the tank in Cassino and he bolted and they never got him until Naples. But he was done, you see. His nerves had gone.’²⁹ May also remembers watching one tank commander after being under artillery fire, his nerves completely shattered; ‘he’d just had enough. I’ve never seen a man change colour like him. He went grey.... He was walking around in a complete haze. So he was sent home, done.’³⁰

Being under artillery or mortar fire proved to be an ordeal for even experienced soldiers. John Shinnick’s diary records the moment when one man reached his tipping point:

darkness came and with it a terrific enemy barrage.... A chap in the platoon lost his nerve with these [shells landing nearby], and he quickly degenerated into a whimpering man. One minute he had to be restrained from shooting himself, and the next he was reading a prayer-book. He became so helpless he messed his trousers. Wounding of the mentality can be far worse than wounding of the body which can quickly heal itself; and yet our Army appears so little interested in it.³¹

The primary group could play an important role in regulating the risks posed by group members who were showing signs of strain. Clem Scott tells of one crew member of the tank that he was in who was eased out of the group:

Shortly after [combat near Orsogna] our driver decided he was crook. He didn’t have to go far back over the hill to headquarters so Lou took him back. They

²⁷ Coughlan diary, Friday 5 May 1944.

²⁸ Coughlan diary, Sunday 7 May 1944.

²⁹ Parr, p.92.

³⁰ Parr, p.91.

³¹ Shinnick, p.53.

went to the doctor or the RAP and not long after that he came back. “Oh” he said “I’ve got influenza, high temperature”. He got all his things and was going back to B Echelon.... After a while Lou came back and said “There was nothing wrong with him, his temperature was perfect. I got rid of him. We’d be better off going into action without him. It was better to have one less than one like him.”³²

Unfortunately, some men reacted to the stresses of modern warfare in extreme ways. The official history indicates that there were nine self-inflicted wounds recorded by medical units in the Mediterranean theatre in the period from 1943 through to 1945.³³ However, there were 9846 casualties caused by accidents during the same period, and it is obvious that injuries caused by, for example, a tank hatch dropping on fingers, a shell dropped on a foot, or the slip of a knife when opening a tin of bully beef, would all achieve the same objective without the same stigma.³⁴ Some men found that they were unable to continue and decided that there was only one option left to them. John Blythe, a radio operator with the divisional artillery, was engaged in a game of chess one night when, ‘a rifle shot immediately outside the awning brought us to our feet and we rushed outside to find one of our sentries lying dead beside his rifle.... The poor chap had clearly committed suicide’. Blythe adds that ‘such cases were relatively rare and were usually put down to marital troubles.’³⁵

The Second World War could be considered the practical turning point in the treatment of battlefield psychological casualties. Terminology and understanding changed: shell shock became battle exhaustion, and there was recognition of the stresses of the battlefield, rather than the belief that it was the character of the man that was at fault. Some sense of the magnitude of the psychological impact of combat was also beginning to be recognised, with one report saying that ‘men will break down in direct relation to the intensity and duration of their exposure. Thus psychiatric casualties are as inevitable as gunshot or shrapnel wounds.’³⁶ Many units, including the New Zealand Division, had staff who specialised in psychiatry and who were able to both assess patients, and administer and improve treatment and understanding.³⁷

³² Plowman, *Rampant Dragons*, p.107.

³³ Stout, p.754.

³⁴ Officially diagnosed self-inflicted wounds for 1944 (per 1000 strength) were: British 0.21, Canadian 2.40, New Zealand 0.10. Accidental injuries during the same period accounted for British 39.06, Canadian 64.80, New Zealand 107.47 (per 1000 strength); W.F. Mellor, ‘Casualties and Medical Statistics’, London: HMSO, 1972, via Copp & McAndrew, p.206. In light of these figures, Bill McAndrew suggests that ‘it would be interesting to determine why such widely varying rates were reported and why New Zealanders were so accident prone.’ Copp & McAndrew, p.206.

³⁵ Blythe, p.128.

³⁶ Steckel, p.296.

³⁷ Lieutenant-Colonel John Russell was the consultant psychiatrist to 2 NZEF.

Copp and McAndrew in their detailed study of Canadian NP casualties during the Second World War, state that ‘heavy fighting in bad weather, produced very heavy battle and NP casualties. Individual and unit reactions to battle were comparable as was the basic aetiology of battle exhaustion.’ and that ‘NP casualties were in step with intensity and duration of fighting, weather conditions and intangible pressures on morale.’³⁸ It is important, also, to bear in mind that when considering the level of NP casualties occurring within a formation, there will be influences through underlying factors such as circumstances, conditions, experience and time in combat, and the battle role of the unit themselves. Internal factors within a unit, such as leadership, comradeship, primary group theory, and morale, also play an important role in the susceptibility to NP casualties.³⁹ Research on the subject of Second World War combat psychology has led to the conclusion that, with regard to NP casualties, the experiences of the Canadians, Americans, and British forces involved in the fighting in Italy – and by extension, given the similarity of their involvement, the New Zealanders – were similar.⁴⁰ This is important because in any study involving the psychological impact of combat on New Zealand troops in Italy, it would therefore be fair to consider and compare data from the other Allied combatants involved in the campaign.

Studies of the Canadian divisions fighting in Italy conclude that the NP proportion of total casualties – killed and wounded – varied between 16.9% and 30.5% during the Sangro River battles. During this period, of the nine infantry regiments in the 1st Canadian Division, six exceeded 20%, and the aggregated divisional rate for the period was 23.7%.⁴¹ During the period March through to June 1944, regimental rates in 1st Canadian lay between 14.6% and 31.4%, with six regiments over 20%, and the overall divisional average reaching 23.1%.⁴² Lieutenant-Colonel Arthur Doyle, a psychiatric doctor with the Canadian corps in Italy during 1943 and 1944, observed that psychological casualty rates reached 35% of all casualties, and 50% of wounded during periods of heavy action, notably at Ortona during the winter of 1943. Doyle then adds that ‘for Canadian troops it is probably safe to say that when neurophysciatric casualties reach 20% the formation concerned is tired and morale is dropping seriously.’⁴³

³⁸ Copp & McAndrew, pp.86 & 93.

³⁹ Copp & McAndrew, p.81.

⁴⁰ Copp & McAndrew, p.86.

⁴¹ Copp & McAndrew, p.58.

⁴² Copp & McAndrew, p.81.

⁴³ Copp & McAndrew, p.103.

The US experience in Italy was that 16% of non-fatal battle casualties were NP; in heavy combat this figure rose to 35%.⁴⁴ Historian Richard Holmes suggests that in the ‘Mediterranean theatre, an NP ratio ... of 1 in 5 (20%) of non-fatal casualties was normal for infantry divisions involved in intense combat’⁴⁵

The campaign in North-west Europe during 1944-45 also throws up relevant data. During the Normandy campaign, British infantry units suffered a ratio of between 22-25%; during Operation *Epsom* this rose to 30%, while battle exhaustion rates within the 2nd Canadian Corps climbed as high as 35% during the heaviest of the fighting in Normandy.⁴⁶ Evidence suggests that up to 66% of British non-surgical cases during operations in Normandy were psychiatric casualties, and that ‘for every formal admission to a medical facility there were three or four ineffective men remaining with their units; the number of exhaustion cases during this period were a cause for concern within the British Army’.⁴⁷ Regardless of scale, a comparison between Normandy and Cassino has some relevance: both had a static nature, and were comparable to the First World War in terms of style, intensity, and casualty rates, and both had very similar rates of NP casualties (see appendix 2). Armoured divisions also suffered large scale losses; in the US 2nd Armoured Division 54% of all casualties during a period of intense fighting during 1944, were NP.⁴⁸ In the long run, NP casualties produced some alarming figures: within 21st Army Group, for the whole of the North-west European campaign, there were 13,255 psychiatric casualties – 15.6% of all casualties suffered.⁴⁹ Globally during the Second World War, the US military lost 504,000 men to psychological problems, enough to man almost 50 divisions.⁵⁰

Another issue that revealed itself during the middle period of the war was that veteran units experienced a decline in battle performance, and suffered higher rates of NP casualties when compared to new, or less experienced formations. It was noticeable during the fighting in Normandy with divisions that had been redeployed from Italy – namely the British 50th and 51st divisions.⁵¹ This also held true for the American units in Sicily that had been involved in

⁴⁴ Copp & McAndrew, p.110.

⁴⁵ Richard Holmes, ‘The Italian Job: Five Armies in Italy, 1943-45’, p.149.

⁴⁶ Copp & McAndrew, pp.114 & 115, & p.126. Jones and Ironside provide the figure of 22%. Edgar Jones, & Stephen Ironside, ‘Battle Exhaustion: The Dilemma of Psychiatric Casualties in Normandy, June–August 1944’, *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 53, (March 2010), pp 109-128, retrieved 22 August 2014 from <http://journals.cambridge.org>.

⁴⁷ Jones & Ironside, p.125; WO177/321, (TNA), D. J. Watterson, ‘Monthly report for June 1944 by psychiatrist attached to 2nd Army, 7 July 1944’, via Jones & Ironside, p.126.

⁴⁸ Richard Holmes, ‘The Italian Job: Five Armies in Italy, 1943-45’, p.218

⁴⁹ Richardson, p.116.

⁵⁰ Grossman, p.43.

⁵¹ Holmes, *Acts of War*, p.222.

the Tunisian campaign, with a US Army report from the beginning of the Italian campaign indicating that:

the Sicilian campaign also exploded the idea that the rates of occurrence of psychiatric disabilities are lessened among experienced troops. In the two “veteran” divisions, used, 66 percent and 88 percent respectively of the NP cases were among veterans of the Tunisian campaign who had not been previously hospitalized for NP disabilities... it is apparent the rate of occurrence is actually higher among seasoned troops than among unseasoned.⁵²

The experiences of the New Zealand Division with regard to psychiatric casualties are well laid out in the official history. Medical staff within 2 NZEF were aware of the changing attitudes around the causes of mental issues within the combat environment. The underlying causes were identified as a lowering of individual and group morale. Removed from the frontline, New Zealand's psychological casualties were initially sent to one of the field ambulances for assessment. Those who needed clinical treatments or rest before being returned to their unit – usually after several days – remained at the field ambulance. Those whose condition was severe were evacuated to a rest centre, or, if severe, to the base hospital.⁵³

Various figures can be located for the levels of NP casualties suffered by the New Zealand Division during the Second World War. The long run percentage of NP casualties for the division during the North African campaign was 15%.⁵⁴ During the Battle for Egypt in mid-1942, 4th Field Ambulance recorded a 10% rate passing through its field hospital, while in the Tunisian campaign the rate was as high as 40%.⁵⁵ In Italy during 1943-44, peaks occurred in step with periods of heavy fighting – the Sangro, in Tuscany and on the Adriatic, and peaking at Cassino where, as the official historian notes, ‘the morale of the Division was below its usual high level, and a noticeable temporary increase in the incidence of neurosis occurred.’⁵⁶ The NP ratio for the early fighting in Italy, between November 1943 and May 1944, was 22%, when the figures are extended out until September 1944, the ratio changes very little (21%).

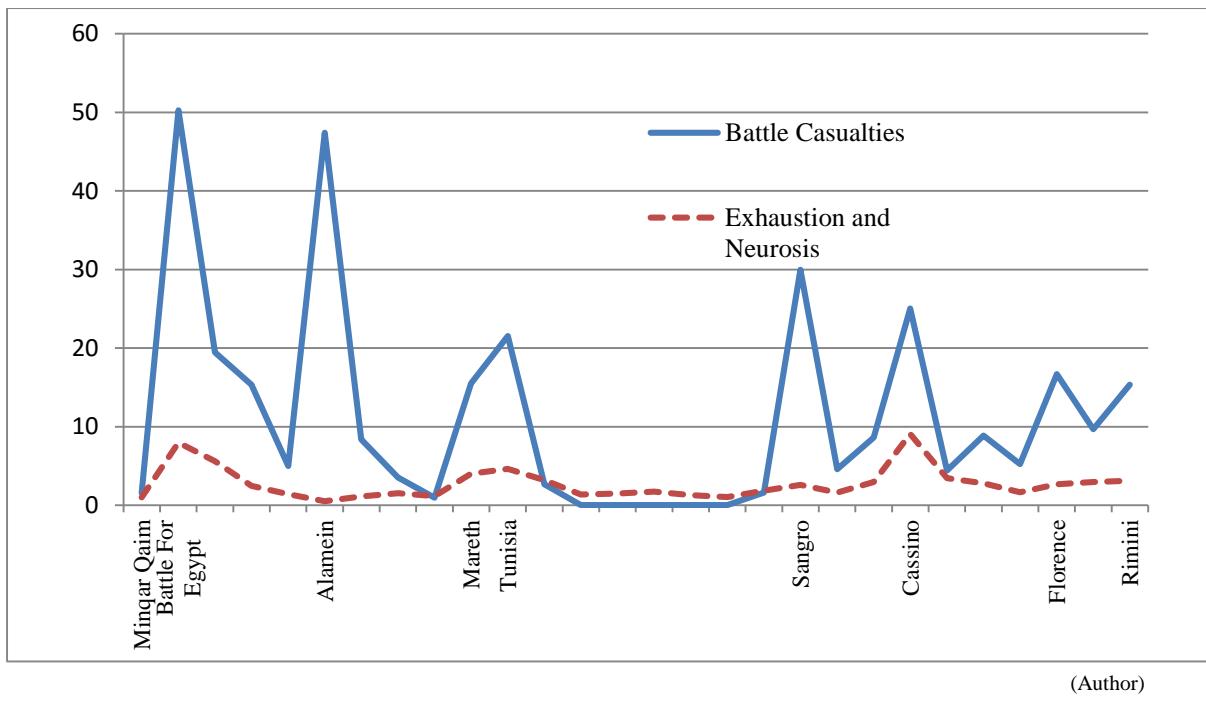
⁵² Quoted in Johnson, pp.8-9; see also Copp & McAndrew, p.110.

⁵³ Copp & McAndrew, p.49.

⁵⁴ See appendix 2. The North African Campaign includes data from June 1942 through to May 1943.

⁵⁵ Stout, p.635. Interestingly, the figures presented for November 1942, during the division's participation in the Alamein battle are very low – a ratio of 1% during a period of high casualties – and warrant further investigation; a pertinent start point being the high level of morale that was apparent throughout the Eighth Army at that time.

⁵⁶ Stout, p.637.



(Author)

Graph 3. Comparison of battle exhaustion and neurosis casualties with total battle casualties, June 1942-September 1944. Per 1000 hospital admissions.⁵⁷

The psychological impact of combat and its aftermath could last many years.⁵⁸ Pensions awarded to New Zealand servicemen for psychiatric disorders had reached 10,070 by 1985, and one psychiatrist conducting routine reviews of men with War Disability Pensions concluded that 50 years after the war, 50 percent of those that he reviewed were ‘still living with severe psychiatric symptoms relating to their wartime terror.’⁵⁹ One Indian soldier, a veteran of the North African campaign and who was interviewed during the 1990s, remembered the dead at Cassino:

I still can’t forget the Cassino ruins. There was nothing but rubble. The bodies were still trapped, stinking – I had to cover my nose as I passed through. I saw legs there, blown off the stomach. I have never seen such a number of dead bodies in any battle. I counted more than 800 – then I gave it up. They were just there in the rubble, covered with a blanket. I felt very sorry. I didn’t know where they were born, how they came there, whether they were enemy or our own troops – they were all mingled together. So many New Zealanders, British, Germans, Indians.... I didn’t understand about war [before Cassino]. But when I saw the bodies in the ruins of Cassino, then it changed my mind. I asked ‘What for man is fighting man, and killing?’ After the war I used to feel it so often: the

⁵⁷ See appendix 2 for data set.

⁵⁸ Beebe and Appel suggest that even five years after the war, many men who had been classified as NP casualties would be considered disabled for combat, Beebe and Appel, p.166.

⁵⁹ Parr, p.11.

scene used to come to my mind. Even now, as I talk to you, I can see the whole scene before me in my mental eye.⁶⁰

There is no doubt that the psychological impact of combat was a significant factor in the battle weariness of 2nd New Zealand Division. Widespread psychological pressure meant not only that losses through NP casualties were high, but also impacted on the underlying morale at all levels. It is to morale that this study now turns to in the following chapter.

⁶⁰ Christopher Somerville, *Our War: How the British Commonwealth fought the Second World War*, London: Weinenfeld & Nicolson, 1998, p.237.

Chapter Seven. Morale.

Discipline and the way it is exercised and displayed affects morale, and morale was central to the problem of battle exhaustion.

Bill McAndrew.¹

The morale of the Army was a complex matter determined by a number of factors – ranging from the quality of the NAAFI tea to the competence of the officers, to the loyalty of wives, to news from the battlefronts.

J.A. Crang.²

Critical to the rate with which both a military unit and individuals decline towards battle weariness, is morale. Dictionary definitions describe morale as ‘The mental or emotional state (with regard to confidence, hope, enthusiasm, etc.) of a person or group engaged in some activity; degree of contentment with one's lot or situation.’³ and ‘the mental and emotional attitude of a person or group with regard to confidence, hope, zeal, willingness... [the] degree of contentment with one's situation’.⁴ The wartime British Army’s adjutant-general’s department defined morale in a military context as, ‘all those things which make the soldier more, or less, keen to carry out his job of soldiering, and readier, or less ready, to endure the hardships, discomforts and dangers that it entails’.⁵ Historian Jonathan Fennell, in his examination of Eighth Army morale during 1942, defines morale as ‘the willingness of an individual or group to prepare for and engage in an action required by an authority or institution’.⁶

¹ Copp & McAndrew, p.67.

² J.A. Crang, ‘The British Soldier on the Home Front: Army Morale Reports, 1940-45’, in Addison & Calder, p.74.

³ Oxford English Dictionary, www.oed.com.

⁴ Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles, Vol. 1, A-M, 5th ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

⁵ PRO WO 277/16, Morale, compiled by Lieutenant Colonel J. H. A. Sparrow, 1949, p.5; as quoted by Crang, in Addison & Calder, p.61.

⁶ Jonathan Fennell, ‘Steel my Soldiers Hearts: El Alamein Reappraised’, *Journal of Strategic and Military Studies*, 14:1 (2011), retrieved 18 September 2014, from www.jmss.org/jmss/index.php/jmss/article/view/447, p.5.

Factors that generated battle weariness within the New Zealand Division, also impacted on the morale – both of the individual and the group. Indeed, morale, or more accurately declining morale, is one of the symptoms of battle weariness. F.M. Richardson, in his work on psychological factors in war, identifies three levels of military morale: personal, group, and unit. A soldier's personal morale is affected both by physical factors including health, food, rest and sleep, and quality of amenities, and mental factors such as ideology, self-confidence, sound personal principles such as self-control and devotion to duty; for leaders this includes having responsibility within the chain of command as well.

Group morale – and Richardson identifies a group as being as small as an infantry section or tank crew – is tied to a number of factors. These include: membership of a contented unit, confidence in leadership from both within and outside of the group, confidence in and respect for other group members, and a feeling of responsibility to other group members.⁷ Historians have recognised the importance of the primary group in maintaining morale and cohesion within the military. One suggests that 'armies are held together, as fighting machines at squad and platoon level', and that 'at that level, comradeship was no fleeting, boozy sentimentality but a fierce and enduring commitment of men to one another.' He continues, qualifying this statement by stating that 'possibly the only effective check on the inevitable breakdown of individual resilience was the support of the men in one's immediate ambit.'⁸ Clearly, threats to small group morale and cohesion – primarily casualties, loss of leaders, and stress – will have a drastic and rapid impact on group battle worthiness.

Lastly, the unit morale of a significant sized formation, for example 2nd New Zealand Division itself, or one of its infantry battalions, is based on *esprit de corps*, a concept consisting of pride in the unit – what Richardson terms regimental pride – comradeship between members of that unit, and underlying factors such as leadership, motivation, success in battle, and other intangibles that 'defy quantification or easy description.'⁹

The flip side of an examination of what makes good morale, is the consideration of factors that erode morale. Adverse operational conditions, hunger, exhaustion, and lack of comfort, act negatively on physical wellbeing, while fear, emotional loss, loss of confidence, loss of comradeship, skill loss, loss of leadership, loss of cohesion, all act on mental wellbeing. In addition, a number of other factors work to magnify any negative impact: difficult terrain

⁷ See Richardson, Appendix I.

⁸ John Ellis, 'Reflections on the "Sharp End" of War', in Addison & Calder, p.16.

⁹ Copp & McAndrew, p.81. Richardson identifies this as '*kameradschaft*... the god of the German army.' Richardson, p.20.

and poor weather, the skill and determination of the enemy, propaganda, leadership issues, lack of planning or plan failures.

During its service throughout the war, the division attempted to gauge troop morale as part of a periodic, centralised, censorship of letters. The summaries of this activity were reported on weekly and provide a useful insight into both the viewpoints of the man in the field, and how these viewpoints were viewed by the military hierarchy. Two points are important to note. First, the sampling programme was comprehensive; during the week 2-8 April 1944 for example, just over 4200 letters were sampled, the censor estimating that this was 12-15% of all letters generated for the period. Significantly, supporting arms such as the supply companies, service corps, and medical units were surveyed as much as the rifle companies, although it could be argued that this dilutes any assessment of morale due to the decreasing influence of combat and frontline conditions. The second point concerns the subject matter written about. Restrictions on the writing on military matters – location, weapons, actions, casualties – were strictly enforced.¹⁰ Because of this, it is then difficult to judge any impact of combat on morale – because of the lack of reference – for both the censor at the time, and any subsequent assessment. However, as has been seen earlier, personal accounts – especially diary entries – cover off this aspect very well, and what the censorship summaries allow us to see is the impact on morale of matters occurring away from the frontline.

For the division's initial period in combat in Italy, leading up to the end of 1943, the censor assesses the division's morale as excellent, with the men 'fighting fit', that 'the spirit of the men [is] high', and that 'the division all seem right on top of their form and as fit as [ever] and rearing to go.'¹¹ By January however, after more than a month in the line and subject to heavy combat and appalling weather, there are indications that things have changed. Morale is assessed as only 'good', mud is a popular topic – 90% of all letters examined 'contained some reference to that curse' – along with snow, slush, the cold, and wet feet.¹² Army issue boots are frequently criticised for their poor quality.¹³ The censor also notes the increase in 'longing for home, tiredness, and fed-upness'. Critically, he also reports 'definite signs of war-weariness', and a 'homesick tone' in many of the letters.

¹⁰ Letters which contained references to military matters, were referred to 2nd New Zealand Division Headquarters for action against the writer. See, 2 NZEF - Headquarters 2 NZ Division – Censorship, DA 21.1/9/G4/11, (ANZ).

¹¹ Censorship summaries, DA 508/2 - DA 508/3, (ANZ): Weekly Report No 2, 5 Dec 43, part 2, p.2.

¹² Censorship summaries, DA 508/2 - DA 508/3, (ANZ), Censorship Report No 6, 26 Dec 43 to 1 Jan 44, part 1, p.1, & Censorship Report No 8, 9 Jan to 15 Jan 44, part 1, p.1, part 2, p.1.

¹³ Censorship summaries, DA 508/2 - DA 508/3, (ANZ), Censorship Report No 9, 16 Jan to 22 Jan 44, part 1, p.1, part 2, pp.1-2.

By April, with the division engaged at Cassino and another period of hard fighting, heavy casualties and harsh conditions, the reports take on an ominous tone. ‘War weariness... faded away to nothing’ writes the censor teasingly, but then notes a rising of:

a feeling of something which is hard to define - a ‘don’t give a damn’ attitude – as though the Div has come to the conclusion that because everything is in such a mess, there is no use in having any interest or enthusiasm over anything except their own present and future lives.¹⁴

He goes on to suggest that there is an undercurrent of dissatisfaction throughout the division, warning that ‘this apparent dissatisfaction has reached the stage where the men no longer even bother to discuss [the reasons for it] in their letters.’¹⁵

When the summaries for the Italian campaign are viewed in their entirety, some judgements can be made as to what drove this dissatisfaction. Several of the key drivers were related: the suspension of furlough drafts, the protection of union members in New Zealand from military service, strikes in New Zealand that occurred for better pay and conditions, and the inability of the Government to facilitate a rotation of servicemen and those in essential industry.

The handling of the furlough scheme caused a resentment apparent from the first weeks of 1944, and those men of the early drafts were the most vocal and bitter. It appeared that they were to be denied a return home, while those who were safe in industry were both protected and earning high wages. The avoidance of what was seen as a fair share of the military burden by these men did not sit well with the members of the division.

Until a few days ago I felt pretty certain in my own mind that I would be on the way home in the near future but my hopes were dashed when we were told a few days ago that there is still work for us yet. You can well imagine how disappointed all of us were who are due for furlough. I reckon we are getting a pretty raw deal as we have had as long and longer service overseas than most and have seen more action than most and now we are told that there is more in store for us.¹⁶

¹⁴ Censorship summaries, DA 508/2 - DA 508/3, (ANZ), Censorship Report No 20, 2 Apr to 8 Apr 44, part 2, p.1.

¹⁵ Censorship summaries, DA 508/2 - DA 508/3, (ANZ), Censorship Report No 20, 2 Apr to 8 Apr 44, part 2, p.1.

¹⁶ Censorship summaries, DA 508/2 - DA 508/3, (ANZ), Censorship Report No 31, 18 Jun to 24 Jun 44, part 2, p.3.

News of unionised workers in protected jobs also caused anger amongst the troops. When timber workers in New Zealand threatened to strike for an increase in the butter ration many in Italy were irate:

We read in today's NZEF times about the West Coast Timber Workers threatening to strike unless they get a pound of butter a week. George said 'send them all over here, they will get all the butter they want.' I'm sure any of us would go back and work in the sawmills with pleasure.¹⁷

News in letters from home also fuelled discontentment. The censor commenting that criticism and blistering sentences had been composed about topics ranging from:

politics generally, behaviour of women, soldiers receiving extra pay for harvest and wharf work, the attitude of the country generally as reported by returned furlough personnel, the increasing incidence of VD in the country, marriages to Americans, etc. And a very popular phrase is 'The biggest majority of them don't realise there is a war on.'¹⁸

One item of news from home that had a big impact, affecting both the recipient and those around him, was the 'Dear John' letter. The New Zealanders would have been well aware that a large number of American servicemen were stationed 'at home', with one historian estimating the number of US servicemen that visited New Zealand during the eighteen months from June 1942 alone, was in the order of 500,000 men.¹⁹ Not only were there the men of at least five infantry divisions, but also members of the US Air Force, navy, and supporting arms. There were also several large hospitals which received and rehabilitated a large number of wounded and sick from the Pacific theatre. The American servicemen were attractive to local girls, physically attractive, confident, well paid, and generous with ample amounts of luxury items. It was not just the Americans that were cause for concern; many eligible men remained employed in essential industries, the military also concentrated young servicemen around its facilities and training areas, and then, at the end of 1943, thousands of troops were returning from the Middle East on furlough.

¹⁷ Censorship summaries, DA 508/2 - DA 508/3, (ANZ), Censorship Report No 16, 5 Mar 44 to 11 Mar 44, part 2, p.2.

¹⁸ Censorship summaries, DA 508/2 - DA 508/3, (ANZ), Censorship Report No 17, 11 Mar to 18 Mar 44, part 2, p.2.

¹⁹ Harry Boliotti, *The Yanks are Coming: The American Invasion of New Zealand 1942-1944*, Auckland: Century Hutchinson, 1989, p.35.



(L.Richards)

Figure 21. German propaganda leaflet; ‘You Americans are sooo different!’

It would have been prominent in the minds of the men in Italy – some separated from their loved ones for a number of years, with knowledge fuelled by the tales told by reinforcements and in letters from home – that the fidelity of wives and fiancées would be tested. The authorities too, were well aware of the impact that any disloyalty would have. A British Army morale report in 1942 contains the opinion that ‘Wives who should, presumably, be a source of comfort seem to be in many cases the reverse [and] letters from wives who are not equal to the test of prolonged separation do perhaps more than any other single factor to undermine the soldier’s morale.’²⁰ Information accumulated during the North African campaign through the censorship of soldier’s letters suggested that ‘this subject [the loyalty, or disloyalty, of loved ones], apart from the ebb and flow of battle, has a greater effect on the men’s morale than any other single factor.’²¹ Those at home did not always help, as a passage in a letter written by Bill Mold alludes to: ‘The Yanks have been getting a pretty good hearing

²⁰ WO 163/161, (TNA), Morale Report, August-October 1942, p.3, quoted by Crang, in Addison & Calder, p.70.

²¹ Quoted in Fennell, Combat and Morale in the North African Campaign: The Eighth Army and the Path to El Alamein, p.167.

in recent letters too, and a lot of the boys are not very happy about it.²² It is therefore not surprising that German propaganda continually and widely targeted this issue.



(L. Richards)

Figure 22. German propaganda leaflet; ‘While you are away’.

This type of propaganda played on a very real fear. The infidelity of women in New Zealand had a considerable impact on the division. The censor was well placed to be able to assess the extent of the problem through his sampling. ‘The subject of marital infidelity still receives bitter comment’ he reported in September 1944, ‘and ten new members of the “turf club” were noted.²³ Given that each week somewhere between 12 and 15% of an approximate

²² Roger Mold (ed.), *Military History for William Edward (Bill) Mold*, unpublished manuscript, n.d., p.22.

²³ Censorship summaries, DA 508/2 - DA 508/3, (ANZ), Censorship Report No 43, 10 Sept to 16 Sept 44, part 2, p.2.

total of 4000 outgoing letters were sampled by the censor, this indicates that failing relationships were occurring at a rate of between 70 and 80 per week, for letter writers only.²⁴ Although letter writing was a regular and popular activity, it was not necessarily universal or weekly. If only 50% of the division are writing each week, *and* include details of their partner's infidelity in their letter, then the underlying weekly rate for the division doubles. This gives an upper level of around 8000 failed relationships *per year*. In an organisation with an establishment of 20000 men then undoubtedly the festering issue of unfaithfulness was one of the big drivers of morale within the division.

Writing about the women that had sent letters to their fiancées and husbands, one writer angrily wrote:

Boy if there is anyone I detest more, it is the [woman] going the Yank way. Half of [the Yanks] are only half breed Ities. If you could only be here with me and hear some of the cases where fellas have been over here for three and a half years and some have been married for five to as much as fifteen years and similar engagements, fellas who have just been living for the time when they could get back to them again, but only to receive a letter saying that he is through. You meet not only one but dozens.²⁵

The impact on men receiving a letter was obvious: 'One of my Cpl's has just lost his fiancée to a married American soldier and it has almost caused him to lose his mind',²⁶ wrote one officer, while another points out that 'It is the cause of a lot of casualties too. One can't take care of himself if he is thinking of someone back home who has left him flat for a Yank.'²⁷ It was not only the man himself in danger, but also those closest to him on the battlefield:

Fancy getting a letter like that when you are going into a scrap at the very time when you need all your wits about you, and you get something like that on your mind. Some of the softer ones even go so far as not to care whether they come out again, and get careless and endanger the lives of a lot of their mates.²⁸

²⁴ Censorship summaries provide an indication of sampling intensity. Each weekly report also provides sample numbers by letter type and indicates total letters dispatched; see, Censorship summaries, DA 508/2 - DA 508/3, (ANZ), Censorship Report No 20, 2 Apr to 8 Apr 44, part 1, p.1, part 2, p.1.

²⁵ Censorship summaries, DA 508/2 - DA 508/3, (ANZ), Censorship Report No 43 Sept to 16 Sept 44, part 2, p.3.

²⁶ Censorship summaries, DA 508/2 - DA 508/3, (ANZ), Censorship Report No 17, 11 Mar to 18 Mar 44, part 2, p.2.

²⁷ Censorship summaries, DA 508/2 - DA 508/3, (ANZ), Censorship Report No 43 Sept to 16 Sept 44, part 2, p.3.

²⁸ Censorship summaries, DA 508/2 - DA 508/3, (ANZ), Censorship Report No 50, 29 Oct to 4 Nov 44, part 2, p.2.

Although combat and related subjects were restricted, censorship did capture some letters containing an occasional glimpse at the stresses that the men had to endure. One writer confides that, ‘There is one thing and that is the nerves are letting me down badly. When Fritz flings the stuff over thick and heavy now I get the shakes and can’t stop. As a matter of fact I’ve just about had enough.’²⁹ One private writes that ‘We have got a hell of a lot of casualties in this stink and it is about time the heads of NZ woke up to themselves as the old NZ Div is pushed in to the thick of it too often’,³⁰ while another voices his opinion that ‘If we don’t get home very soon there’ll be very few of us left, as the boys say, General Freyberg [is] the butcher.’³¹

And always the theme of the poor weather is woven through the majority of narratives. ‘The men are not moaning’ observed the censor, ‘but they are apparently very susceptible to changes in conditions and the reoccurrence of cold and wet weather has given the mail a very gloomy tone.’³² It affected all, frontline or rear: ‘You get out of the truck and in places you go up to your knees in slush and mud.... It makes everyone miserable’,³³ wrote one driver, while another notes that ‘The weather is our biggest enemy, just lately it’s been awfully cold and wet and mud everywhere – ankle deep and where trucks have been manoeuvring [and] boots aren’t a bit of good to you.’³⁴ The two winters that the division spent in Italy were both bitterly cold, with atrocious conditions that could seem unending:

We are in the thick of the winter season here and boy it certainly is cold. All day yesterday frost was falling and then last night we had a light fall of snow about quarter of an inch. Today the sun is trying to poke its nose out, for the first time in five days, the temperature has risen above freezing point. It is now midday and it is reading 33° [1°C]. At one time it was down to 14° [-10°C].³⁵

The censorship summaries chart the mood of the division on a roller coaster through periods of both darkness and happy times. In periods of combat the letters and subsequent reports take on a gloomy note, and it is plain to see morale falling away. Conversely, when the

²⁹ Censorship summaries, DA 508/2 - DA 508/3, (ANZ), Censorship Report No 6/45, 4 Feb to 10 Feb 45, part 2, p.1.

³⁰ Censorship summaries, DA 508/2 - DA 508/3, (ANZ), Censorship Report 19, 26 Mar to 1 Apr 44, part 2, p.2.

³¹ Censorship summaries, DA 508/2 - DA 508/3, (ANZ), Censorship Report 19, 26 Mar to 1 Apr 44, part 2, p.1.

³² Censorship summaries, DA 508/2 - DA 508/3, (ANZ), Censorship Report No 13, 13 Feb to 19 Feb 44, part 2, p.1.

³³ Censorship summaries, DA 508/2 - DA 508/3, (ANZ), Censorship Report No 8, 9 Jan to 15 Jan 44, part 2, p.1.

³⁴ Censorship summaries, DA 508/2 - DA 508/3, (ANZ), Censorship Report No 57, Dec to 25 Dec 44, part 2, p.2.

³⁵ Censorship summaries, DA 508/2 - DA 508/3, (ANZ), Censorship Report No 4/45, 21 Jan to 27 Jan 45, part 2, p.1.

division is out of the line, when there is rest, rugby, clean clothes, good food and leave, morale begins to rise once more. At all times though, there remains an undercurrent of discontent. One letter writer succinctly sums up the general opinion of the campaign when he writes:

You can guess we are all pretty tired of this Italy, it has been a long drawn out offensive with a stubborn and clever enemy retreating always to prepared positions and with the natural defences [of] mountains and rivers.... General "Winter" is starting to make things unpleasant for us, but having lived through the last one I guess we'll soldier on through this one.³⁶

Failing morale was fertile ground for other problems; soldiers were less emotionally prepared for combat, and therefore more susceptible to psychological injuries. Discipline is another key strand in the military culture that weakens in step with falling morale. Discipline through training, inclusion, hierarchy, leadership, and pride, impacts positively on morale; conversely, a declining morale leads to a falling away in discipline. Military philosopher, Carl von Clausewitz, identified the fragility of this relationship between morale and discipline when he stated that:

Discipline, skill, good-will, a certain pride, and high morale, are the attributes of an army trained in times of peace. They command respect, but they have no strength of their own. They stand or fall together. One crack, and the whole thing goes, like a glass too quickly cooled.³⁷

Importantly for this work, New Zealand military historian John McLeod also identifies this relationship, and its impact on battleworthiness, when he states that, 'in Italy, the New Zealander's discipline out of the line fell away, paralleling the decline in their morale and battle discipline' and adding that 'It was a state of affairs that the New Zealand officers seemed powerless to stop.'³⁸

Elements of discipline within the 2nd New Zealand Division during the Italian campaign will now be explored.

³⁶ Censorship summaries, DA 508/2 - DA 508/3, (ANZ), Censorship Report No 57, Dec to 25 Dec 44, part 2, p.2.

³⁷ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. & trans. Michael Howard & Peter Paret, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976, p.189.

³⁸ McLeod, p.132.

Chapter Eight. Discipline.

The Kiwi was said to be a flightless bird who ran around Italy crying, ‘Loot, loot’.

Gordan Slatter, 26 Battalion.¹

The discipline and turnout of the men is bringing disgrace onto the division.

Freyberg, October 1944.²

Looting

Once the New Zealanders began arriving in Italy in early October 1943, it did not take long for them to begin to take advantage of opportunities to improve their situation outside of the normal channels of supply. Typically, the activities were minor, and in most cases opportunistic, but they were also indicative of the attitudes of a number of the New Zealanders towards authority and basic military discipline. If there was some minor advantage to be gained and making a bivy a bit more comfortable, or supplementing rations, then unattended property – military or civilian – was fair game. Clarrie Ingham, an anti-aircraft gunner, had been in Italy less than 48 hours before becoming involved in a pilfering expedition. ‘After lunch’ he wrote in his diary, ‘the boys started to raid a supply dump which turned out to be an Itie Army dump.’³ Fellow gunner ‘Fritz’ Harris also recorded the same incident, but in a little more detail, and with some indication of the scale of the event:

Today we were all making ourselves comfy when the old bush wireless screamed that sugar, cordial, jam etc could be had for grabbing. I went down & was trying to get some floor boards and some means of getting them home when the bush wireless sent thru’ warning that provosts were coming down to guard the stuff. Well what a frenzy. A truck arrived & dozens of chaps poured off & about two dozen more rushed it with boxes of stuff & inside two minutes

¹ Slatter, p.113.

² Freyberg, Special Files - Re-organisation, October - December 1944, WAIIS8/8/77, (ANZ), File Note, October 1944.

³ Ingham diary, 10 October 1943.

the truck was loaded & dozens of chaps rushed around trying to find room for something. Later we had to return all the stuff.⁴

Laurie Birks also noted the incident: ‘all and sundry indulged in commandeering of Italian Army supplies from stores along road mainly jam & lemon syrup, but turned out this was against orders from above & stuff has to be returned.’⁵ Clarrie Ingham records on the same day that ‘some of the stuff was returned but most of it is buried around the camp.’⁶ The next day, the anti-aircraft gunners of Birks’ unit were reprimanded: ‘Capt. Chance gave us a dressing-down over slackness of discipline.’⁷ A move later that week meant that caches of loot had to be recovered. Ingham’s gun crew retrieved their bag of sugar from a nearby gully, which they rolled up inside a bedroll.⁸ Harris’ crew did the same, with Harris recording tongue in cheek that ‘bed rolls were very heavy to lift, it could not have been cordial sugar or jam as we’ve returned it all?’⁹ The next night, after moving their camp some two miles down the road, eight of Ingham’s crew ‘returned to the old area and dug up the rest of our stolen goods.’ For their sins, and typical of the Italian autumn weather, as they were doing this ‘it teamed with rain and we got soaked to the skin’.¹⁰

John Stichbury, a gunner in 6th Field Regiment, also records the incident in his diary and gives some indication of the scale of this event. He wrote:

‘We “cleftied” about 300lb [of] sugar, and as much tin jam tomatoes and cordial as we could carry.... It was certainly an amazing sight to see hundreds and hundreds of fellows all carrying as much as they could back to the Arti lines. The “Ities” guarding the goods helped the boys take it away and then rang the provosts.’¹¹

This incident occurred the day after the troops arrived in Italy, and is recorded in Freyberg’s GOC’s diary: ‘Already NZers in trouble – commandeered an Ity truck and drove in to take some rations, from Ity dump.’¹² Further information became available overnight and

⁴ Harris diary, 10 October 1943.

⁵ Birks diary, 10 October 1943.

⁶ Ingham diary, 10 October 1943

⁷ Birks diary, 11 October 1943.

⁸ Ingham diary, 17 October 1943.

⁹ Harris diary, 16 October 1943.

¹⁰ Ingham diary, 18 October 1943.

¹¹ John Stannus Stichbury, Papers, MS-Papers-4166, (ATL), diary, 10 October 1943.

¹² General Officer Commanding’s Diary - Part IV, September 1943 - October 1944, WAI18/6/46, (ANZ), 10 October 1943.

the next day Freyberg wrote that a ‘party of NZers with officers going into Ity Dump, forcing the guard and driving off with supplies including of all things – cases of bully.’¹³

Sugar was a commodity that was also in demand by the local population, and it could fetch high prices. Later in the campaign, with the Germans in full retreat, the spoils of war, often from German supply dumps, could be quite impressive. One lucky soldier ‘had a busy time selling German sugar to the Ites. Netted £14.00 for about 100lbs of sugar’,¹⁴ while Scotch Paterson’s company managed to appropriate a three-ton truckload of sugar from a German food dump, an acquisition that stood them in good stead at the close of hostilities.¹⁵

The wharves and railyards at Taranto, the staging point for the New Zealand Division for the early part of the campaign, could also provide rich pickings for those with a sharp eye and quick wit. Roger Smith remembers one member of his platoon arriving back at camp with a cartload of ‘booty’; ‘two enormous tarpaulins... two cases of tinned fruit, two of condensed milk, and a carton of tea.’ A case of the much maligned bully beef had also been lifted and exchanged for the hire of the horse and cart used to transport the collection of loot.¹⁶ Geoffrey Duff recalls a group of Kiwi infantrymen sent to the wharves at Taranto to collect bags of mail and, ironically, to guard against pilfering. While there, they observed a supply of rum being offloaded from a ship, and the sergeant in charge of the group was able to appropriate a case from one of the Italian wharfies. Hidden during the subsequent search by military police, and smuggled out amongst the mail sacks, the rum was later shared out amongst the group.¹⁷ Importantly, and in both cases, it had been more than ordinary soldiers involved; in Duff’s party it had been the sergeant who had been the key person in securing the case of rum. In the episode described by Smith, the platoon officer observed the arrival of the booty, but then walked away, turning a blind eye to the incident.

Was this behaviour – a propensity for petty theft and looting – new to the division, or had it simply resurfaced when new opportunities presented themselves? Significantly, Italy offered more scope for pilfering and petty theft than North Africa. In the desert especially, with few civilian settlements, loot was typically a result of combing through defeated enemy positions. In the cities of Egypt the authorities and military police ensured little opportunity for trouble. However, when presented with favourable circumstances, the New Zealanders were

¹³ General Officer Commanding's Diary - Part IV, September 1943 - October 1944, WAI18/6/46, (ANZ), 10 October 1943, 11 October 1943.

¹⁴ Edward Cecil Paul, Papers relating to war service, 1942 – 1946, MS 2012/7, (AWMM), (Paul Diary), 1 May 1945.

¹⁵ Paterson, pp.149-150.

¹⁶ Roger Smith, p.109.

¹⁷ Duff, p.58.

quick to take advantage. Jack Kirk, a private in the 4th Echelon, described a number of incidents during 1940/41 in which similar events to those described previously occurred. In 1940, as the Echelon passed through Sydney, wharfies conveniently ‘dropped’ a case of beer, splitting open the case but not damaging the beer. Kirk wrote that ‘all the wolves in uniform were in. Next minute there were cases (whole cases of 3 dozen) coming from everywhere.’¹⁸ In May 1941, after the evacuation of Greece, Kirk’s unit was on a troop train in Alexandria waiting to be returned to Maadi when someone found a railwagon filled with beer. Again, word went around and it was not long before ‘the rails were a mass of flying khaki. Cases were being handed down and ripped open, bottles were disappearing in all directions.... and soon all trucks on the train were in [a] more or less happy mood.’¹⁹

In other examples, Clarrie Ingham records in his diary that in June 1942, when the division was passing through Palestine on its way back from Syria, ‘everytime we stopped the boys raided corn fields and watermelon patches.’²⁰ With almost 20,000 men, the passage of the division must have had a big impact on roadside farms. Rear echelon soldiers also made the most of their opportunities with some involved in substantial activities. In February 1941, three NCOs, including a Regimental Quartermaster Sergeant, stationed at a prisoner of war camp, were jointly charged with the theft of 2400 blankets, an activity obviously aimed at supplying the black market.²¹

In the forward to the second official history volume covering the Italian Campaign, Brigadier Monty Fairbrother, a veteran of Italy, described the attributes of the typical New Zealand soldier. Effective as fighting men, they were also energetic, adaptable, resourceful and mentally alert; intelligent initiative was not lacking, as was spirit, skill, and doggedness.²² Similarly, historian Matthew Parker describes the New Zealand soldier as well educated, practical, and skilled at improvisation.²³ While these attributes produced excellent soldiers, they also contributed to independent minded free spirited men with an eye for opportunity and the wherewithal to make those opportunities succeed. Italy had population – importantly large rural communities – resources and infrastructure, and that meant that there was no shortage of situations where loot could be got, or got rid of. Hungry civilians were willing to trade a variety of commodities for food, clothing, cash, and comforts such as cigarettes and minor equipment.

¹⁸ Jack Kirk, Egypt, letter to Stan Kirk, 24 January 1941, MS1418, (AWMM).

¹⁹ Jack Kirk, Egypt, letter to Stan Kirk, 14 May 1941, MS1418, (AWMM).

²⁰ Ingham diary, 17 June 1942.

²¹ Special Files – Discipline, WAI8/4/35, (ANZ).

²² Kay, *Italy, Volume II*, pp.v-vii.

²³ Parker, *Monte Cassino*, p.155.

The civilian population was itself not beyond resorting to theft and pilfering, thus contributing to an environment where both military and civilians viewed the laws as flexible. While billeted in an Italian farmhouse, Leonard Melling ‘saw the woman of the house come out, look both ways and “borrow” my shovel to clean the pigs out’, the borrow was permanent as Melling adds that his ‘shovel never came back.’²⁴ On occasion piquets were needed to guard tents and bivys, as the local Italians were not beyond raiding the New Zealand positions.²⁵ War correspondent Norman Lewis recalls watching locals pillaging an abandoned military vehicle; ‘Today at Posilippo I stopped to watch the methodical dismemberment of a stranded German halftrack by a number of Italian youths who were streaming away from it like leafcutter ants.’²⁶ Members of other military units too, would not think twice about taking from their allies, K.J. Smith noted in his diary that a ‘new mob of Pongos pulled into our area last night, as usual, some of our gear is missing this morning. Thieving crowd they are.’²⁷ Worse still, Kiwi would steal from Kiwi. Laurie Birks records the ‘theft of 10,000 lire (£25) of canteen funds, pretty obviously by someone in troop, second or third occasion on which money or valuables have been stolen.’²⁸ On another occasion, after being in action near Faenza in December 1944, Clarence Moss’s unit was being withdrawn for a period of rest, Moss was annoyed to find that ‘our truck [came] up and I find my base kit missing.... A chap takes his chance in action and they go through his gear in B Echelon.’²⁹ Moss couldn’t complain too much though, when later he drank his – absent – friend’s beer; ‘had about a dozen large bottles. Half of it was Herbie’s. He had been saving it up but had gone out with jaundice. Doesn’t pay to save in the army!’³⁰

In Italy, with the opportunity, need, and the underlying culture within the division, looting, pilfering, petty theft, and trading in stolen or borrowed goods, threatened to become institutionalised within the New Zealand Division. Martyn Uren wrote that during the advance in northern Italy he ‘passed through groups of hilarious Maoris who were engaged primarily in that absorbing custom of looting the shattered buildings of all that they held dear’.³¹ Another

²⁴ Leonard Melling, p.85.

²⁵ Clarence Moss diary, 22 March 1945.

²⁶ Lewis, p.43. Similarly, Lewis recounts a later episode where he observed over a period of some days the ‘spectacle of a damaged tank which, although one never saw a finger laid on it, shrank away as if its armoured plating had been made of ice.’, Lewis p.99.

²⁷ Smith diary, 7 April 1944. Smith tried to repay the favour a week later when his O.P. was visited by a number of British officers: ‘tried to “clifti” [the] Col’s walking stick but I missed, very nice too.’ Smith Diary, 14 April, 1944.

²⁸ Birks diary, 1 February 1944.

²⁹ Clarence Moss diary, 8 December 1944.

³⁰ Clarence Moss diary, 2 February 1944.

³¹ Uren, p.168.

group was watched by some Canadians in Florence, who observed that the ‘Maoris had loaded their trucks with a vast stock of ladies’ shoes that they obviously intended for barter with civilians.’³²

The progression from casual petty crime to something a little more organised was natural. Throughout late 1943 and 1944, much of southern Italy, typically the port cities, and Naples especially, developed a local economy that was anchored in the black market and crime – both organised and casual. In Naples, up to a third of incoming Allied supplies of food, clothing, medicine, and luxury items – cigarettes, chocolate, alcohol – were going missing before leaving the city; thefts of military vehicles reached 60 -70 a night, and everything and anything from telephone poles to manhole covers to used tyres had a value.³³ Many New Zealanders were drawn to the opportunities that the local black market presented. ‘One beautiful racket that went on for months, and... must have netted many thousands of lire to the few in the secret’ author Leslie Hobbs recalls, involved the transport and sale of olive oil. ‘Transport of civilian goods had just about broken down’ he wrote:

The south was full of olive oil. The Rome area desperately wanted it for cooking. The men involved in this had one truck which made a regular run from somewhere behind Cassino up to Rome. Those in on the joke bought hundreds of litres of olive oil every time they came south at 125 lire a quarter, sold it in Rome, no questions asked, and everyone was glad to get it, for 500.

What was more, they carried the olive oil in full view.... Their truck... carried, neatly fitted into place, over a score of jerry-cans – some ostensibly for water, some for petrol. In actual fact they were all for olive oil, and a fortune was made.³⁴

Cigarettes were always a tradable commodity. Jim Eder and his pal were on leave in Florence and were running short of money. By chance they stumbled on a quick and easy way of raising some cash. Eder recounts the methodology of the transaction as it was explained to him at the time:

When you get to the [US Army] Canteen, go to the counter and ask for two packs of cigarettes, (the legal amount one man could buy.) The ‘Itie’ girl behind the counter will put up 2 packs. Take them and give her twice the price of them. She

³² Mark Zuehke, *The Gothic Line: Canada’s Month of Hell in World War II Italy*, Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2003, p.23.

³³ Lewis, pp.55, 67, 99 & 109; Parker, p.205.

³⁴ Leslie Hobbs, George F. Kaye, Neville Colvin, *Kiwi Down the Strada*, Christchurch: Whitcombe & Tombs, 1963, p.18. Saul David recounts that one escaped British mutineer survived for some months during 1944 trading in cigarettes and olive oil. The oil was bought in Bari and sold for four times as much in Naples. Saul David, *Mutiny at Salerno: An Injustice Exposed*, London: Brassey's, 1995, p.184.

will take the money and give you two more packs. Join another queue and repeat the process until all your money has gone. Then go to the address I gave you, walk in and put all the packs on the table. The Itie there will pay you double the price for each pack. Then you can go back to the canteen for some more.

'I forget the price of a pack of cigarettes in the Canteen' writes Eder 'but I think it was 25 Lira for 20 cigarettes. Andy and I had about 400 lira between us, (£1.0.0. sterling) so we began with that. In about an hour we had enough money to see out our leave.'³⁵

Cigarettes, issued as rations or bought cheap at unit canteens, provided soldiers with a readably tradable commodity. In his diary, Fritz Harris records several transactions with local Italians. 'Sold some more cigarettes – sell them at double the price we buy them for' he wrote, also noting that he would use the profit to make up any deficit in his unit's canteen book. He also records that 'The Ities are dicky about taking anything from us in the line of Army gear as the Field security apparently check up on them.'³⁶

One military item that the Italians were desperate for was clothing. By 1944, years of wartime conditions and rationing meant an increasing scarcity of new clothing. Allied military issue was both a source of new items and raw material. Rifleman Alex Bowlby recalls that when the officers came around make lists of equipment deficiencies, half the platoon put in for khaki-drill trousers; these were very popular with the Italian farmers, fetching a higher price than anything else.³⁷ Jim Elder also remembers the value of articles of clothing and that 'American-type army blankets were in great demand. The Italian women could convert them into good skirts and dresses in no time at all. They were worth around 3000 lira each on the black market.'³⁸

Houses, abandoned or not, also became a source of moveable comforts. 'One is always on the lookout for a mattress etc,' wrote Clarence Moss, 'might as well have comfort if one can.' However, Moss then makes a point that would be an underlying theme in many of the New Zealander's dealings with the Italians: 'One just takes what one wants.'³⁹ Martyn Uren remembers his 'pillaged wire wove bed'⁴⁰, while in Colin Arroll's unit, authority had had enough with the collection and continual transport of collected goods leading to instructions

³⁵ Jim Eder, *Khaki Recollections*, Waikuku Beach, Canterbury, New Zealand: self-published, 1993, p.73.

³⁶ Harris diary, 12 June 1944 & 13 July 1944.

³⁷ Bowlby, p.58.

³⁸ Eder, p.74.

³⁹ Clarence Moss diary, 25 September 1944. Although in his diary, Fritz Harris says, '[We] always do our best to pay for things.' Harris diary, 5 December 1943.

⁴⁰ Uren, p.161.

being issued and the men being ‘told to leave beds behind, but loaded up [the] Piano.’⁴¹ In northern Italy John Shinnick’s section was billeted in a house which was fortunate enough to have two stoves, a bonus at the time as the section was able to cook their Christmas dinner – several fowls and geese – ‘in a fashion that savoured yuletide.’ Once it was time to leave however, the New Zealanders decided that ‘one stove was enough in any house, and backed up our assumption on the fact that most likely [it] had already been looted... from somewhere else.’ The section carried off the stove for themselves ‘despite the protestations of the owner.’⁴²

Another source of loot and income was equipment that had been abandoned by the Germans as they retreated. Fritz Harris notes in his diary that he was able to use German rations that he had acquired to pay to get his washing done.⁴³ However, the collection of loot in the south never reached the heights that it did during the final months in Italy. ‘There was so much German gear left behind’, remembers Ron Tanner, ‘during a pause in our push forward [April 1945] we collected some gun horses and sold them to the Italians, who were stealing all they could get their hands on. We took a heavy Panzer motorbike along with us.... [It] stayed with our platoon till we had to finally leave it behind.’⁴⁴

Similarly, Scotch Paterson, an officer in 22 Battalion, recalls that, ‘In the last run-up through northern Italy in pursuit of the fleeing and disorganised enemy, my company had by chance acquired six German army trucks and five cars.’ Two of the trucks were filled with liberated wines and spirits, another with three tons of sugar. Paterson’s company sold the German vehicles once they reached Trieste, the funds from which financed the men during their time in that city.⁴⁵ The acquiring and trading in loot became so widespread and popular, that it threatened to cloud military judgement. “Boys keen to get in [to the front]” wrote Clarence Moss, ‘as they want some loot. Good opportunity with Jerry on the run.’⁴⁶

The acquisition of items of value and especially ‘prime’ loot, makes regular appearances in many of the men’s Italian diaries. Tanker Jim Sloan recorded that, near Rimini, ‘loot we got yesterday was four Beretta tommy guns, two Schmeisser tommy guns, three Lugers, three fountain pens and a few other odds and ends.’⁴⁷ K.J. Smith was not quick enough on one occasion when ‘last night 60 Jerry prisoners went down the road but I wasn’t on the

⁴¹ Arroll diary, 25 November 1944.

⁴² Shinnick, p.181.

⁴³ Harris diary, 30 May 1944.

⁴⁴ Tanner, p.129.

⁴⁵ Paterson, pp.149-150.

⁴⁶ Clarence Moss diary, 27 April 1945.

⁴⁷ Plowman, *Rampant Dragons*, p.178.

spot to get any loot. One [of the] boys got [a] watch.⁴⁸ Corpses were also a source of loot: ‘found a dead Hun who had been wounded and left’ wrote K.J. Smith, but there was ‘nothing left on him.’⁴⁹ Laurie Birks also found a German corpse on the hill behind his camp and proceeded, over the course of several days, to return several times removing the dead man’s badges, his hat, buttons, and waterproof coat; the man’s boots had already been ‘souvenired’ – ‘as usual, his boots were gone.’⁵⁰

Senior officers were also not beyond participating in some grey areas. Freyberg himself records in the GOC’s diary that he ‘got another room opened in this chateau during the day and found some useful equipment.’⁵¹ The next day, on a day off in Bari, the general makes a purchase of ‘silk stockings from black market at 10/- a pair.’⁵²

Obtaining food was another favourite pastime that sat in the sometimes grey area of the conquerors’ right to live off the land. Petty theft of food items is regularly recorded in documents from the time, or in memoirs: Ron Tanner recalls ‘stealing the farmer’s eggs in Italy’⁵³, for Clarence Moss it was a ‘breakfast of rabbit one of the boys had pinched.’⁵⁴ Laurie Birks records in his diary that the ‘chaps scrounged a sand-bag of new potatoes from field yesterday, another today, also pumpkin’.⁵⁵ The next day another entry in his diary records that he had a ‘good dinner tonight – best for long time, all off country. For 12 of us 7 small rabbits, 4 chickens, one duck, new spuds, marrow, stuffing with parsley, sage, onions, all scrounged by some of the crew.’⁵⁶ Tini Glover, a member of the Maori Battalion, recalls one trick that the New Zealand engineers used to secure their food supply near Faenza: ‘I had a mate in the engineers and he said if [I] want some cabbages [to let him] know.... I said why? He said see that field of cabbage over there with all those white tapes on, I said yeah they’re mined aren’t they, he said there’s no bloody mines in there, we put it ‘round there, we help ourselves. Whenever you want a couple of sacks of cabbage let me know.’⁵⁷

Raiding for food could get out of hand, either through blatant stealing of livestock from local farmers, or semi organised sweeps through the rural countryside that aimed to strip

⁴⁸ Smith diary, 20 March 1944.

⁴⁹ Smith diary, 16 October 1944.

⁵⁰ Birks diary, 5 – 8 May 1944.

⁵¹ General Officer Commanding's Diary - Part IV, September 1943 - October 1944, WAI18/6/46, (ANZ), 12 October 1943.

⁵² General Officer Commanding's Diary - Part IV, September 1943 - October 1944, WAI18/6/46, (ANZ), 13 October 1943.

⁵³ Tanner, p.140.

⁵⁴ Clarence Moss diary, 13 October 1944.

⁵⁵ Birks diary, 12 July 1944.

⁵⁶ Birks diary, 13 July 1944.

⁵⁷ <http://www.28maoribattalion.org.nz/audio/tini-glover-describes-food-italy>.

specific items from farms. Near Florence a group of 28 Battalion soldiers raided a local pigsty. Graeme Innes remembers that ‘about 3 o’clock in the morning there was a hell of a scream down over the hill. At daylight the Maoris bought this pig up, a big white pig.’⁵⁸ Some New Zealanders had to be a little creative to recover their prizes; ‘near Ortona the Maori cooks managed to snaffle a local pig for the pot and contrived to sneak it past the villagers by laying it on a stretcher and throwing a blanket over it.’⁵⁹ As the campaign drew to a close, stealing food, as with the pillaging of materials and goods, reached epidemic proportions becoming almost ingrained in the soldier’s personalities. The ‘favourite pastime’ noted Clarence Moss, ‘is getting fowls – pinching them off Ities.’⁶⁰

As Churchill’s ‘red hot rake of war’ moved in fits and starts up the Italian peninsula, the members of its forces did not hesitate to supplement their rations with local produce and livestock and live off of the land. Much of the time it was bartered or purchased from the local population, but all too regularly – from pinching a few bunches of the plentiful grapes through to making off with a prize pig – servicemen would simply take what they wanted, with little thought of, or heed to the protestations of, the local people. The rake of war included the denuding of an area of food and produce, and as Martyn Uren remembers, the ease with which vegetables [and similarly other food] could be procured:

depended on the length of time that an area had been occupied as to the ease with which these commodities could be bought. Sometimes an area would be swept clean in a month, or even a week. Often an area was vacated by the residents... and here fruit and vegetables were available for plucking. This applied also to wine. If the Eighth Army had passed through at a slow speed enough to permit of occasional indulgence in drinking wine, then the area would undoubtedly be dry’.⁶¹

Some soldiers were uncomfortable with the way that food was appropriated from the local population, much of which was, in some areas, on the verge of starvation. British infantryman, Alex Bowlby, remembered that foraging for food felt like being Peter Rabbit in Mr McGregor’s garden,⁶² while Laurie Birks, after participating in ‘another “acquired” meal [of] rabbits and geese’ reflected that he wasn’t ‘altogether in favour of this commandeering, but can’t very well refuse to eat stuff.’⁶³ This statement hints at the possibility that, as a member of

⁵⁸ Quoted in Plowman, *Rampant Dragons*, p.174.

⁵⁹ Williams, p.130.

⁶⁰ Clarence Moss diary, 27 April 1945.

⁶¹ Uren, pp.112-113.

⁶² Bowlby, p.45.

⁶³ Birks diary, 15 July 1944.

a small and intimate primary group, Birks felt some pressure from his peers to go along with the group's way of doing things. In turn, this opens up the possibility that many men felt pressured through their primary group, to participate in unsavoury behaviour.

In some areas, the impact of troop concentrations and behaviour threatened to get out of hand. The official historian describes the situation at Fabriano during October 1944, where the division was resting out of the line:

A stern note ended the routine orders for October. *Vino*, poultry, pigs, cars and clothing had disappeared in Fabriano, where the removal of furniture, fittings, and electric light bulbs 'will seriously prejudice the smooth running of the theatres.... civilian women have suffered from the unwanted attentions of drunken soldiers', the local *Carabinieri* (police) complained that their pistols and rifles had been taken away from them, and 'in the event of further incidents occurring it will be necessary to move the Brigade from the built-up area into the fields.' Two men stealing a goose were chased by a fierce old woman with a sickle, and a man taking cabbages in the night comforted himself with the thought: 'Anyway he fought against us at Alamein.'⁶⁴

One diary entry helps put the behaviour of the New Zealanders and their 'scrounging' into perspective. John Rist recorded how he and some of his section had been invited to have some wine with a local family, and that all of the family 'hated the "Tedeschi" poisonously. The Tedeschi took all their wine, their food, their poultry, and their prize pig.'⁶⁵

Alcohol

In Italy, alcohol became a major problem for the division. There was a big difference between how alcohol had featured in North Africa and then in Italy. In Egypt it was only in Cairo, or Alexandria, where the New Zealanders had access to alcohol in large quantities; the New Zealand Club, set up by Freyberg, went some way to managing the mix of Kiwi soldiery and drink. However, it only had moderate success, if at all. Freyberg was far more confident that a spell in the desert, where beer rations were both small and infrequent, would dry his troops out. Letters and diary entries from the desert often complain about the lack of drink.⁶⁶ It

⁶⁴ Jim Henderson, p.384.

⁶⁵ Rist diary, 20 November, 1943.

⁶⁶ Stan Kirk, Letters from members of the College Rifles Rugby Football Club 1939-1945, MS1418, (AWMM), provides examples of the complaints about the scarcity of alcohol in North Africa: 'the boys are going crook – no beer for two days – a shocking state of affairs', Private Jack Kirk, Egypt, letter to Stan Kirk, October 1941; 'the

wasn't until they arrived in Tunisia, with its greater rural population and benign climate that vineyards and wine became common. When the troops reached Italy though, it all changed.

Throughout the Italian countryside, vineyards were widespread and winemaking occurred on a variety of scales – on the farm and in the towns, as family sized operations and on a commercial scale. Alcohol in Italy was always readily available, supplementing the meagre and sporadic official ration, and contributing to the wartime scene both as a commodity, and as a source of comfort to the troops themselves. The locals were often generous in sharing a bottle with the liberating troops; ‘everywhere we go’ wrote Clarrie Ingham, ‘wine is handed out to us.’⁶⁷ Just as likely though, stocks of alcohol were ‘liberated’ – looted from abandoned buildings, from under haystacks, from farm wineries, or, most prized of all, from damaged breweries or distilleries. Much was simply stolen. Known by the New Zealanders under a variety of names – purple death, rooster blood, shell shock, or most commonly simply ‘plonk’ or ‘vino’ – the majority of the division regularly partook in the local brews.



(Alexander Turnbull Library: DA-03283-F)

Figure 23. Two New Zealand Infantrymen receive a glass of wine from one of the inhabitants of the village of Barbiano.

beer question has been very serious lately & have not had a drop of the old hops for many many weeks’, Driver Nick Hemphill, Egypt, letter to Stan Kirk, 1941; ‘Beer is the hardest thing in the world to get & believe it or not I haven’t had a drop since leaving Maadi at the end of February. Apart from a few mugs of Jerry “plonk” I’ve led a strictly tee total existence – That’s what the papers mean when they speak of “the horrors of war”.’ Private Max Boyle, Tunisia, letter to Stan Kirk, June 1943.

⁶⁷ Bombardier Clarrie Ingham, Italy, letter to Stan Kirk, December 1943, MS1418, (AWMM).

It did not take long for the newly arrived New Zealand troops to become acquainted with the local brews. On the day he landed in Italy K.J. Smith noted the ‘Ities, soldiers & civvies, selling grapes & wine along roadway’, and the next day he recorded that there were ‘Ities selling wine, grapes, nuts, dried figs outside camp, so had 3 cups of wine & nearly drunk before “munga”.’⁶⁸ Laurie Birks also noted the sellers outside of the camp and that there had been ‘a good deal of wine bought & drunk’, but he also hinted at an undercurrent of trouble and that the purchase would ‘probably be stopped soon on that account.’⁶⁹ Men were keen to get away from the early camps and into nearby Taranto; a number skipped the camp to return hours later, usually the worst for wear. The result was a night in the cooler, and for the unit involved, a dressing down by the CO.⁷⁰ As the days in the camps near Taranto progressed, the organisation of social events and the amounts of liquor consumed increased. Inter-unit rugby games provided opportunities for drinking sessions – ‘afternoon played centre, Rgt. Team 30 Bty against an AA team.... stayed there for tea and party afterwards, about 120 gallons of “plonk” [of] all kinds. Don’t know much about getting home’ wrote one soldier.⁷¹ A similar type of event was the commemoration of the Alamein battles held near Taranto on 23 October 1943, where K.J. Smith’s unit received 75 gallons of white wine.⁷² Given the widespread nature of these events and the amounts of alcohol that were involved it is obvious that to some level the excessive drinking was condoned by the New Zealand officers. Fritz Harris notes that his gun crew won ‘a prize of 2 galls of plonk, and nice stuff too’, during a troop gun drill competition, and obviously sanctioned by the unit’s leaders.⁷³ Higher ranks too, participated in drinking sessions, for example, Smith notes that his Commanding Officer – Brigadier Steve Weir – was also ‘on the vino’,⁷⁴ while Frank Rennie recalls that the staff at the Advanced Base at Bari had ‘the greatest collection of alcohol stills I have ever seen’.⁷⁵

By November 1943, many in the division had immersed themselves in a cross cultural mix of Italian wine and Kiwi heavy drinking, with references in letters and diary entries to being drunk becoming more common. Wine had become the beverage of choice: ‘we now drink wine instead of tea’ wrote one soldier,⁷⁶ and for the hardened drinkers, there were many opportunities to indulge. ‘We are now in Italy’ announced Tommy Thompson in a letter, adding

⁶⁸ Smith diary, 9-10 October 1943.

⁶⁹ Birks diary, 10 October 1943.

⁷⁰ Birks diary, 11 October 1943.

⁷¹ Smith diary, 3 November 1943.

⁷² Smith diary, 16 & 23 October 1943.

⁷³ Harris diary, 18 November 1943.

⁷⁴ Smith diary, 26 October 1943.

⁷⁵ Rennie, p.61.

⁷⁶ Smith diary, 6 November 1943.

that there was ‘plenty of vino of various grades from plonk to liquors & very cheap. One can get quite rotten for 1/- if a bit of judicious buying is done.’⁷⁷ These opportunities, however, could take their toll. Infantryman John Rist writes of a ‘vino session last night. Woke up shivering this morning in [an] olive grove far from camp. Lost upper set of teeth.’⁷⁸

Typically, available alcohol was limited to local wines of varying quality, and an occasional issue of beer through the NAAFI. However, Italy did expose the New Zealanders to various other types of exotic liquor; ‘in our mess we have liqueurs which NZ has never seen and some mornings I wish I never seen them too’ wrote one soldier.⁷⁹ Wine based liquors such as marsala, cognac, and especially vermouth were common. The New Zealanders also took to producing their own distilled wine – grappa – with several commentators noting that many units had their own stills.⁸⁰ Clarence Moss described the *casa* in which his gun crew were billeted which ‘in the farmyard has a viney. There’s about 20,000 gallons of wine there. Also some cognac and a very nice vermouth – rather like a light creme de menthe.’⁸¹

Apart from receiving alcohol from military establishments – unit canteen, NAAFI, or clubs and messes – or gifted directly from the locals, supplies of alcohol for the New Zealanders was likely to come from two other sources. The first was chance; by good luck, soldier or unit would stumble upon a supply of various amounts. This could be, for example, in the course of occupying a house for the night, as Cecil Coughlan found out:

the house we are in belongs to a fascist & we broke open the cellar which was cemented up & got over 100 bottles of liquors & champagne. We all got drunk & next day we all got told off by the O.C. So we all got drunk again in the afternoon, & also that night. A great life at times!!⁸²

The Italians, especially the more landed, regularly hid their valuables – including prized cellars – underground, beneath haystacks for example. The New Zealanders soon became wise to the most likely hiding places: ‘Laurie Max dug up the old bird’s (he was a fascist) supply of

⁷⁷ Sergeant ‘Tommy’ Thompson, Italy, letter to Stan Kirk, 15 December 1943, MS1418, (AWMM).

⁷⁸ Rist diary, 24 October 1943.

⁷⁹ Warrant Officer Class 2 Dick Pedrotti, Italy, letter to Stan Kirk, 21 June 1945, MS1418, (AWMM).

⁸⁰ ‘The staff had the greatest collection of alcohol stills I have ever seen, particularly producing grappa, a distillation of wine. Most of the tents had a system of drums and copper tubing operating continually and culminating in a steady drip drip of grappa into a jar. The result could have been used to fuel torpedoes’, Rennie, p.61; ‘Every crew had a still for distilling spirits’ Plowman, *Rampant Dragons*, p.15, ‘Hemphill... was fortunately off the plonk when I saw him. He has been on it for months & found he needed a spell. He is a bugger when he gets going. Distils the plonk & makes Hokonui [moonshine] from it. Also drinks the insect repellent we have to keep the mosquitoes away. A distinctly bad type.’ Sergeant ‘Tommy’ Thomson, Italy, letter to Stan Kirk, 10 June 1944, MS1418, (AWMM).

⁸¹ Clarence Moss diary, 1 December 1944.

⁸² Coughlan diary, 19 December 1944.

old wines and liquers. I sampled a bottle of old French Chartreuse – very good too.'⁸³ In November 1944, elements of the division ‘captured’ a war damaged brewery, the results of which were recorded in a number of contemporary accounts: ‘Called in to see the “I” boys they had a pile of vermouth. It’s beautiful stuff too. They got it from a vino factory where it is running free for all out of a 6” pipe.’;⁸⁴ ‘came across a big brewery full of cognac & vermouth, filled up all our water cans, over 100,000 litres of the stuff. Everybody got drunk. Very good place this!!’⁸⁵ Several sources note that their unit’s water carts were soon filled with vermouth from this find.⁸⁶



(Alexander Turnbull Library: DA-06456-F)

Figure 24. New Zealand soldiers with large casks for aging wine, in the cellar of a house near San Casciano.

⁸³ Sutherland, p.129.

⁸⁴ Sutherland, p.160.

⁸⁵ Coughlan diary, 28 November 1944.

⁸⁶ ‘Big news – our water truck went to fill up and found a lot of free vermouth wine. The Germans had split open some big wine vats but the liquid stayed in a large concrete area like a swimming pool. All the Div got stuck in. I managed to get about 4 gallons. Everyone did very nicely.’, Arroll diary, 27th November 1944; ‘At that stage all the water trucks in the whole division were filled with vermouth. You couldn’t get a mug of water. Water became an item that you just could not get and brushing your teeth in vermouth is not really to be recommended. You just get sick of the taste of vermouth.’, Plowman, *Rampant Dragons*, p.191; ‘The Battalion [23], along with most other units had got on to some very good vermouth in the Faenza/Forli area where an enormous vat, a bit like a gasometer, had been hit. They had taken the precaution of refilling water cans (and the Battalion water cart)’, Rennie, pp.76-77.

The second regular source of booze was the New Zealanders ability to scrounge and loot. Along with foodstuffs, alcohol was a priority during scavenging expeditions. John Rist records in his diary that the members of his unit used their Bren Gun Carriers to drive around the countryside procuring large quantities of wine to see them through the 1943 Christmas/New Year period.⁸⁷ K.J. Smith also records several similar expeditions, he writes during November 1944 for example, that ‘last night couple boys went on recce & bought back 23 gallons which we had for dinner & tea today’⁸⁸ This is not an isolated incident for Smith’s group, but one of several that occurred over that period of time.⁸⁹ It is also obvious when reading through a number of diaries, that the procurement and consumption of alcohol was continually occurring, forming a silent, institutionalised, backdrop to the more notable events that the men are involved in.

Contemporary records also help understand the range of outcomes that resulted from the use of alcohol within the division. At a basic level, it could mean a good fun time, with the worst physical result being a sore head – possibly for a few days. ‘At present I am in a tent with Ian Wylie & have suffered for it several times’ wrote Tommy Thompson:

This bloody plonk KOs me & I have had quite a few blackouts, also Ian, and we have had some busy times getting each other or one another home, both in camp & in Bari. Things got so bad, I had to sign the pledge for a week! Tried a second week but suffered after two days. However we have a bridge four going now and that saves us a heap of trouble. Life is not safe on the plonk.⁹⁰

John Rist’s experiences are also enlightening. After his group spends several days gathering up a large supply of wine near Castelfrentano over the Christmas period in 1943, his diary is silent for several days until on the 30th December he writes:

Last four days devoted to wild partying. One night we stayed up till dawn and had at least three sessions on the monastery bells. This caused great consternation throughout Castelfrentano, the town mayor sending us a warning that all bell ringing must cease, or else. We have only just found out why. The bells serve as an air-raid signal!⁹¹

⁸⁷ Rist diary, 24 & 25 December 1943.

⁸⁸ Smith diary, 20 November 1944.

⁸⁹ See Smith dairy, November – January 1944/45. Typically, entries are noted as; ‘13 November, ‘got plonked up’; 31 December, ‘got some plonk in’; 2 January, ‘had few plonks last night’; 22 January, ‘had few vinos together’.

⁹⁰ Sergeant ‘Tommy’ Thompson, Italy, letter to Stan Kirk, 15 December 1944, MS1418, (AWMM).

⁹¹ Rist diary, 30 December 1944.

For a number of the men the constant drinking habits of their companions, and the outcomes from it, could have a negative effect on morale. ‘Chap drunk and annoying me’ wrote Clarence Moss, ‘Told him I was sick of it. Got very annoyed.’ The next night Moss is once more kept awake into the evening. His diary entry reads: ‘the drunks are a nuisance. One pretends to sleep but pretty hopeless until about 11pm when they settle down. They are enjoying themselves in a queer way.’⁹²

Similarly, Laurie Birks suffers under the drunken antics of his gun crew, but whereas Moss was a drinker himself, Birks was a non-drinker, and his crew were continually more of a nuisance than Moss’s. Birks’ diary charts his growing frustration and isolation, as well as the decline in the functionality of his gun crew. ‘Rest of crew had drinking party in big tent tonight, considerable uproar’ he wrote, and ‘half or more of the crew more or less drunk. Got wine before we moved.’ What is worse is that the authority in the gun crew was one of the worst offenders: ‘Harry Menzies, the Sgt. supposed to be in charge.... heated argument between Harry & Bernie, both half drunk.’⁹³ Towards the end of June relations within the crew began to come to a head. The NCO in charge – Harry Menzies – had been transferred out of the crew; his replacement – ‘Ian’ – appears to have enforced some discipline within the crew, a move which some clearly resented:

Butch came in drunk in the early hours this morning, away again all afternoon. On the vino apparently. Damn fools, sort of thing that causes all the regimental boloney. Ian not too popular with some on the crew so far, too particular about pickets & so on.... Bernie & Harry E’ham on vino today, bit of friction between them and some of the crew including Ian, accused of being too ‘regimental’.⁹⁴

Two weeks later things appear to have changed little: ‘most of the crew more or less drunk from 2pm on’. Birks appears then to have resigned himself to having to carry the crew and attend to much of the cleaning and maintenance himself. He wrote the next day:

most of crew away greater part of time in casas drinking vino mostly. Managed to collect them 5pm & after packing up, mostly by me, lined up with rest of troop [and moved out].... Three or 4 from other guns on the back of [our] tractor, with

⁹² Clarence Moss diary, 20 November 1944.

⁹³ Birks diary, 3 April & 31 May 1944.

⁹⁴ Birks diary, 25-26 June 1944.

ours more or less drunk, I only one completely sober as they drank a good deal on way, more when arrived. Couple still going midnight. Kept me awake.⁹⁵

Unregulated and uncontrolled drinking had a impact on some of the military processes in the division. K.J. Smith tells of one parade where members of his unit paraded drunk,⁹⁶ while Cecil Coughlan remembers a fight after a big booze up, and another time when ‘some officers had a drunken party & shot one another.’⁹⁷ More serious were incidences of drinking in the front line. Clarrie Moss wrote that he ‘dislike[s] the chaps drinking in the line. Alright in moderation but one drink leads to another and drunkenness in action is a bad thing.’⁹⁸ Worse still, K.J. Smith’s gun crew went into action on 1 January 1945 firing a 70 round barrage with ‘quite a few of us pretty merry still.’⁹⁹

One of the worst incidents involving drunkenness on duty was recorded by Laurie Birks. His gun troop was moving up into the line when they had to wait on the side of the road for other traffic to move through. Birks records that there then began a ‘good deal of drinking of vino, especially by most of E5 crew.... the driver [became] so drunk he could hardly stand, drunk all day.’ The convoy continued along a ‘narrow road, mostly one-way with sharp corners & cut into hill-side, with slope down to left.’ As they travelled into the night the inevitable happened and Birks tractor was stopped only to find the E5 tractor and gun over the bank, upside down. Several of the crew were pinned, some badly injured, two were dead.¹⁰⁰

Desertion and Disobedience.

An examination of the figures available concerning the levels of desertion and long term absence from the division provide interesting reading (Table 9). Several points become obvious. First, although the overall figures for desertion are quite low, there are noticeable peaks during periods when the division is in action. Second, there are two periods where relatively large numbers of men offend – December 1943 near Orsogna, and July 1944, near Florence. These incidents are covered in more detail below.

⁹⁵ Birks diary, 15 August 1944.

⁹⁶ Smith diary, 23 October 1943.

⁹⁷ Coughlan diary, 26 October 1944 & 10 June 1944.

⁹⁸ Clarence Moss diary, 2 December 1944.

⁹⁹ Smith diary, 1 January 1945.

¹⁰⁰ Birks diary, 23 July 1944.

	Desertions in the Field	Disobedience of order to go into action	AWOL
Nov. 43	2		
Dec. 43	7	10	
Jan. 44			
Feb. 44	1		1
Mar. 44	1		1
Apr. 44	3		1
May. 44	4		1
Jun. 44			1
Jul. 44	16	1	1
Aug. 44	1	1	
Sept. 44	5	1	3
Oct. 44	4		1
Nov. 44	1		
Dec. 44	3	6	
Jan. 45	1	1	
Total	49	20	10

(Author)

Table 9. Convictions by month of offence, 2nd New Zealand Division: desertion, disobedience, AWOL (20+ days). 1 January 1944 – 10 February 1945.¹⁰¹

During the campaign in Italy, the Eighth Army suffered almost 3000 cases of desertion during 1944, and a further 860 cases of long term absences without leave.¹⁰² A comparison between the New Zealand Division and other Eighth Army divisions can be made, and it is clear that the division's record compares favourably with the majority of other Eighth Army divisions (Table 10).

Unit		Cowardice	Mutiny	Desertion	AWOL
1st Armoured Division				24	7
6th Armoured Division		1		153	35
4th Indian Division	Withdrawn November			13	4
8th Indian Division				182	53
10 Indian Division	Arrived March	1		65	13
1st Inf. Division				106	48
4th Inf. Division	Withdrawn November	1		306	74
46th Inf. Division		5		256	22

¹⁰¹ Barrowclough to Freyberg, 10 December 1944. Morale (File of Statistics on Desertion Rate in British Army), WAIIS/17/BBB, (ANZ).

¹⁰² Stayner to Freyberg, 15 January 1945. Morale (File of Statistics on Desertion Rate in British Army), WAIIS/17/BBB, (ANZ).

56th Inf. Division	Withdrawn March - July	1	31	162	47
78th Inf. Division		2		680	249
2nd NZ Division				69	10

(Author)

Table 10. Cases tried by Field General Court Martial, various Eighth Army units. (1 January 1944 – 10 January 1945). Compared with 2nd New Zealand Division convictions (1 January 1944 – 10 February 1945).¹⁰³

The avoidance of combat situations by individuals showing exhaustion, as outlined to some extent in chapter five, was, if not accepted, tolerated to some degree. Wholesale refusal to enter combat by a number of individuals was a different situation. Twice in Italy groups of New Zealanders refused to obey orders and enter combat.

The first incident occurred during the fighting around Orsogna. In what the official history calls ‘a grim example of indiscipline without precedent in the division’s history’, 14 men in one platoon of 21 Battalion ignored orders to participate in an attack.¹⁰⁴ Kippenberger, the brigade commander, gives a reasonably full account in his book, *Infantry Brigadier*. The men in question had decided to ignore their platoon officer’s instructions to assemble prior to the attack, and while the officer and four of the platoon went into battle, the 14 men, including the platoon sergeant, remained at rest in a farm house. All fourteen were subsequently tried at a court martial, 10 were convicted and sentenced.

Although Kippenberger states that ‘there was no sympathy for them in the Battalion’, he confirmed their sentences with reluctance.¹⁰⁵ It is easy to understand both how this circumstance arose as well as the reluctance that Kippenberger felt. The official historian suggests that at the time, the division was ‘jaded’, and Kippenberger records that he was ‘concerned about the state of his troops’, that they were showing signs of strain’, that there was a ‘poor mood in the 21 Battalion officers’ and that ‘no one seemed enthusiastic’.¹⁰⁶ It is no wonder that the brigadier himself had ‘doubts about the attack’.¹⁰⁷

Another item that hints at possible reasons for this incident occurring is a memorandum from Kippenberger to Freyberg. In it Kippenberger suggested that the senior NCO ‘is a proper

¹⁰³ Stayner to Freyberg, 15 January 1945, Morale (File of Statistics on Desertion Rate in British Army), WAI18/17/BBB, (ANZ).

¹⁰⁴ Phillips, p.142. This incident occurred on 24 December 1943, during Operation *Ulysses*, an effort to circle around the north eastern flank of Orsogna.

¹⁰⁵ Kippenberger, pp.344-345. However, one biographer suggests that ‘Kip was not unsympathetic, as they all had good records, especially their sergeant’, Dennis McLean, *Howard Kippenberger: Dauntless Spirit*, Auckland: Random House, 2008, p.261.

¹⁰⁶ Phillips, p.141, Kippenberger, pp.340-341.

¹⁰⁷ Kippenberger, p.340.

case for clemency', having 'acquitted himself well as a rifleman and section leader at Ruweisat Ridge, Manassib, Miteriya, Halfaya, Nofilia, Tebaga Gap, Takrouna, Djebibina'. This is a who's who of some of the hardest fighting across North Africa during 1942-43, and it would be reasonable that the Sergeant is feeling some strain because of this. In the same document Kippenberger used a number of terms to describe the men that could point to similar mental strain: 'very young – 20', 'heavy burden', 'two weakest men', an 'effort to stiffen them', 'did the nasty job of leading the tanks at Arielli', 'appears to have been badly shaken', 'extenuating circumstances'.¹⁰⁸

There are a number of reasons for this state. First, 21 Battalion had been in the combat area for over a month with 'no break since we crossed the Sangro'.¹⁰⁹ Second, casualties during this period had been heavy and constant; at the commencement of Operation *Ulysses*, all three of the assaulting battalions were under strength.¹¹⁰ The 21st Battalion commander, McElroy, felt that only one of his companies was fit for further fighting.¹¹¹ Conditions at the time had also played their part: the weather during this period was bitterly cold and dull, the ever present mud made movement difficult, and the troops themselves were living in 'very hard conditions'. The night of the attack itself was 'cold, wet and misty'.¹¹² The opposing troops were formidable. Fresh replacements had been moved into the area in the days prior to the attack, including some battalions of paratroops, which Kippenberger described as 'cocky' and 'aggressive'.¹¹³ They were supported by the usual mortars, as well as armour, some of which were flame throwing tanks.

The second incidence of combat refusal of some scale occurred in July 1944, during a period of heavy fighting as the division advanced on Florence. Two platoons of A Company, 23 Battalion were set to assault the village of San Andrea, but when their officers tried to move their men forward, a significant number – including one whole section and its leader – refused to budge. Even the arrival of the Battalion commander failed to shift the men. The attack went ahead without them.

Again, in this example, the stresses that the men had been through in the days previous need to be considered. Before the battalion had re-entered the line on 21 July, it had lost 78

¹⁰⁸ Kippenberger to Freyberg, 19 January 1944. Miscellaneous Matters Relating to Discipline, WAIIS/18/GGG, (ANZ).

¹⁰⁹ Kippenberger, p.344.

¹¹⁰ Phillips, p.142.

¹¹¹ Cody, *21 Battalion*, p.301.

¹¹² Kippenberger, p.339; Phillips, p.142.

¹¹³ Kippenberger, pp.338-339.

men to the *Taupo* draft.¹¹⁴ For the next week the battalion was involved in some of the most violent and costly fighting of the campaign, which began as the battalion moved into the line and was subjected to shelling during the changeover, a notoriously vulnerable period.¹¹⁵

In the sweltering mid-summer heat – and freezing nights – the rifle companies were then involved in assaulting a number of villages which were stoutly defended by paratroops supported by self-propelled artillery and heavy tanks. Not only did the New Zealanders fall into a number of ambushes – allowed to walk within a short distance of the defending machine-guns where there was slim chance of taking adequate cover – but they were also subjected to heavy infantry/armour counter attacks. Losses were heavy; critically, most of the officers were lost, and the platoons were being led by NCOs. Worse still, as A company advanced on the village of Fabrica, the supporting artillery barrage fell short amongst the men. In fact, the high losses within 23 Battalion had been noted by divisional headquarters, with the entry in the GOC's diary recording that 'precise orders to restrain Thomas [23 Battalion commander] have been given as his casualties are up to 60 and 70.'¹¹⁶

At around midnight on 29/30 July, 9 Platoon attempted to enter San Andrea, but were repulsed after coming under concentrated automatic weapon fire from short range. The decision was made to try again at dawn. It was then that the A Company men refused to go forward, reaching, in the words of the official historian, 'the limit of their physical and nervous reserves'.¹¹⁷

In both cases, that a small number of the assaulting units refused combat should not be surprising. It was, simply, the ultimate expression of battle weariness.¹¹⁸

The New Zealand Division remained in action until the New Year, with only a brief rest during August 1944. They would be involved in heavy combat once more as they moved along the Adriatic shore near Rimini, and inland around the towns of Forli and Faenza.

By Christmas, the division's front rested on a non-descript minor river – the Senio. It was bleak, wet, and muddy; temperatures were freezing and snow lay on the ground. Operationally, the static warfare was typically one of spandaus and mortars, patrolling, snipers, raid and counter raid, harassing artillery fire, and a continual trickle of losses; it was a miserable

¹¹⁴ Angus Ross, *23 Battalion*, Wellington: War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, 1959, p.357.

¹¹⁵ The German shelling during the period in question was noted by several participants as particularly heavy. See Ross, p.358.

¹¹⁶ General Officer Commanding's Diary - Part IV, September 1943 - October 1944, WAIIS/6/46, (ANZ), 23 July 1944.

¹¹⁷ Ross, p.372.

¹¹⁸ Harper is another who also suggests that the 21 Battalion incident 'demonstrated the war weariness of many of the New Zealand infantry.' Glyn Harper, *Kippenberger: An Inspired New Zealand Commander*, Auckland: HarperCollins, 1997, p.248.

existence for the men. ‘These months saw the Kiwis at a pretty low ebb’, wrote one veteran, who continued:

As at Orsogna, so here at this wretched little Senio, real winter came down with a swoop, and everyone had to bow to it. In the cheerless farmhouses, or in their billets in Faenza or Forli, the boys spent an uninspiring Christmas and New Year, forcing their spirits up with lots of food and drink and as much gaiety as they could muster; then came the snow, and thousands of trucks and tanks and jeeps and boots churned it into slush, and the mud and the gloom deepened. It was worse than at Orsogna, for instead of the clear mountain air you had the foggy damp of the plains that got into your throat and your lungs and your very bones. Everyone had perpetual colds, and nobody had enough to do. Even up in the front line time hung heavily; back out of action it was worse. It was a long, long winter.¹¹⁹

It is clear that by August 1944, Freyberg had had enough of the slackness in discipline within the division. At a conference of his senior commanders he outlined some of his concerns. ‘Isolated incidences are funny’ he suggested, ‘but they are far too frequent now and they are getting the Division a very bad name.’ He then goes on to specifically pinpoint alcohol, looting, and dress, as areas that required attention, concluding with the instruction that:

I want you to get this question of drink, this question of pillage, this question of dress under control. If you explain to the men the very bad impression that we are giving to [the] South Africans, Canadians, and British. I am sure they will realize [sic] that it must be taken in hand.¹²⁰

At the same conference Freyberg also appears unhappy with the high level of casualties in the previous actions before Florence in late July, and that ‘there appears to be a slackness of leading and a slackness of battle discipline.’ He went on to suggest that the basic reasons for this were:

lack of experience of junior leaders and the absence of battle drill. When you see a force going forward you see it straggling and not under command. You don’t see any proper battle formation and I don’t think in a lot of cases the men are properly under control.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ W. D. Dawson, *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, Wellington: War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, 1961, p.603.

¹²⁰ General Officer Commanding's Diary - Part IV, September 1943 - October 1944, WAIIS/6/46, (ANZ), 8 August 1944.

¹²¹ General Officer Commanding's Diary - Part IV, September 1943 - October 1944, WAIIS/6/46, (ANZ), 8 August 1944.

Three months later and little had changed. At a similar conference in October, Freyberg proceeded to lay down the law. ‘It is a sad thing to see a division with such a high reputation in the front with such a mediocre reputation in rear areas’ he told his officers, ‘the discipline and turnout of the men is bringing disgrace onto the division.’ He also indicated that the officers and NCOs were responsible; the division had ‘got into very slack ways and it was the officers fault.’¹²²

Freyberg then continued saying that the looting in which many of the men were participating in was ‘a disgraceful thing’ and ‘nothing more than stealing.’ He believed that ‘unit commanders must go into the question of illegal stuff being carried in unit vehicles. If a search was made at the present moment, it would build a mound as big as one of these hills round about.’ His instructions were then that ‘officers to take a note of it and stamp it out.’ The extra vehicles that the division had accumulated, and the extra equipment that was being carried, were to be got rid of, saluting to be improved, and curfews strictly enforced. ‘By next spring’ he said ‘the honeymoon is over.’¹²³

Freyberg recognised that his men were all but fought out, and – as early as September 1944 – had begun to make changes that would profoundly alter the division, and produce one of the standout performances of the campaign. These developments, which transformed the weary division, are examined in part three.

¹²² Freyberg, Special Files - Re-organisation, October - December 1944, WAI8/8/77, (ANZ), File Note, October 1944.

¹²³ Freyberg, File Note, October 1944, Special Files - Re-organisation, October - December 1944, WAI8/8/77, (ANZ).



(Alexander Turnbull Library: DA-06406-F)

Figure 25. Members of the division, wearing some of the hats acquired in a village on the advance to Florence. One soldier wrote that 'It's great to see hundreds of the boys wearing Stetson hats of all shades mostly all loot. The most popular hat is the white straw Stetson and some even wear caps.'¹²⁴ The proliferation of non-service issue headwear did not escape the attention of Freyberg who wrote that 'Nobody is more amused than I am by seeing the driver of a bulldozer in a Stetson, but it doesn't do any good. Our turnout must be improved'¹²⁵ and that 'The situation with regard to clothing has got to such a state that I had to send a personal letter to unit commanders. Notwithstanding that yesterday I saw a man standing on top of a truck with a bell-topper on, and on the truck an NCO was travelling and I think possibly an officer.'¹²⁶ Leslie Hobbs, in his classic study of the New Zealanders in Italy, comments on this same photograph: 'Here's a sample of what brought about publication of an order prohibiting the wearing of non-regulation headgear.'¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Censorship summaries, DA 508/2 - DA 508/3, (ANZ), Censorship Report No 38, 6 Aug to 12 Aug 44, part 2, p.3.

¹²⁵ Special Files - Re-organisation, October - December 1944, WAI18/8/77, (ANZ).

¹²⁶ General Officer Commanding's Diary - Part IV, September 1943 - October 1944, WAI18/6/46, (ANZ), 8 August 1944.

¹²⁷ Hobbs, Kaye, & Colvin, photo section, pp.64-65.

Part Three. Renewal: The advance to the Po River, 9 – 24 April 1945.

Chapter Nine. Solutions: Manpower, Organisation, Weapons and Training.

Another rumour going now, a couple of our [batteries] of gunners are said to be going to be privates in the infantry + a rumour has it that the 3 Div. AA is coming across to here.

Fritz Harris, 8 April 1944.¹

Freyberg was acutely aware of the manpower issues that faced the New Zealand Division during the middle of 1944. In June he was advocating that for the division to continue in a combat role in Europe, a replacement scheme rather than a continuation of the *Ruapehu* type furlough draft would be required.² This indicates a change in policy from the *Ruapehu* type draft where men were returned to the division after furlough in New Zealand – and the associated issues that the *Ruapehu* draft suffered with some men refusing to return – to one of permanent withdrawal and replacement.³ By October, a solution to the question of where the replacement manpower would be sourced from was becoming clearer. The demands of maintaining an increasing large airforce, ongoing naval contributions, and the requirement to increase manpower needed to cope with increasing supply commitments of foodstuffs, woollen products, and raw materials, meant that the ability to maintain two divisions – the 2nd in Europe and the 3rd in the Pacific – was no longer possible; the men of the disbanded 3rd Division would be sent to Italy.

¹ Harris diary, 8 April 1944.

² Freyberg to the Prime Minister, 9 June 1944, *Documents Volume II*, pp.349-350.

³ The decision not to return men to Italy is, to an extent, vindicated in a passage from the official history which reveals that ‘It turned out that the great majority of the men never returned to the Middle East from furlough in New Zealand; as a result of unforeseen psychological reactions in New Zealand most obtained their discharge on medical or other grounds.’, Stout, p.463.

In October, in a telegram to the Minister of Defence, Freyberg outlined his plan for a large scale – and in Freyberg’s words ‘drastic’ – reorganisation. It entailed the replacement of almost 11,000 of the longest serving men within 2nd Division – and Freyberg again highlights both battle weariness and declining discipline – with drafts that included many 3rd Division men from the Pacific. ‘The more I go into details the more certain I am that we shall have to replace at an early date all officers and other ranks who have taken part in fighting up to and including the Battle of Alamein’, Freyberg wrote, going on to then draw attention to the impact of combat on experienced units that had been transferred from Italy to North-west Europe, and whom ‘have not done as well as fresh British and American troops.’⁴

With the manpower supply addressed, Freyberg then turned his attention to addressing the deficiencies in the structure of the division.⁵ Understanding that the role for which the division had been structured for in North Africa – one of mobile pursuit – was unlikely to eventuate for some time, and seeing the combat pressures that were falling on the two infantry brigades, Freyberg set about creating a third infantry brigade. Two approaches were used to achieve this. First, a number of units within the division were disbanded, and their compliment restructured into the other divisional arms, primarily the existing infantry units.⁶ The Armoured Brigade was also downsized from 168 tanks to 132, freeing up some 250 men and allowing support to each infantry brigade of one armoured regiment.⁷ Second, three of the division’s support battalions – 22 (Motor) Battalion, the Divisional Cavalry Regiment, and the 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion – were retrained as the new 9th Infantry Brigade.

In the event, additional units were attached to the New Zealand Division as the Po Valley campaign developed. These included an extra infantry brigade – the 43rd Indian – ten extra regiments of British artillery, and an armoured reconnaissance unit – 12th Lancers. These extra units increased the robustness, the hitting power and the mobility of the division. The addition of the 43rd Indian Brigade is of major significance in regards to the development of an operationally robust division. During the period from Alamein across North Africa, through

⁴ Freyberg to the Minister of Defence, 8 October 1944, *Documents Volume II*, p.366.

⁵ Laurie Birks records in his diary in an entry, dated 16 August 1944, that during the battery parade their officer had announced a proposal to turn the AA regiment into infantry. Birks dismissed this as merely a threat to try to keep the men well-behaved. Birks diary, 16 August 1944. Clarence Moss also recorded that, ‘A parade this morning and told the story. Big crowd going home. Reorganisation and hard training.... Some talk we made be made into an Infantry Bn. However just talk I expect. Appears general that punishment now incurs a transfer to the infantry.’ Clarence Moss diary, 26 October, 1944.

⁶ Freyberg to the Minister of Defence, 22 October 1944, *Documents Volume II*, pp.371-373.

⁷ Freyberg to the Minister of Defence, 4 December 1944, *Documents Volume II*, p.380. This restructure also allowed for the formation of a specialist assault squadron equipped with armoured bulldozers and tank mounted self-propelled assault bridges.

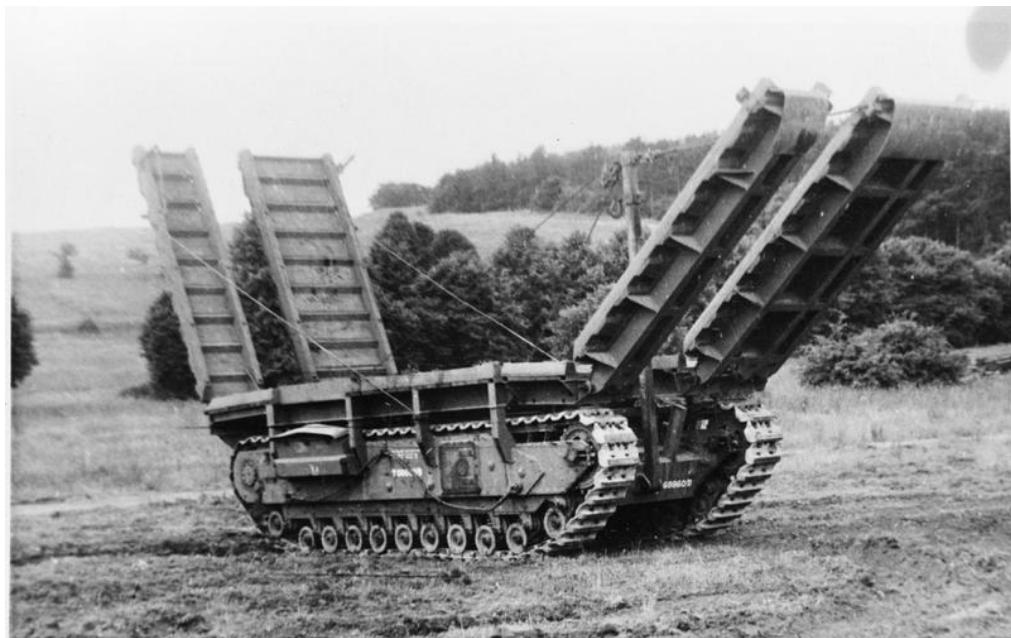
Italy to Florence, two brigades – six infantry battalions – had borne both the weight of combat, and the cost in casualties. For the initial assault across the Senio in early April, the division was able to use nine infantry battalions in three brigades – typically two engaged and one in reserve. After the offensive had been underway for several days, the 43rd Brigade was attached, resulting in 12 infantry battalions under command, allowing two brigades up and two resting in reserve. The pattern that Freyberg was able to then utilise was to rotate his paired brigades every few days, allowing time for rest and recovery, and spreading the weight of casualties over a larger fighting force. It was a situation that was critical to the endurance of the infantry battalions during the April offensive.

By the last stages of the war, the western allies had assembled an array of specialist equipment designed to fill tactical niches in their offensive capabilities. To assist with their campaign in the Po valley, the New Zealand Division had access to, and used, a number of these innovations.

Three of these ‘specials’ played key roles bridging the many streams, canals, ditches and other obstacles as the New Zealanders advanced during April 1945. The ARC (or Ark) – Armoured Ramp Carrier – was a bridge carrying tank based on a turretless Churchill hull. In place of the turret was a metal platform with hinged extensions at either end. The Ark would be driven into ditches or streams, the ramps deployed, and other vehicles could be driven across it. Where the depth of the obstacle was an issue, ARCs could be stacked on top of one another (see figures 26 & 27). Similarly, the division also used ‘scissor’ bridges, based on a Valentine tank chassis, for wider obstacles. A third mobile bridging asset was the Churchill AVRE, which carried a large fascine of logs, which could be placed in ditches or streams to enable vehicles to cross. These vehicles were grouped in a new engineering unit formed within the division just prior to the assault across the Senio River – 28 Assault Squadron. Sherman tanks with bulldozer blades attached were also a welcome addition in this unit, the tank mounted blades proved especially valuable for frontline work compared with the unarmoured and exposed bulldozers that had been used previously (see figure 28).

Flame throwing vehicles were available in two forms in northern Italy; a light unit, mounted on a Universal Carrier, which was nicknamed a Wasp, and a heavier unit based around a Churchill tank, known as a Crocodile (see figures 30 & 31). These weapons were used immediately prior to infantry assaults, most notably against fieldworks on river stopbanks.

They were used in concentrations, for example 22 Battalion was supported by eight Crocodiles and six Wasps as it assaulted across the Sillaro River.⁸



(© Imperial War Museum/ MH 2202)

Figure 26. Churchill Ark Mk II bridging vehicle;



(© Imperial War Museum/ NA 23920)

Figure 27. Churchill tank of the North Irish Horse crossing the River Senio over two Churchill Ark bridging tanks, 10 April 1945.

⁸ Jim Henderson, p.430.



(Alexander Turnbull Library, via NZETC)

Figure 28. A 28 Assault Squadron armoured dozer near the Senio River.



(© Imperial War Museum/ NA 24598)

Figure 29. A Buffalo amphibian or 'Fantail' loaded with supplies heads out across the River Po, 26th April 1945.



(Alexander Turnbull Library: DA-11538-F)

Figure 30. Churchill 'Crocodile', Faenza, 1944.



(© Imperial War Museum/ H 18217)

Figure 31. A flamethrower mounted in a Universal Carrier (Wasp) in action.



(© Imperial War Museum/ NA 24043)

Figure 32. A 'Priest' Kangaroo personnel carrier transports infantry near Conselice, 13 April 1945.

The third notable vehicle used was the Kangaroo, a turretless Sherman hull with ammunition stowage also removed, which functioned as a basic armoured personnel carrier (see figures 32 & 33). Protected against small arms fire and to all but a direct artillery hit, the Kangaroo was able to deliver a section of infantry close to its objective, quickly, relatively fresh, and as a group. The positive impact on the morale of the assaulting troops, who were travelling forward in relative safety surrounded by members of their primary group, should not be underestimated. Another positive use of the Kangaroo was its use in evacuation of wounded. Kangaroos were a common feature throughout the division's final battles.⁹

⁹ See, Doherty, *Eighth Army in Italy*, p.175; Clarence Moss diary, 16 April 1945 – Kangaroos were used to transport Vickers guns and their crews allowing heavy machine gun support to the assaulting infantry; Also, see Jim Henderson, pp.419–432; as well, Jim Rolfe, a member of 27 Battalion, gives a useful account, Jim Rolfe, *Brothers at War; A Kiwi Family's Story*, Auckland: Penguin, 2004, pp.192–195.



(Alexander Turnbull Library, via NZETC)

Figure 33: Members of 27 Battalion waiting in Kangaroos before the Senio River.

A number of existing tactics and items of equipment had also been refined and improved by early 1945. A number of up gunned Sherman tanks – the Firefly – had arrived within the division. Armed with the powerful 17 pounder anti-tank gun, and with improved ammunition, these tanks were a match for their German counterparts. Artillery barrages and air support had become more clinical, Artillery was more likely to shoot at known targets and counter battery work rather than blanket barrages. Fireplans were both detailed and extensive, often utilising corps and army resources as well as guns from adjacent units. By the early 1945, the New Zealand artillery was operating to a high standard, and had developed and adapted a number of new techniques. Some were borrowed from adjacent units, notably the Canadians, while many were developed ‘in-house’. During the April assault on the Senio river, the New Zealand artillery used a new type of barrage – DRAGNET – where the guns would fire a creeping barrage, but would suddenly drop their fire back onto an area where enemy concentration was likely.¹⁰

¹⁰ Other improvements include: streamlining the paperwork process that was required to generate artillery fireplans, allowing plans to be produced within hours rather than days – an important point in the speedy production of the artillery barrage against the Gaiana River defences on 19 April; also, procedures for controlling movement and supply of artillery units as the division advanced.

The New Zealand engineers understood the nature of the ground that the division would be operating in, and that because of the concentration of watercourses bridging ability would be crucial to success. Bailey bridges, a kit set bridging solution, would prove invaluable in the plains of the Po valley. Time was vital in getting armoured support across the rivers to assist the assaulting infantry. Just as important was the ability to get reinforcements and supplies up to the leading units; timely bridging was central to both of these requirements. Here too, the New Zealand engineers developed a set of solutions that were to prove ideal in assisting the momentum of the attacking units. Central to this was the development of the low level Bailey bridge. Close to the waterline, the low level bailey proved quick to emplace, safe to work on as it was not as exposed, used less bridging resources as it was shorter and lower to the ground, and easier and quicker to recover when finished with.¹¹

At the beginning of March, the division was relieved out of the line and moved south to the Fabriano area. For many there was the opportunity to relax and enjoy recreational activities; inter unit sports were encouraged – sport kept the men fit. Rugby was popular, as was hockey and soccer. Less formal were the tennis-quoit and tug-o-war competitions, and donkey races, complete with ‘totes’.¹² Freyberg also set about addressing morale. Clubs were set up in regional cities for the use of the New Zealanders, where soldiers on leave could stay, clean up and have a good meal. Tours were organised of cities such as Rome and Florence; some went to San Marino, luckier still were those who drew a pass to a skiing rest camp at Sarnano – ‘the best leave they had ever spent overseas.’¹³

However, not only was the time at the rear a break from the bleak Senio line, it was central to the rebuilding of the fighting efficiency of the division. All units set about a rigorous programme of training. Tanks and infantry practiced together, there was an emphasis on river crossing; infantry practiced with assault boats and kapok bridges, engineers experimented with blowing holes in stopbanks, and competed in bridge building races; they also practiced building bridges at night.¹⁴ There were formal demonstrations of flame-throwing, river-crossing, and anti-tank and artillery methods.¹⁵ NCOs went to ‘NCO school’, for ten days of concentrated instruction.¹⁶ Weapons training, live shoots, tank-hunting and night manoeuvres featured, as

¹¹ J.F. Cody, *New Zealand Engineers, Middle East*, Wellington: War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, 1961, pp.673-675, 685.

¹² Murphy, p.688.

¹³ R.J.M. Loughnan, *Divisional Cavalry*, Wellington: War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, 1963, p.395.

¹⁴ Dawson, pp.606-607, Murphy, p.675.

¹⁵ Cody, *21 Battalion*, p.406; Robin Kay, *27 (Machine Gun) Battalion*, Wellington: War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, 1958, p.465.

¹⁶ Ross, p.434.

did advancing behind a live barrage. The culmination of these training programmes was mock attacks on local villages in battalion or even brigade strength.



(P. Froggatt)

Figure 34: Members of 10 Platoon, 22 Battalion, practice river crossings using a kapok bridge. Lamone River.

Not only did the ongoing and intensive programme prepare the men for the upcoming offensive, it also gave recent reinforcements an insight into the mechanics of the division and helped to bond the men – new and old – together. Behaviour and military standards were also addressed. As one commentator observed, ‘formal discipline had grown pretty slack, attire round the camps had become startlingly informal, parade smartness had gone out of fashion. Now an organised effort was made to straighten up the whole of 4 Brigade.’¹⁷ And not just in the armoured regiments; in 23 Battalion for example, there was a ‘fresh emphasis on discipline and efficiency.’¹⁸ Drill was a regular occurrence, and the period of rest culminated with a number of brigade and battalion parades in front of dignitaries and higher ranking officers at which a number of decorations were awarded.

¹⁷ Dawson, p.611.

¹⁸ Ross, p.434.

By the end of March, the division that departed the rest areas was vastly different to the one that had gone in; ‘the troops who had come out of the line grey and weary and covered in mud were now fit and keen’, wrote one observer.¹⁹ Twentythree Battalion history records that:

The men had been rested out of the line. They were fully and efficiently trained and magnificently equipped. They were taking the offensive again with the odds very much in their favour. All the war news was good.... C Company's diary gives the best contemporary impression of the sanguine outlook of the 23rd. ‘Everyone felt extremely confident. Morale was high with the sight of the huge piles of ammunition, the densely populated gun-lines, and the daily moving up of more and more equipment.... The Coy's spirits and confidence were even more increased when they heard of the colossal support, both from the air and the ground, that they were going to receive, when they made the assault.’²⁰

¹⁹ W. A. Glue, & D.J.C. Pringle, *20 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, Wellington: War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, 1957, p.554.

²⁰ Ross, p.440.

Chapter Ten. Execution – ‘Gatecrash ‘em and bash ‘em’, the battle of the river lines, 9 – 24 April 1945.¹

We are now in the line on the eve of active operations. We are up to strength, everybody is in good health, and morale could not be higher. I consider the Division has never been in better condition.

Freyberg, 7 April 1945.²

We visited each small group in each platoon and gauged their spirit. I had never seen them better. They knew the coming show was well jacked up, the support terrific. I felt extraordinarily proud of them and their spirit, and experienced a thrill of achievement, to see how effective the hard training, discipline and the NCO school had been.

‘Sandy’ Thomas, CO 23 Battalion.³

The New Zealand Division re-entered the line on 1 April 1945, taking up positions in front of the Senio river’s eastern stopbank. The New Zealanders were to play a leading role in Operation *Buckland*, the Eighth Army’s offensive into the area between Bologna and the Po river. The division’s objective, once across the Senio, was the capture of a bridgehead over the next major river – the Santerno (see map 5). If the situation allowed, the division was to keep advancing, either supporting the adjacent British 78th Division as it wheeled northwards, or to drive towards the town of Budrio, near Bologna, (see map 6).

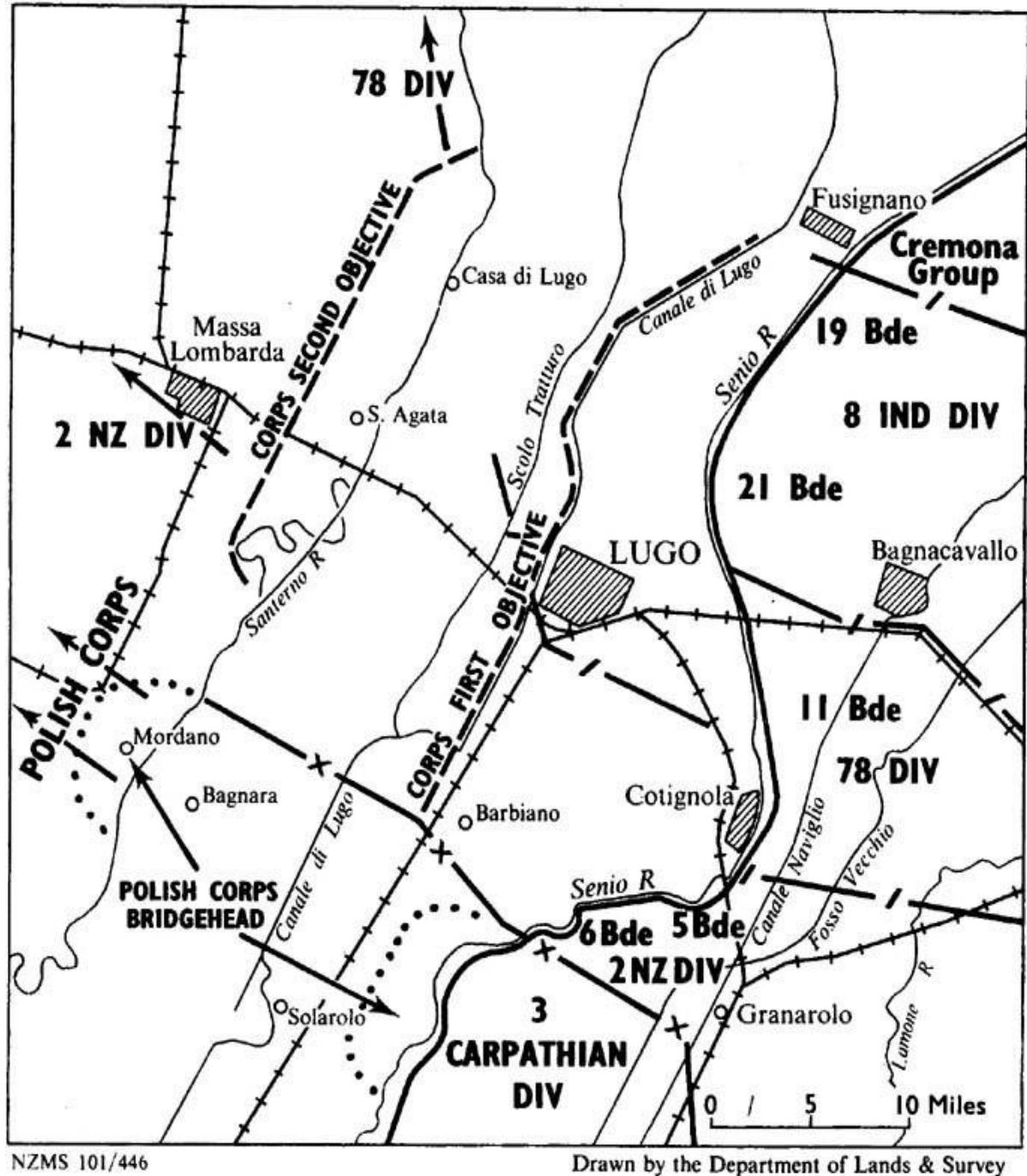
The attack began on 9 April in a carefully choreographed plan of aerial heavy bombardment and five distinct phases of artillery fire, interspersed with fighter bombers

¹ ‘Gatecrash ‘em and bash ‘em’ was Freyberg’s term. The writer of *One More River*, the unofficial survey of the final campaign in Italy, writes that ‘In its application that meant: to go in with everything forward, to seize both banks of every river line, and to jump the enemy before he had time to settle into his usual stubborn defence. It was the refinement of a system developed through months of heartbreaking advance through line after line in the mud of the river valleys.’ *One More River: With the Second New Zealand Division from Florence to Trieste*, Wellington: Army Board, 1946, p.37.

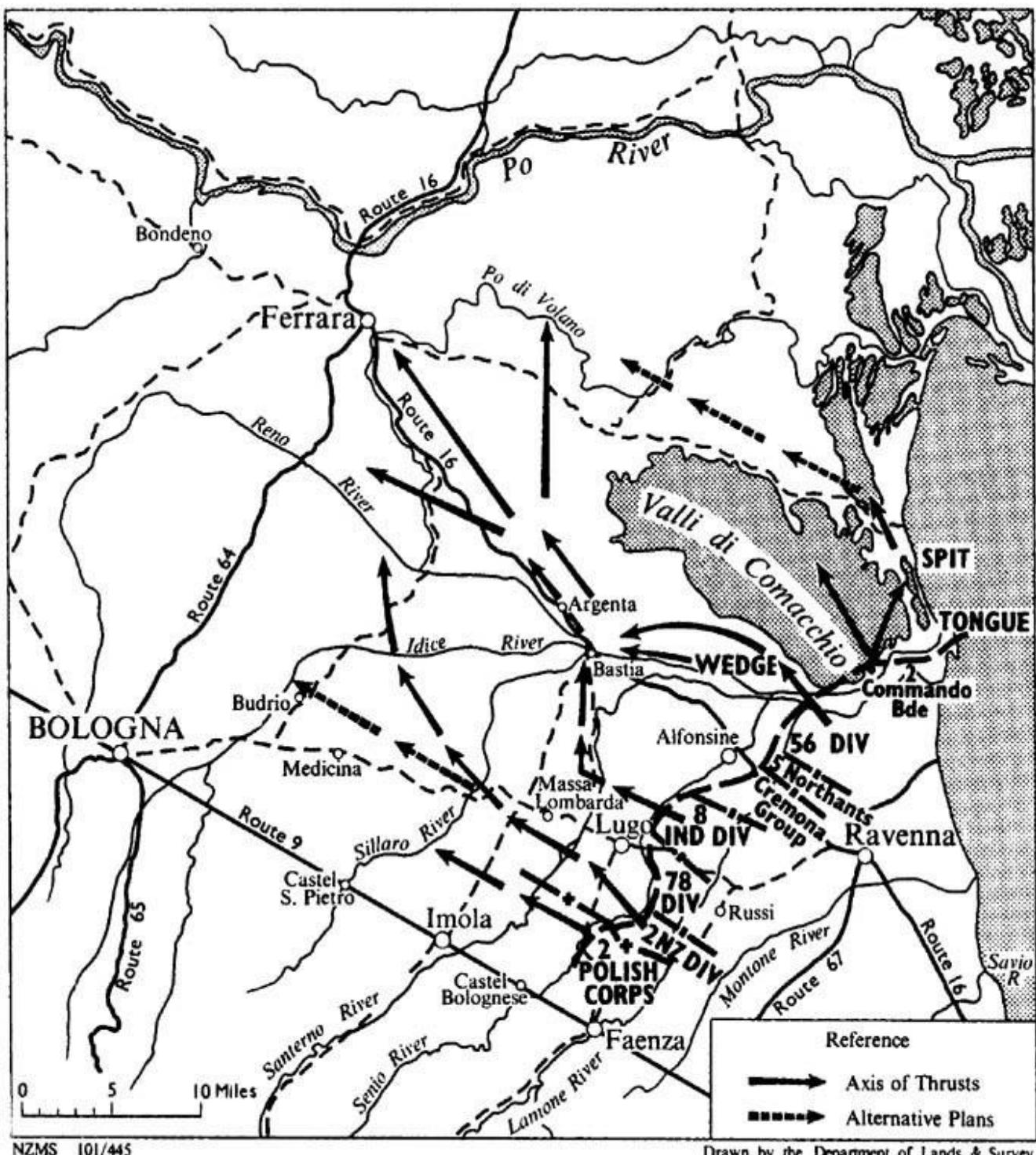
² Freyberg to the Prime Minister, 7 April 1945. *Documents Volume II*, p.395.

³ Ross, p.440.

attacking German movement behind the front line, and flying close support against the enemy held far stopbank. Importantly, during the heavy bombing the lessons of Cassino had been well



Map4: 5 Corps 'plan to cross the Senio River.



Map. 5: 5 Corps' plan to advance to the Po River.

learned; instead of large high explosive bombs which created problems for vehicles, the ordnance used was smaller fragmentation bombs, which were effective against troops and light vehicles, and most importantly, against communications.⁴ During the last lull in the artillery, as the defenders emerged from their fieldworks, a large number of flame-throwing vehicles hosed the enemy held bank.⁵ The impact of these weapons was fearsome and the official historian records that ‘The flame-throwers... made a profound impression on all who saw them.’⁶ In some men, that impression was somewhat poetic. ‘Their spurts of flame, red under the lightning flashes, showed again, again, again’, wrote Geoffrey Cox, who continues; ‘All along the line of the river they glared red and ugly. The black smoke mounted up into the stars.’⁷ Another man recalls simply that the stopbank ‘was just one sheet of flame, a sight never to be forgotten.’⁸

In the early evening, the New Zealand infantry assaulted across the Senio using assault boats and kapok bridges. Resistance on the far stopbank was patchy and generally light, bridgeheads were enlarged and the leading troops fanned out into the farmland beyond; ‘the Division was off on the great adventure for which it had awaited so long.’⁹

An excerpt from the German 98th Division’s history describes the Senio attack from the defender’s point of view:

Early in the morning of April 9, great bomber units suddenly flew out of the Apennines heading southeast. The enemy squadrons flew over the division sector and dropped their heavy bombs on the artillery positions. An uncanny roaring and thundering followed. Then a gigantic cloud rose high over the ground, out of which wood, stones and clumps of earth were constantly flung down. The carpet bombing was followed immediately by pursuit-bomber attacks on individual targets to the foremost foxhole. As of 3:20 P.M., the enemy artillery fired five waves, each lasting 40 minutes, with ten-minute pauses between them, in which pursuit bombers swept over positions and barriers and fired on or bombed anything that still moved or looked in any way suspicious. Then they gave the infantry the signal to move in (two New Zealand divisions). In the area where each enemy battalion was pushing forward, six flame-throwing

⁴ Ross, p.439. Over 1800 aircraft – 825 of which were heavy bombers delivered what Evans describes as ‘an unprecedented onslaught’ over the period of 90 minutes where 175,000 fragmentation bombs were dropped. Also dropped were fuel tanks filled with jellied gasoline – napalm. Evans, pp.204-205.

⁵ There was one Crocodile flame-throwing tank every 100 yards, with a lighter Wasp in each gap, giving one vehicle every 50 yards of river frontage.

⁶ Kay, *Italy, Volume II*, p.475.

⁷ Cox, p.130.

⁸ Major R.H. Spicer, quoted in, Jim Henderson, *22 Battalion*, Wellington: War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, 1958, p.430.

⁹ Dawson, p.615.

tanks led the way against our barricades, which had been evacuated since 3:00 P.M. The glowing bursts of fire were poured on them. At almost the same time, the New Zealand infantry crossed the barricade.¹⁰

The fighting beyond the far bank was at times intense and at close quarters, with a number of German heavy tanks roaming the area as well. Allied fighter bombers continued to harass the defenders and successfully broke up potential counter-attacks, and the speed and weight of the infantry attacks prevented the Germans both smooth withdrawal and opportunities to regroup. ‘Overhead, above the battlefield, circled the ‘planes on cabrank,¹¹ waiting to be called down on targets, and endlessly, in their neat noisy sixes, came up out of the eastern skies’,¹² wrote divisional intelligence officer Geoffrey Cox:

All day we phoned Colmore [the air liaison officer] the targets which we secured from the prisoners, from documents, from the air op. All day the brigades sent in their targets too. All day the sky was filled with ‘planes circling, ‘planes diving, ‘planes coming up out of the east and south, moving across the blue like footballers in formation.¹³

The division performed well and the Santerno was reached by midnight on 10 April – in 24 hours the division had advanced six miles and taken over 600 prisoners; importantly, the defending 98th Division had been seriously damaged, and a number of enemy tanks had been knocked out.¹⁴

The disorganised nature of the defence provided the New Zealanders the opportunity to cross the Santerno River in strength and advance into the country beyond. The Santerno and its defences had been well and truly ‘gatecrashed’.

By the 13th, the next major obstacle, the Sillaro River, had been reached, only to find a fresh German division – the 278th – defending the stopbanks. The New Zealanders did not hesitate, and in the early morning of the 14th, the ‘new’ infantry of 22 Battalion and the Divisional Cavalry, assaulted across the river under fire.

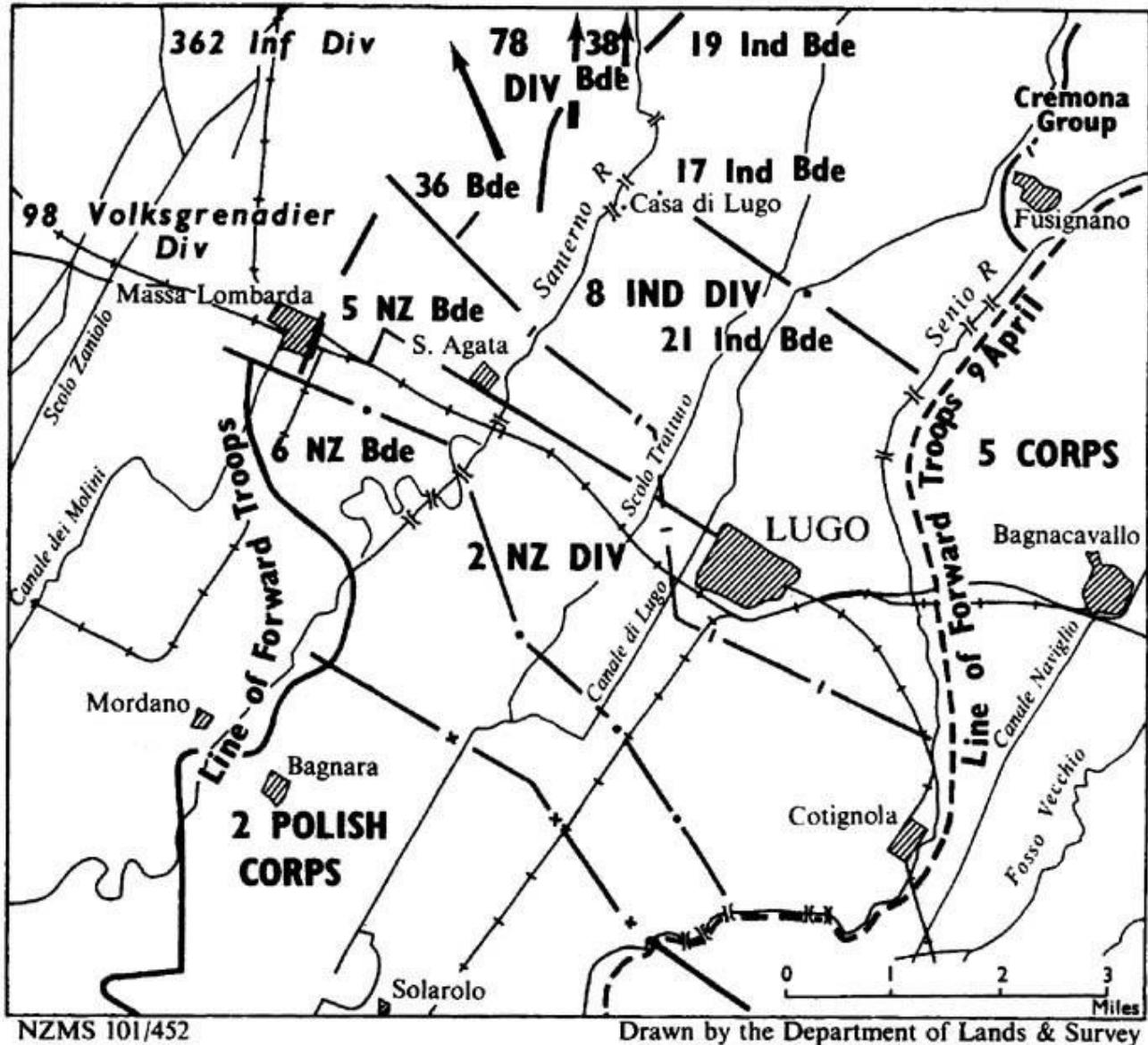
¹⁰ Excerpt from the divisional history of the German 98th Division concerning the Senio battle, April 1945. Buchner, p.168.

¹¹ Cabrank was the system of on-call air support, usually fighter-bombers, which patrolled above the battle-field and were summoned onto targets through an airforce liaison person attached to forward divisional units.

¹² Cox, p.101.

¹³ Cox, p.122. The contribution of the various Allied air forces during the April offensive cannot be underestimated. During April, the Mediterranean Allied Air Force (MAAF) flew 65,959 sorties, of which 4007 were reconnaissance, and dropped 48,310 tonnes of bombs. Between 21 and 24 April, 5876 German vehicles were destroyed by attacks from the air – ranging from tanks and trucks, to dispatch riders and carts; Andrew Brookes, *Air War over Italy, 1943-1945*, Shepperton: Ian Allen Publishing, 2000, pp.148, 151-152.

¹⁴ Of the 98th’s component infantry units, the 289th Regiment was ‘virtually destroyed’, the 290th regiment was down to one battalion, and the location of the division’s remaining three battalions was unknown. Cox, p.96.



(Internal Affairs)

Map 6: Situation at nightfall, 12 April 1945.

One writer describes the attack across the Sillaro as ‘one of the most successful in the Division’s history.’¹⁵ Once again though, the fighting was fierce, and the New Zealand infantry was at times forced to fight without heavy weapons or armoured support until it crossed the river. However, in numerous small scale actions the New Zealand infantrymen proved how good they were. Using basic infantry weapons – hand grenades, PIATs, and phosphorus bombs – they knocked out a number of German heavy tanks, often at ranges under 5 metres.¹⁶ In the

¹⁵ One More River: With the Second New Zealand Division from Florence to Trieste, p.40.

¹⁶ One More River: With the Second New Zealand Division from Florence to Trieste, p.40. In the week since the offensive began the division had destroyed 23 of the German’s 80 tanks in the area. Seven of 20 Tigers, seven of 23 Panthers, and seven Mark IV Specials.

36 hours since the division fronted the Sillaro, it had crippled the 278th Division, all the more remarkable as this was a fresh unit in strong defensive positions. To the 1300 men of the 98th Division who were now in the POW cages, a further 900 from the 278th were added. Critically, the New Zealanders were flushed with success; ‘That morale may remain high much longer when success is obvious, even despite physical weariness, was shown at this time. The relentless pressing on brought success after success at very low cost in casualties’.¹⁷ ‘It was exhilarating,’ wrote one man,

that surge forward from the Senio, from river to river, from map sheet to map sheet, driving Jerry back and back till finally he broke and the Allied flood swept through. Even in the first days, fighting for every stopbank, desperately short of sleep, nagged by shells and mortars, the beginning of that exhilaration was there. Morale and fighting spirit jumped, so quickly that it did not seem real, from the depths to the summit. Suddenly the regiment was itself again. Tankies and infantry, who had been calling each other names for too long, once more developed a proper mutual respect.¹⁸

However, the going was set to become more difficult at the next river line – the Gaiana – as another fresh formation, the elite 4th Parachute Division, took up defending positions. As the leading elements of the New Zealand Division approached, the defence intensified, and the attacking units began to suffer heavy casualties.

Freyberg made the decision to halt the advance before the Gaiana and carry out another set piece attack on the evening of 18 April. The German strength opposite the New Zealanders was estimated at a maximum of 1000 men. Against these, the divisional artillery fired 100,000 rounds in a barrage that lasted half an hour on the stopbank – a ‘stander’,¹⁹ then lifted to 500 yards beyond.²⁰ The stopbank was then flamed. Brian Moss, of 27 Battalion, recalls watching the flamethrower attack on the Gaiana, and that:

The fearful molten streams curved through the air and slobbered all over the river. Soon the levees were outlined in sizzling, licking fire and looked like walls of hot lava. At every fresh spout of the flaming liquid, the glare would light up the pillarising clouds of smoke giving the sky the appearance of a display of the southern aurora.²¹

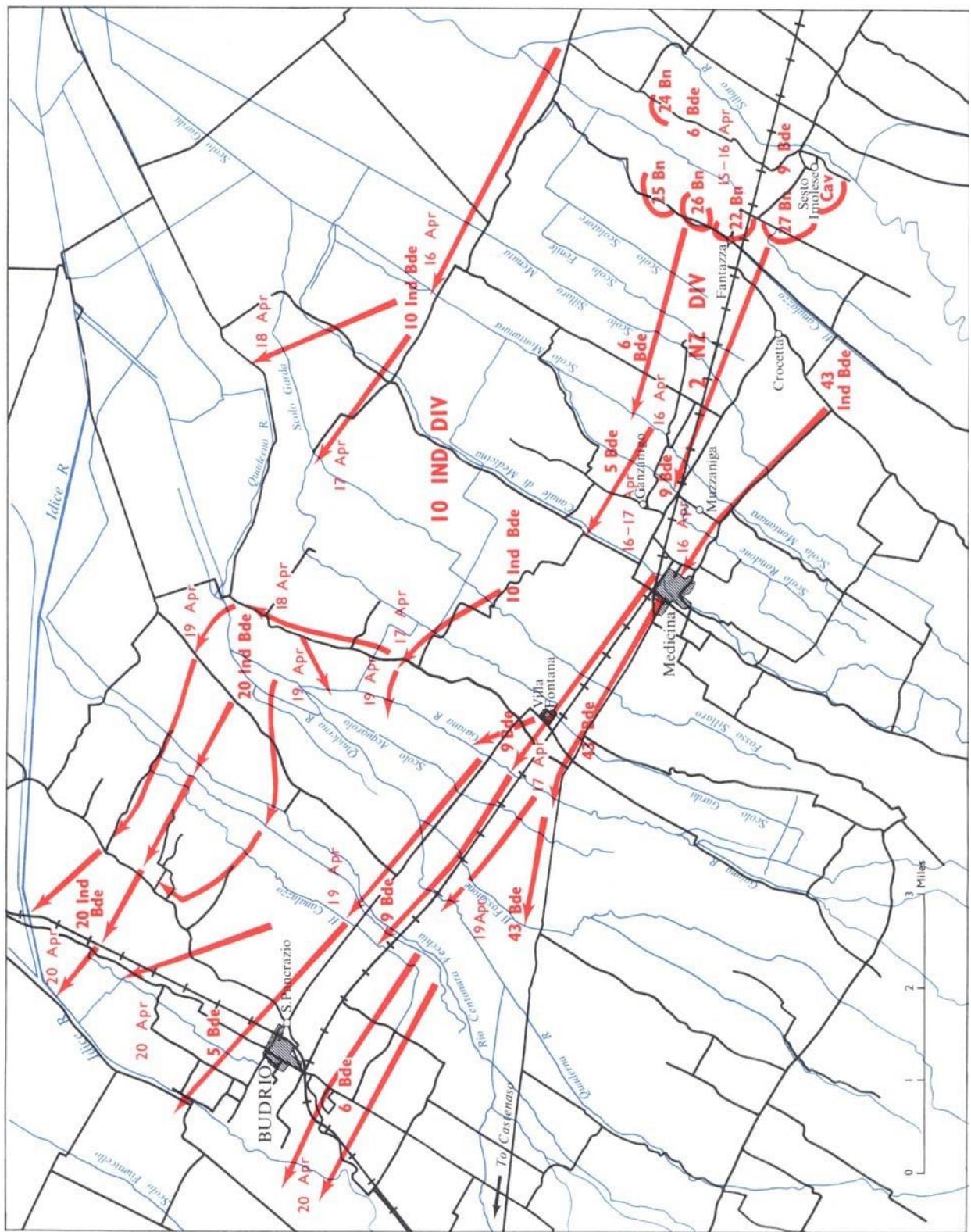
¹⁷ Ross, p.460.

¹⁸ Dawson, p.616.

¹⁹ Murphy, p.701.

²⁰ Kay, 27 (*Machine Gun*) Battalion, p.489. In addition, further support was offered by a number of Corps artillery units – a further 80+ guns, Kay, *Italy Volume II*, p.473

²¹ Kay, 27 (*Machine Gun*) Battalion, p.489.



Map 7: From the Sillaro to the Idice River, 15-20 April 1945.

(Internal Affairs)

When the barrage had lifted and the flame-throwers had finished, the infantry crossed the Gaiana, and, due to the weak opposition encountered, were over 3000 yards beyond the start line within four hours.

The Idice was reached by noon on the 20th. Immediately, leading elements crossed the river and were fighting groups of disorganised defenders on the far stopbank, but it took until the following morning before crossings were secure and tanks were being passed across.

Once across the Idice in force, and a few miles beyond, the division wheeled towards the north, and moved towards the next river, the Reno. The countryside was relatively undamaged: bridges and canal crossings were intact, roads uncratered, and houses still standing. ‘The whole German front’ wrote one commentator, ‘was cracking like an ice flow in spring.’²²

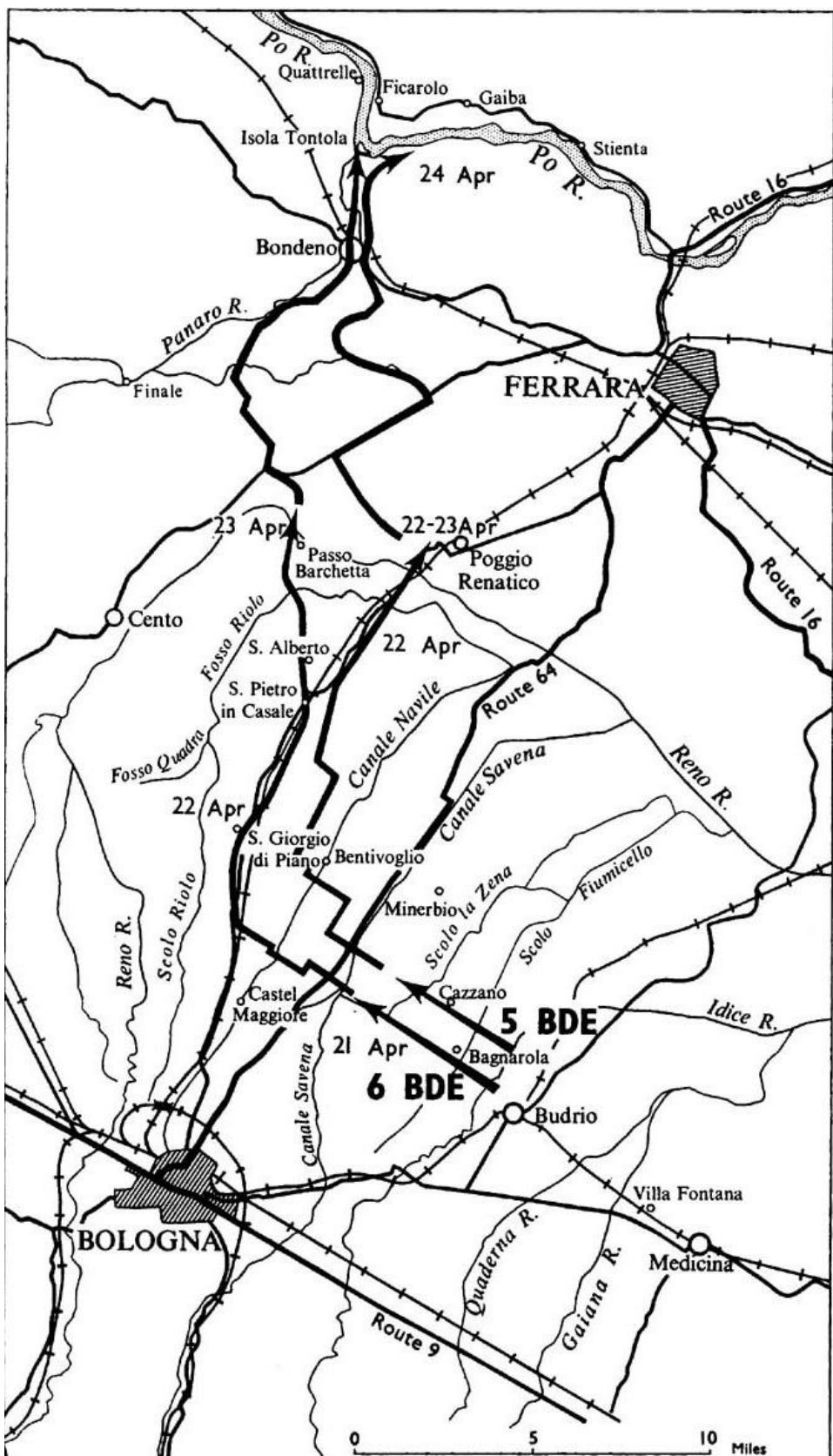
Opposition began to fade away, and apart from isolated pockets of resistance and assisting partisan groups, progress beyond the Idice was quick. Throughout the path of the division most buildings had white sheets hanging from their windows, towns were in an ‘uproar – people crowding the streets, throwing flowers, jumping on vehicles, and proffering wine – all the exuberance of liberation.’²³ The commander of 24 Battalion, knowing the possible ramifications of mixing victorious troops, liberated civilians, and celebratory vino, held his troops outside of the town of San Giorgio: ‘I had no desire to take my trucks in there and have half my men get drunk’.²⁴ The Reno, less than a foot deep in places, was easily crossed on the 23rd, and by the morning of the 24th leading elements of the division were on the Po.

The battle of the river lines, beginning on 9 April with the assault on the Senio, finished successfully on the banks of the Po River fifteen days later.

²² Cody, *21 Battalion*, p.425.

²³ Kay, *Italy Volume II*, p.496.

²⁴ R.M. Burdon, *24 Battalion*, Wellington: War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, 1953, pp.330-1



Map 8: From the Idice to the Po, 21-24 April 1945.

Since 9 April the New Zealand Division... has been attacking continuously. During that period we have carried out four heavy offensives and have destroyed three German divisions – the 98th, 278th, and the much hated 4th Parachute Division.... Your Division has captured five defended river lines – the Senio, Santerno, Sillaro, Gaiana, and Idice. Although the enemy has tried desperately to hold us, he is now broken in Italy.... During these last battles the Division has fought with a toughness and determination equal to all its past record.

Freyberg, 22 April 1945.²⁵

Our New Zealand troops have gone into these battles day after day and night after night with a quiet, steady determination and a spirit I have seen unequalled elsewhere in my experience of warfare.

Freyberg, 5 May 1945.²⁶

²⁵ Freyberg to the Minister of Defence, 22 April 1944, *Documents Volume II*, pp.402-403.

²⁶ Freyberg to the Minister of Defence, 5 May 1945, *Documents Volume II*, p.410.

Conclusion

This study has considered the 2nd New Zealand Division during its service in the Italian campaign 1943-1945. Specifically, Freyberg's assertion, on several occasions, that the division was 'battle weary' has been examined in detail. To do so, this study took the position that Freyberg's assertion was correct; the research proves that this was a valid position. As was demonstrated in chapters six through to eight, battle weariness manifested within the men of the division, primarily through mental exhaustion, declining morale, and declining discipline – both behind the lines, and in action. This position is also strengthened through comments made at the time by senior members of the division, and by historians since the war.

This thesis considered three key questions. These were: what were the factors that caused battle weariness within 2nd New Zealand Division? What were the symptoms of battle weariness? What were the solutions used to address the division's problems, and how successful were they?

Part one – chapters one through to five – addressed the first question and identified influences on battle weariness. To begin the section, battle weariness was defined as the degradation of military ability through participation in combat. Battle weariness can affect an individual – of any rank – a sub unit, or the entire entity. Degradation can be mild, or it can be extreme. Regardless of the extent of battle weariness, unit abilities will be impaired; in extreme cases the unit will cease to function as a worthwhile fighting force.

Chapter one located 2nd New Zealand Division within the structure of the Italian campaign. It examined both Allied and German strategy and outlined the division's role in the early part of the campaign. Background conditions that were themselves conducive to fostering battle weariness within the Allied units were in place even before the campaign began. These underlying factors were primarily a function of leadership and command problems, and were identified as: the lack of strategic clarity; national jealousies; leadership issues; failure to grasp operational opportunities; and tactical naivety. It was suggested too, that Freyberg himself was suffering a weariness that presented as a mediocre performance at Cassino.

Manpower issues, including accumulating casualties and the ability to replace them, the need to furlough the longer serving soldiers, and the structure of the division, were examined in chapter two. By the end of the fighting in North Africa, the division had been moulded into a

hard hitting, mobile force, consisting of two infantry brigades, a modern armoured brigade, support battalions for reconnaissance, heavy weapons, and mobility. However, Italy lacked the sweeping expanses of North Africa; terrain dictated that the campaign was one primarily fought by infantry and artillery. In Italy, the two infantry brigades bore the brunt of difficult fighting; they also suffered the burden of a disproportionate level of casualties. Divisional structure was an important reason why the division was being battered into such a battle weary state throughout most of 1944. As the campaign progressed, this issue ate away at Freyberg. In April 1944, he recorded that he had to ‘face the fact that the morale of the Division is dropping because we are hammering our frontline troops with only 2 infantry brigades.’¹

Also identified as having an effect on the battle weariness of the division was the removal of Allied resources, specifically a large number of seasoned fighting divisions, as well as experienced army level staff and supporting arms. In the latter part of the campaign, the 2nd New Zealand Division became – and remained – one of the more seasoned divisions on the Allied order of battle, as a result it inevitably featured in more and more of the fighting as the campaign progressed.

The impact of the poor Italian weather and difficult terrain was considered in chapter three. These conditions provided the perfect platform for the German strategy of delay and attrition. The difficulties presented by either weather or terrain singularly, were multiplied when these two factors were present in combination. Endless hills, mud, torrents, snow and cold not only made the men miserable, but hastened the onset of fatigue – mental as well as physical.

The Germans in Italy provided the Allies with a skillfull adversary. Chapter four looked at the skills and weapons that the New Zealanders encountered, and the tactics that were employed when both of these factors were used together. The German order of battle contained a number of units that could be classed as elite – the paratroopers of 4 *Fallschirmjäger Division* for example – and that were commanded by experienced officers, many of whom had served on the Eastern Front. Weapons used by the Germans in that period of the war were generally technologically superior to those used by the Allies, and they were used well. The strategy used by the Germans, one of delay and attrition, frustrated the Allied advance and caused seemingly endless casualties in a campaign that was more a series of minor actions than the type of large scale battles that typified the Eastern Front, or even North-west Europe. The mine and the demolition charge were the weapons of the campaign, not only were their wounds physical, but

¹ General Officer Commanding's Diary - Part IV, September 1943 - October 1944, WAI18/6/46, (ANZ), 18 April 1944.

the unknown, hidden threat they possessed nagged at the back of many men's minds. John Ellis provides some indication of the magnitude of the task the Allies faced when he concluded that: 'the Italian campaign must rank as one of the greatest defensive achievements in the history of warfare.'²

A study of the New Zealanders experience of combat makes up the last chapter in part one. Key to understanding what combat was like, and why it had such a psychological impact, are the accounts of many New Zealander soldiers who fought in the campaign. These accounts have been sourced from both published memoirs and collections, as well as archived primary sources such as diaries and letters. The first part of the chapter looks at how the sights, sounds and smells of combat provided an assault on the senses, while the second part examines the emotional impact of fear, casualties, and death. Without the narratives of the men themselves, an appreciation of how psychologically tough combat was during this period, is difficult.

Part two answers the question 'what were the symptoms of battle weariness?', exploring how battle weariness manifested itself within the division, namely the occurrence of psychological casualties, a lowering of morale, and ill-discipline. Chapter six examined the psychological cost of combat. The Second World War proved a turning point in the recognition and treatment of neuropsychiatric problems within military units. In the years after the war a number of studies were completed that advanced medical knowledge of this issue. These studies are also critical to understanding how the 2nd New Zealand Division was impacted by the, sometimes considerable, length of time that its men had spent in combat. The key points are: almost all combatants become psychological casualties to some degree, the mental breaking point for a combat infantryman in Italy was, on average, 88 combat days, and that after 210 days 90% of a unit would have become psychological casualties.³ It is no surprise then that one US military report concluded that psychiatric casualties are 'as inevitable as gun shot or shrapnel wounds'.⁴

As demonstrated in chapter six, many of the New Zealand soldiers serving in Italy had either accumulated enough combat days to reach this level from their time in North Africa, or were about to acquire them during the early part of the campaign. While the number of 'exhaustion and neurosis' cases appear in monthly medical reports, assessment of the problem on a case by case basis was flawed; many sufferers were overlooked, or ignored, or simply 'took it'. A sense of the scale of the underlying problem that faced the division is indicated by two points made by the official historian. First, that 32% of the men invalided back to New Zealand

² Ellis, *Brute Force*, p.342.

³ Beebe & Appel, pp.92 & 163.

⁴ Appel, quoted in, Steckel, p.296.

during the war were evacuated due to ‘nervous disease’.⁵ Second, that from the *Ruapehu* draft ‘the great majority of the men never returned to the Middle East from furlough in New Zealand; as a result of *unforeseen psychological reactions* in New Zealand most obtained their discharge on medical or other grounds’ (emphasis added).⁶ The *Ruapehu* draft contained 6087 members of the first three echelons – men who had participated in up to 283 combat days.

Morale is a factor that is critical to military performance, from the division’s *esprit de corps*, to the ties that bind a small primary group together, where comradeship is a fierce and enduring commitment of men to one another. Threats to small group morale and cohesion – primarily casualties, loss of leadership, and stress – will have a rapid and drastic impact on group morale. External factors that were occurring away from the battlefield, also played an important role in influencing how the men acted at the front.

The most telling of these distant factors, were those happening, or influenced by events, at home. Throughout the war, the division systematically monitored outgoing mail, selecting a significant selection of the men’s mail for censoring. Weekly reports summarised findings and allowed, then and now, a view into the morale of the division. Typically, the bad weather, mud, poor clothing, and a longing for home featured in many letters, however, one of the conclusions reached by the censor in April 1944 is that there was an undercurrent of dissatisfaction throughout the division. The principle drivers of this dissatisfaction originated in New Zealand: the suspension of the furlough drafts; the protection of union members from military service; strikes that were occurring for better pay and conditions; and the inability of the Government to facilitate a rotation of servicemen and those in essential industries.

However, one factor above all from the home front drove the morale of the New Zealanders downwards: the disloyalty of wives and girlfriends. A situation that one writer pinpoints that ‘apart from the ebb and flow of battle, has a greater effect on men’s morale than any other single factor.’⁷ While 2nd New Zealand Division was engaged in the Middle East, up to 500,000 US servicemen visited New Zealand. Additionally, there were many eligible men still in New Zealand, with others returning through furlough, or from the Pacific Islands. Censorship summaries help quantify the impact of this critical factor: in an organisation numbering around 20,000 men, the estimate of failed relationships during 1944 could have been as high as 8000. It was a situation that German propaganda, particularly through leaflets, ruthlessly exploited.

⁵ Stout, p.463.

⁶ Stout, p.757.

⁷ Quoted in Fennell, *Combat and Morale in the North African Campaign: The Eighth Army and the Path to El Alamein*, p.167.

Historian John McLeod suggests that during the Italian campaign the division's battle weariness, 'drove a decline in discipline, and that 'the New Zealander's discipline out of the line fell away, paralleling the decline in their morale and battle discipline.'⁸ The outcome was a 'deterioration in the men's effectiveness as soldiers.'⁹ Alcohol and looting are identified as prime disciplinary issues in chapter eight. Freyberg himself appears embarrassed at the spectacle that was the New Zealand Division behind the lines. 'Isolated incidents are funny' he suggested to his senior officers, 'but they are far too frequent now and are getting the Division a very bad name'¹⁰, and that it was 'a sad thing to see a division with such a high reputation in the front with such a mediocre reputation in our rear areas.'¹¹ He lamented the 'very bad impression that we are giving to [the] South Africans, Canadians, and British.'¹²

Looting, pillage, black market activities, and simply the accumulation of useful material, by members of the division was rife during the campaign, from Taranto through to Trieste. In early October 1943, within hours of their arrival in Italy, a large number of men of the New Zealand Artillery – several hundred at least – conducted a raid on an Italian army supply dump, spiriting away, with the help of several trucks, what can only be estimated as several tonnes of booty, principally sugar and other foodstuffs.¹³ By May 1945, at the other end of Italy, and as the war drew to a close, members of a company of 22 Battalion, drove into Trieste with their collection of acquired vehicles, loaded with 'loot', including a truckload of sugar.¹⁴ Over the miles in between, the New Zealanders had raided, stolen, pinched, traded, sold, and swindled their way up the Italian boot. Much material, especially foodstuffs and household items, was recovered from abandoned dwellings, but even so, much was also blatantly stolen from the hands of Italian owners. These activities were persistent, organised, and regularly occurred on a large scale; they also appear to have become ingrained, and to a certain extent institutionalised within the division. There were no limits regarding rank, with both ordinary ranks and officers involved.

Alcohol was another underlying problem. It was freely available in most areas, typically it was locally produced wine, a drink to which the New Zealanders were unaccustomed to. Many suffered after uncontrolled 'plonk' sessions, a result of trying to drink wine like beer –

⁸ McLeod, p.132.

⁹ McLeod, p.136.

¹⁰ General Officer Commanding's Diary - Part IV, September 1943 - October 1944, WAI8/6/46, (ANZ), 8 August 1944.

¹¹ Freyberg, File Note, October 1944, Special Files - Re-organisation, October - December 1944, WAI8/8/77, (ANZ).

¹² General Officer Commanding's Diary - Part IV, September 1943 - October 1944, WAI8/6/46, (ANZ), 8 August 1944.

¹³ A number of diaries record the event, including the GOC's. See pp.116-118 above.

¹⁴ Paterson, pp.149-150.

a swill mentality of ‘as much as quickly as possible’. Unfortunately, alcohol could influence the military functionality of the division. Men were drunk on duty and in the frontline, and this work highlights an incident where drunken antics caused at least one serious accident that resulted in multiple fatalities.

Freyberg was also concerned about battle discipline within the division, noting in August 1944 ‘a slackness of leading and a slackness of battle discipline’, also an ‘absence of battle drill.... straggling.... [no] proper battle formation... [and] in a lot of cases the men [aren’t] properly under control.’¹⁵ Worse still, there were two separate incidents where groups of men within infantry companies refused to go into action. The first was at Orsogna in December 1943, the second near Florence in July 1944. In both cases the units involved had been in the line for a significant period of time, involved in heavy fighting, and had suffered heavy casualties. Both incidents can be considered the result of battle weariness; the subsequent actions taken by senior officers, especially at Orsogna, back this up to a certain extent. Importantly, it should also be noted that the New Zealand division’s record regarding desertion and long term absence, was one of the better in Italy.

The last part of this study examined the solutions used to address the division’s problems, observed their impact during the final significant battle in northern Italy, and considered their success. Chapter nine examined the solutions. Principally, the division was restructured, with some disbanded units providing manpower for the infantry battalions. Other units were converted to infantry, forming a third infantry brigade. The manpower supply issues that had dogged the division throughout the campaign were addressed through the resumption of furlough drafts, thereby removing the longer serving – and weariest – men from frontline units and returning them to New Zealand. At the same time, these men were replaced by the members of the 3rd Division who had participated to a limited degree in the Pacific war. Once the division was re-engaged in April 1945, use was also made of several external units – principally the Gurkas of 43rd Indian brigade – which importantly, allowed the division to use a rotational system of two brigades in action and two resting, going some way to addressing Freyberg’s fear of ‘hammering our frontline troops’.¹⁶

In March 1945, the division spent time out of the line, to both rest and retrain. River crossing tactics were practiced, including improving the construction of Bailey Bridges. Infantry

¹⁵ General Officer Commanding's Diary - Part IV, September 1943 - October 1944, WAI18/6/46, (ANZ), 8 August 1944.

¹⁶ General Officer Commanding's Diary - Part IV, September 1943 - October 1944, WAI18/6/46, (ANZ), 18 April 1944.

practiced co-operation with armour, and battlefield tactics were practiced at all levels from sections through to brigade level mock assaults on local villages. Discipline was addressed with a focus on dress and military procedure.

New weapons were introduced, particularly specialists armoured vehicles. A new engineering unit was formed – 28 Assault Squadron – equipped with tank mounted equipment: bulldozer blades, ramps and fascines for bridging ditches, and scissor bridges for larger channels. New equipment allowed new tactics. Kangaroos, tanks that had been converted into rudimentary armoured personnel carriers, carried a number of infantry units directly into battle, while a new assault tactic – ‘flaming’ – saw the use of massed flame throwing vehicles. Tactics used by artillery and air power had also been refined: artillery plans were both more detailed and extensive, but conversely, had been simplified to allow for ease of development. Tactical close air support had been refined and was available above the New Zealanders via networked radio. Heavy bombers, were used with some finesse as the April offensive began, a far cry from the high explosive mayhem that they had caused a year before at Cassino.

The New Zealand Division assaulted across the Senio river on the evening of 9 April 1945. Often without supporting armour, the infantry reached not only their immediate objectives, but over the next two weeks swept across the *Val Padana* – the plains south of the Po river. The new weapons, tactics, and training were of immeasurable benefit: flaming of the river stopbanks on the Senio and Gaiana rivers, the concentrated artillery barrage of the Gaiana, the confidence and morale demonstrated by the infantry as they took on and destroyed numerous German armoured vehicles by hand, and the rapid bridging of the numerous channels and ditches criss-crossing the plain by a variety of solutions. By 24 April, the leading elements of the division had reached the southern banks of the Po river, and in the process effectively destroyed three German divisions. Although they had suffered heavy casualties during the battle, the previous period of training and the resultant high level of morale and discipline meant that the division proved resilient, remained battle worthy, and was in a position, willing, and able, to lead the subsequent dash to Trieste.

There are a number of areas for further investigation that have been identified as a result of this work. The impact of domestic events and the related issues with the furlough drafts on the morale of the New Zealand troops in Italy deserves a more thorough investigation. It would be of significance to compare the impact of battlefield influences against external influences on troop morale. Issues surrounding discipline should also be investigated further, both in depth, and breadth, including relations with local women, minor absences, court martial events, and military procedures. Some further research would also be beneficial around the

biometrics of the personnel of 2nd New Zealand Division. For example, an assessment of age, length of service, marital status, volunteer or conscript, as a minimum. These could then be compared by year, unit, battle, providing a picture of the New Zealand soldier as he evolves over the course of the war.

The participation of 2nd New Zealand Division in Operation *Buckland* also needs fuller coverage. Previously any narrative of the battle of the river lines has been tacked on at the end of broader histories, somewhat in the shadow of North Africa and the Cassino battles. It is, however, a significant event in New Zealand's military history. A clear and overwhelming victory, albeit against an opponent on the back foot, a set piece battle that demonstrated the division's ability in that situation but, as it developed into a flowing breakthrough, also demonstrated the division's tactical flexibility at all levels. That the 2nd New Zealand Division suffered heavy casualties, and still remained in a position to continue to victory, reflects a spirit that deserves to be celebrated.

It is clear that the campaign carried out by 2nd New Zealand Division in Italy during 1943 and 1944, characterised by involvement in hard battles and difficult conditions, occurred against a backdrop of battle weariness – a decline in battle worthiness, morale, and discipline. It was a situation that threatened the viability of the division as a combat unit during 1944. However, by the beginning of 1945, and with an understanding of what the underlying problems were, Freyberg initiated a number of significant changes that resulted in what could rightly be described as the pinnacle of 2nd New Zealand Division's effort during the Second World War.

Appendix 1: Reinforcements and Furlough Drafts.

Departure Date	Event	Arrivals		Departures		Details
		Officers	Ranks	Officers	Ranks	
5 January 1940	1st Echelon	353	6175			
2 May 1940	2nd Echelon	428	6410			
27 August 1940	3rd Echelon	365	6078			
8 November 1940	4th Reinforcements (1)	83	1404			
19 December 1940	4th Reinforcements (2)	129	2191			
1 February 1941	4th Reinforcements (3)	181	3559			
7 April 1941	5th Reinforcements	22	6606			
27 June 1941	6th Reinforcements	145	3663			Arrived 29 July
15 September 1941	7th Reinforcements	159	5610			
10 December 1942	8th Reinforcements	218	5287			
9 May 1943	9th Reinforcements	107	3402			
12 July 1943	1st Return Draft (Ruapehu)			288	5799	Comprising men of 1 st – 3 rd echelons.
21 July 1943	10th Reinforcements	176	5887			
9 January 1944	2nd Return Draft (Wakatipu)			232	2326	
12 January 1944	11th Reinforcements (1)	144	3242			
31 March 1944	11th Reinforcements (2)	68	2564			
29 June 1944	12th Reinforcements	154	1640			
28 September 1944	13th Reinforcements	106	2022			Joined units by end of February 1945. ¹
28 September 1944	3rd Return Draft (Taupo)			121	1639	
24 November 1944	4th Return Draft (Kaikoura)			165	1539	
5 January 1945	14th Reinforcements	275	3421			
18 March 1945	5th Return Draft (Tongariro)			334	5286	Those remaining up to and including 5 th Reinforcements
15 April 1945	15th Reinforcements	155	3391			

¹ *Documents, Volume II*, p.393.

Appendix 2: Comparison of Battle to Psychological casualties, 2 NZEF, 1942-44.

Monthly rates per 1000 Hospital admissions. ²				
Period	Battle	Battle Casualties	Exhaustion and Neurosis	ratio
Jun-42	Minqar Qaim	1.6	1.0	39%
Jul-42	Battle for Egypt	50.3	8.0	14%
Aug-42		19.5	5.6	22%
Sep-42		15.3	2.5	14%
Oct-42		5.0	1.4	22%
Nov-42	Alamein	47.4	0.5	1%
Dec-42		8.4	1.1	12%
Jan-43		3.5	1.5	30%
Feb-43		1.0	1.2	54%
Mar-43	Mareth	15.5	4.0	21%
Apr-43	Tunisia	21.5	4.6	18%
May-43		2.7	3.2	55%
Jun-43		0.0	1.4	-
Jul-43		0.0	1.5	-
Aug-43		0.0	1.7	-
Sep-43		0.0	1.3	-
Oct-43		0.0	1.0	-
Nov-43		1.6	1.8	53%
Dec-43	Sangro	30.0	2.6	8%
Jan-44		4.6	1.6	26%
Feb-44		8.6	3.0	26%
Mar-44	Cassino	25.0	9.1	27%
Apr-44		4.4	3.4	44%
May-44		8.9	2.8	24%
Jun-44		5.2	1.6	24%
Jul-44	Florence	16.7	2.7	14%
Aug-44		9.7	2.9	23%
Sep-44	Rimini	15.3	3.1	17%
		130.0	34.7	21%

(Author)

² Stout, p.656.

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New Zealand infantrymen moving into forward positions at dusk, near the Lamone River.

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American, French & Indian mule teams used by Indian formation, Monte Cassino.

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New Zealand gun crew, Forli area.

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