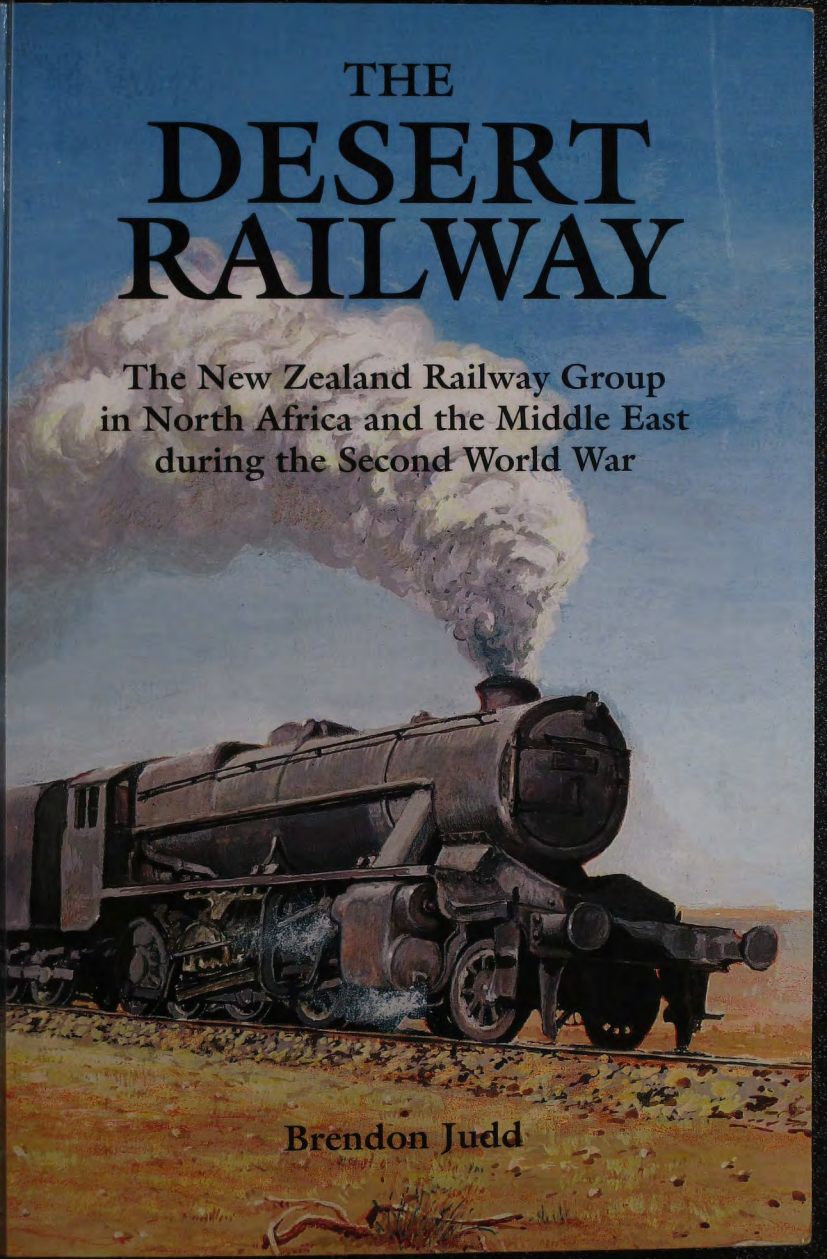
THE DESERT RAILWAY

The New Zealand Railway Group in North Africa and the Middle East during the Second World War



Brendon Judd

THE DESERT RAILWAY

Presented by:
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(sometime 2007 - 2011!)

THE DESERT RAILWAY

The New Zealand Railway Group
in North Africa and the Middle East
during the Second World War

Brendon Judd

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO ALL THE SERVICEMEN WHO WORKED ON THE RAILWAYS IN NORTH AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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FOREWORD

by Major General Piers Reid (Rtd)

It is nearly sixty years since the New Zealand Railway Group returned to New Zealand from the Middle East at the conclusion of the North African Campaign. The Railway Group's contribution to the success of that campaign is little known in New Zealand. The return of the Railway Group while the war still raged in Europe meant that they were quickly assimilated back into running New Zealand's railways, over-burdened at the time in supporting the wartime economy and the American troops, and they have been largely forgotten by the New Zealand public. Never really a part of the New Zealand Division, the Railway Group was never the subject of an official war history as were all other units of 2NZEF.

It is therefore timely that Brendon Judd should have researched and written this fascinating history while there are still members of the Railway Group around to relate their stories. It has taken a lot of time and patience to research this history. Many of Brendon's interviews were with men at the very limit of their memories some sixty or more years since the events. Similarly Brendon has meticulously retrieved and researched the records and documents pertaining to the Railway Group and its operations, theatres and employment.

In many ways the mid-twentieth century was the glorious era of New Zealand's railways. At the time the engineering, skills and ingenuity of New Zealand railwaymen were known and respected throughout the world. It was hardly surprising therefore that with the outbreak of the Second World War Britain requested New Zealand volunteers to help run the railways in France in what was expected to be a repeat of the First World War. While their actual employment became, in the main, the Western Desert, their proximity to the fighting was much

closer than had been originally envisaged. That the New Zealand Railway Group managed to eventually undertake tasks as diverse as building a desert railway where none had been before, dodging Axis air attacks and operating the wharves of Tobruk during the siege is tribute to their versatility.

The Railway Group history is also interesting in that the Group operated away from the main body of New Zealanders in the Western Desert. Perhaps it was this separation, which led to their story being sidelined in the histories of New Zealand's efforts in World War II, but the story is an important one. It is a story of technical skills and improvisation of which New Zealanders can be proud. It is also a story of men at war, of casualties and sacrifice by skilled railway operators a long way from home. Not least it is the story of the unique and individualistic railwaymen 'characters' who made up the Group.

The men of the Railway Group were older, more mature and much more ruggedly independent when compared with most New Zealand units sent abroad during the war. Brendon Judd, with his own solid railwayman credentials has accurately captured the nature of these determined men. He shows the uniqueness of this group and especially portrays their character in numerous anecdotes and quotations. These were not the kind of men who could fit easily into regular Army units, but they were just the men to survey, build and operate railways, even under enemy attack.

Brendon Judd has brought special dedication and insight to the writing of this history. He tells the story with deep understanding, detailed inside knowledge, genuine respect for those involved and a sense of humour. I commend this history to all who are interested in New Zealand's history and wish to recall the contribution dedicated New Zealanders made towards winning the Second World War. I also commend it to those interested in railways and to those who would enjoy a good story about some amazing Kiwi characters.

Piers Reid
Major General (Rtd) CBE
December 2002

CONTENTS

About the author

Over sixty years have elapsed since the Railway Group was formed at the request of the British Government at the commencement of the Second World War. Little has been written of the contribution made by the volunteer railwaymen, so a group of ex-railway servicemen formed a committee with the intention of gathering memoirs and information that was to become the basis of this book.

As a committee dedicated to having the Railway Group remembered in New Zealand's war history, we searched for a writer who had some knowledge of the Railway Group's existence. We eventually found someone suitable for the task.

Brendon Judd completed his MA thesis at Massey University in 1998, where he researched and evaluated the contribution made by the New Zealand Railway Group in the years 1940–43. Before undertaking university study, Brendon was employed as a locomotive engineer with the New Zealand Railways Corporation, and therefore knew something of what it means to be a railwayman. Having completed his academic studies, Brendon once again returned to the locomotive footplate, and now lives in New Plymouth with his wife, Anna.

Brendon was provided with vast quantities of information given by remaining ex-railway servicemen and their families. Duly supplied, he set about collating the mass of information into some semblance of order and produced a book that records the exploits of the separate companies that comprised the Railway Group.

We thank Brendon for undertaking this difficult task as so much of the information was based only on fading memories, which after so many years, can often be difficult to substantiate.

Norman Leaf,
Chairman,
The Desert Railway Committee, 2002

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The author wishes to thank the members of the book committee and all those associated with the production of this book:

Norman Leaf Committee Chairman (Auckland)
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To all those too numerous to mention, who have contributed directly or indirectly by providing information, personal memoirs, correspondence, photographs and inspiration, my sincerest thanks.

The many threads of the final manuscript were brought together and edited by Tony Williams and Chris O'Brien.

Finally, without the dedication and hard work of Norman Leaf, it is doubtful whether this project would ever have reached fruition. It is with heartfelt appreciation that I say on behalf of the committee, thank you, Norm.

Brendon Judd
September 2002

Note

We wish to point out that due to the many variations of spelling of place names in the Arabic language, the author has adopted some standardisation to suit. While every care has been taken to ensure accuracy, some dates and accounts of events may be debatable. However, due to the age of many of those who contributed information and the time lapsed since 1943, it is reasonable to expect some discrepancies. Neither the author nor the committee accept any responsibility for the veracity of contributors' memoirs.

The Organising Committee's Wish

I like to think when life is done,
That I have filled a needed post;
That here and there I'd paid my fare
With more than idle talk and boast;
That I had taken gifts divine; the breath of life,
and manhood fine,
And tried to use them now and then in service
for my fellowmen.

I hate to think when life is through, that I had
lived my round of years
A useless kind, that leaves behind no record in
this vale of tears;
That I had wasted all my days by treading only
selfish ways,
And that this world would be the same
If it had never known my name.

I'd like to think that here and there, when I am gone,
There shall remain
A happier spot that might have not existed
Had I toiled for gain;
That someone's cheery voice and smile
Shall prove that I have been worthwhile,
That I had paid with something fine,
My debt to God for life divine.

Anon

A Report from a New Zealand War Correspondent published in the *New Zealand Herald*, 1942

NEW ZEALAND RAILWAYMEN CARRY ON DURING HEIGHT OF BATTLE

New Zealand's "front line troops" in the latest Libyan battle have been railwaymen of a non-divisional construction and operating group. Through weeks of the most severe bombing and machine-gun attacks they have known, these railway companies have built and operated the 215 miles of track that extended almost to the battlefront. So close was their final railhead at Bel Hamid to the rapidly changing front that shells from the battle landed only a few thousand yards away while the men were unloading trucks.

One section of the line was spread by the tracks of a heavy tank which passed over it going into the attack. Although the Germans directed continuous air attacks against the trains, stations and dumps in order to break our supply line, the company carried supplies forward until the last possible hour. When the evacuation became inevitable the forward operating company worked feverishly to move back the supply dumps. When they left, all the dumps had been cleared, the engines and rolling stock had been taken back a safe distance out of the path of the advance, and a scorched earth policy had removed anything else that might have fallen into enemy hands.

The gallantry of the men who operated the trains throughout air attack, dust storms and a three day khamseen has not been surpassed on any battlefield. The first warning the engine crews got of German planes above them was when cannon shells screamed into the cabs. One driver took his engine through eight machine-gun attacks before he was wounded. Another driver and his fireman died in their cab when it was raked by machine-gun fire. Others were scalded when cannon shells punctured the boilers of their engines.

"Through all that there was never a word of complaint from our men", one officer told me. "It was a terrific strain, driving without lights over new tracks and waiting for those planes they could never hear above the noise of the engines. They worked all night and then had to try to sleep during the heat of the day."

During one of the most severe air attacks one train took seven hours to go 53 miles. Six times the train stopped while the crew jumped clear to avoid machine-gun fire.

Daylight raids on the temporary railhead at Bel Hamid were common for, as the enemy advanced, the position was within easy reach of the enemy's forward aerodromes. Men handling petrol and ammunition carried on through seven days of air attacks, their only concern being to get the supplies through.

There are stories of men who risked their lives to save petrol waggons and of men who uncoupled waggons loaded with explosives while nearby trucks were ablaze. During the last few days of our occupancy of Bel Hamid's railhead the men who manned the stations and sidings were taken to their posts and withdrawn by means of a railcar which ran ahead of the trains. By this means tanks of petrol and waggons loaded with ammunition were delivered almost on the battlefield.

PLANE CAPTURED

When the enemy found that bombs and machine-guns could not stop the supplies going forward, an attempt was made to mine the track. Two German airmen who landed beside the line headed out into the desert on foot when their mining operations were disturbed by the N.Z railway boys. Our railwaymen promptly dragged the enemy plane back to the nearest station where it was handed over to the R.A.F. That night more tanks were unloaded at the railhead.

New Zealand railwaymen have served in the desert through every phase of the Libyan campaigns. In October 1940 they went to the desert to handle the increased traffic on the western end of the Egyptian State Railways system. As our army advanced, detachments from the Operating Company worked as far west as Benghazi. Prior to last winter's campaign, New Zealand railway construction companies had taken the rail-

head 68 miles further into the desert. Further miles of line were added until 162 miles of track stretched between the coast and the new railhead at Fort Capuzzo.

While our forces consolidated their positions the construction companies were at work again extending the line across country that had been the battlefield of the New Zealand Division three months earlier. Such famous points as Bel Hamid, Gundagai and Halfaya became stations on the line. Working through the blackout with an improvised signal system, the operating companies moved between 75 and 80 trains a week over the main section of the line. Their record effort was more than 3,000 tons unloaded at the railhead in one day.

The 1940 circular sent to all eligible locomotive railwaymen by D.G. Sullivan, Minister of Railways, appealing for volunteers.

INTRODUCTION

There is little denying that New Zealand servicemen made a profound impact on the successful conclusion to the 1940–43 North African and Middle Eastern Campaigns. Their exploits have become indelibly etched into the consciousness of people throughout the Commonwealth and confirmed that New Zealanders are a tough and resourceful race. By their deeds, later generations were able to proudly boast that they had come from a country where the legendary can-do attitude was immortalised by men in the desert who came to be recognised for their 'Kiwi ingenuity'. Never before were men called upon to be as flexible and self-sufficient than in the vastness that characterises the North African desert.

While the exploits of the fighting soldiers have been widely publicised and documented by historians and by ex-servicemen themselves, a unique group within the Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force (2NZEF) has been somewhat overlooked. Among the numerous units that found themselves fighting in this campaign there was one which epitomised the meaning of adaptability and enterprise — the New Zealand Railway Group, an ad hoc 'battalion' hastily formed following the outbreak of war between Britain, her Allies and Nazi Germany, in August 1939. Even before the call went out for men to join the ranks of fighting units, the British Government requested experienced railway tradesmen to enlist immediately to bolster their own railway companies who were suddenly thrust into prominence by events in France.

As the British Expeditionary Force began to establish its defensive positions near the French–German border during what was colloquially known as 'The Phoney War', railway transportation became the primary and strategically important means of ferrying equipment from the French ports to the 'front line'. Little-used airfields suddenly provided the RAF and the French Airforce with forward bases from which

to maintain air defence forces at combat readiness. Spur lines from main arterial railway lines provided these bases with direct links to the supply dumps located in the rear echelons. However, the British Royal Engineers' composite railway companies could not meet the demands placed upon their services to build so many spur lines, so they requested assistance from within the Commonwealth for experienced railway tradesmen.

Recognising the vital necessity for maintaining efficient domestic railways, the British Government listed many train-running duties as 'reserved'. Engine drivers and firemen were released to volunteer for military service, but with reluctance. So, on 19 November 1939, the then Secretary for Dominion Affairs, Anthony Eden, asked through the New Zealand Governor General, whether the New Zealand Government could raise a company made up exclusively of Railway Department and Public Works tradesmen. These volunteers were to be trained and dispatched forthwith to assist the British railway companies in France.

New Zealand's Labour Prime Minister, Michael Savage, having pledged to 'stand where Britain stands' was unequivocally proving this country's loyalty to Britain, a stance adhered to by his successor, Peter Fraser. As a result, the request was agreed to immediately and the Minister for Railways, Daniel Sullivan, posted recruitment notices in railway depots throughout the country. Bob Semple, the Minister of Works, made a radio appeal. The call was resoundingly answered by enthusiastic railwaymen who went on to form the Railway Group that was to become an important strategic asset to the Allies' interests in North Africa and the Middle East Campaigns.

Chapter 1

THE CALL FOR VOLUNTEERS

The specialist Railway Group was formed at the behest of the British Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, Anthony Eden, on 19 November 1939 following New Zealand's offer of assistance to Britain after the declaration of war against Nazi Germany on 3 September 1939. As there had not been the slightest hint that a specialist railway group might be required, there was something startling about the suddenness of the call, heightened by the fact that the appeal was couched in language indicative of critical military exigencies.

Britain requested the New Zealand Government to form the following railway companies: one Headquarters Maintenance and Construction Group, one Railway Survey company and four Railway Construction Companies, all of which were to be attached to the Royal Engineers Corps of the British Army. The New Zealand Government responded positively, but only promised one railway construction company, and not four, as asked. Eventually, however, New Zealand provided seven railway companies for military service. The first three were the 9th Railway Survey Company, commanded by Major Packwood, with six officers and 66 other ranks; the 10th Railway Construction and Maintenance Company, commanded by Major T.C.V. Rabone, with five officers and 273 other ranks, and the Headquarters, Railway Construction and Maintenance Group, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel J.E. Anderson with two officers and 22 other ranks. The 10th Railway Group was given its basic training at Burnham Camp near Christchurch and sailed from Lyttelton for Europe on 2 May 1940 on the *Andes* with the Second Echelon.

These men duly arrived in Gourock, Scotland on 16 June 1940, before continuing on to Longmoor, the estate of Lord Woolmer, in

Hampshire, southern England, for further training. Initially, the 10th Railway Group seemed destined for service in France which Germany invaded on 10 May while the New Zealanders were still at sea. A detachment only was sent but was withdrawn almost immediately and thereafter the Railway Group's future became uncertain until Mussolini, the Italian dictator, decided to join the 'winning team' and declared war on Britain and her Allies on June 10. Italy had a massive army in Libya in 1940, numbering some 215,000 troops — many 'battle hardened', having fought and beaten the stubborn but poorly equipped Ethiopians. Opposing them was approximately 36,000 British and Allied troops stationed throughout Egypt. Under threat was the British presence in Egypt and access to resources in the region (primarily oil) and control of the key Suez Canal. Realising the importance of maintaining a strategic transport system operating in North Africa the 10th Railway Group was sent to Egypt.

Again, the British Government requested that New Zealand form two Railway Operating Companies and a Headquarters Railway Operating Group along with another Construction and Maintenance Company.

On 14 June 1940, the Minister of Railways, Daniel Sullivan, issued a nationwide appeal to railway depots calling for further volunteers to join their colleagues in the companies formed a few months previously. The request was for railwaymen who were actually involved in train operations: locomotive crews, guards, signalmen and so on. An excerpt from Sullivan's telegram underlines the urgency of the call:

> I now make a further appeal to all railwaymen for the formation of two Railway Operating Companies for service overseas to be manned entirely by officers and men of the Railway Service.
>
> There is no need for me to enlarge upon the urgency of this appeal. I do, however, stress the fact that we want the men at once, and I know that railwaymen will respond to the call.

The importance of the formation of operating companies was demonstrated again in a footnote to the appeal, where it was stated that those selected for inclusion in the special force would be called upon to enter

camp at an early date and dispatched overseas, following a short basic training.

As a consequence of this appeal, two operating companies were formed: generally men from the South Island formed the 17th Railway Operating Company, and their North Island counterparts formed the 16th Railway Operating Company. To direct operations of these two companies, a small Group Headquarters Company was also created. Commanding the 16th was Major F. Aickin, with Major G.T. Poole in command of the 17th Lieutenant Colonel A. H. Sage commanded the Headquarters Company.

Each Railway Operating Company (ROC) comprised of six officers and 355 other ranks, with the Headquarters Company comprising three officers and 24 other ranks. In addition a further Construction and Maintenance Company, mainly from the Public Works Department, was formed. This was the 13th Railway Construction Company (RCC) commanded by Major R. Trevor Smith with 6 officers and 280 other ranks.

The Railway Group's total complement that served overseas was 40 officers and 1368 other ranks — 1408 men in all.

For the purpose of simplification, the generic term 'Railway Group' will incorporate the activities of all the individual railway companies serving in the North African and Middle East campaigns.

Within ten days of the call for volunteers, some 500 men were in Burnham Camp near Christchurch, and Hopu Hopu Camp near Ngaruawahia in the foggy Waikato, while hundreds more from further afield were on their way. Although only approximately 800 men were required, 1400 responded immediately to the appeal.

It was specified that volunteers were to be aged between 21 and 40 but the upper limit was not strictly adhered to and a number of men up to 45 were accepted. As skill in railway operating work is dependent so much on experience, it was not surprising that an unusually substantial proportion (by military standards) of the troops were over 30 years of age. Many of the volunteers were married and had grown-up families. In fact, some of then had sons serving in the Armed Forces. However, in the interests of the war effort, the authorities did not restrict older volunteers from joining the new companies. Shortly after

entry into camp, an unofficial inquiry into the ages of the men in one company was instituted. The strength of one company selected for the inquiry being 377 all ranks, it was discovered that 45 men were over 40 years of age, 57 between 35 and 40, while of the balance, 275, many were in the late twenties or early thirties.

Officers with previous military experience were asked to enlist and their average age was fairly high. At least one of them had memories of the 1915 Gallipoli Campaign, and of the original ten officers, eight wore the ribbons of the First World War. In the ranks, too, when all danger of being returned to civilian duty on account of being over the age limit had passed, medal ribbons appeared on many jackets. Married men with families were faced with a major dilemma involving a tug-of-war between their responsibilities at home and their duty to the Empire. Theirs was a difficult decision to make, especially so as only a few days were allowed in which to make up their minds. In most cases, once men had volunteered, they found themselves in camp five days later.

Following the call to volunteer for the Railway Group, the question of pay scales was brought up by the enlisting men. Although eager to offer their services to the war effort, the railwaymen, and the unions who represented them, were anxious to have their areas of expertise recognised, and retain something akin to their civilian pay rates. Although the authorities agreed to this, they did not comply. Once in training at Hopu Hopu Camp, the government reneged on the deal, claiming that additional imbursement was not economically viable. It appears that the Railways Department had made promises that it could not, or never had, any intention of honouring. Naturally enough, there was an outburst of complaints when it was realised that locomotive running staff were not to receive the additional payment, and the unions became involved. The General Manager of the Railways Department, E. Casey, wrote to the Railways Minister on behalf of the affected railwaymen, complaining that his former employees had been recruited under false pretences. Despite the inherent dangers of foreign military service, the pay was not commensurate with the risks involved.

In following up the issue, EFCA (Engine drivers, Firemen and Cleaners Association) examined the recruitment offers made by Sullivan

following the request to form the Railway Operating Companies. It was confirmed that union officials had approached Sullivan to inquire about housing and pay issues, which, he assured, would be protected. Having had their queries answered by Sullivan, the union sent the following information to the various locomotive depots throughout New Zealand:

> Urgent appeal for Engine drivers and Firemen. Interviewed Minister today re homes. No termination of tenancy without agreement between Management and Association. Military rates of pay equivalent to two pounds nineteen shillings and six pence weekly for single engine drivers. Married engine drivers one pound one shilling for wife plus ten shillings and six pence each child. Firemen one shilling per day less than single engine driver plus above family allowance. Definitely loco running duties overseas with Special Unit. Government specially emphasises urgency for immediate voluntary response from locomotive men. Acting engine drivers treated as engine drivers. Post conspicuously.
> Signed Stephenson.

The other questions most frequently raised by the volunteering railwaymen, revolved around the continued tenancy of Railway Department dwellings, as many of the railwaymen were married men with children. Considering that railways are vital during wartime, engine drivers would have had a legitimate case for being exempted from military service and thereby retaining civilian pay rates and housing. Despite the assurances given by Sullivan regarding occupancy of railway houses by spouses of men on overseas duty, it became apparent by September 1940 that this tenancy agreement was also under threat. While men were employed with the Railways Department, they were entitled to occupy Railway Department houses at low rents. However, they were no longer technically employed by the Railways Department once they joined the army, and therefore relinquished their entitlement to railway accommodation, despite what had been promised. By September 1940, it was clear that housing was becoming a major problem, with the following edict being issued as a warning to any railway employees intending to join the military services:

> Owing to the acute shortage of housing accommodation and the difficulty being experienced in replacing married employees with single employees it will not be practicable in future to allow the dependants of employees who join the military forces to remain in occupation of departmental dwellings, and, in this connection, married employees, who hold the tenancies of departmental dwellings and who desire to join the military forces, will require to make definite arrangements for their families to vacate such dwellings before being released for military duty.

The railways had a system to operate and replacing those men who joined the forces was of paramount importance. Often only one house was provided for the use of railway personnel in remote areas and alternative accommodation was simply not available, while single-man huts were deemed unsuitable as they lacked both ablution and cooking facilities. Therefore, while the actions of the Railways Department appeared harsh, they were driven by the realities of a wartime situation. It is puzzling that such complications were not anticipated when the initial call went out for railwaymen to serve overseas. Despite the issues over pay and accommodation, the railwaymen were still keen to serve abroad and the debates never diminished their sense of duty.

For many men, the introduction to service life was a dramatic change from their civilian occupations. Life in the army during basic training was usually a dismal affair but it still came as a surprise when the railwaymen were issued empty pailliasses and directed to an LA-class railway wagon full of straw. The men were then ordered to stuff their 'mattresses' with the straw as this was to be their bed while at Hopu Hopu Camp. Camp 'inspections' (a term soldiers come to loathe) entailed a group of officers inspecting the assembled men, their rifles, uniform and personal effects. During one inspection, an officer was critically checking a newly recruited railwayman's rifle when a spider chose to make an appearance from out of the rifle barrel! Such a 'breach' of discipline would normally result in the man being confined to barracks, another term for losing privileges.

While most of the men were used to a degree of company discipline, the sudden appearance of noisy Non-Commissioned Officers

(NCOs) bellowing at them must have been a rude if not unexpected shock! Many of the camp staff were veterans of the 1914–18 war, and knew that the railwaymens' survival depended on their learning essential fighting skills — well-trained soldiers had a lower battlefield casualty rate. Being volunteers, some of the men were not particularly receptive to such regimes and one railwayman was soon summoned to the camp's Orderly Room for contemptuous behaviour. Major Poole was giving a stern lecture to men on parade, about what they would be doing and what they were not to do when a wag retorted, 'that'll be the day'. The furious officer, indignant at having being publicly mocked, demanded that the culprit step forward. Percy Isitt boldly stepped out of formation and thus had the dubious honour of being the first to endure the wrath of the Orderly Officer, who was charged with maintaining discipline in the ranks. Percy Isitt later gave his life for his country at Fort Capuzzo in 1942.

If the men who trained at Hopu Hopu forget all else of their time spent there, one aspect indelibly printed into their memories was the morning fog — fog so thick that the Camp Commandant could not see the flanks of the daily inspection parade. This had its advantages for the flanking units, the 13th Construction and the 17th Operating Companies, but the 16th, which was directly under the Commandant's keen eye, did not regard it as a blessing for they could still be seen despite the murk! However, the fog caused the men a great deal of misery too, as orders stated that for ventilation purposes, tents and huts had to have windows and flaps open at night. The dense fog resulted in bedding becoming damp and cold, and many men contracting colds and 'flu as a consequence. It was not unusual for several dozen men to be in hospital at any one time recovering from illnesses brought about by this ridiculous directive.

The day always opened with this review, the Commandant, stick under arm, roaring out the commands ''SHUN', 'SLOPE', 'PRE-SENT', etcetera. These war-winning movements having been satisfactorily performed, he invariably added 'PADRE', after which the Padre, who had been a fighting soldier in the Canadian Army in the First World War, offered the daily prayer. In keeping with military tradition of the time, a marching song was composed, entitled 'Railway Battalion', but of

course, it had only unit appeal and was not widely known, unlike the current favourites such as 'Roll out the Barrel' and 'Maori Battalion'.

The railwaymen were issued standard military equipment and that peculiar item known to all those in the armed forces — a service number. This number had to be memorised immediately and repeated on demand, along with name and rank, from an officer or NCO. Just another aspect of military life indoctrination. Soon the men were carrying their standard issue Lee Enfield .303 rifles everywhere, exhorted to treat them as their wives, mistresses and girlfriends — for 'a weapon is a soldier's best friend'. From then on, the days prior to departure comprised of weapons' training: dismantling, cleaning and reassembling rifles, along with rifle-range practice. Interspersed with this activity was field-craft — teaching the men basic survival skills in the field — although at this stage, the men were still of the opinion that their destination was to be France or England, not the harsh desert as transpired. The men also undertook the obligatory route marches and camp guard duty. Like all conscientious armies, the military authorities ensured that men who were destined to serve abroad and possibly die, received tropical inoculations, dental treatment and x-rays. Members of the legal profession kindly came out to the camps and drew up wills for the railwaymen, not that any of them really imagined being killed overseas; such was the feeling of immortality of these men!

While their daylight hours were given up to the 'bull-ring' (army slang for the parade ground) the company officers and orderly room staff spent most of their nights until well into the morning hours working out details connected with the internal organisation of the companies. Recollections of those nights are of the intense cold and of the coughing that went on the whole time in every part of the camp. Hundreds of the troops had severe colds, yet very few were absent from parade in the mornings. Embarkation without notice was always imminent, and no one wished to be left behind.

Although the men knew that embarkation could occur at any stage, they took their chances with the military police and camp guards and defied the ban on unauthorised leave from camp. As Hopu Hopu was also used for the training of young Territorials, it was not permitted to have a 'wet' canteen. This meant that the troops had to go a long way

for their grog; it also meant that when they went overseas there would be no canteen profits for distribution and therefore, unlike units from other camps, they would have no company funds.

Sundays were visiting days, with families of the railwaymen coming from far and near to see their sons, husbands and in some cases, fathers. Due to the proximity of Hopu Hopu Camp to the North Island Main Trunk railway line, the railwaymen knew the timings of the express trains and took advantage of them. As the passenger trains passed the camp, the engine drivers would slow their trains to a pace where 'thirsty' soldier-railwaymen could jump aboard and hitch a ride to the nearest town that possessed a pub and there refresh themselves from the rigours of military life. Those men who were not permitted to leave the camp confines displayed gymnastic ability in getting over the hedge to avoid the pass-collecting sentries. Some were not so agile as others, and a tell-tale tear in a soldier's trouser leg sometimes offered mute evidence of the fact.

Many of the officers who suddenly found themselves in charge of men they were expected to command as a military railway unit had no previous army training. This required them to hurriedly learn military doctrine and organisation with minimal support from Regular Army personnel who were already occupied in training volunteers for combat units. As New Zealand had never sent specific railway units to previous wars, planning had to be done from scratch, or from what existing training manuals were available. Britain had supplied a limited number of training manuals but as they were in short supply the women from the Railway's Department typing pool steadfastly copied extracts from borrowed manuals, and these were distributed to the new recruits to learn what they could about things military.

There was no information regarding the organisation of Railway Companies other than the number of each type of craftsman, skilled operatives and other personnel required. Working things out for themselves it was decided that there should be four sections in a company. One section was assigned the orderly room staff, motor transport men, train controllers, operating clerks, batmen-drivers, and pay staff; to the second section was posted outdoor traffic men such as shunters, brakesmen, blockmen (stationmasters) and pointsmen. The third sec-

tion was composed entirely of engine drivers, firemen and men for engine-depot duties. The fourth section was the workshop section, which contained tradesmen and men of allied occupations. These 'sub-divisions' turned out to be entirely satisfactory in the field, and although they discovered later that English companies were organised differently, the New Zealand Railway Group retained their own ' set-up' throughout the campaign.

Men who showed leadership qualities were singled out and given supplementary training with the intention of promoting them to NCO rank. The officers were also undergoing intensive training on what being an officer entailed. Considering the fact that being part of a specialised military railway unit was unique to New Zealand's war contribution, all the men had to adapt to previously unknown service doctrine and it was no small feat that this was done so quickly. Service manuals were scarce and did not offer any advice on how to conduct military railway operations. Innumerable hours were spent by officers and NCOs alike working out the finer details that would shape the Railway Group into a viable and effective force.

It was generally understood at the time that the Railway Group would be in camp only long enough to be equipped with military issue before being dispatched to France via Canada. Had this been the case, the troops would have undergone basic training on board the transport vessel, which most of the troops suspected was the vessel *Awatea*. Fortunately for the railwaymen this did not eventuate and training was conducted on terra firma. However, such was the haste to get the Railway Group to France, their equipment was already being sent directly to France (prior to Hitler's invasion in May 1940). Six months later, New Zealand railwaymen serving alongside English railway troops were told that many cases of equipment marked 16th and 17th ROC (Railway Operating Company) were being landed at French ports. The English were totally baffled about these 'ROCs' and even though they deduced it must be a military unit they had no idea where they were coming from. Eventually all mention of the ROCs were preceded with the words 'New Zealand' to avoid further confusion.

While the German Wehrmacht were pushing the Allies out of France rumours began to circulate among the men at Hopu Hopu that the

Railway Group might be disbanded entirely, with the volunteers being seconded to the more orthodox engineer corps and fighting battalions. However, these rumours remained just that — rumours. Senior railway officers knew from official reports something of the strain under which the British railways were operating and, therefore, realised that they would have difficulty in supplying railway troops for the Middle East and other theatres of military activity. The Italians at that time were active in North Africa, and this fact made Egypt a very likely destination. Considering the training that they were being put through, the officers never contemplated the disbandment of the Group despite the rumours. Soon the men who comprised the Railway Group were given final leave at which time they said their farewells to families and loved ones. Now the reality of what war service meant was beginning to sink in.

Then came the day the railway volunteers who had been training at Hopu Hopu had long anticipated — the farewell march of the Third Echelon in Auckland on 17 August 1940. Similar parades were also conducted in Christchurch for those railway soldiers trained at Burnham Camp in the South Island. Reveille and breakfast was at a very early hour, then, the necessary 'spit and polish' having been applied, they were ready to entrain for Auckland and the parade. In addition to the railway companies from Hopu Hopu, there were infantry, artillery and other Third Echelon troops from Papakura in the parade. But the principal cause of the day's excitement was not the march itself, it was the fact that an early overseas departure was now imminent.

Finally on 26 August 1940, after two months of preparation, the Railway Group bade farewell and sincerely thanked the respective Camp Commandants and their staff for their efforts in turning the railway volunteers into an efficient military unit. The departure from camp was supposedly 'hush-hush' but the attendance of huge crowds at every station en-route to Wellington throughout the night, and in Wellington itself the following morning, might be attributed to telegraphic transmission; more likely it was a result of the notorious 'bush telegraph'.

During that same morning several trainloads of troops from Papakura, Hopu Hopu, and Trentham arrived at the Wellington wharf.

By noon the whole North Island contribution to the Third Echelon was aboard the two conscripted troopships — the *Empress of Japan* and the *Mauritania*. Immediately after embarkation, the ships pulled out into the stream and lay at anchor until the following morning.

Chapter 2

VOYAGE TO EGYPT

The troopships carrying the North Island railwaymen moved quietly out of Wellington Harbour before breakfast on 28 August 1940. The city, not yet astir, was barely visible through misty rain. Somewhere beyond the Wellington Heads the *Mauritania* and *Empress of Japan* (later changed to the *Empress of Scotland*) were joined by the *Orcades* carrying troops from camps in the South Island.

After being at sea just on an hour, the ships were joined by HMNZS *Achilles* — the celebrated warship of Battle of River Plate fame, where she saw action against the German Navy's (*Kriegsmarine*) pocket-battleship *Graf Spee*. As the convoy sailed out of Cook Strait and into the Tasman Sea, the men on board got their last glimpse of New Zealand; for most of them it would be another three-and-a-half years before they saw their homeland again. For several, it was their last.

Having several thousand fit young men confined on board a troopship was a captain's nightmare. How to accommodate them? How to feed them, and how to entertain them? Deck games such tennis and quoits were soon arranged with the men organising themselves into teams; crown-and-anchor and two-up schools soon appeared. One former railwayman, Pat Houlihan, related how he was told by First World War veterans who joined up for another shot at the Germans, that things would be different this time round, and that servicemen would be transported in ships that had enough cabins for all. Unfortunately their predictions proved to be unreliable, as the men of the Railway Group discovered when they boarded. Each available cabin was allocated two men each, but eventually another two made the cabin floor their beds. Some of the less fortunate men found their accommodation in the hold of the ship to be extremely rudimentary,

where they were packed in like sardines. This was particularly unpleasant for those who suffered from seasickness.

The lack of organisation was appalling at the start with meals being served at irregular intervals. One former officer remembered vividly the first few days at sea with fights and brawls the norm at meal times. Some seventy other ranks from one company volunteered for mess duties to assist the Mess Officer deal with the complaints and within a few days things began to improve. It came as no surprise to experienced officers that 'old soldiers' with their particular cronies were amongst those who cheerfully accepted duty in the mess saloon. No doubt the prospects of better food and the certainty of freedom from irksome drill and guard duties provided an adequate incentive.

Sleeping on board came as a rude shock to most of the railwaymen. Getting used to sleeping in hammocks required practice and severe weather on the first night at sea made conditions in the sleeping decks unpleasant in the extreme. There were no receptacles for the use of the victims of 'mal-de-mare', sufferers had to rely on their shipmates or look after themselves. And despite being considered rough and callous creatures by nature, the men endeavoured to comfort and take care of their stricken comrades. Only a few nurses (from the 2nd General Hospital) were present on the ships, so there was little room for machismo. Able-bodied men displayed genuine compassion and kindness for those less fortunate, treating all kinds of shipboard symptoms. Moreover, the soldiers had the skills to improvise, a national characteristic developed to a high degree from working in remote areas of New Zealand where medical attention was not always readily available. No matter what the emergency might be, there were always those who could resolve problems as they arose.

Fortunately, the *Empress* had not been entirely denuded of her peacetime trappings; in some cabins there still remained many brass bowls of excellent Chinese craftsmanship. The men were not interested in these as *objets d'art* — large jam tins would have suited their purpose equally well — but during the absence or indisposition of the cabins' occupants, they borrowed the bowls. By such means was an unbelievably distressing situation overcome, and a few days later, after the troops had gained their sea-legs, the commandeered property was restored to

their rightful place where they resumed their ornamental function.

Being a military ship, orders were posted to remind those men wearing dentures to remove them prior to being seasick. The orders read that 'a charge of £3 per denture will be made for replacing any lost through neglect of this order'. In polite reply to this Standing Order it was stated that to ensure no losses would result provision of adequate 'receptacles' and more toilets be provided on all troopships.

Two days into their voyage the men were inoculated once again as the route would go via Bombay, India. (Malaria and typhus were the primary killer diseases in the tropics.) During this medical procedure, blood was also taken for future use.

As there was no spare space for them in the sleeping decks, rifles were stored away, greased, in the armoury. Fortunately the men did not get to 'play' with them much on the voyage because it took several hours to draw them from, and replace them in, their inaccessible compartment in the bowels of the ship. Military training on board took the form of lectures, though an anti-aircraft guard of some 60 or so riflemen was on duty daily and put through its paces. A submarine guard also was mounted each day. Emphasis was placed on bodily fitness and thus physical 'jerks' and route marching clockwise round the promenade deck occupied most of the time. Boots were worn during the marching to keep the feet from becoming soft. On board was a drummer who beat out the time as the troops passed along one side of the deck, after which he would dash through the lounge vestibule to perform the same office as they marched down on the other side. The drummer was devoted to his music and once, when he lent his drum to the jazz band, he became so temperamental that the 'swing addicts' hardly dared ask for it again. The drummer did not return, and now lies with other comrades in the military cemetery at Mersa Matruh.

Also travelling onboard with the Third Echelon was a broadcasting unit. It was really a recording unit, its proper function being to make permanent records of the activities of the 2NZEF overseas — 'in action, in inaction and in training'. Many of the talks and personal messages in the series of broadcasts entitled *With the Boys Overseas* heard in New Zealand during the war were made by the broadcasting men of the Third Echelon. They had a caravan-like vehicle containing all the

necessary paraphernalia, and this was planted in the best spot on deck, near the Ship's Orderly Room. As the Broadcasting Unit used the caravan for sleeping quarters, its occupants were greatly envied while the ship was in the tropics. The Kiwis called it the 'pie-cart' as it did bear a strong resemblance to a 'café de kerb'. They had a loud-speaker system attached but only one march record available and soon every note in that tune was known by heart by every soldier who pounded the decks in his daily march. It was a unit of less than a handful but, as events proved, it justified it existence.

The escorting warships on the voyage included some of the celebrities of the war. Accompanied from New Zealand by the *Achilles*, the men felt quite secure. Later on, the convoy would be escorted by the British warship HMS *Ajax*, another of the ships which had taken part in the River Plate action. When dawn broke on the day after the Australian warship HMAS *Canberra* joined the convoy, it was noticed that the number of transports had increased by one. The champion of old troopers, the four-funnelled 'smoke-belcher' *Aquitania*, crammed with Australian 'diggers', had joined the throng.

For many men, the voyage was a totally fascinating experience, particularly as they saw whales and dolphins close to their ships. After eight days sailing, the convoy reached the Western Australian port of Fremantle. The weary railwaymen were given leave to visit nearby Perth but on the train journey into the city some were 'enticed' by the charms of prostitutes who were adept at advertising their considerable wares. For some, the temptation was too great and they jumped from the train to acquaint themselves with their Australian hosts.

Most headed for that quintessential Australian institution — the pub. Intentions to explore the city were soon abandoned as they realised that their next serious drinking session could be a long way in the future. However, the Australians arranged receptions, suppers and dances for their ANZAC cousins, a gesture deeply appreciated by the Kiwis. This brief interlude was soon interrupted, and once more the men boarded their floating home.

It was with a certain degree of alarm that after putting to sea, the New Zealanders learned they had acquired an additional soldier in the form of an Australian home-guardsman who had joined the Kiwis in

their revelry. When the Kiwis reported back to the ship, their Australian companion followed them up the gangplank. As the ship's captain was anxious to set sail positive identification was not carried out and a burly sergeant bundled the intoxicated Australian aboard. The man made a statement to the effect that his wife would not be amused by his departure. This was greeted by a terse comment from the Kiwi officers — not aware of their blunder — that it was a bit late in the day for worrying about what his wife would think. He had after all volunteered for service. Thrown into the ship's brig to sober up overnight, the press-ganged digger could not inform the officers of their mistake until the next day — too late to return him to Fremantle. No doubt he had some major explaining to his wife upon his eventual return. However, this was not the only incident that would test the patience of the officers. While on leave in Perth, the New Zealanders met up with their Australian counterparts sailing on the SS *Aquatania* and decided to cause a bit of mischief. A number of Australians and New Zealanders swapped uniforms, names and unit numbers and returned to the others' ship. There were 'diggers' dressed in New Zealand uniforms playing two-up on board the *Empress of Japan*, and Kiwis doing the same on the *Aquatania*. It created a real headache for the officers but was eventually sorted out when the ships berthed in Bombay. What happened to the perpetrators is not recorded!

As the convoy neared the equator, the heat began to make itself felt. Soon the men were crowding into the swimming baths on board the ships, but not all could enjoy this temporary respite as the pools were unable to accommodate everyone. The ships' captains' realised the potential danger of enemy submarines and surface ships, so enforced strict blackout regulations. This increased the discomfort of the seagoing railwaymen immensely, but they understood the reasons and endured this restriction with cheerfulness. Any pent-up frustrations were alleviated by boxing matches arranged for entertainment, and for protagonists to square up against each other to settle their differences. On one of the troopships, two reputable fighters gave their shipmates a match that they would long remember. 'Ginger' Bourne from the 17th Railway Operating Company fought H.T. Hepburn. They were both accomplished light-heavyweight boxers who had met in 1934 in

a New Zealand title fight, Bourne winning the contest to become the New Zealand champion.

Musical concert programmes were also encouraged and arranged. Aboard the *Empress of Japan* one Norman Leaf, a railwayman from Auckland, sang duets with Tony Rex. Norm was embarrassed, for having finished singing a rollicking ditty called 'Nursie, come over and hold my hand', he received numerous cat-calls from the audience. Glancing down he noticed several rows of nurses destined for hospital war service. Before being allowed off stage, the ships OC Colonel Shuttleworth announced to all that it was Norm Leaf's 21st birthday. He later received an envelope containing 'beer money' from the orchestra but had a restless night thanks to his comrades tipping him out of his hammock every time he attempted to climb in. The leader of the orchestra was T.J. Kirk-Burnnand, who was to later to command the lauded 'Kiwi Concert Party'.

Despite the army's intolerance to liquor being consumed, men smuggled various beverages aboard, so 'cabin parties' were a feature of ship life. Half a million bottles of Red Band beer was among the cargo loaded at Wellington, but at the rate it was being consumed, rationing was soon established to conserve it for the entire voyage. Fresh water was also rationed, as supplies of this most vital commodity could not be guaranteed once the ship departed from Australia. Two days after departing Fremantle, the *Achilles* increased speed until she reached the front of the convoy, cut her engines and drifted as the remaining ships steamed past in a salute of farewell. Those on board the troopships were deeply moved, as the assembled ships' crews — dressed in their summer white uniforms — sang 'Now is the hour'. Many men unashamedly had tears streaming down their faces as they watched this last link with New Zealand bidding them farewell. It was a moment etched indelibly in the troops' memory.

The next port of call on their voyage was the exotic city of Bombay. As in the First World War, young New Zealand men found themselves both bedazzled and disgusted by this enchanting city. Before the ships had even docked, Indians were alongside in all manner of craft to ply the wide-eyed Kiwis with fruit and wares, and to demonstrate — for a rupee — their athletic prowess at somersaulting and tumbling tricks.

Once leave was granted, the men set about exploring this fascinating city, but not before warnings by more worldly peers about the Indians' penchant for exploiting new arrivals. They first negotiated with taxi drivers to take them on tours and it soon dawned on them that road rules and traffic police were merely abstract items and not to be taken seriously.

Having arrived from a sleepy New Zealand, the men were intrigued by the various sights that greeted them on peering into Bombay's streets. Some were conned by a snake charmer who would let them witness a fight to the death between a snake and a mongoose. However, the two creatures were almost comatose, drugged either by smoke or a mild narcotic, and the hapless Kiwis were told that no fight would be occurring that day. Their money was not refunded.

Further into the tour, the railwaymen saw the macabre 'Towers of Silence' where the Indian Zoroastrian followers known as Parsees deposit the corpses of their dead, to be devoured by the numerous vultures that inhabit the area. And then on to the infamous Grant Road where they witnessed the spectacle of young girls exhibiting themselves in cages from where they enticed men into parting with money in return for sexual favours. Questioning a local policeman, the Kiwis were informed that the women plied their trade from the confines of the cages in order to keep competition under control. According to the affable officer, the girls were likely to attack and kill others who might attract custom from their own business — hence the cage idea. The men were warned not to succumb to the pleasures offered, as the adjoining rooms and cages were filthy and ridden with disease. Contracting a sexually transmitted disease was a punishable offence under military regulations. Another racket the troops had to be made aware of was 'baby purchasing' — native women offering to sell infant children for a rupee (approximately one shilling). It appears to have been a kind of blackmail trick in which, after the child is 'purchased', the police are called in. 'Attempting to kidnap' is then alleged and the matter satisfactorily settled for suitable damages payable on the spot!

During their tour, the taxi drivers took the men to areas of no interest simply to run up the fare, but the frugal Kiwis soon caught on to this con and refused to pay. Up against big robust men, the Indian cab

driver didn't try too hard to extract full payment — he knew that he'd been tumbled. The Kiwis soon became wary of cheating taxi drivers and merchants, but found it difficult to ignore the multitudes of child beggars. After giving one or two children money they were followed by a clamouring crowd of grubby and dishevelled kids *all* demanding money. The timely intervention of a baton-waving policeman was needed to disperse the beggars — much to the relief of the soldiers.

As the troopships were destined for Egypt, two UK-bound forestry companies disembarked to await a suitable connection. They hadn't been issued with tropical clothing and the railwaymen watched them march off in the stifling and clammy heat wearing their heavy battle-dress and in full marching order, and their greatcoats strapped to their packs.

Another new experience for the railwaymen was the violent and colourful tropical thunderstorms, the intensity of which they had never seen before. However, the torrential downpour that followed the pyrotechnic display was the perfect opportunity for the men to shower in fresh water. After weeks of washing in salt water, the fresh rain was a welcome change.

All too soon the ships put to sea once more. Nearing Aden, the Kiwi troops watched as a well-lit hospital ship sailed past one night. The war was beginning to come closer with every mile travelled. As the convoy approached the Red Sea the threat from the Italian Navy increased. Precautionary measures were taken, such as half lowering the lifeboats at night — a grim reminder of what this whole adventure was about. Troops were advised to sleep below decks to reduce the chance of injury if attacked by enemy ships. Their spirits remained high, however, and they still engaged in high-jinks such as pillow fights, much to the amusement of the ships' crews.

Despite the potential hazards, the convoy reached Tewfik, a port on the Suez Canal, on 29 September with the troops disembarking the following day. As in Bombay, seagoing traders and merchants did their collective best to separate the Kiwis from their money. Pulling alongside the troopships, the Egyptians eagerly tried to outbid each other to sell a variety of goods to the new arrivals. And along with the Egyptian hawkers came the notorious Egyptian flies.

There was now a real sense of urgency and purpose: the troops were quickly herded onto waiting trains to be transported to the main New Zealand camp at Maadi, close to the ancient and alluring city of Cairo. On their journey they saw the hovels that passed as homes for so many Egyptians — shanty towns built from an assortment of grubby materials — all generally very dirty and noisome. The landscape was sandy and barren, until the train approached the Nile Valley where the greenery stood out in stark contrast to the surrounding desert. After passing through Cairo, the train stopped about two kilometres short of Maadi Camp, the troops marching this last segment of their long and arduous journey. Entering camp, the new arrivals were greeted by men from the First Echelon. The 'old hands' took no time to rib the pasty-faced newcomers about their complexions and their obvious lack of experience with desert conditions.

The Prime Minister of New Zealand, Peter Fraser, sent the good wishes on behalf of the Government and people of New Zealand as well as his thankfulness at the safe arrival of the Third Echelon, expressing confidence in them all. Orders were received which contained endless screeds about 'doped' liquor, places that were in bounds and places that were out of bounds; localities that were deemed nice to visit, and those that were not — with the latter outnumbering the former in the ratio of 100:1. Lectures were given covering such topics as health, conduct, security, the war in general and the railway situation in the Western Desert.

The men were given a crash course on how to deal with the natives. Currency exchange was a lucrative business for the locals and they were all too ready to capitalise on the inexperience of the new influx. As in Bombay, the men were eager to explore the exotic delights of Cairo. As soon as leave was granted they headed 'downtown' in droves.

Just like Bombay, the Kiwis were mobbed by a tide of beggars, clinging to the Kiwis and crying 'baksheesh' (money), but the newcomers soon learnt the word 'Imshee' (go away). Many toured the ancient monuments and museums in and around the city riding the 'gharris' and buses recklessly driven by their Egyptian operators. Some even visited the zoo where they marvelled at animals not ordinarily seen in New Zealand at that time, particularly the reptiles. While there

had been an aversion to the Bombay prostitutes, the men were less hesitant now and many sought out the notorious fleshpots in Sharia el Berka, or 'the Berka' for short. By now, they realised that the war was no longer a distant event — it was very imminent — and they were keen to savour the touch of a woman before departing for the inhospitable desert.

Chapter 3

TRAINING AT MAADI CAMP

Life at Maadi consisted of further training, parade ground drill, rifle practice, grenade throwing and desert survival training. In keeping with being an Engineer Battalion, the railwaymen were trained in booby-trap instruction, demolition and Bailey bridge construction. Some of the railwaymen received something of a rude awakening when they encountered British NCOs for the first time. The new NCOs came from the Coldstream Guards and other British regiments. The Guardsmen were deemed 'tough roosters' by the men.

Despite being a military formation comprised solely of New Zealand personnel with army ranks, the Railway Group was classified as 'Non-Divisional' because the men were engaged in their civilian occupations — albeit in a war situation — and was not directly under the jurisdiction of Headquarters, Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force (2NZEF).

By arrangement between respective Headquarters, the railway companies came under the control of the Director General of Transportation, Middle East, a British establishment. This excluded 2NZEF's senior staff from having any real say in how the railway companies were utilised. While this system of 'general utilisation' did not give British authorities total carte blanche to use New Zealand troops as they saw fit, it did tend to isolate them from the main body of New Zealand troops in the Middle East. This command structure resulted in the New Zealand fighting men not always being aware of the presence of their fellow countrymen in the Railway Companies. Later troops were often surprised to find themselves being transported on Egyptian trains hauled by New Zealand-crewed locomotives, and being hailed by distinct Kiwi accents while stopped at isolated stations in the Western Desert.

It was vitally important to acclimatise the fresh troops to desert conditions, particularly in the rationing of that most precious of commodities — water. In a move to ensure New Zealand troops were well catered for, General Bernard Freyberg, commanding officer of 2NZEF, had arranged for numerous canteens, a YMCA facility, Lowry Hut, and a 'Shaftos' theatre for their entertainment and refreshment. Generally the camp was very pleasant under the circumstances.

Once the railwaymen were settled into Maadi Camp, a renewed sense of urgency asserted itself. They were required in the Western Desert to learn Egyptian State Railway (ESR) procedures with the eventual prospect of taking over from their Egyptian counterparts. Therefore the officers started in real earnest to put the finishing touches to their training and commenced the hardening-up process of making the railwaymen desert-worthy. The pace was being forced and did not cease even during the oppressing heat of the afternoon. It was with much envy that the 'new boys' observed the 'originals' of Maadi Camp taking their siesta (variously called 'spine bashing' or Maori PT in soldierly parlance). Musketry, bayonet fighting, and the more advanced training rounds filled most of their days. They were addressed and bellowed at by training officers, NCOs, lectured and inspected, until finally they were deemed fit for service in the desert environment.

Although the men were recruited for railway service, they were still required to learn how to shoot with antiquated .303 Lee Enfield rifles. One day, after a practice session at the range, a rumour began to circulate that the sergeant-major (J.J. McNearney) had been challenged to a contest by a regular army officer, a Captain Forder. The captain, whose mission it was to instil discipline into the ranks of the unruly railwaymen, was not terribly popular. And while the sergeant-major was considered a tyrant, he was at least respected for his sense of fair play and a genuine concern for his charges. So the railwaymen assigned to display the necessary targets decided to 'assist' the sergeant-major — without his knowledge — in order to win the competition and teach the stern officer a lesson in humility.

Several days later, a couple of the men on 'target duty' were apprehended for being AWOL (absent without leave) by the very same NCO. The absconding offenders were 'on the mat' in front of the sergeant-

major who was about to pass sentence on them. They shrewdly reminded the NCO that they had been his 'target boys' and that he had 'miraculously' beaten the expected winner. The sergeant-major suddenly understood the implication and confessed that he had wondered how he was able to defeat the crackshot officer! In recognition of their 'loyalty', the sergeant-major dropped the charges with the warning that he didn't want to see any of these men in front of him again.

The Maadi Sporting Club offered its outdoor amenities to the men during specified hours, but they were too busy or too tired to avail themselves of the club's hospitality.

There was spirited bidding by the Egyptians for the purchase of the cookhouse refuse and meal scraps from all British camps, and the Railway Group, in common with other New Zealand units, received regular accretions to company funds from that source. The scraps, ostensibly, were intended for animal feed, but from the careful way in which they had to be sorted, it was soon concluded that the bulk of the refuse went to the two-legged species. Slops were drained off, meat placed in one tin, bread scraps in another, vegetables separated and so on. Used tea leaves were not sold but burned, the reason given for this prohibition being that the leaves would be dried by the Egyptians and then mixed with pure tea and put on sale. It was later rumoured that some of the Kiwis in Tripoli made quite a lot of money by selling used tea leaves, which they used to dry over Primus stoves. Considering the reputation of double-dealing conducted by the Egyptians, it seems ironic they were beaten at their own game by New Zealanders!

Naturally enough, the troops saw as much as possible of Cairo during the short period they remained at Maadi prior to the opening of the New Zealand Forces Club. This club, that was to become the bastion of Kiwi hospitality in Egypt, was set up and operated by the wife of General Freyberg, Lady Barbara Freyberg. Assisting Lady Freyberg were young New Zealand women, affectionately known as 'Tuis'. However, many of the visits took the form of aimless wandering and café crawling.

Like all soldiers abroad, souvenir hunting was a high priority — a fact not lost on the wily Egyptians, who had the opportunity to practise their selling skills on ANZACs from the previous war. It was widely

accepted that the Egyptians would always win the haggling war before settling on a price that suited both parties — provided it was in the sellers' favour. However, the Egyptians met their match in a railway soldier named David Craw — nicknamed by his mates as 'Abdul' on account of his proficiency in speaking Arabic. David had the ability to learn new languages with relative ease and soon even mastered writing his name in Arabic script. He posed a problem for the locals — they had to be wary of what they said in his presence — and labour gangs even refused to speak with each other when this man, whom they called 'musquais eskari', meaning 'bad soldier' was close by. The railwaymen liked to go shopping at the Muski Bazaar with David as he and his companions would haggle with the Egyptians in English while David would listen to them discussing what price they would drop to. Then he would promptly offer them that price in Arabic to the disbelieving traders. Bargains were usually obtained!

The 'Orders in Case of Fire' at Maadi were extremely precise. They were more complicated than any subsequent operational orders, according to one officer's recollection. The men adopted a fatalistic attitude, which was the only course possible, and just hoped that they would not have to put these regulations to the test with a real fire emergency. In addition to these 'Standing Orders' there were numerous instructions regarding traffic routes and regulations in and around Maadi Camp and Cairo itself. As the new arrivals didn't know the names of the streets mentioned in these orders and as Cairo is an easy place in which to get lost the instructions were virtually meaningless.

As with all soldiers serving abroad during the war, they were constantly reminded of the need for secrecy and discretion. Upon arrival at Maadi Camp, a sergeant from the Field Security Corps addressed the railwaymen at a lecture stressing the importance of not divulging information to anyone — no matter how trivial it may seem. The NCO went on to explain that even though he was addressing them as a sergeant, that was not necessarily his rank. Taking the cloak and dagger scenario even further, he told them that next time they saw him he could be dressed in civilian clothes. And he may even be in the company of a pretty girl. If seen by the soldiers-railwaymen they were not to greet him under any circumstances. As he explained, if he was out of

uniform and acknowledged by those who were in uniform, the girl with him would immediately realise that he was a not what he appeared to be, his cover would be blown and his life could then be in jeopardy. All very sinister for men who had had no prior experience with the murky world of espionage.

As if to prove what they had been told, a couple of railwaymen were in Cairo on leave. Intent on purchasing a watch they entered a jewellery shop. The men browsed around the shop as the attractive French shop assistant scrutinised them. She quickly ascertained that they were New Zealanders by their shoulder tabs, but their suspicions were aroused when she inquired of them the whereabouts of the New Zealand 21st Battalion. She explained that her husband had been killed while fighting with this battalion, and now she wanted to meet and talk to someone who was with her husband when he died. Conscious of the importance of not divulging specific units' whereabouts, the railwaymen wisely did not enlighten her — even if they had been in possession of such information.

However, leave in Cairo was not all seriousness, as demonstrated on one occasion when two of the 'colonial' soldiers were able to gain a chuckle at the expense of a British officer. The old city was like a rabbit warren of twisting streets and arcades, known as 'souks', and it was not uncommon to unexpectedly meet other soldiers browsing through the ancient markets. The two railwaymen were walking through a narrow street when they noticed a British officer laden with parcels coming towards them, the obligatory cane tucked under his arm. The Kiwi pair promptly came to attention and delivered an impeccable salute, stifling their grins as the officer was forced to drop his parcels to return it. Such was his state of flux, he returned their salute with his left hand, a breach of military etiquette! Having had their fun, the two railwaymen carried on, pleased to have had the opportunity to put one across a British brass hat.

The sights and attractions were numerous, particularly for so many young New Zealand men, many of whom had previously lived in quiet rural locations. In 'the Berka' the colonial boys could see and experience things they had only dared whisper about back home. The 'shows' knew no bounds and often groups of railwaymen would watch in awe

as Egyptian women performed sexual acts, with each other or with animals, that hitherto had defied their imaginations. Nothing was taboo and frequently 'spectators' were enticed with prize money if they joined in some of the depraved acts. One 'madame', when an offer was made for her services, declined the potential client in rather crude terms, informing him that she had previously 'entertained his father'; no doubt in reference to the Great War soldiers who had also paid a visit to this infamous street.

One afternoon, a band of Australians became involved in an altercation with a group of British troops in the Berka district. While a certain amount of rivalry and mutual slanging existed between the New Zealanders and Australians, it was an unwritten agreement that both nationalities would stand together should any other external force attack either of the ANZAC components. Seeing that their trans-Tasman neighbours were engaged in a scrap with the 'Tommies', the Kiwis quickly waded into the fray to assist their ANZAC mates. Word of the fight soon reached the ears of the Red Caps military police, who were renowned for their severity when dealing with disorderly military personnel: no one wanted to be arrested by them. During the brawl, a piano was tossed out of a first-floor window and half of the district's brothels closed their doors. The whole area was a mess and the local medical centre resembled a battlefield. Who won the fight is not known, but no doubt the ANZACs gave a good account of themselves.

Chapter 4

INTO THE WESTERN DESERT

On 13 September 1940 Mussolini ordered the Commander-in-Chief Italian forces in Libya, Marshal Graziana, to invade Egypt with his 10th Army, commanded by General Mario Berti. The Italians made a ponderous advance 60 miles into Egypt, the heavily outnumbered British Forces making a strategic withdrawal. The advance came to a halt just east of the coastal town of Sidi Barrani where Berti awaited further supplies.

On 1 October the 10th Railway Construction Company was the first part of the railway group to be deployed when it was moved to Maaten Burbeita, not far from Baggush where the 2NZEF 4th Brigade was camped on the coast, close to Mersa Matruh. However, it was not railway construction that was to occupy the railway troops — the army required 48 fortified pillboxes and 18 machine-gun emplacements to be built as a possible defensive line against the eventuality of enemy advances into Egypt. This defensive line became known as the 'Rabone Line' (named after the CO of the 10th Railway Construction Company). It was to become a familiar problem for the railway construction companies; they were obliged to complete their tasks using incompatible equipment and varying materials, the pillboxes being no exception.

The only aggregate available was 'primary crushed' and had not been screened, a process that sifts the smaller metal from the remainder. This resulted in large chunks of crushed stone being mixed with the cement, and when poured onto the reinforcing steel, would not fit between the reinforcing mesh. The whole design had to be modified to allow the heavier grade concrete to pour through. In addition to this difficulty, reinforcing steel was in short supply, as was cement. The construction crews used whatever materials were at their disposal —

even to the extent of using old tyre wire as reinforcing. Despite all these associated problems, the army's request was fulfilled with all 48 pillboxes being completed by November 1940 — a considerable feat under the circumstances. The railway construction crews' efforts were, however, in vain. The only time British troops used the fortifications was during the retreat in 1942. However, they were ideally suited for the Germans when Montgomery began his offensive in late 1942.

The next major undertaking for the railwaymen was to survey and build the envisioned Desert Railway Extension from near the railhead at Mersa Matruh. The line between Alexandria and Mersa Matruh had been extremely useful while the front line had been the Libyan/Egyptian border, but now that the front was deep into Libyan territory it seemed logical that the railway should be further extended to serve the military's requirements. Upon reviewing the situation, Middle East Headquarters assigned New Zealand railwaymen, assisted by Indian labourers, to extend the Western Desert Railway to Belhamed, a small village several kilometres from the port town of Tobruk. Originally the railway extension was planned to reach Gadd El Ahmar, 300 miles from Similla and about 60 miles west of Tobruk, but due to the fortunes of war this objective was never reached.

The junction was to be situated at Similla, about eight miles east of Mersa Matruh. The greatest feat of engineering for this proposed extension was to find a viable route from sea-level up onto the desert escarpment, some 700 feet above sea-level. Lieutenant Jim Macky of the 9th Survey Company was assigned to survey a route, a problem that had not been solved by their British and Egyptian counterparts, even though the ESR had decided the route should begin at Similla. The line could not be more than a 1:100 gradient and curves had to be of a radius that would allow the British rolling stock to safely traverse them. The grades, in fact, had to be kept to a minimum as ESR rolling stock was not 'train braked' (where air brakes on all wagons were controlled by the engine driver from the cab of the locomotive) and trains weighing 1500 tons had to be slowed by the locomotive brakes only. If a grade was too steep, the potential of having a train run away was very real. Unlike New Zealand, where the narrow 3' 6" gauge was used, the railways in Egypt reflected the European and British convention of

Hopu Hopu Military Camp and Memorial. The 13th Railway Construction Company and the 16th and 17th Railway Operating Companies trained here in 1940.

Railwaymen at Hopu Hopu, 1940. Back row: J.H. Burke, G.G. Leggett, R.A. Swanson, F.T. Warren, C.M. Price, M.J. Chapman, T.G. Johnson. Front Row: J. West, (name unavailable) C.W. Stewart, E.G. Bishop, E.D. Roberts, J.W. Morgan, D.G. Walton, L.E. Evans.

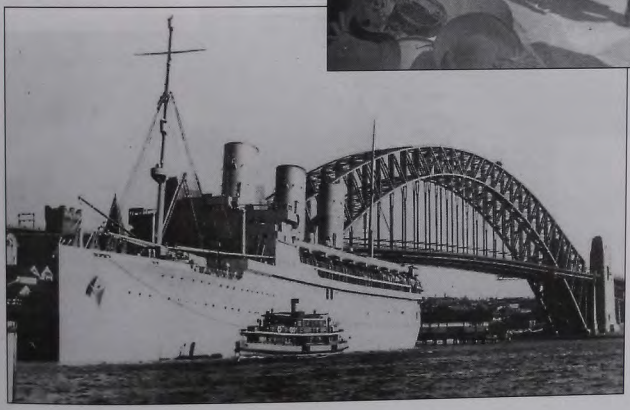
Railwaymen at Hopu Hopu, 1940. Back row: L.G. Madson, R. deBruison, (5 names unavailable), J.A. Stephenson. Middle row: N.W. Leaf, (6 names unavailable), Front row : R.A. McGregor, J.R. Bindon, E.D. McKechnie, (1 name unavailable), R. Graham, (4 names unavailable).

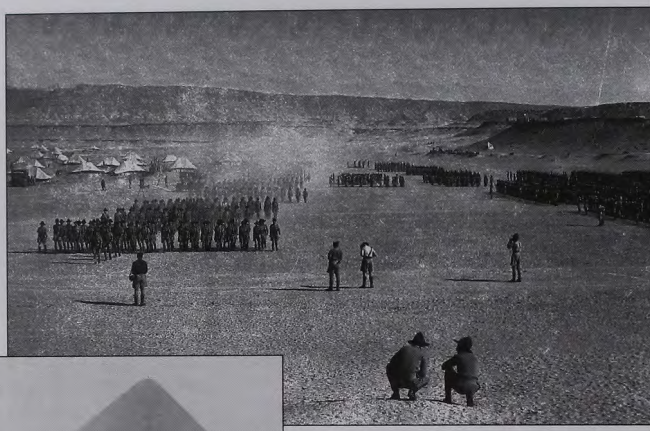
Railwaymen at Hopu Hopu, 1940. Back row: L. W. Kerr, S. Ruffles, J.H. Kilmister, H. Padlie, P.E. Haddock, J. Flannery. Middle row: P. O'Halloran, A.W. Robertson, J.G.W. Comber, J.R. Cook, J.V.Martin, C.E. Hollick. Front row: I.M. Wilson, G.E. Laming, W.G. Pearce, C.F. Waterworth, H.Gemmel, K.Emery, S.V. Frost, O.Offerson.

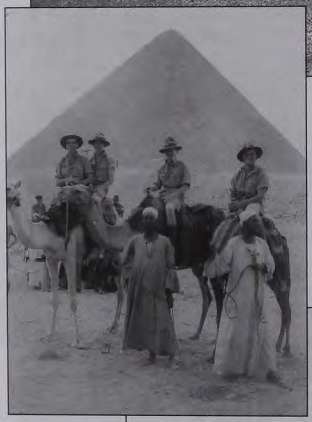
Above: *Inspection by Hon. D. Sullivan, Hopu Hopu Camp 1940.*

Right: *Final march through Auckland 1940.*

Below: Empress of Japan *in Sydney, prior to the embarkation of the 13th, 16th and 17th Railway Companies in Wellington.*







Above: *The dust bowl of Maadi Camp, Helwan, Egypt.*

Left: *I.M. Wilson, S.T. Morrison, J.C.W. Comber and P.E. Haddock at the Giza Pyramid.*

Below: *Dabaa Railway Station, mosque in the background.*

Above: *Lt. Chapman supervising the coaling of an engine at Dabaa.*

Right: *A two-up school.*

Below: *Mail delivery (patriotic parcels) in the middle of nowhere.*

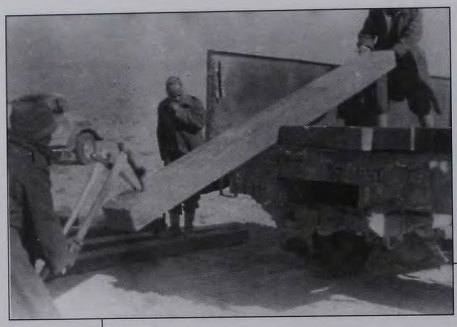
Above: *The* Chakla *brought them to Tobruk. They left, and she stayed.*

Right: *Tug boats used by the Railway Group at Tobruk.*

Tobruk accommodation with lines of Italian prisoners waiting to be shipped out.

Ship bombed at the wharf in Tobruk.

A German success at Tobruk.



Top to bottom: *Unloading sleepers for the Desert Railway.*

Laying sleepers for the track.

Unloading rails for the Desert Railway.

Indian unit laying rails.

a 4' 8½" gauge. While the narrower gauge had its limitations, it did allow for tighter curves.

Work began on the extension on 4 October 1940 at Similla, chosen for the junction as the terrain surrounding Mersa Matruh was too steep for normal rail traffic to negotiate and would have required major earthworks to build a suitable track-bed. The task of surveying the line fell to a detachment of 9th Survey Company, led by Lieutenant D.U. White, who chose the most suitable route with No. 2 Section. The 10th and 13th RCCs commenced work immediately on the initial formation employing local fellaheen (Egyptian peasants) with primitive equipment — crude picks and shovels for excavating the cuttings and woven baskets carried on the shoulder for taking the resulting spoil to the fillings. The men allotted for the task were of two separate tribes, Saidi and Bedewi, from Upper and Lower Egypt respectively. No amount of cursing or threats would induce them to work at a pace that could even come close to matching the Kiwis' expectations, and to add to the railwaymen's frustrations there existed an intense ancient enmity between the two groups: infighting was always a very real concern. The extremely slow pace of work also added to the frustrations of the railway engineers. Tension between the two tribes eventually reached crisis point, and on Christmas Eve 1940 a fight broke out and sappers were forced to separate them by driving trucks between the warring factions. From this 'action' the 10th RCC was dubbed 'The Fighting Tenth'.

The 16th Railway Operating Company (ROC) began deployment on 11 October 1940 — almost a fortnight after the bulk of the Railway Group had arrived in Egypt — when nearly 100 officers and men moved out of Maadi Camp. They were the advance party heading into the desert to prepare for the arrival of the balance of the company, and to commence the relief of the British 10th Railway Construction and Operating Company, Royal Engineers, a small company made up largely of personnel drawn from other units who had had some experience with railways in various parts of the world in peacetime. It was formed in Egypt not long before the New Zealand Railway Group arrived. As soon as the New Zealanders were in a position to take over, the British railway company was to be withdrawn for service in the Sudan.

Initially Major F. Aickin, CO of the 16th ROC, and Lieutenant

Colonel A.H. Sage, CO of Headquarters Company, went to El Dabaa in the Western Desert, 80 miles east of Mersa Matruh and about 120 miles west of Alexandria, in order to arrange the handover. After their return to Maadi the advance party, led by Captain Pearse and Lt. George Hayman, proceeded to El Dabaa. Once there, they conferred with the British 10th Company, RE. After a few days of inspection and having gained sufficient information about the desert railway, the CO returned to Maadi. Then followed a period of hectic activity. For several days officers and NCOs alike hounded the staff at the Ordnance Depot, obtaining by means of priority requisitions signed on the highest level, all those things necessary for the desert-bound railwaymen. Meanwhile the men were occupied on still more rigid training courses. Spurred on by the urgency of the situation, officers from the transportation, stores, Middle East General Headquarters (GHQ) and ordnance corps at Abassia were assisting in preparing the Railway Group to take up duties in the desert. Despite the haste imposed, the railwaymen were treated in a friendly and courteous manner by the supply units.

However, there was one very important piece of equipment that could not be initially supplied — a water cart. Despite assurances by GHQ that once in the desert the local units would look after the Group's water supplies the CO was determined to have a water 'bug' (a tank on a truck) of their own. The officers commanding the Railway Group were not entirely convinced that those making these promises had more than a fleeting acquaintance with the desert and doubted the sincerity that water would be readily supplied. Eventually a water bug was located and assigned to the Railway Group, thus assuring the CO that they would not be so dependent on others for this vital commodity. Eventually the Railway Group was in a position to be able to supply other units with water themselves. The railwaymen also availed themselves of tents from Maadi Camp. It just so happened that these tents did not belong to them, and should have been left for following troops entering the camp. By the time this inadvertent oversight was discovered the tents were weather-beaten and desert worn and in army parlance — unserviceable. Now that they had a reliable water supply and accommodation sorted out, the New Zealand Railway Group was ready to undertake the duties for which it had trained so hard.

Before the main body of the company broke camp, it took part in a ceremonial parade at which the Third Echelon was inspected by Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson, KCB, DSO. The general critically examined the men in the ranks of the company that was formed up in its customary four sections. As he was nearing the end of his inspection, General Wilson turned to his escorting officer and commented upon the excellent physique of the men, adding that it was a 'group to be proud of' and declared that they 'ought to be infantry'.

On 19 October General Freyberg inspected the troops at Maadi and was extremely impressed by their calibre and morale. As a reward he gave them additional leave so once again some of the men made their way into Cairo. Having tasted the more lurid attractions, the railwaymen now turned to the former glories of the Pharoahs, and made their way to Giza by tram to see the fabulous pyramids. The Kiwis were somewhat surprised that the public transport system took them right to the base of the historic monuments. They were somewhat perplexed and rather disappointed as photographs had always given the impression that the pyramids and sphinx stood in solitary isolation from the trappings of modern civilisation. Visions of swaying desert palms and silhouetted camel caravans were replaced by the constant attention of beggars and self-styled 'guides' who demanded baksheesh for anything — from lighting a match to yelling inside the pyramids' vaults 'to make special effects'. Like their First World War predecessors, the New Zealanders climbed to the tops of these majestic monuments to look over the distant desert, their area of operations for the next few years.

'Shafto's', the cinema at Maadi Camp, was comprised only of walls — no roof — and, despite showing out-of-date films that had been screened in New Zealand several years before, the men nevertheless went along for the entertainment after a day's wearying training. On the night of the 20th the camp cinema shut down halfway through the programme and the patrons were ordered to disperse: an 'aircraft red' signal had been received indicating that enemy raiders were coming in the direction of the camp. The railwaymen abandoned the heroine to the machinations of the villain and walked back to their sector of the camp in time to see the fireworks commence. Maadi Camp, like most

military installations, was blacked-out when threatened by air raids. A lone Italian bomber, flying very high for such a raid, came over and attempted to bomb the wireless station situated on the edge of the camp. The pilot only succeeded in bombing a native village about half a mile away from the intended target, unfortunately killing some inoffensive fellaheen and frightening a number of people who were having a quiet drink in the Maadi Club.

On the evening of 21 October, the main body of the 16th ROC, comprising of four officers and 241 other ranks, marched out of Maadi Camp to entrain at a siding a couple of miles away. It was late in the day, the temperature was beginning to drop and the railwaymen found marching in the evening quite pleasant. Prior to departure, the men showered and for once the men found the water was actually quite cool. Generally the water ranged from warm to very hot and before commencing a shower it was advisable to first run the water before standing under the spray. As the plumbing was usually exposed to the hot Egyptian sun, the water was often heated to temperatures that would have scalded anyone unfortunate enough not to take this simple precaution.

The 16th ROC was accompanied in their deployment by 13th RCC and a formation of Australians. The other railway operating company (the 17th) was left behind at this stage, much to their disappointment. It was being kept in reserve for the time being, though they too eventually followed their companions into the desert.

On account of the bombing the night before, instructions were issued that smoking was definitely forbidden and that under no circumstances were lights to be used. While the men patiently waited for the train to depart the siding, unable to read or smoke, a brilliant electric light on the back porch of a two-storey dwelling close by threw the train into bright relief. Despite this comical situation, orders were not relaxed to allow the men to light up a smoke, much to the railwaymens' disgust!

Next morning, at approximately 0230 hours, the railwaymen were approaching the ancient port city of Alexandria. As if in welcome, enemy aircraft came over and dropped a number of bombs somewhere in the vicinity of the railway line. These nocturnal raiders were again un-

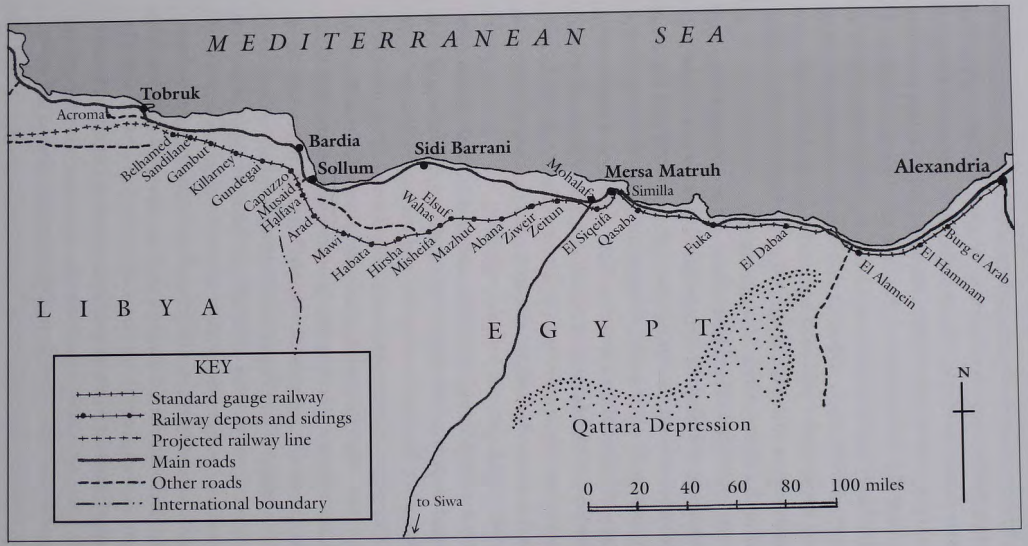
successful and the train safely reached its destination. Eventually the train carrying the two railway companies reached El Dabaa which was to serve as the headquarters for the 16th ROC for some time to come.

Although they were part of the overall Railway Group, both the 16th ROC and the 13th RCC had their equipment transported to El Dabaa by ten large trucks from Maadi Camp transport corps. The Railway Company's own trucks followed the train with more personnel. The journey to El Dabaa was 300 hundred miles and the route was soon to become very familiar for just about all New Zealand soldiers who served in the North African Campaign.

The route to the Western Desert from Maadi Camp passed the camp's wireless pylons before having to negotiate a bumpy railway crossing. The drivers had to demonstrate great care here to avoid breaking suspension springs — they were now heading towards the war zone and not just out for a training exercise. They didn't even pause at the Maadi tent where British ladies and assorted helpers dispensed tea and soft drinks. Shortly the convoy reached the residential area of Maadi, passing down a long cool avenue of flaming-red poinsettia. When the jacarandas were in bloom, the archway was blue.

The shaded avenue was all too short, and within a few minutes the convoy turned sharply to the right into the tree-lined Helwan-Cairo road with the Nile flowing on one side and cultivated fields and the railway on the other. Dhows tied to the river bank were loading and unloading cement, bricks, fertilisers and foodstuffs, while feluccas glided past, tall sails reaching high into the air searching for a breeze. Scattered among the river vessels were strings of barges being towed along by tugs of the Inland Water Transport Organisation.

Despite wanting to observe in detail the fascinating life along the Nile, the convoy was required to keep to the timetable laid down on the army's obligatory Movement Order. Preceding the convoy were troops of the NZ Provost Corps mounted on powerful motorcycles, serving in the dual capacity of guides and clearing a right-of-way. On this road were all manner of military vehicles winding their way through an endless stream of heavily-laden camels, donkeys, humans and an assortment of wheeled transport, from rickety native carts and old motor trucks to the most modern vehicles.



Map 1: Western Desert Railway and Extension

Traffic congestion, the apparent absence of road rules and the reckless speed of Egyptian drivers meant the convoy drivers had to exercise special care in order to avoid collisions. At one point, a 'gamoose' (cow) grazing on the side of the road took fright and dragged its keeper, together with the child she was nursing, into the irrigation ditch which ran parallel to the road.

Eventually the convoy reached the open road on the outskirts of Cairo. The city's tramway system commenced there and the provost troops had to display their acquired skills in Egyptian traffic management in order to pilot the convoy through the jaywalking throng of Arabs, the numerous vehicles and animals, and lead it safely into the more orderly thoroughfare of Cairo itself.

After another half-hour, the convoy turned away from the city and, with increasing speed, travelled the long straight road to Mena. It was now on the broad highway, a double set of tram tracks down the centre, which lead directly to the Pyramids. At the top of a steep rise, before going down into the flat miles of mystery beyond, the troops looked back over their shoulders — as so many others did throughout the desert war — to glimpse what might be their last look at the pyramids. The convoy then headed west, the troops eager to discover whatever lay ahead while the lorry drivers settled in for a long steady journey.

The sealed road from this point ran through a sandy waste for 100 miles or so before coming to the junction where the road diverged into the Western Desert and Alexandria. The drivers now had to pay strict attention as the grading of the road was deceptive and dangerous in patches. If a vehicle ran off into the desert while travelling at any speed, it was likely to skid and overturn. After a couple of hours of sand-glare, telegraph posts, shimmering heat and monotony, a welcome change greeted the weary men when the 'Halfway House' was reached. The Halfway House was a café built in an attractive local style with the added attraction of being the only sign of civilisation between Mena and Alexandria. It appeared out of the monotony like an oasis.

While the British held this territory in 1940 convoys used to stop to refuel. Some of the railway transport vehicles required water which was loaded after the troops had cooled themselves down with the help

of a 'wallad' (boy) in the café, who, at a clap of the wayfarer's hands, was accustomed to attending to his desires in the way of refreshments. Prices for the refreshments, of course, were high, and despite being in transit on a military mission, the men had to purchase food and drink out of their own pockets. A couple of years later, the NAAFI set up a large tented canteen near this place so the soldiers no longer needed to use up a day's spending money for a drink and a bread roll. Later, as Rommel's forces advanced towards Alexandria, the Halfway House became incorporated into the greater defensive area designed to protect Cairo. El Alamein, where the Allies eventually halted the Germans, was only 100 miles away.

Rested and refreshed, the next two hours passed in greater comfort but there was still 170 miles to El Dabaa and 60 miles before the main turn-off to Alexandria was reached. After an hour or so the scene changed again. Airfields and military camps were seen, and a level-crossing on the Western Desert Railway was passed at a point where the railway veered south into the desert before passing out of sight behind rising ground. The convoy had now reached Amriya, which would later become a huge base and very familiar to New Zealand soldiers. It is at Amriya that the Western Desert railway proper may be said to commence.

As the destination of the greater part of the convoy was El Dabaa, still about 100 miles from Amriya, it did not halt for the night but continued on. A short distance further on the road turned sharply to the right for Alexandria, the heart of the city being only eight miles away, but the convoy continued past. On the roadside was displayed a large War Department sign on which was printed the message that this was the official limits of the Western Desert. For half an hour it was difficult for the troops in the convoy to believe that this was indeed the Western Desert as the surrounding land was cultivated and lush, complete with date palms, vegetables and fruits grown for the local Alexandrian markets. However, their opinions were soon dispelled when the road to Burg el Arab was reached.

Only a few hundred yards from the road stood shimmering white sand dunes that were painful to look at. Young girls (colloquially known as 'bints') and boys (wallads) could be seen working in the narrow

fields between the road and the dunes, ploughing with an ancient implement drawn by a camel or donkey. For some reason the convoy halted temporarily and provided the troops with the opportunity to watch this timeless agricultural chore in close proximity. When the young girl paused from her labours, the young camels, which had been following in the furrows, rushed to their maternal parent, harnessed as she was to the plough, and demanded refreshment.

The Western Desert Railway ran through Burg el Arab and on to El Hammam. From there it continued on to El Dabaa. The line traversed through what were to become the major battlefields of El Alamein, Tel el Eisa, Ruweisat and Ghazal, where bitter fighting continued for ten days before the final breakthrough in 1942. The road to El Dabaa, however, continued straight past the Burg el Arab turn-off, and was never far from the coastline. The terrain through which the convoy moved was barren desert, rocky and dusty.

Soon the road became a series of bumps, so close together that the springs of the motor vehicles were likely to self-destruct if a speed greater than ten miles per hour was maintained. In fact, many notice-boards warned the careless or unwary of the consequences should they exceed the recommended speed limit. A year later, Royal Engineers assisted by the 21st New Zealand Mechanical and Equipment Company improved this portion of the road enormously, after which much higher speeds could be maintained. Over a thousand native labourers, comprising men, women and boys were engaged on the repair job. It came as no surprise that this rough part existed in an otherwise smooth highway between Alexandria and Mersa Matruh; after all, this was Egypt. Prior to the war, a contractor, who tendered for the job of constructing this stretch of road, discovered on commencement that he had priced himself below what it would actually cost to build. His demands for more money were declined by the government department responsible, and so, duly bound by the contract, was forced to construct the road in the cheapest manner possible. This was, according to Egyptian practices, typical.

The corrugated stretch of road lasted for approximately 30 miles until El Alamein but, halfway along the route, a white pole barred the way. This was a checkpost of the Egyptian Frontier Force, most of

whom were Sudanese. The frontiersmen duly examined every vehicle, as they were required to see that no unauthorised civilian passed through.

The railway line and road almost converged at El Alamein, only being separated by a mile or so. From here the road to El Dabaa improved vastly, allowing the drivers to relax after the harrowing stretch encountered earlier on. The country then began to open up on either side of the road, with endless desert to the south and the coast to the north. However, frequent dust storms made travelling on this part of the road unpleasant and hazardous, but the railwaymen travelled the 40 miles from El Alamein to El Dabaa without incident. The railwaymen had finally reached their destination and base for railway operations into the desert.

Chapter 5

EL DABAA AND MERSA MATRUH

The primary section of track on which the railway companies were employed — in conjunction with ESR staff — was initially the section of line between El Dabaa and Mersa Matruh, a distance of 86 miles. The New Zealand railwaymen were reasonably self-sufficient, being able to maintain the track, carry out shunting duties, safe signalling procedures and train operations. Before the arrival of the New Zealanders, this section of line had been operated by a small composite unit of Royal Engineers, which had since departed to the Sudan. El Dabaa was 50 miles from what was to become the Baggush Box defences, and due to the existing rail facilities was selected by the military planners as an advanced supply base from where to develop those defences and the main headquarters for railway operations.

El Dabaa was not even a village. It was simply the location of a railway sub-terminal station, which in peacetime had served as a military post and provided for the limited transport requirements of the Bedouin. Despite its diminutive size, El Dabaa possessed a mosque from where the muezzin would call the faithful to prayer five times a day from his lofty minaret. Any romantic notions of colourful Arab tribesmen living in tents were shattered: the local inhabitants existed in a shantytown of homes made from flattened petrol tins, which also housed their sheep, goats, fowls and beasts of burden. The stench was nauseating. The animals had the freedom of the vacant spaces about the hovels and their masters paid scant attention to sanitation — either animal or human. There appeared to be no reason for the Bedouin population to remain in what now constituted a military zone, but they obviously served some menial functions for the ESR staff and

were not removed by the security police. Having found their surroundings to be so noisome, the railwaymen adopted an almost fanatical approach to hygiene and promptly declared war on the fly population. Rats proliferated due to a chronic shortage of cats. The only feline observed by the new inhabitants was also spotted by some local boys and provided a tasty accompaniment with their cous cous.

The only other permanent buildings at El Dabaa were those of the military post, the railway offices and some dwellings and barracks occupied by employees of the ESR and the Telegraph Service. The railwaymens' wives did not live with them, and in consequence the staff was constantly being relieved in order to permit the employees to visit their homes. El Hammam, a village 60 miles to the east, and Mersa Matruh, were the nearest towns with a peacetime population of more than a couple of dozen people. Until late in the campaign there was only a handful of civilians in Mersa Matruh, and these worked for the army or government. El Hammam was a Bedouin trading centre.

The military depots at El Dabaa were dispersed over a wide area with some being scattered up to a mile away from the main railway station. Initially this seemed inefficient and a time-consuming exercise to move between the depots, but it proved to be beneficial once bombing began as widely dispersed targets were difficult for the aerial raiders to destroy. A few hundred yards from the station were a series of sidings, which constituted the marshalling yards. Here trains originating from El Dabaa were 'made up' (when individual wagons were coupled together prior to being hauled away by a locomotive) and load consignments sorted for attachment to through trains from Alexandria for delivery at railheads further west.

Egypt found itself placed in a difficult political situation. The Egyptian Government was not technically at war with the Axis countries, and this posed a political problem for them in aiding Britain's war effort. Despite this, Egypt was obliged to allow its railway system to be utilised by British forces. The major problem this created was train crew shortages, worsened by the unreliability and obsolescence of much of Egyptian State Railways' locomotives, rolling stock and signalling systems. However, the ESR had no intention of surrendering the line while enormous profits were to be made from freight charges. Having

been requested to assist with Britain's wartime transport shortages, New Zealand railwaymen were given the task of operating trains and maintaining rolling stock, locomotives and the permanent way in conjunction with their Egyptian counterparts.

Initially, the primary task of the New Zealand railway companies dispatched to Egypt was to work in conjunction with the local railways' employees in all aspects of normal railway operations, including extending and upgrading the original railway systems. Respect for each other was usually mutual, and the New Zealanders believed that the Egyptian train crews did not resent the presence of the shadow crews. Most Egyptian locomotive crews were conscientious in carrying out their duties while New Zealand railwaymen were present, and the only delays were attributable to their regular daily observation of prayer. However, a hostile attitude towards anything British did exist and acts of sabotage from certain ESR staff did occur.

Operating a railway during a war was vastly different to peacetime operations. Furthermore, to the New Zealanders it seemed that timetables and efficiency were almost antithetical to the Egyptians despite their acceptance of foreigners 'assisting' them in railway operations. Bringing with them the real sense of pride shared amongst railwaymen who viewed running trains to timetables as a paramount objective, the New Zealanders found it hard to accept the Egyptian term of 'bukra', which roughly translates into 'it will get done all in good time'. This could mean anytime from one hour to several days before anything eventuated. Also, the Kiwi engine drivers and firemen kept their cabs clean and they ensured that running gear was always well-oiled. When they arrived in El Dabaa they were amazed at the contrast in standards in railway operating procedures.

With the addition of so many more trains to the timetable the situation had the potential to deteriorate into hopeless delays; existing railway resources would be unable to cope with the increased rail traffic unless efficiency was improved. Nevertheless, the Egyptians had to be handled in a delicate fashion to avoid offending them and creating diplomatic incidents. The solution was to assign each New Zealander to their local counterpart as a 'learner'. Consequently every Egyptian station porter and train crew had a shadow crew, ostensibly to 'watch

and learn', but in reality to maintain order, timetables and generally speed up the whole process. However, by the beginning of Rommel's 1941 offensive, the New Zealanders were operating trains without ESR staff and, as the situation demanded rapid train movements, the pretence of diplomacy was discarded.

Delays in shunting from the civilian sidings at the station to the military depots were all too common before the arrival of the New Zealanders. After observing the delays two locomotives were hired from the ESR and an efficient shunting schedule was introduced, thus eliminating delays entirely. The system was the precursor of a general improvement in rail operations overall, the goal being to have at least eight through trains daily between Mersa Matruh and Alexandria, and two trains daily each way from El Dabaa. Fortunately El Dabaa had an abundance of rolling stock and therefore trains did not have to depart fully laden for the sake of economy.

As the ESR still maintained control of the railway system at this stage, all arriving trains had to be shunted by ESR staff. The Kiwis were not entitled to detach wagons from trains but could move them about within the designated military sidings once placed there by their ESR counterparts. At about this stage the subtle beginning of a complete takeover of rail operations began. Eventually the ESR hierarchy accepted that the lines of demarcation were gradually changing, and did not oppose the process. Not only did the New Zealanders prefer to shunt trains for efficiency purposes but even the Egyptian engine drivers appreciated the Kiwi methods and often refused to commence shunting trains in their designated yards until a New Zealand shunter was present.

The long military sidings that serviced the depots and the marshalling yards were recent additions to El Dabaa station. The new military sidings were constructed at the request of the British Government for the purpose of the desert campaign. The sidings enabled wagons delivering war materiel to be delivered right into the depots from the main line, thus avoiding the transhipment to motor transport. To the west of the station were several other 'roads' (railway parlance for railway tracks) meandering away in different directions serving petrol dumps, Royal Engineers' stores, armoured vehicles' loading ramps, ordnance,

RASC (Royal Army Service Corps) and NAAFI depots, and a field bakery. One long siding led away into the far distance east of the station and, spaced at intervals towards its extremity where it curved towards the Mediterranean, were several large ammunition and bomb dumps indifferently camouflaged against enemy observation.

Two airfields were in use at El Dabaa, one of them between the station and the ammunition dumps, not a pleasant situation for those working in the rail yards. The Italians bombed the locality on many occasions, frequently interrupting the shunting gangs on night shift. Fortunately, none of the raids met with any real success as the Italian airmen usually released their bombs from a very high altitude, but they did prove a nuisance to the busy railwaymen.

Occasionally Egyptian shunters would blow their shunting horns to instruct the engine driver to 'ease up' (a term used to request an engine driver to move the locomotive closer to a coupled wagon in order for the coupling hook to be lifted). Instead of 'easing up', the ESR engine driver would ignore his countryman and inquire as to the whereabouts of the New Zealand shunter. As the improvements made at El Dabaa worked so well, more engines were borrowed from the ESR and the same shunting system was introduced at the terminal railhead of Mersa Matruh and at another forward supply base at Qassaba, 20 miles east of Mersa Matruh.

Some Egyptian engine drivers often refused to leave El Dabaa with their trains for Mersa Matruh if the New Zealand 'shadow' engine driver was not in attendance. Despite the ESR stationmaster exhorting the Egyptian engine driver to depart, he would respond with 'wait Kiwi' and wouldn't budge. It had taken several months and a great deal of patience by the New Zealand railwaymen before their ESR colleagues began to grant such concessions!

No matter how many improvements were made to the train timetable at El Dabaa, the efficiency was almost nullified by unreliable running from the eastern section of the line from Suez, Moascar, Cairo and Alexandria (operated by ESR and British railway units). The trains were frequently held up in that direction on account of bombing raids, and to exacerbate the situation, when they reached El Hammam — about half way to El Dabaa — something often occurred to cause a new

delay, making the trains extremely late into the New Zealanders area of operations. Delays of a few hours were tolerable, but some of the trains took so long to reach El Hammam that on arrival there they were out of coal or water. Usually the engine crews had been on duty for so long that they were exhausted and entitled to book off for a sleep. This would mean a delay of from six to ten hours, often longer.

Returning to their home depot, was always warmly anticipated by train crews who had spent many hours 'out on the track'. Once back into the depot, the railwaymen could have a meal and get their heads down for some well-earned sleep. Ross Warnock and his mate were two crewmen looking forward to a rest after being at the controls of a locomotive all night. They had left Similla and were travelling towards Mersa Matruh — their temporary home depot — hauling a train consisting of 76 laden wagons, none of which had individual brakes.

As the train entered a two-mile straight stretch of line, there was a sudden loud bang from beneath the locomotive. Instinctively the men assumed that they had run over a mine lying between the rails, but as they were still moving forward, at about 15 miles per hour, they deduced that nothing drastic had occurred. Trains and locomotives are noisy as a matter of course, so they just kept going, looking forward to finishing their wearying shift.

So it was with this thought in mind that they proceeded on towards Mersa Matruh. Soon, however, their complacency was replaced by alarm, for when the brakes were applied nothing happened. By now the train was gathering momentum as the track began to descend. Acting quickly, they tried applying the tender's handbrake, which might have slowed their speed if nothing else, but to no avail. Then they decided to put the locomotive into reverse, apply sand and add steam to the pistons. The only result was the wheels going into an uncontrollable backward spin. With their speed increasing and knowing that they were approaching a major station and marshalling yard where they would be diverted into a siding, the desperate men knew they had to warn the depot staff at the bottom of the grade.

Luckily this locomotive had a very loud whistle, so the men figured that a series of SOS whistle messages would alert the station staff of their plight and safety measures could be organised. With no more

options left to them, Ross and his colleague resigned themselves to ending their shift in a great pile up in the railway yard. With nothing to lose, they tried once more to halt their progress by engaging the reversing lever and to their immense relief the runaway train began to slow. Gradually the train lost momentum and once again they regained control. They rolled the train into the prepared siding and brought it to a complete halt. Climbing down from their 'iron horse', the only comment that their previous whistle signals elicited was 'What in the hell was all that noise up there for?'

Despite the railwaymen not being specialist soldiers, they were still expected to adhere to the usual military discipline imposed by the army authorities. One of the railway officers was Captain (later Major) Richard 'Dick' Pearse, affectionately known as 'Fighting Dick' on account of his volatile temperament. He was extremely popular with the rank and file and the general consensus was that they would have followed him anywhere. Military infractions were usually dealt with in the 'Orderly Room' where a malefactor would be sentenced by an officer to whatever punishment befitted the crime. Dick Pearse did not believe in such unnecessary protocols, he would simply tell the accused to 'step out the back and put 'em up'. This practice contravened all military disciplinary procedures, but for the men it meant a quick if painful resolution to their punishment.

While he was domiciled at El Dabaa, Dick Pearse had to deal with several minor misdemeanours at Mersa Matruh. Much to the amusement of the railwaymen at El Dabaa, the scrapping officer once returned sporting two magnificent black eyes. It didn't take long for the men to deduce what had happened. Evidently Dick had had to discipline one of the two well-known boxers in the Railway Group, A.J. 'Ginger' Bourne and H.T. Hepburn who as well as fighting each other, had fought against allcomers on the ship coming over and had also performed in the ring against local champions in Egypt. Being extremely courageous, Dick had not resorted to standard army punishment procedures but had opted for his usual 'stick 'em up' routine. In this case, he was hopelessly outclassed! Dick did not limit his punch-ups to fellow Kiwis either — he also had a very public fight with a stroppy Australian NCO when Dick challenged him to sort out a dispute over

money. Unfortunately the Australian won.

Goods trains always changed engines at El Dabaa, and it was soon discovered that further delays were caused by the relief locomotives assigned to take the trains on to Mersa Matruh not being prepared in time or being defective in one way or another. This occurred with such regularity that it was decided to keep a gang of locomotive men and fitters in the sidings, completely shedding the guise of 'learners'. This immediately resulted in a marked improvement in the despatch times of trains and again the Egyptians accepted the improved services without complaint.

It was also planned to ensure that the locomotives for trains returning from Mersa Matruh had their tenders full of coal and water and were generally prepared for service in time to depart on schedule. This was not always an easy task to accomplish. Water supplies were irregular, and the available water had to be carefully rationed. Before leaving for El Dabaa, the locomotive would be topped up with 3000 gallons of water and as El Dabaa had the next available water supply this precious commodity had to be very carefully conserved. Locomotive water rationing was disliked by the Egyptian engine drivers because it meant that they could not waste it by blowing off steam unnecessarily nor drive back in their accustomed fashion — slowly and wastefully. But, as the water belonged to the ESR, the officers commanding the railway operating companies frequently had their authority to interfere questioned.

With the water situation at Mersa Matruh being so uncertain due to the water supply ship from Alexandria not always arriving, or the failure of the ESR to forward sufficient by rail, water intending for drinking was used. This resulted in a reduction of the daily ration to the troops which didn't go down too well with the thirsty men. The problem became so critical that any pretensions of coming under ESR jurisdiction were ignored and control of the water situation was taken over by the New Zealanders. Surprisingly enough, the ESR authorities did not dispute this control although individual ESR engine drivers continued to grumble about the new methods of water savings. Nevertheless, military considerations took precedent and the water rationing and conservation was a priority issue, the bulk of the water having to

come all the way from Alexandria.

As the railway troops settled into life at El Dabaa, a detachment of operating personnel was sent to Mersa Matruh, the western Desert Railway terminus. Situated as it is right on the coast, Mersa Matruh was a popular holiday destination for the wealthy from Cairo and Alexandria. With its excellent hotel, beaches, cinema, and shops it had all the hallmarks of being an attractive resort in peacetime. Unfortunately for the Kiwi arrivals the resort was no longer such a pleasant destination in 1940–41. The saving grace of Mersa Matruh was the fact it was a coastal town and had a pleasant swimming beach. Not long after arriving, a group of four young railwaymen were sun-bathing naked on the beach when they observed three European women — nurses off an ambulance train — in bathing suits, making their way towards the water about 20 metres away. Leaping up to welcome them they suddenly realised that they were clad only in their 'birthday suits'. Modesty quickly reasserted itself: as one, all four men dropped back onto the sand, with red faces and white posteriors!

Despite having suffered considerable damage from enemy bombers, British troops moved into the former Egyptian Army barracks located on the outskirts of the town and left vacant since the departure of the Egyptian soldiers. Anti-aircraft batteries manned by Egyptian soldiers went into action at Mersa Matruh in the first weeks of the war and apparently acquitted themselves with credit but not enough to preserve the town's pre-war image.

The New Zealand railwaymen were also billeted in houses that had previously been occupied by ESR staff who had since departed. Ever the profiteers, the ESR management charged the Kiwis for rent even though some houses had been damaged. The town was an important target and the New Zealanders were frequently obliged to take cover as enemy planes roared overhead dropping bombs on them. Most missed, although a few hits saw railway houses destroyed. Outside the station was a slit trench for those on duty to scurry into when raids were in progress. However, this trench was often occupied by 'gate-crashers', thus leaving those it was intended for to find cover elsewhere. Bombs were not the only dangerous ordnance to be delivered by the Italians. The aerial raiders would also drop booby traps, such as soap

impregnated with acid, explosive fountain pens and thermos flasks. Many of these bombing missions were led by Bruno Mussolini, son of the Italian dictator. In typical macho Italian style, his squadron's bombers had distinctive blue-painted propeller bosses on their aircraft.

The defences around the camp were ineffective in the extreme. Several wooden 'gun barrels' pointed towards the sky in the vain hope that they might frighten off the aerial raiders. The nearby airfield, where the squadron of RAAF flew vintage biplane fighters did little to inspire confidence in the railwaymen. But despite their antiquated aircraft (that would have made fine exhibitions in an aviation museum), the RAAF pilots would gamely takeoff and do battle with the enemy. Unfortunately their craft could only reach speeds of 80–100 miles per hour, and the attackers would have long departed by the time the Aussies reached altitude. One railwayman remembers two Australian pilots having an argument over who had shot down an enemy plane; it resulted in an all out fist fight. Eventually the RAAF airfield took delivery of a Hawker Hurricane fighter, which became a focal point of interest for the Kiwi railwaymen. When one of the railwayman was inspecting the sleek fighter, he was approached by a senior RAAF officer who said to him that he was 'welcome to look around the aircraft, but for God's sake, don't steal the bloody thing!'. Perhaps the railwaymens' reputation for 'appropriating' certain goods had reached the ears of their ANZAC neighbours!

The town of El Dabaa was raided daily, both by day and by night and the railway, which was frequently the target, was hit many times. In an effort to maintain the train schedule, railwaymen were constantly on duty. Unfortunately for the railwaymen, the Italian airmen were able to pinpoint their targets by using the local mosque's two minarets to guide them in on their bombing run. But despite cursing these convenient landmarks, the British Army would not tolerate their destruction for fear of inciting a major political incident. The one good aspect of these nightly raids was that it kept the Egyptians well away and the New Zealanders could work unhindered without ESR interference.

Not all ESR staff had departed Mersa Matruh. An Egyptian stationmaster remained, and he was, by all accounts a very conscientious

railwayman, full of vigour and enthusiasm. He was of French extraction and extremely sympathetic to the Allies' war effort in North Africa. A year after the New Zealanders arrived he lost a leg in a shunting accident and was evacuated, his loyal and courageous conduct recognised by a grateful British Government when he was awarded an OBE (Military Division).

Another group who ably assisted the railwaymen were the Egyptian coal trimmers (men who filled locomotive tenders with coal). These tall, gaunt-looking fellaheen, dark-skinned naturally, but always black from soot and coal dust, were extremely loyal to the Kiwi railwaymen and never shirked their duties. Some were employed for over two years. Such was the regard in which they were held, it was decided to keep them on the payroll even after the railway companies were forced to retreat later in the campaign. As a counterattack was envisioned, their cheerful services were retained.

Chapter 6

BURG EL ARAB

As the 16th Railway Operating Company settled into life at El Dabaa and Mersa Matruh, troops of the 17th ROC began rail operations at Burg el Arab, a Bedouin village about 40 miles west of Alexandria. There was speculation that this tiny village was once the historic boundary of ancient Egypt, and as if to add some credence to this claim, a cairn of stones stood in the village. While encamped in Burg el Arab, the 17th ROC demolished the cairn and used the stones to construct a smart new cookhouse, unaware of their significance.

While the railwaymen may have boasted of their handiwork their actions caused a furore and almost led to what nowadays is euphemistically called an 'international incident'. It seems that the Egyptians placed great value on these stones and were bitterly opposed to them being used for such a purpose. Regimental Sergeant-Major J.J. McNearney, who had a reputation for picturesque language, was instructed to immediately dismantle the cookhouse and return the sacred stones to their original position. Even though the RSM complied with this order, he apparently stated that he could understand the Egyptians making a fuss had he 'borrowed' the Sphinx or removed some chunks of the pyramids, but those 'flaming stones' were still just stones to him.

The RSM was an Irishman, a veteran of the Great War, and well versed in how to deal with ANZAC soldiers. His thick Irish brogue was heard all over the camp every morning at 6.00 as he screamed out 'rise and shine, an show a leg youse blooda men'. Due to his capacity to distort the English language out of all recognition, the Orderly Room felt compelled to write a dictionary of his peculiar sayings. One sapper, Alan Fletcher, even went so far as to compose a poem commemorating the colourful Irishman.

There are none of us actually love him
And I don't think that we are to blame
For I'm talking of our Sergeant Major
'Old Riso' is the gentleman's name.

Since we met this remarkable fellow,
Our vocabulary has extensively grown
For he is the chap you've all heard of
Who has a language all of his own.

It's really a great education
To hear Old Riso talk
And he marches just like a real soldier
In a typical cow cockie's walk.

Now he lined up his sexual sergeants,
And he rubbed it in pretty damned hot
For the *OC* had been on the warpath
And Riso had been on the spot.

Now get all these blooda men crackin'
The camp's in a helluva mess
And if it's not clean up by tea time,
You'll go blooda hungry I guess.

Now you know where to put all the rubbish,
The insinuator's just over there
And I don't want no blooda men slacking
Or he'll go on the mat, so there.

No take your respectable positions
And clean up the place slick and fast,
And I don't want to see men doing washing
At absolution benches as they have in the past

Hickey, you bring your truck here
And we'll load up this gear right away
Just bring it here in reserve
And it'll save a lot of delay

And when you've got this gear loaded
Just contract me here at my tent
And I'll show you just how to stack it
Where all the other stuff went.

Now youse blooda men be careful
And wear your tin hat in a raid.
For there's Bedford guns all around us
And you'll be getting hurted I'm afraid.

I've just had word from the Wogs.
Some insanitary bombs have been dropped at the station
So just pick some men to go there
And verdify this information.

Now some of youse men think you're clever
And it's time some attention was paid.
You should stand out here beside me
And watch yourselves come on parade.

That gives you a sample of Riso,
You'll admit he's a bit of a wag,
For he told us one day to be careful
And keep explosives out of our bag.

Another character to gain a reputation at Burg el Arab was Sergeant D.G. Walton, known to most as 'Scotty'. Being a Scotsman, he was proficient in playing the bagpipes. Scotty used to lead the route marches over the desert sand at 120 paces to the minute. Needless to say, marching under the desert sun was not an experience enjoyed by the railwaymen — even if they were in the army.

Unfortunately for Scotty, he lost a stripe for some minor military infraction and wanted to exact his revenge on the officer concerned. Taking his trusty bagpipes onto a nearby sand dune, behind the major's tent, he commenced to play dead marches from 6pm until lights out at 10pm. With a bright moon silhouetting the lone piper — a memorable scene — and the discordant sound of Highland pipes filling the air, the major responsible for Scotty's demotion was nearly driven mad by the mournful music.

Renowned for their adaptability, the New Zealanders who found themselves in the desert soon learnt to make life a little easier with ingenious inventions. A railway soldier stationed at Burg el Arab, Sapper Dave Robertson ('Big Dave'), gained permission to rig up a stove that comprised a container of sand with a drip-fed petrol line which

regulated a controlled amount of petrol into the sand. The device worked admirably until Big Dave was away on a regular rail patrol and the cook, Cpl. J.E. Dawson, took charge of cooking operations. Unfortunately for this hapless cook, he did not fully grasp the principle of Big Dave's contraption and instead of using the control valve, he just turned the petrol on and ignited the flow. The effects of a petrol fire in an enclosed space does not need to be explained and the singed cook emerged from the cookhouse somewhat baffled as to why such a tried-and-true method had literally blown up in his face!

Wherever the railwaymen pitched their camp, they organised a canteen where they could relax and enjoy a cold beer — if the situation permitted. When an Australian unit camped close to the railway encampment, the Kiwis hospitably offered their ANZAC mates the use of the canteen. One evening, an Australian private, decidedly inebriated, went outside to stare up at the brightly shining full moon. He repeatedly told some curious railwaymen: 'See that moon, when it dips over the horizon, I'll be in Sollum.' Apparently, the Australians were planning to attack Hell Fire Pass from the sea the following morning. As if sensing his impending death, the Australian left one of his shoulder tabs with one of the railwaymen — who still possesses it today. Evidently German intelligence had prior knowledge of this intended raid, and the Australian unit suffered heavy casualties. The railwaymen never learned of the Australian's fate.

Burg el Arab was fully exposed to the dreaded 'khamseen' wind which begins to blow in March. According to sources, the word khamseen denotes 'fifty' as the wind can blow for a constant duration of up to fifty days. It is a wind that infuriates and it is said that many Arab men were guilty of murdering their wives when the khamseen blew. For the railwaymen, it meant gritty food and bloodshot eyes from the constant irritation of sand in their faces and even serious abdominal illnesses that still causes discomfort and pain to those alive today. Machinery was particularly affected as sand managed to get into every part of engines and mechanical equipment such as bearings and journals and hasten wear. Despite their imposing size and strength, steam locomotives have delicate working parts, particularly the side rods and pistons. Excessive wear on these parts soon rendered a locomotive inefficient. For the

men who worked in the confines of a locomotive cab, the khamseen meant poor visibility, possible obstruction of the rails and searing temperatures. Combined with a massive boiler in front and a hot wind blowing, temperatures reached a point where steel was far too hot to touch without the benefit of leather gauntlets. For the railwaymen in yards and in constructing the line, the khamseen also signified misery and discomfort. All the men serving in the desert were forced to wear balaclavas, scarves, goggles and whatever other item of clothing or equipment that would minimise the effects of wind-driven sand. Drifts would pile up against tents and require shovelling to prevent the weight of sand from causing them to collapse.

The blockmen who manned the desert stations would be obliged to trudge the length and breadth of their yards ensuring switch points and rails were not buried in shifting sand. Trying to use hand-signals to shunt trains was almost impossible due to the limited visibility. Therefore the shunters would have to walk an extra distance to convey what they wanted done by the engine drivers.

When the khamseen blows, the flying sand and grit reduce visibility to almost nothing. This made finding familiar landmarks and buildings a trying task. During one windstorm, a couple of off-duty railwaymen decided to wet their parched throats with a few cool beers. They left their tent for the short walk to the canteen, located only 100 metres from their tent, but half an hour later they were still wandering around in search of their destination. To make matters worse, they completely lost their sense of direction and could not even find their own tent! Suddenly, a shrouded apparition emerged out of the gloom, armed with an ancient rifle, challenging them to halt. The ghostly figure was an Arab employed to scout around the desert perimeter and report any potential enemy movements. With the uncanny ability of the desert dweller, he knew exactly where the railwaymen were — a quarter of a mile past the canteen.

The wind continued overnight and by dawn everything and everyone was smothered with sand. Drifts up to eighteen inches deep formed around the tent flaps. Sapper Ken Emery had made the mistake of sleeping on his back, and when he awoke and opened his eyes, he was temporarily blinded by sand which had built up on his face. His tent

mates had to sacrifice a valuable bottle of water when they threw it into his face to wash away the blinding grit. When Ken picked up his blankets to shake off the offending sand a scorpion fell out onto the ground — evidently it had crawled into bed with him during the night seeking a little warmth.

The wind-driven sand made life thoroughly miserable for everybody. The army cooks simply could not prepare proper meals as food quickly received a hefty seasoning of sand. Canned bully beef was the staple diet during a khamseen, with the trick being to try to turn away from the full blast of the wind to eat — which was always done in a hurried fashion. Many of the returned desert servicemen were to suffer long-term health effects from having ingested such quantities of this abrasive grit, with many having to have surgery performed to remove damaged tissue caused by ulcers and inflammation. It is not surprising that all were very relieved when the wind ceased, even though it enabled enemy pilots to once again resume their attacks.

As both El Dabaa and Burg el Arab were within reasonable travelling distance of Alexandria, leave used to be arranged in order for the railwaymen to have a break from the heat and dust of the desert. On one such occasion, half a dozen of the railway soldiers were in the company of Sgt Keith Elliott who had recently been awarded the Victoria Cross for outstanding gallantry under fire in Crete and was displaying the distinctive purple ribbon on his left breast.

As the Kiwi soldiers ambled along the street, a Scottish officer, resplendent in full dress kilt, flanked by two Redcaps (British military police), came marching towards them. As the two groups passed each other, a high-pitched voice commanded the Kiwis to halt. Having stopped as requested, Sgt Elliott politely enquired the reason for the interruption to his stroll. The officer pompously informed the New Zealanders that they had omitted to salute him and that they were not properly attired — as was typical of colonial troops. Sgt Elliott wryly explained that he thought the major was under arrest, due to the presence of the military police, a suggestion guaranteed to further inflame the officer's sense of self-importance.

In an attempt to placate the major, Keith Elliott offered to line his comrades up and march past the major, who grudgingly accepted. This

was done but still the New Zealand NCO refused to salute. Sensing victory over the impertinent colonials, the officer produced a notebook and demanded the names, regimental numbers and units of all the men present. The Kiwis complied with his demands with the requested information being extremely slow in forthcoming. In response, Sgt Elliott then requested the same information from the major. The apoplectic Scotsman almost exploded with fury by this insolent question, but the unflappable Kiwi NCO then explained to the major that he was Sergeant Keith Elliott, VC. Much to the major's chagrin, the purple ribbon of the highest decoration in the Commonwealth forces, was not easily visible against the khaki battledress blouse. All serving soldiers, no matter what their rank, must salute a VC recipient first. Having played out his little joke, and teaching the bombastic major a lesson in humility, Keith Elliott returned the officer's salute. Having to salute the man, who up to a few moments ago was merely an undisciplined colonial deserving a lesson in manners, clearly galled the inflated Highland hero. The real hero and his grinning mates resumed their journey, leaving his antagonist to mull over the consequences of tackling Kiwi soldiers on such trivial matters.

It was not only NCOs and other ranks that caused the railway officers difficulties. While at Maadi, an officer was enjoying an evening fraternising with his brother officers in their mess when comments were made that eventually led to him being cashiered out of the army and sent back to New Zealand. Lieutenant Mike Waterhouse, a railwayman who was selected to become an officer, was a popular and valued subaltern with the men, but on this occasion he allowed his concern for the men's welfare affect his judgement. The lieutenant told the CO what he thought of him and his methods of dealing with the railwaymen. Unfortunately he had imbibed one too many beers and committed the ultimate sin in the military — he struck a senior officer — and was duly placed under arrest. Following this incident, the railwaymen were all marched off to the beach for 'rest and recreation' while the court-martial was in session. Sadly Lieutenant Waterhouse, the champion of the lower ranks, was stripped of his rank and returned to New Zealand.

General Freyberg was extremely concerned that two other regular

army officers did little or nothing to defuse the situation before it resulted in the assault. These two officers were later censured for their lack of immediate action. Such was the support for Mike Waterhouse, almost all the NCOs and sappers in his section signed an illuminated address to the cashiered officer, showing their appreciation for his service. The whole episode cast a pall over this particular railway unit, but eventually the war asserted itself, and the matter was relegated to the past.

During a period of leave, a group of railwaymen, who were billeted at the YMCA in Alexandria, went into the town seeking entertainment. Having found a suitable restaurant-cum-bar, they parted the obligatory blackout curtains and entered the brightly-lit room. As they walked in, the five-piece band recognised their distinctive 'lemon squeezer' hats and struck up 'Now is the hour', a perennial Kiwi favourite. Encouraged by his mates, and noted for his singing ability, Norm Leaf went up on-stage and sang a few songs. Receiving an encouraging amount of applause, he sang a few more. Finally, after his impromptu concert, he left the stage to deafening applause from his comrades. Confused by their exaggerated appreciation of singing, he was told that the manager had promised his mates free drinks while he continued to sing on stage, thus providing his establishment with cheap entertainment.

Occasionally the New Zealand soldiers were fortunate enough to play golf at the illustrious 'Fleet Club' in Alexandria, while on leave. One condition of playing this course was to have a caddy. Local Egyptian boys did the job admirably. Much to the surprise and delight of the Kiwi golfers, they always seemed to hit a hole-in-one while on this course. Consequently the player was expected to 'shout' for his good fortune and deposit a few 'akkers' (Egyptian coins) into the grubby outstretched hand of his caddy, which would be shared with his accomplice who had arranged for a ball to be placed in the intended hole. Needless to say, the less talented players often found it difficult to believe that their mediocre tee-off had resulted in this magical score. When they expressed their doubt, the young caddy would act highly offended that his integrity had been questioned!

However, life was not always so humourous. Soon after the railway-

men arrived in the desert, the war became a serious business, with everyone receiving basic training in recognising possible booby traps that they might encounter. They learned about pressure, pull-release traps and sand traps, designed to catch the unwary. On completing the course, the men had the opportunity to experiment with these traps by 'setting' them for those in the next group. Despite this knowledge, the railwaymen were not always ready for the booby traps the Germans dropped at night. Playing on people's propensity for picking up small objects, the Germans had designed exploding pens and various similar objects that, if moved, could easily blow off a hand or foot, or blind the victim. A few of the locals were injured by these awful weapons even though they had been warned of the dangers.

Another reminder that the war was never far away occurred when a British bomber made a sudden appearance over the railway camp on a day that promised to be infernally hot. The bomber circled briefly overhead but then banked away towards the coast. About an hour later the same aircraft returned and this time the railwaymen could see that it was riddled with bullet holes. As the bomber flew over the camp, live rounds tumbled from the slow flying plane. Finally the pilot turned the bomber towards a relatively flat area close to their camp and made a belly-landing in the sand. Only two of the crewmen were alive, but suffering from injuries sustained during their mission. Despite being wounded, the pilot had taken his badly damaged aircraft out over the sea to dump surplus fuel before attempting his crash landing. The railwaymen were very amazed that the plane had managed to fly at all despite such extensive damage.

Chapter 7

LOCOMOTIVE WATER REQUIREMENTS

The arid, dusty desert lacked the one thing which is absolutely essential to operating steam locomotives. In fact all those who served in the North African Campaign soon realised that the most precious commodity for survival was water. It rarely rained in northern Africa and when it did the valuable moisture immediately drained away into parched sand. Desert oases were traditional water-holes for the inhabitants of this hostile environment but they rarely had a supply sufficient to satisfy the demand of voracious steam locomotives.

The water had to be fresh and clean, not just for drinking but because water that is dirty or too acidic will soon render even the best made machinery useless. All steam locomotives require to be taken out of service at short intervals so that their steam tubes can be thoroughly flushed out. The frequency with which engines are brought in for their regular 'wash out' even under peacetime conditions depends principally upon the nature of the water used. Instructions from the Director of Railways stipulated that the desert locomotives were to be flushed out at seven-day intervals but the railwaymen safely ran them for ten days or longer. During the latter stages of the desert campaign, the railwaymen were operating purpose-built British war locomotives in the worst possible conditions. The Director of Railways took issue with the fact that his instructions regarding the care and maintenance of the locomotives were not being followed to the letter. However, the Kiwi engine crews knew their business and when GHQ 'experts' later inspected the fleet to satisfy themselves that they were not being abused, pronounced them to be 'in a healthy condition'.

While stationed at El Dabaa, the nearby wells at the pleasant San Yet Kebir oasis provided sufficient drinking and ablution water. In the desert, personal hygiene was considered a high priority as well as a welcome relief from the constant dusty conditions. Shower days were a treat beyond description although the men could not raise much of a lather with the soap available, on account of the salt content of the water. In winter the water was supposed to be heated, for which purpose a boiler had been installed which had probably been 'cliftied' (borrowed on permanent loan) and which was 'asthmatic' (it farted and rumbled like an asthmatic camel). Hot water was frequently not forthcoming so railway officers investigated the situation and ordered fitters to rectify the problem.

An Egyptian, who supposedly had a 'donkey-engine ticket' (for a small or auxiliary engine) was employed by the army as a boiler attendant. It soon became apparent that he knew more about donkeys than engines. When the railwaymen became suspicious of his apparent lack of knowledge and questioned his qualifications he exacted revenge upon them by ensuring that scalding hot water would emanate from the pipes while they were showering. No doubt the occasional screams and furious curses from the par-boiled railwaymen mollified the indignant Egyptian somewhat. But the men soon figured out his trick and when they felt the boiler begin to vibrate they knew to take evasive action. Nevertheless, the railwaymen were never sure how long the boiler would tolerate the treatment it was receiving as it did not have a safety valve.

Water that was drawn from the wells in the coastal region of the Western Desert had to be pumped up carefully, for if this process drew water from the deeper recesses the saline content greatly increased. This rendered it unfit for human consumption and corrosive when used in locomotives. Even the Egyptians, who had an aversion to keeping their locomotives in excellent running order, refused to use this well water.

The real problem facing the Railway Group was ensuring a regular supply of water for their locomotives. The trains being hauled on the Western Desert Line were heavy and long, so water consumption was high.

At the peak of railway operations in 1940, a daily supply of 138,000 gallons of water was required at El Dabaa depot and another 43,000 gallons required at Mersa Matruh. Later in the campaign diesel locomotives were utilised, but initially all trains were hauled by steam locomotives.

Except in the case of a daily 'passenger train', all train locomotives were changed at El Dabaa. Incoming goods trains from the east terminated at El Dabaa and drew 4000 gallons for the return journey to Alexandria. The locomotives assigned to continue on to Mersa Matruh also drew on the El Dabaa water reserves to the extent of 8000 gallons each. At Mersa Matruh they then topped up with 3000 gallons to enable them to return to El Dabaa. The Egyptian locomotives had large tenders because of the long distances between stations where coal and water could be replenished. They carried approximately ten tons of coal and about 5000 gallons of water. This quantity of water, however, was not always sufficient to take them to their destinations or allow for delays en route. Therefore, attached to each locomotive (waboor) was a large water battery (sahreeg meeyah) capable of holding 8000 gallons. The water battery was a cylindrical tank similar to New Zealand Railways petrol tank wagons.

At the El Dabaa depot, a sturdy diesel engine drove a high capacity pump which delivered water into an overhead holding tank. Gravity then supplied the water, via standpipes on the preparation road, to the locomotives. Whereas overflowing tenders or spills were a common occurrence in New Zealand, in the desert railwaymen were extremely conscious of how critical the water situation was and took every care not to allow such wastage. The pumphouse contained a reserve diesel engine, but it was spirited away, allegedly for repairs, and was still away when, at a dangerously critical time, the remaining engine broke down with an incurable complaint. Happenings like this and similar led the railwaymen to the belief that not all of these problems were purely coincidental. Sabotage was always a factor to be aware of but the railwaymen could not be expected to constantly watch what their Egyptian labourers were up to. On occasions the pumphouse attendant would mysteriously disappear, leaving the door locked and the pump still operating, allowing the overhead tank to overflow with the consequent

waste of precious water.

In the event that the pump should again malfunction, the railwaymen were prepared with an assortment of about eight small pumps and hundreds of yards of two-inch hose, and managed to keep the locomotives watered. Amongst the assortment of necessary equipment brought into service were four small Merryweather coal-fired steam pumps. These were kept going at full steam over several nights, their fires lighting up the station, which did not add to the general comfort of the men at the time, especially as Italian planes were on the warpath. Fortunately, except for a couple of occasions, the planes had other engagements to fulfil, and ignored the targets offered below. At this critical period the railwaymen were reduced to the stage of robbing one engine of its water to enable another to run.

In order to keep the trains moving, two water trains were required to shuttle back and forth as quickly as practicable between Alexandria (later El Hammam) and El Dabaa, with every third or fourth train going right through to Mersa Matruh. With the benefit of hindsight, it is difficult to understand why the Italians or the Germans did not concentrate their bombers in sustained attacks on the water works at Alexandria. Occasionally they dropped a bomb fairly close to the works, and on one of these occasions destroyed a place a couple of hundred yards distant called 'Mary's House' at which, according to Mary's business card, 'French speaking', was taught. The bar in the establishment, no doubt, was an aid to fluency. It would have been worth the loss of a considerable number of bombers if they had destroyed those works, as a successful attack would have made operations more difficult for the Western Desert Force.

Even without enemy attack and sabotage, there was still a desperate shortage of water. The nearest source of water supplies for locomotive purposes was Alexandria, 200 miles east of Mersa Matruh and 120 miles from El Dabaa. At these two places the Egyptian State Railways had made underground reservoirs, each of which was capable of storing 100,000 gallons of the water brought by the railway tank wagons from Alexandria.

The railway also put into use ancient reservoirs that had been excavated by Romans during their period of expansion after the Punic Wars.

The Romans built these subterranean cisterns one day's march apart to facilitate the legions charged with occupying Cyrenaica. These 'birs', constructed out of stone without the benefit of cement, usually measured 75 feet square and 20 feet deep — a capacity of 112,500 cubic feet. Later, railway engineers built sidings to them and poured concrete spillways which allowed water trains to simply berth alongside and discharge fresh water from spigots into the rejuvenated Roman cisterns. This, apparently, was sufficient for peacetime requirements, but were inadequate for the number of trains that had to be run during the peak points of a military campaign.

Ships conveying water, sent from Alexandria, helped the situation at Mersa Matruh, but were far too vulnerable from air attacks. Despite the courage of their captains and crews, they simply could not be relied upon to maintain a regular schedule. If enemy air attacks did not account for their losses, worn engines would result in lengthy delays while marine fitters did their best to keep them seaworthy. Most of the water transported by sea was usually destined for the troops.

A pipeline from Alexandria was in the process of being laid, but this, along with the construction of additional storage reservoirs and boosting stations at intermediate points was a major job and would not be ready for service for several months. Filthy though it was Nile water was particularly suitable for steam locomotives. (But if a soldier fell in the Nile he could expect as many as 21 injections!) Wagons containing untreated Nile water had a red flash painted on them to indicate to troops the dangerous nature of the contents. For drinking purposes, the Nile water was put through a filtering process, and the wagons in which the filtered water was carried were marked, appropriately enough, with a blue band. Nile water, in its natural state, did not seem to affect the Egyptians, and doubtless many unsuspecting Kiwis enjoyed Egyptian hospitality by drinking tea with them, made with water from this famous river, much to their later regret.

For the purpose of storing water, whether supplied by rail or pipeline, it was imperative that further reservoirs should be constructed at El Alamein, El Dabaa and Mersa Matruh. These were completed fairly early in the piece. Later during the campaign, the army had its own filtration plant outside of the Alexandria area danger zone. A square

close to these waterworks with nearby converging tram tracks made a conspicuous land mark viewed from the air so, in order to deceive the enemy, it was completely covered with camouflage netting.

Along with the shortage of so much necessary equipment required to keep the railway functional, there were insufficient tank wagons for the conveyance of water. The shortage of these vehicles was worsened by the fact that some of them were designated for the transportation of drinking water only, thus precluding interchange to cope with peaks in consumption of loco water. Occasionally, when the railways became so desperate for water, they were forced to 'borrow' drinking water from the troops' rations. This was a last resort and did not happen very often but one that the railwaymen did not enjoy doing.

When the tank wagon shortage become particularly acute, the matter was finally forced to the point where only filtered water was sent to the railway depots, which eased the problem by making all tank wagons available for peak demands. The officers in charge of the railway operating companies learnt from an ESR colleague that six tank wagons were being used exclusively on a small branch line to supply water to ESR railway staff located there. The New Zealanders managed to persuade the ESR authorities to release these wagons for use in more necessary areas — namely their own. It was also discovered that tank wagons were being used simply as storage tanks, and not being discharged as intended. Once more the Kiwis made a case and obtained these much sought-after vehicles.

Once enough water wagons had been obtained the problems of supply ceased, though every single day was a battle to retain every ounce of the commodity that in the desert was worth more than gold.

The filling station at Alexandria was extremely slow, as was the journey out to the waiting depots. Unfortunately, the sector east of El Dabaa was not under the direct authority of the New Zealand railwaymen, and the railway telephone system was so bad they could not even keep track of any trains, including the all important water trains. As a result, the Kiwis were frequently using the telephone system to harass the ESR staff in an attempt to ensure that the trains would be kept to some semblance of a schedule.

Two trains daily were scheduled: train No. 1 which was made up of

old locomotive tenders, varied in capacity between 1500 and 4000 gallons of water. This train leaked so badly that several wagons arrived at their destination empty. Train No. 2 was less antiquated and was comprised of purpose-built cylindrical wagons and delivered double the amount of its rival.

One day, much to the annoyance of the recipients out in the desert, the expected No. 2 train did not arrive but in its place was the lighter No. 1 train. This was caused by the laxity of the Egyptian attendant at the filling station: his reasoning was that if he had less to do, then the sooner he could relax and fall asleep and leave the greater capacity train for his colleagues. Just another of the numerous frustrations endured by professional men trying to run a railway under exacting conditions.

Eventually they were forced to take matters into their own hands and sent men to the filling station at Alexandria to hustle things along, putting an armed crew on each water train to keep them moving. The rifles were not intended as a threat to the Egyptian railwaymen, but were useful for keeping the desert-dwellers from stealing the water once it had been secured.

Once the trains arrived in El Dabaa, a team of men would launch an attack on the side cocks of the wagons to which they affixed hoses or iron troughs. So urgent was the need that this happened before the slack of the train had eased out after stopping, and as soon as the wagons finally came to rest, the cocks were opened. The water then gravitated into a trough running parallel with the track on which the train was standing, and thence into the storage reservoirs at a lower level beyond the outermost siding at the station. When the military reservoirs were full, the balance of the water would be directed to the ESR underground reservoirs.

The armed railwaymen continued to stalk up and down the water train while it was being emptied, otherwise a large part of the supply would disappear into the camps of the nearby Bedouin. If a locomotive were left unattended, even for a short period, the wallads and bints (boys and girls) would bleed it of as much water as they could carry away while locomotive crews were resting or carrying out other duties. In the desert there was never a drop of water to spare.

Chapter 8

OFFENSIVE AND COUNTER-OFFENSIVE

Following the success of the Royal Air Force in the Battle of Britain, Winston Churchill felt it was time to secure a land victory, hoping to capitalise on the euphoria brought about by victory in the skies. He agitated for a successful engagement in the North African theatre, desperately wanting to inspire the British and Commonwealth forces to continue the struggle against Hitler and, simultaneously, encourage the sympathetic but wavering Americans to enter the war as an ally. Thus, Churchill instructed General Wavell to launch an offensive against the Italians amassed in Libya and drive them out of North Africa completely. Success would also bolster public opinion that Britain and her Allies could defeat the seemingly invincible Axis forces.

Wavell was opposed to the idea; he knew that to mount a sustained attack and hold occupied territory he would require reliable lines of communication and a solid logistical base — the desert was not the place for a modern army to forage for the necessities of life. However, as on so many other occasions during the war, Churchill's iron will prevailed.

Though unaware of the politics of war that were taking place at the highest level, the railwaymen became among the first to indirectly discover this new strategy. Located along such an important route, they were able to accurately interpret the many signs — traffic movements, both road and rail — taking place and observe what equipment was being given precedence. Thousands of tons of war materiel was staged through El Dabaa and Mersa Matruh, much of which had been rushed from Britain at a time when invasion seemed inevitable. In small increments, the tiny Western Desert Force was being strengthened, organised

and equipped. This vital equipment was taken up to the forward railheads by rail, and some had been transported by motor transport to places out in the forward desert where it would be available for immediate use. At the same time sufficient stocks, considered by the standards of those days, were dispersed at convenient places in the vicinity of Mersa Matruh, whence they might be drawn on as battle progressed. Finally there appeared the final harbingers in the build up to a battle — the ambulances were moved forward.

For security reasons, the NCOs and officers in charge of the railway station detachments were not notified of the actual day when the attack against the Italians would take place but were warned that the following few days would be of great importance. Their primary role was to convert the 80 miles of railway between Dabaa and Mersa Matruh into a transport system upon which the army could rely to keep the advancing troops supplied. They were instructed that no delay would be tolerated in keeping the forward troops stocked with provisions and ammunition. They were given a high degree of latitude in being issued this order as it was expected that telephone communications would be an early casualty once the attack began, with instructions not always reaching intended recipients. Common sense and initiative would be crucial in keeping the trains running. The railwaymen were ordered to take any action deemed necessary to ensure compliance of these instructions. All railwaymen concerned were fully aware of the responsibility entrusted to them and they concentrated all their efforts on meeting these demands. The endless days and weeks of preparation prior to the offensive had paid off, as this period had enabled the multiple obstacles confronting the Railway Group to be removed or reduced. As the battle became more imminent, a renewed sense of activity and urgency gripped the men (who now described themselves as Freyberg's Colonial Carrying Company) with the days never seeming to be long enough to accomplish all that was required. Even then, though the railwaymen were unaware of it, even with such reinforcements and equipment as Britain could spare, Wavell's force was still under-equipped and overwhelmingly outnumbered by the Italian enemy.

For two nights in succession prior to the initial attack, the Desert Force had been quietly taking up positions in readiness for zero hour,

and neither they nor the dumps of equipment and ammunition they had made were observed by the enemy. Then, on Monday, 9 December 1940, the attack commenced. Despite being numerically superior, the Italians wilted and were soon driven back towards Libyan territory. The tactical blitz that had been anticipated against the all-important railway line never eventuated. The Italian airmen must have had more pressing missions . . . Moreover, despite its modest size and being vastly outnumbered, the RAF in Egypt soon gained command of the African skies.

By 10 December, Sidi Barrani was in British possession and several days later, troops entered Libya. Sollum and Fort Capuzzo were occupied on the 17th, thereby securing the coastal frontier of Egypt and giving the army a rudimentary port to keep the forward fighting units supplied. Initially the attack had only been planned to last for five days, but it gained new impetus on 3 January with the arrival of a replacement division and Bardia fell the next day.

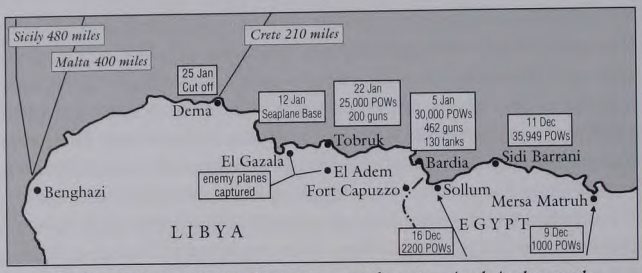
During the offensive 19th Army Troop sappers were working with desperate speed to complete the pipeline. By mid-December they had achieved limited operation to El Hammam, 60 miles east of El Dabaa. After that only part of the water required had to be transported from Alexandria When the water became available at El Hammam, the railway operators promptly switched over one of their 'water trains' to shuttle between El Hammam and El Dabaa, easing the restrictions somewhat. Had the pipeline been in commission to El Hammam by late November or even early December, the water troubles which they faced in the build up to the offensive would not have been nearly so serious. The pipeline reached El Dabaa on 21 January. That same day the port town that was to beome famous — Tobruk — fell into British hands.

The western drive continued along the coast and on 5 February reached the port town of Benghazi which had a little-known Italian-built railway running for 106 miles between Soluk, 38 miles south-west, and Barce a thriving inland town, 68 miles east. This narrow gauge 95 centimetre-wide track had survived attempts by the departing Italians to destroy it and attracted the interest of the Allies. Soon afterwards, a detachment of 18 railway personnel from 16 ROC led by Lieutenant

Bishop travelling there to examine the practicability of using it. On their arrival, the New Zealanders discovered three steam locomotives, two small diesel shunting locomotives and sundry four-wheeled rolling stock. Along with the remnants of the railway, several railway employees also remained, including an Italian stationmaster. However, due to the doubtful loyalty of Arab locomotive staff, 17th ROC personnel joined the 16th. The Benghazi-Soluk section was not used frequently, but the New Zealanders worked two trains daily right to the Barce terminus. These trains were employed to transport Italian prisoners of war, their captured equipment and petrol. The captured Italians, approximately 850 per day, were railed to Barce and petrol was railed back to Benghazi.

Elsewhere on the railway network, the transport of prisoners had become a deluge. Just after the beginning of the offensive, the New Zealand railwaymen were running ten trains daily each way between El Dabaa and Mersa Matruh. By 11 December, the ratio of trains altered, with more heading back east rather than westward. Over 130,000 Italian troops were captured in the first few days of Wavell's offensive, many of them simply surrendering to the Australian and British troops *en masse* even though they often outnumbered their attackers. No accurate tally was ever recorded as to how many POWs were transported by rail from Mersa Matruh and Hatawa, but it was a high proportion of the 130,000 captured. This unexpected situation caused more logistical problems for the Allies: these prisoners had to be guarded, fed and transported back to Egypt, putting further strain on already stretched resources. Using any available carriages, the railwaymen were charged with removing captured Italian soldiers from the front line. Fortunately the Italians, happy to be alive and away from the fighting, were not difficult to guard, with only token sentries being appointed to watch them. Crammed tightly into the wagons, the tired and dejected Italians almost seemed pleased to be heading for captivity. They were dirty, unshaven, hungry and thirsty — completely demoralised — no longer the strutting fascists, who had proudly occupied Abyssinia and Libya in their quest to re-establish the Roman Empire.

Despite being the enemy, the Kiwi railwaymen treated the Italian POWs in an almost sympathetic manner. What food and water they



Italian prisoners of war; they came — and went — in their thousands

had to spare was often given to them as it was apparent that many of them had no stomach for war and didn't want to be involved in the first place, at least not against an enemy that could and would fight back. The railwaymen distributed bully beef, biscuits and 'poor man's chianti' — water — among them and ordered their NCOs to organise themselves. Still, fights broke out in the carriages and wagons and more dominant individuals sought the lion's share. Discipline and order had all but disappeared now they'd become captives.

The huge number of POWs meant freight wagons were brought into service to transport them back to the cages. As many of these wagons had conveyed fuels in five-gallon tins that were prone to leaking, old straw and dunnage was used to help soak up the spillage. In one such wagon at El Hammam, several dozen Italians were loaded, with strict instructions not to light up cigarettes in case of fire. Disregarding the warning, a POW duly lit up and set fire to the petrol-soaked straw. Instantly the wagon became an inferno, and despite the valiant efforts of the railwaymen, all the Italians perished. This was a sombre spectacle, for although they were the enemy, the New Zealanders were sickened by the horrible way in which the POWs died.

Even the Italian officers were grateful to be out of the war, graphically demonstrated when a POW train was passing through El Dabaa. Two high ranking officers obtained permission to detrain and, in keeping with their rank, make use of the latrines (squatting in the sand was for the rank and file, not senior officers). A number of Egyptian Army officers had come to the station and were strutting around as if they

were the conquerors. One of the Egyptians suggested that a guard be placed over the latrine in case the officers tried to escape, which was a totally unattractive proposition given the hostile and barren landscape all around. The suggestion was duly ignored as the Kiwis knew they couldn't have induced the Italians to return to their own lines even if they had offered a first-class train ticket and all the *vino* they could drink! When the train's locomotive blew its whistle to depart, the officers, terrified of being left behind, came charging out of the latrines with their breeches around their knees! A most pathetic and undignified pose for the formerly pompous *fascisti*.

To some Egyptians, the Italian POWs were fair game and they taunted them unmercifully when the trains halted at stations. At one stage, an officer of one operating company took exception to this behaviour. Being fully aware that the Egyptians had taken absolutely no part in repelling the invaders themselves, while exacting great profits from those who did, the officer pointedly told an Egyptian who was baiting the POWs to go and get some of his own prisoners to tease!

The Italians disillusionment was made complete when they later entered Alexandria. They asked their captors what city it was and refused to believe that it was indeed the ancient city founded by Alexander the Great. In keeping with the phenomenal boasting and claims of Mussolini, the ordinary Italian soldier had been told that the 'courageous' *Reggia Aeronautica* had flattened the place out of existence. In fact, the city was totally unscathed.

While the success of the offensive came as a relief to the general public and politicians alike, senior military strategists were aware that it was a tenuous victory. The forward fighting units had advanced well ahead of the supply lines and became vulnerable should the enemy mount a determined counter-attack.

In Berlin Hitler and his top aides watched with consternation their Italian allies being driven westwards by a diminutive British force. This was not a good omen for their alliance nor was it a theatre Hitler wished to become involved in, but in order to secure the productive Romanian oilfields it became imperative that the British be driven out of Egypt and the all-important Suez Canal zone.

So Hitler decided to send reinforcements which became known as

the Afrika Korps. He chose as its leader a relatively young general, Erwin Rommel. Such was Hitler's respect for Rommel, he appointed him as commander of his bodyguard — a coveted position for a non-SS officer. Rommel had fought as an infantry soldier in the First World War, ending it as a captain and being awarded Prussia's most prestigious medal, the Pour le Merite. Between the wars he wrote a book on infantry tactics, and as a devotee of mobility and surprise, he requested command of a Panzer division at the outset of the Second World War, leading it with dash and vigour during the successful campaign waged against France, Belgium and Holland. Rommel's innovative style matched Hitler's notion of how war should be waged, thus winning permanent favour with the *Führer*.

Rommel arrived in Tripoli on 12 January 1941 and the first German troops followed two days later on the 14th. The man who would later become known as 'The Desert Fox' could barely hide his contempt for his Italian colleagues, and it galled him terribly that he was subordinate to the Italian Marshal Graziani, a political decision made by Hitler in order not to further embarrass his fellow dictator. He counter-attacked on 23 March 1941 and easily took El Agheila the next day. He then advanced on Mersa Brega which provided more spirited defence but was taken on 1 April. Rommel then split his forces into three columns, one of which took Benghazi on 4 April. Just before that the New Zealand railwaymen were forced to retreat, leaving the narrow gauge railway they had so carefully maintained to be bombed by the RAF.

The Australian and British forces lacked the heavy armour to combat the well-equipped Germans, nor did they use their artillery and infantry in close association as the Germans did. They were also outthought by Rommel who quickly appreciated that desert warfare was not about territory but remaining mobile and striking when the moment was advantageous. The wily Desert Fox had the Allies beating an arduous retreat that may have become a rout had not Churchill decreed that Tobruk must be held at all costs. The task fell to the 9th Australian Division who fought the rearguard action, but also inside the city that was about to be besieged were New Zealand railwaymen who were operating the port.

Chapter 9

THE RATS OF TOBRUK

The harbours and ports scattered along the North African coast have been trading centres and ports-of-call for seagoing vessels dating back thousands of years. Phoenician traders plied their wares long before the mighty Roman Empire embraced this coast. Many of these ancient ports are still in use today and some were the focus of intense hostile attention during the North African Campaign. Then the initial success of provisioning through the coastal ports made them increasingly important as supply lines lengthened. The Royal Navy was fully occupied in action against enemy shipping so longshoremen and lighter boat crews had to be found from among the ranks of the land forces. On 17 December 1940, a call went out for volunteers from the railway companies for men who possessed a modicum of mechanical ability or seafaring experience to help. Being the sort of give-it-a-go types, many of the railwaymen who applied had mechanical skills but no experience in handling boats, particularly clumsy barge-like vessels that required some maritime knowledge. Two weeks later a detachment of men from the 17th ROC were sent to Alexandria where they boarded the *Chakla* and HMS *Medway*. It was on this vessel that the railwaymen were taught how to operate and maintain marine diesels — from starting them with 'air bottles' (compressed air that was used to turn the engines over, which in turn fired into life) to splicing ropes and tying nautical knots. The men also learnt how to navigate unwieldy barges that were used for ferrying water, food, ammunition and sundry war materiel from larger ships to shore.

But by far the majority of the railwaymen who became involved in seagoing operations were sent to a port that was to become famous during the Campaign — Tobruk.

During 1940 and early 1941 many ships of the Italian coastal fleet were sunk in Tobruk Harbour by the British Fleet as they sought to destroy Italy's naval presence in the Mediterranean. The harbour was soon littered with sunken ships making it hazardous, if not impossible, for large ships to enter the port. When the Germans launched their effective counter-attack the clutter of sunken ships increased in the harbour as the *Luftwaffe* sank vulnerable supply ships trying to provide supplies to the garrison. Soon the harbour sprouted masts and funnels jutting out of the water in such numbers that it was dubbed 'Spaghetti Harbour'. When the seconded railwaymen arrived in Tobruk there were only a few scattered wrecks semi-submerged in the inner harbour. By the time they finally departed 52 ships littered the waterways.

This and the shallowness of the port gradually prevented large ships from entering it so that all supplies had to be laboriously barged from ship to shore. About 75 railwaymen volunteered to support the defenders, the 9th Australian Division, by assisting the British 1018 Docks Operating Company in providing labour, tugboat crews and serving as longshoremen, their primary role being to supervise the various labour gangs.

Rommel was only too aware of the vital importance of maintaining a serviceable port closer than Tripoli, which had served as the primary staging post for his force's incursions into North Africa. Later, in 1942, he pleaded with Hitler to be allowed to wrench the island of Malta from British control, claiming that the British naval presence hindered his supply routes to Libya. Eventually Hitler agreed and the bombing soon followed, although the island refused to concede defeat and continued to hamper Rommel's supply ships.

Rommel desparately wanted Tobruk for its port so that supplies could be brought closer to the forward fighting units. In an ironic twist of fate, Rommel was now experiencing what the British had — over extended lines of communication. He exhorted his troops to expel the Australians and New Zealanders at all costs. Knowing the forces being amassed against them, the Tobruk garrison began to 'dig in' — literally.

The port was surrounded by hills, riddled with caves which had been excavated over the centuries. This caused the men who were

trapped at Tobruk to be contemptuously labelled the 'Rats of Tobruk' by the British traitor William Joyce, more widely known as Lord Haw Haw. Joyce broadcast from Berlin that the 'country boys from way down under' would soon be crushed like vermin by German forces. The Australians and New Zealanders enlarged and strengthened the caves which provided welcome shelter during the raids, not that they were given much time: the air-raid warning system was very rudimentary — a red flag was raised when enemy aircraft appeared overhead!

The railwaymen were divided into two groups. One section manned the tugs that towed the flat-topped lighters while the other section unloaded them on to waiting motor transport. Although Tobruk possessed a large and reasonably sheltered harbour it was only serviced by five small wharves, which were completely devoid of any lifting apparatus. Ship's winches were employed to discharge their loads onto the lighters. After a lengthy delay a small mobile crane was made available but it only had a lifting capacity of 10 hundredweight and was used exclusively for lifting 250 and 500lb bombs until there were no aircraft to use them. The work was exhausting and dirty. Sandstorms and aerial attacks were all part of the daily routine for the railwaymen in Tobruk.

Some railwaymen went on to actually skippering coastal vessels despite their lack of navigation and seafaring skills. One such man was Dunedin-born Joseph Messines Simmonds who became known as 'Tugboat Joe' (a term he did not appreciate). Simmonds operated a tugboat between Sollum, a tiny Egyptian coastal town close to the Libyan border, to the besieged Tobruk.

Joe became an expert navigator through these wrecks, even at night. He had extraordinary vision and could see hazards where others could not. He carefully piloted his tugboat through the rusting hulks; avoiding tangled masts and superstructure and barely submerged hulls. Joe's feats of daring and expertise soon became legend among the men in the region.

Another soldier who came to be seen as a stalwart of Tobruk was Lionel Stuart, also known as 'Corporal Darkie', who said that Joe's contempt for British military officers was well known. According to Stuart, Joe often had altercations with the British officers when his tugboat was alongside the wharf. The irony of this situation meant

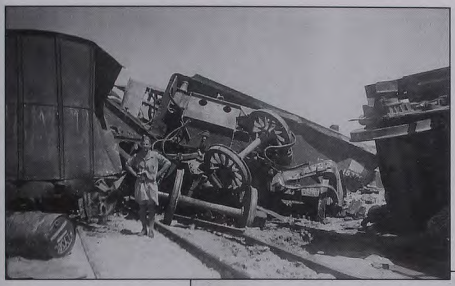
that to charge him with some military offence would require sending him to Alexandria to face a Court Martial and possible incarceration in a military prison. This would have been counter-productive as Joe's abilities were extremely important to the British operations. Besides, had Joe been threatened with anything remotely resembling a charge for breach of discipline he would have challenged his accuser and settled the debate with his fists.

This attitude typified that of many civilian tradesmen and experts in their respective fields who volunteered for service abroad. They knew what was required to be done and refused to conform to the military's regimentation, in particular the British method, of doing things. Being ordered about by officers who frequently had no concept of how to effectively manage transport systems severely tested the patience of the real operators. In Joe's case, it was said that had he not been abusive when dealing with officers he would have been recommended for a high decoration for his work at Tobruk Harbour.

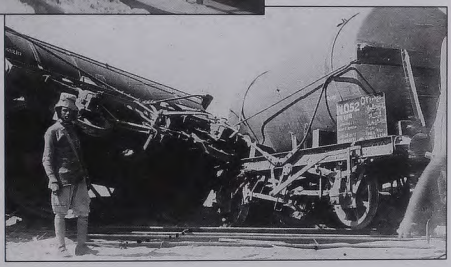
Some weeks after Joe's return to his original company a war correspondent burst into his tent asking for Sapper Joseph Simmonds. Joe quietly answered that he was that bloke. The war correspondent was effusive in his praise of Joe and his exploits and told him that he was a living legend in that part of the world. He went on to ask Joe to describe in detail his experiences while running supplies into Tobruk during the siege. To this Joe replied that had the correspondent been so eager for a good story why didn't he travel to Tobruk when 'the shit was flying' and write about it. At this point the war correspondent realised that he had experienced Joe's legendary bluntness personally and retired, a somewhat deflated cub reporter.

Joe was deemed a man amongst men by his peers. He demonstrated the modesty that characterised so many exceptionally talented soldiers and never sought to broadcast his achievements at Tobruk.

Another New Zealand railwayman working the tugs in Tobruk Harbour was a West Coaster, Dick Nyhare. Dick was operating an all-important water barge from Mersa Matruh to Tobruk during the siege. Despite being regularly attacked the tug survived and a rumour surfaced that Dick sailed his craft to Alexandria for a 'refit'. Upon his arrival in the ancient port, he found no place to berth his vessel so,



Above and right:
The result of a train parting on the Fuka bank. (Linkage broken).



Right and below:
Italian prisoners arrive in their thousands to be transported to Prisoner of War Camps.

B.L. Campbell and C.J. Flannery with their engine, an 8F Stanier locomotive.

Left: *The engine Cpl. H. Padlie was driving when wounded and in which W.J. McCown and the Egyptian Crew were killed.*

Right: *Major Aickin stands where Padlie stood, surrounded by the holes of 250 bullets and 50 cannon shells.*

Above and right: *Disaster at Fuka in which H.S.B. Leighton lost his life.*

Below: *Ceremony at the graveside of H.S.B. Leighton.*

Left: *'Mary's Well' in Nazareth, Palestine.*

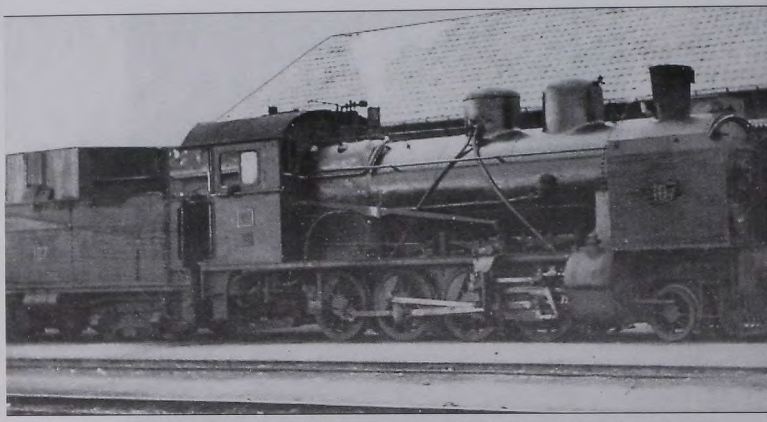
Above: *In a Palestinian date grove: D. Hopkins (Invercargill), R. Fry (Nelson), T.Bryant (Nelson), N. Leaf (Auckland), D. Craw (Huntly).*

Right: *Approaching Nazareth.*

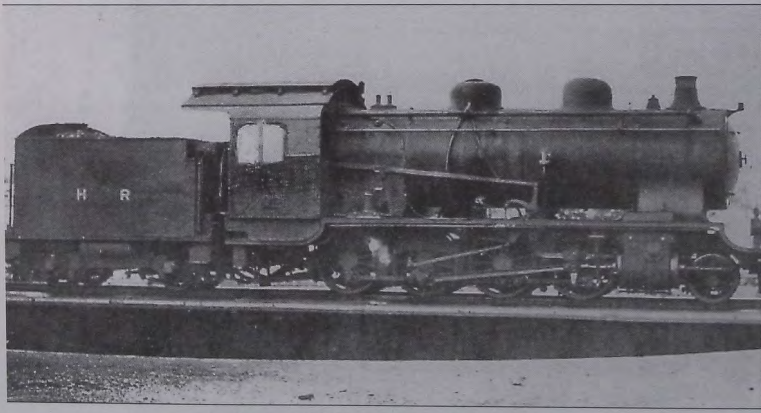
Right: *The 17th ROC Base camp at Afula (Palestine.)*

Below: *Major Poole inspecting the rugged and difficult terrain between Makaren and Zeizoun (Syria).*

Right: *Deraa Station (Syria)*



Hartman 2-8-0 Locomotive used on the Hejax Line (diesel fired).



Borsig 2-8-0 Locomotive used on Hejax Line (coal fired).

Khayat Cemetery at Haifa.

A New Zealand girl (Susan Ben Meir) places flowers on Geoff Gibb's grave in the Khayat Cemetery, Israel, 1994.

Left: *Drilling holes for the dogs which fastened the rail to the sleeper.*

Right: *Dragging rails into position prior to fixing.*

being a resourceful Kiwi, Dick tied her up alongside a British cruiser, then nonchalantly made his way to the prestigious Fleet Club. When the Royal Navy realised that one of their capital ships had a 'parasite' attached to it Dick was ordered to remove his offensive little craft.

Being able to muster only one crew member, Dick had some difficulty in disengaging his vessel from its more illustrious cousin and, in the process, removed a great deal of the cruiser's paint. This defacing of His Majesty's warship could have been exacerbated by Dick having sunk a few well-earned beers. The threats of court martial by the Royal Navy were real when they realised their ship had been 'vandalised'. However, when it was revealed that Dick and his boat were siege runners, all notions of being brought to trial were dropped.

Life in Tobruk for the beseiged men was miserable. They were required to sleep in crowded lice-infested caves and endure frequent night-time aerial attacks and artillery shelling during the day. This all became too much for one railwayman from the 17th ROC who decided that life away from Tobruk was more desirable. He hitched a ride on a Greek vessel to Alexandria and from there by means unknown, made his way to South Africa. Once in the safety of Cape Town he opened a fish and chip shop and thought that the war was over for him, but eventually the military police tracked him down and returned him to his unit, then stationed in Afula, Palestine. Not content with military life, he once more went AWOL but was soon recaptured and sent back to New Zealand. While it would be easy to judge this man as a deserter, it must be remembered that Tobruk was attacked incessantly and everyone's mettle was being severely tested.

The railwaymen/seamen who found themselves in Tobruk not only ferried supplies to the besieged garrison but ferried wounded men out to the waiting hospital ships, irrespective of nationality. Even wounded Germans were probably ferried by railwaymen out to the ships. In contrast to international rules of engagement the Germans attacked a hospital ship moored in the harbour on 4 May 1941. The attack was made by a dozen Junkers 87s (Stuka dive-bombers) and five Messerschmitt fighter aircraft. While the ship may not have been a primary target it was reprehensible that the enemy should attack ships moored nearby, with the hospital ship receiving a direct hit. Another deliberate

attack was made on a hospital ship by Stukas, forcing the ship to be beached after hull plates were sprung. It was repaired and managed to limp back to Alexandria. When German POWs were questioned as to why their aviators were attacking a ship bearing the Red Cross, they replied: 'It was in a war zone and hence a target.' It seems that the Geneva Convention did not apply to mercy ships in Tobruk. Because of this callous disregard for evacuating the wounded, fast destroyers were used. These ships would come in under cover of darkness on moonless nights and quickly load up the wounded for the trip back to Alexandria.

Notwithstanding the enemy attacks on British hospital ships, the men who operated the tugs and barges along the African coast never lost their compassion for the wounded, even enemy POWs. In late January 1940, while en route from Tobruk, the *Sollum,* ferrying 800 Italian POWs back to Egypt, was strafed by enemy aircraft off the coast at Sidi Barrani. Watching in horror from an escarpment overlooking the beach were railwaymen who saw the terrified Italians rushing for the lifeboats. The boats were soon grossly overloaded and spilled their occupants into the sea, most of whom drowned. The ship's skipper, seeing the carnage, tried to beach his vessel but ran aground on a submerged reef. With a high sea running and being a sitting target for the aircraft, the situation was desperate. One valiant Italian POW swam through the rough surf with a line attached to his body, collapsing on a ledge above the waves. A sergeant quickly dragged the man ashore, assisted by an Egyptian foreman. Once the line was secured, the railwaymen, in waist deep water, proceeded in relays to pull the POWs to safety. Some of the Italians were washed away in the rough sea and many injured on the rocky shoreline. The seriously wounded were pulled ashore on Carley floats and passed up the steep cliff by a chain of men precariously clinging to whatever footholds they could find. After all the POWs were off the vessel, the crew abandoned ship. Doubtless many Italians owe their lives to the selfless attitude of these former foes.

The railwaymen not only faced the danger of aerial attacks but also had to contend with mines laid along the main coastal routes. During an operation at Sollum, where Italian prisoners were being ferried out

to the *Farida*, a mine exploded beneath the Kiwi-crewed vessel. Four crewmen were killed, as were many of the POWs. It seemed German airman cared not that they were probably killing more of their own allies than their enemies had. Another New Zealander was killed on Christmas Eve 1940 as he assisted in the unloading of fresh oranges for the frontline troops, when the *Luftwaffe* showed their festive spirit by bombing the barges as they ferried the fruit ashore. One Sapper had foreseen his own death and had even carved himself a headstone out of sandstone, which is used to mark his grave at Sollum.

Two others who lost their lives on the barges were M.J. Crosby and A.G. Figgins, both blown up when their barges struck a mine between Tobruk and Sollum.

Although the conditions and constant danger made for a hazardous existence, the railwaymen and their fellow soldiers did not endure discomfort without moments of levity. The men tasked with loading up the lorries did not consider them laden until nothing more could be stacked onto them and often crammed five or six tons onto a 30-cwt lorry. As the road out of the immediate vicinity of the port was quite steep, lorries sometimes stalled and had to be lightened before resuming their journey. In one particular incident a lorry laden with 64 cases of beer and cigarettes (weighing three tons) stalled on this road with the Australian driver demanding that it be relieved of its heavy burden. By coincidence it had stopped right outside 'ANZAC House', the 'residence' of the Y Docks land-based team (comprising railwaymen). Their mess would no doubt have benefited from this unforeseen delay!

Aerial defence at Tobruk was initially provided by three Hurricanes and one Blenheim bomber. Once besieged, Tobruk had no air cover whatsoever. In 40 days, Tobruk experienced 370 air raids — excluding all the false alarms. In real terms, Tobruk was the recipient of more aerial bombardment than Malta, receiving its thousandth raid in a shorter period than Malta. Although the *Luftwaffe* pounded Tobruk relentlessly in an attempt to dislodge the determined 'rats' and there were constant ground assaults from Rommel's troops, the tenacity of the indomitable ANZACs proved Lord Haw Haw wrong. Tobruk did not fall.

Chapter 10

TRAGEDY AND BRAVERY

While the events in Tobruk were largely unknown to the railwaymen out in the desert, the arrival of the German air force was certainly noticed. The *Luftwaffe* pilots sent to North Africa were still smarting after their defeat at the hands of the RAF during the recent Battle of Britain. Pilots of the slower aircraft such as the infamous Junkers Ju-87 Stuka dive-bomber and the twin-engined Messerschmitt Me-110 who had suffered savage maulings by Spitfires could now inflict revenge on static targets and trains in the desert. At this stage, the RAF presence in North Africa was minimal and unable to quell the rising number of enemy incursions into British airspace. Unlike their Italian counterparts, who favoured high altitude bombing runs, the Germans preferred to attack low and fast. By July 1941 the *Luftwaffe* had asserted dominance over the desert with frightening consequences for the Kiwi railwaymen.

Steam locomotives are noisy machines, making it impossible for the crews to hear incoming aircraft, friend or foe. And with eyes glued on the track ahead, they couldn't look skywards for potential threats. The German pilots liked to streak in low with the sun behind them so that engine crews rarely knew they were under attack until they heard the dreadful crack of bullets and cannon shells slamming into their locomotives. Nor could they dive for cover in slit trenches as infantry soldiers did. They could only grit their teeth and hope.

At this stage in the war, the Egyptian passenger rolling stock was painted white. By day the carriages glistened in the sun and were easily discernible on moonlit nights. They made easy targets. On 7 July 1941 a train was conveying troops back to the safety of Alexandria for what was optimistically called 'change-of-air leave' when the fighting soldiers

could wash the sandy grit from their bodies and throats alike. The train was well back from the front-line at Nooh, a crossing place built between Abu Haggag and Sidi Haneish, close to the Fuka Bank (near Baggush) when the soldiers saw seven planes streaking low over the coast heading towards an RAF fighter base near Abu Haggag. Those watching assumed they were friendly planes and a general cheer went up for the 'glamour boys' of the RAF. They were soon corrected of this notion when twinkling lights appeared along the leading edges of their wings as the *Luftwaffe* Messerschmitts opened fire. They raked the train with cannon fire, paying concentrated attention to the locomotive.

The engine driver was Corporal H. Padlie from Kaikohe. With him was his Kiwi fireman and the Egyptian crew they were 'shadowing'. The enemy planes swooped in for the kill, cannons and machine guns firing rounds into the frail carriages where the soldiers, pleased to be on leave, desperately sought to bail out of what had suddenly become a death-trap. There were many casualties among those caught in the hail of fire. Meanwhile, up in the locomotive's cab, Bert Padlie had been hit by five bullets but was still alive. Realising that his train could run away down the steep grade unless he managed to shut off steam and apply the brakes, he struggled to retain consciousness until someone could assist him. The ESR engine crew, that the Kiwis had been assigned to shadow, were terribly wounded and lay unconscious alongside the young New Zealand fireman, W.J. McCown, on the grimy cab floor. All three later died from their wounds.

An English officer, Captain Brown, who was on the train, climbed over the tender of the locomotive (a brave act in itself) to see what he could do for those wounded. Despite his severe wounds and loss of blood, Bert Padlie briefly explained to the officer what he must do to halt and secure the train properly. Fortunately the officer understood what he was instructed to do and closed off the steam to the pistons. Had the train not been stopped, it would have gathered momentum and careered down the steep bank, resulting in a greater loss of life. For his courage and his determination to ensure the train was safely secured, Cpl. Padlie was awarded the Military Medal — a decoration that recognised bravery under fire. While it may not seem a great feat to some, remaining at one's post on a locomotive, enemy aircraft likely

to return for a second attack at any minute and the potential for steam pipes and valves rupturing and causing horrendous burns, it was an extremely gallant action.

Under the headline 'HIGH COURAGE' the following report was published in the NZEF *Times* on 13 October 1941:

> General Sir Claude Auchinleck, Commander-in-Chief Middle East has approved of an immediate award of the Military Medal to Lance-Corporal Herbert Padlie of [16th] railway operating company, N.Z.E.
>
> Corporal Padlie was military accompanying engine-driver on the engine of a train which was attacked on the Western Desert line on the morning of July 8. His action in applying the brake so as to bring the train to a standstill and subsequently in instructing an officer how to complete the operation and shut off steam when he was rendered incapable of doing this himself owing to at least four body wounds, was stated to show courage of a high order and devotion to duty worthy of recognition.
>
> "Had this action not been undertaken by Lance Corporal Padlie" states the citation, "the train would have gathered speed and proceeded out of control until brought to a standstill by lack of steam. It is probable that this would have led to further loss of life and damage."

Another incident, which occurred a fortnight later on 25 October, also at Fuka, had tragic consequences. A heavy freight train, weighing approximately 800 tons, with an Egyptian crew, approached Fuka on the main line and failed to notice that a stationary petrol train was already occupying the line. In New Zealand railway operational practice, it is a cardinal sin to allow two trains to occupy the same section of track unless signals authorise this to occur, and then only when both trains have a sufficient distance between them. Normally in this instance there would at least be some warning from the lights of the two trains. However when operating under wartime conditions, it is essential that no lights (head or tail) be used as this attracts enemy aircraft — even signals were reduced to the hand signal or lantern (used discreetly). During the day and even on moonlit nights, trains were too easily spotted, even without any lights being used.

As the Egyptian driver was complying with wartime regulations, he failed to see the stationary petrol train berthed on the line in front of him. The station was not equipped with signals, which would have alerted the approaching train of the presence of another immediately in front. The reason why this train was allowed to enter the station before the line was clear will probably never be known. On the moving train covering the ESR crew was a young New Zealand fireman, Sapper H.S.B. Leighton. At the moment of collision — which was completely unexpected — he had no time to brace himself or take evasive action and was propelled into the unforgiving steel boiler end with all manner of projections that did not yield to human flesh. He was killed instantly.

At the rear of the stationary train was another New Zealander. He was covering the ESR crew member who was the guard of the train. In railway terms the guard is the brakeman who rides in a purpose-built braking van at the rear of a train. Such was the force of the impact of the colliding train slamming into it, that the guard's van was thrown up into the air. Its occupants were still inside it as it rolled. It was then sprayed with petrol from a ruptured tank wagon and caught alight. As the guard's van became a blazing inferno, the New Zealander, miraculously uninjured from the crash, crawled from the wrecked van to safety. Water was so scarce in the desert there was no attempt of even trying to contain the fire and the van was left to burn itself out before the wreckage could be cleared from the main line.

Fuka seemed to attract bad luck, for once again in October 1941 another catastrophic incident occurred when aircraft attacked this unfortunate railway outpost. A rake of 20 wagons (term used to describe coupled wagons not attached to a locomotive) containing 50 to 500 pound bombs was standing in No. 2 road while another rake of 25 tank wagons carrying aviation spirit was standing alongside on No. 1 road when they were attacked by German aircraft. Cannon shells immediately ignited the volatile aviation fuel and the heat from this quickly set fire to the tinder-dry wagons containing the ammunition. The steel components soon began glow a cherry red which in turn created a combustion sequence to more wagons and their contents. The resulting explosions blew bomb fragments and unexploded bombs over

a wide area. Heavy steel parts of railway wagons also became lethal missiles as they were blown about like cricket balls. Major Frank Aickin, was watching the event and while observing a blazing tank wagon burn, an ammunition wagon standing behind it erupted in a huge explosion.

A sergeant and two of his men from nearby Abu Haggag, not having seen the attack and resultant explosions, travelled to Fuka to ascertain the reason for trains being delayed. Just as they arrived another ammunition wagon exploded with a deafening roar thus answering his unasked question. Shortly after, a further four ammunition wagons were engulfed in flames and destroyed, vanishing completely.

Resigned to the loss of aviation fuel and ammunition, the railwaymen waited for the fire to burn itself out and for the remaining unexploded bombs to detonate or cool, so that reconstuction could begin. This was undertaken by the railway construction companies who were quickly on the spot. Realising the hazard of trying to reconnoitre the sidings in order to determine the extent of the damage, railway staff made an educated guess as to how long the line was likely to be closed, before making a report to Railway Headquarters. They knew that the track would have to be re-laid as the intense heat had caused the rails to buckle and twist.

As a new offensive was planned in a month's time, the reopening of the line as quickly as possible was extremely important. Although the damage was extensive and explosions had sent deadly shrapnel in all directions, no casualties were sustained at all. The station which housed the sole fire extinguisher was badly damaged and at one point was surrounded in a sea of flame. Fire fighting equipment was virtually non-existent and what was available could never have coped with such a ferocious inferno.

Being such an important place in the military lines of communication, the destruction at Fuka could not be allowed to halt the movement of trains. Therefore trains were worked up to both ends of Fuka station, where they were stopped at a safe distance while troops and goods were trans-shipped from each end with the assistance of the 4th New Zealand Motor Transport Company who were garrisoned nearby.

Both locomotive firemen, W.J. McCown and H.S.B. Leighton, were buried at the military cemetery on the high ground above the desert

oasis of Maaten Baggush — two railwaymen killed in the service of their country. Their graves were later transferred to the El Alamein cemetery under the control of the War Graves Commission.

It was not only the actual train crews who faced the wrath of the *Luftwaffe*. The men manning the often lonely block stations also sustained random aerial bombing and strafing. With the strict blackout required, they walked many miles in complete darkness as they shunted trains and set points to allow trains to enter and cross at stations. Trying to signal trains to enter stations required them to walk out beyond their station to give a signal to the driver that he could enter either the main line or crossing loop line. It was not uncommon for one of these men to walk 12 miles or more during a shift on duty. If an aerial raider suddenly appeared and dropped magnesium flares, they could be caught quite some distance from slit trench shelters — and frequently were. It was not only the possibility of being killed by shrapnel or bullets that was a concern, but railway yards were often filled to capacity with wagon loads of ammunition, petrol and aviation fuels. Being caught among such volatile substances was a horrifying prospect.

This did not deter Lance Sergeant T.V. Carpenter from risking serious injury when he detached and removed a burning petrol wagon from a train during an air raid at Gerawala on the night of 25 November 1941. The station had come under attack resulting in the wagons catching fire. Having moved the wagon a safe distance from the remainder of the train, he then proceeded to unload the tins of petrol that had not caught fire, and then extinguished the fire. His actions prevented a major conflagration that could have consumed the train and its valuable supplies. For his courage and devotion to duty, Lance Sergeant Carpenter was awarded the British Empire Medal.

The following week another railwayman, Corporal Gerry Summers (who had received shrapnel in his buttocks while stationed in Syria), was also awarded the BEM for courage under fire. On the night of 1 December 1941, Cpl. Summers was at the controls of a train conveying essential supplies to the front line when his train was subjected to an aerial attack. Bomb splinters smashed into two coupling hooks between wagons, breaking the train into three parts. Despite this, Cpl. Summers managed to bring his train to a halt, effected repairs to the

coupling equipment while the train was still under fire and continued on to his destination. Had he not brought the train to the forward areas, the fighting soldiers could well have found themselves without ammunition and other urgent materiel to hold the enemy at bay. This was the second time that Cpl. Summers had distinguished himself during aerial attacks.

Just 48 hours later a train was being driven west by driver Harold Allingham accompanied by fireman Ross Warnock of the 16th ROC when it was spotted by an enemy pilot. The following is Warnock's personal account of the incident.

> 'Well, Jerry has a nice night for it tonight, don't you think?' Harold Allingham said to me, as he sat at the controls of a train heading 'up' the desert to the railhead. The train was loaded with a mixed cargo of foodstuffs and supplies for the men in the front line. I agreed that I had never seen such a beautiful night. The fleecy clouds had stretched across the heavens forming a white ceiling at about 10,000 feet, through which an almost full moon shone with all its brilliance upon the white desert. Landmarks, though few, could be picked out easily and we knew our train was casting a conspicuous black shadow across that whiteness. However we had a schedule to keep, so we kept that shadow moving ever onwards into the danger zone. We had been on the road [railway term for the line] for several hours and were anxious to reach our destination and snatch a few hours' sleep before daylight and heat made sleep almost impossible.
>
> On nearing El Sutt at the 78-mile peg, I said, 'Green light ahead, Harold. Looks as though we are going to get a clear run through.' Little did I know how false my words were to prove. We were now running slowly into the station and I was watching for the blockman to exchange the 'line clear' ticket, but he was not there. Harold brought the train to a standstill at the station and went over to see what was wrong, while I stayed on the locomotive and prepared it for the next part of the journey. The hiss of steam and other noises made me oblivious to the enemy lurking overhead and who, at that moment, was taking a bead on me through his bombsight.
>
> The next few seconds were full of action as with a deafening roar of racing motors and screaming bombs Jerry levelled out

from his diving bomb run. I was so taken by surprise that for a few seconds I did not know what to do. I flattened myself on the floor of the cab and in my excitement tried to dig through it with my fingernails as I waited for the bombs to explode. With a deafening series of crump, crump, crump they exploded. I was still in one piece. I took a quick glance in their direction. Jerry had hit the siding near the rear of the train. I wondered what damage had been done and whether our guard had left the van before the attack, but my thoughts were soon cut short.

Jerry was coming back. I must get away from the train, was the one thought that galvanised me into action. In one glance I picked my first spot of shelter, a sand-bagged bivvy about 50 yards away. With Jerry still coming in I ran harder. The ground seemed to stand still under my feet yet I fell into the shelter of that bivvy just as a stream of machine-gun bullets peppered the train and ground immediately alongside me. I saw them ricochet from the rocks and wagons as the plane rushed by (every fourth bullet is a tracer).

As quickly as he came, so he flew off. All was clear for a few minutes, during which time I tried to find my mate and the station staff. I gave a yell and was immediately answered from the furthermost bivvy with, 'What a bastard!' It was Harold, safe and well. 'Have you seen anyone around here yet?' he asked. 'No,' I replied, 'they must have heard him coming and made a bolt for the blue. 'Don't blame them either, do you?' 'No, I'm getting out of this myself in a minute,' I replied.

At that moment the telephone rang, so I answered it. It was the stationmaster at Wahas who wanted to know what was going on down there. I gave him as many details as possible and learned that Misheifa was also receiving attention from these nocturnal bandits. 'Well, cheerio, Colin. I've got to get back to my shelter. Another one is coming. Might get in touch with you later.' I dropped the receiver and made a bolt for my cubby-hole.

This time Jerry attacked from the rear of the train, dropping another load of bombs just beyond the locomotive, covering it in a cloud of dust. I did not find out until the following morning that a 1000-pounder had hit the deck twelve feet from the tender but failed to explode. After the attack, Harold and I decided to make for the blue. I went back to the engine and banked

the fire so that it would not require any attention for some time, then off we went. We had hardly gone 100 yards before we heard another bomber circling around. We decided to seek cover and lay down, for we were casting shadows and our goggles were reflecting light from the moon. However, no cover was available. There was not even a rock big enough for us to hide behind. We did not have much time to make up our minds for Jerry was just going into his dive. I dived behind a small bush and watched him. He was flying at about 2000 feet from the rear of the train. As he came level with the engine he flipped his plane over and hurtled down in a screaming vertical dive. I fully expected our train to be blown in two for he seemed to be directly over it. He levelled off and screamed away to the right. There were four blinding flashes and a deafening roar with the centre of the train being obscured by a dense cloud of black smoke.

It cleared slowly, and to my surprise the train was still intact. He had missed again! Still further into the desert we ran. We wanted as much distance as possible between us and the train. As we ran, we saw two others waving and shouting to us. One was Corporal Roussell who was delivering rations from our train to each station. The other was a South African who was in charge of the South African Christmas mail going to the front. They were both excited and a little shaken too. While swapping experiences we heard another plane coming our way so we made another bolt for the blue. Cover was equally as scarce as last time, so we picked out the largest mound of sand we could find, which was approximately four inches high, and lay down, screwing ourselves round so that we would keep the mound between us and the plane. I went twice round my mound. The South African was lying near me and as Jerry came into the attack, he said, 'Mon, look at 'im, do you have to put up with this every night? I'd sooner be in the front line any day, mon. You have got something to cover you there.'

This time the plane did not dive. He released his bombs at about 2000 feet. We could see him very plainly, although I could not identify the type of plane. The bombs were whistling over our heads towards the train. Wham! They all seemed to explode at once right on our train. As the cloud of smoke cleared away, I could see that once more he had missed. I was just thinking

what poor shots they were when 'plonk', a lump of shrapnel landed beside me. I was too scared to reach round to try to find it. I jumped up and ran still further into the desert.

Then we heard frantic yells coming from the blue. 'Lie down, for Hell's sake, lie down!' But I wanted some better shelter, so I ran on until I could find some. All the station staff were also hugging the earth in an almost filled-in slit trench. I jumped in with them, thankful that at last I had found some reasonable cover. Even then it was not very good. A hole scooped out about six inches deep with a ring of stones around it. They were very glad to see that we were all still intact and apologised for not being able to give us a warning as we came in.

'Look, what's that? The train is on fire,' someone yelled. The last bomber must have found his mark after all. We all watched closely and saw small tongues of flame shooting up from one of the wagons. It was on fire all right. Our attention was deflected to a whirr-whirring up in the sky.

'There he is,' said Harold, as he pointed to a plane coming straight for the train. He too must have seen the flames and was coming down to investigate. We did not have long to wait, for he put his plane into a dive and screamed down. In spite of the noise and speed of the attacking aircraft, time dragged as we watched the plane as it seemingly dived in slow motion. Suddenly it levelled out and began to pull up again, and as it did so we heard the deafening concussion as the bombs exploded. Despite his efforts, the pilot missed his target.

From then on things became quieter. No planes could be heard at all, so three of our party, Corporal Roussell, Fergy Kaye and Tom Tregurther decided to make a dash for the train to try to extinguish the fire that still flickered from the wagon. They had been gone for some time and when we could not see any flames from the wagon, we all went back to the station to get the train on its way again. It had been standing there for three hours now.

As we neared the train we heard once more that familiar roar up in the sky and as one man, we turned and made a bolt for the blue. The three who had been putting out the fire also heard the plane and were also running for their lives when Jerry dived on them with machine-guns rattling. We were about 500 yards away from the train when the pilot opened fire. We bit the dust.

I took a peep at proceedings and immediately froze to the spot.

I watched as the bullets kicked up little spurts of sand and stones as they stitched a line towards my three cobbers who were frantically running directly to where I lay. Just in time, they dived to the ground and avoided being hit. However, the bullets kept coming at me. I did not experience any sensation of fear, I think I was past that stage. I said to myself, 'If he gets me, he gets me and that is all there is to it'. Fortuitously he had stopped firing only 50 yards in front of me, and as he roared overhead I gave a great sigh of relief although I was shaking from head to foot, and try as I might I could not shake off that sensation for the remainder of the night.

As the three firefighters came up, we learned that the wagon containing a quantity of matches had been struck by shrapnel and had caught fire in one corner. They had experienced some difficulty in extinguishing the flames but succeeded just prior to the last attack. By this time the nerves of the whole party seemed on edge. One of the station staff had tried to ring through to the railhead for information, but found the line out of order. This resulted in our train staying until daylight. We were still out in the blue when Jerry paid us his last visit. Three planes could be seen circling overhead. While we waited for the first one to attack, two of them decided to go further up the line leaving one to deliver his goods on us. This chap seemed to be rather cautious, because he kept us in suspense for a long time. He circled around and around, then we could see him straighten out for an attack from behind us. I lay on the desert shivering from the cold and shaking with fear and suspense. He was flying directly in line with us and I thought that from this height he had only to make a slight error of judgment to land his bombs uncomfortably close to us. Then they came, whistling and screeching down at us. It seemed as though they were never going to pass over us. Seconds seemed like hours, then we knew they would hit somewhere near the train. 'Crunch!' It was a 500-pounder that landed about 50 yards from the train, but it did not detonate.

I lay there for a long time, thinking of nothing in particular. At last I gathered my self-composure and realised it was all over and I was still in one piece. Later that night I tried to sleep, but it was impossible. I lay under my blankets in a bivvy about 50

yards from the train. I could not put my mind to rest. I heard 'Wimpeys' (slang for RAF Wellington bombers) flying overhead back and forth, and even though I knew they were our planes, my stomach turned over and my whole body shook. For two hours I lay there in that state until at last the first rays of the sun crept over the horizon. The worst night of my life has passed, never to be forgotten. I crawled out of bed thankful to be able to still walk about and tried to forget the nightmare of the previous ten hours. Harold had slept as sound as a log during those last two hours of darkness and woke up feeling more or less his old self, but one look at me told him that I had not slept a wink.

We decided to have a look at the damage caused by the many bombs and were surprised to find the whole of the train still in one piece, although several wagons bore shrapnel holes, especially the wagon containing the South African Christmas mail. It was in a terrible mess. The bags had been torn open, and cigarettes, cakes, sweets and fruit were all mixed together in one sticky mess.

After partaking of our breakfast, we pushed on towards the railhead. On reaching the first bend past the station we saw perched out in the desert about 60 yards from the track the unexploded bomb. Harold and I both crouched by the window of our cab as we crept slowly past. Its great ugly nose pointing at us. We were rounding the bend when Harold said, 'Look, it's following us.' But although it looked very much as though it was, I am sure that our eyes were deceiving us. We were not sorry to be on our way, but in the back of our minds will always lurk memories of the night of December 3, 1941.

Throughout the three years of service by the Railway Group, there were numerous causes of continued courageous conduct carried out unflinchingly as ordinary routine duties in the several campaigns in which railwaymen took part. Many front-line soldiers and airmen too, said that they would rather have their jobs than those of engine crews whom, when attacked, had no protection whatsoever and could not dive for cover, even if any were available.

Chapter 11

GREECE, THE CANAL ZONE AND PALESTINE

During the North African Campaign the Railway Group was not limited to operating trains in the Western Desert. Some railway surveyors and construction men were sent to Greece, which Italy had invaded in 1940, but the Greek Army easily repelled the Italians and pushed them back into Albania. The British offered military aid to Greece in an effort to bring Greece, Yugoslavia and Turkey into the war on the side of the Allies.

One of the first contingents of Allied soldiers to arrive in Greece was a unit from the Railway Survey Company. This was done without the approval of the New Zealand Government or of the Commander of the New Zealand Division, General Freyberg. At first the British denied to Freyberg that the New Zealanders were in Greece, but when the truth was finally admitted, Freyberg, with his usual diplomatic manner, advised the New Zealand Prime Minister Peter Fraser of this new development, thus avoiding an 'incident'. But it set a precedent and was the precursor to a much heavier New Zealand involvement in the ill-fated Greek campaign.

The Railway Survey Company unit — Captain Tom Nevens and Lieutenant George Rushton, along with 17 other ranks — left Egypt on 13 November 1940. Rushton and five other ranks travelled on HMAS *Sydney* with their own motor transport, while the remainder travelled by less glamorous freighter, a much slower trip. Their task on arrival was to survey possible landing sites and potential airfields along the southern coast of Greece should they be required in the event of a pre-emptive British invasion — no matter how unlikely.

The railwaymen carried out their instructions and hastily surveyed several potential landing sites along the Attic Peninsula (the southern coastline). At this point of the lull before the storm, the railwaymen found themselves in the peculiar position of walking around Athens alongside German diplomats and 'embassy officials' (in reality intelligence operatives gathering data for the impending German invasion). As Greece was still a neutral country, the New Zealanders were cautioned not to provoke the Germans which might cause an 'international incident', a strange irony of the war.

In February 1941 a composite operating unit under the command of Lieutenant Cliff Chapman and consisting of 64 other ranks was also preparing to leave for Greece. However, this project was abandoned before they departed and the railwaymen returned to their original units.

Meanwhile the New Zealand Prime Minister, Peter Fraser, agreed to the broader use of New Zealand soldiers in Greece believing that it had already been discussed with Freyberg. Freyberg thought the British had already discussed it with Fraser. Neither was strictly true. The British had effectively played both ends against the middle and as a result the bulk of the New Zealand Division was transported to Greece in March 1941 as part of a force (under Middle East command) which included the 6th Australian Division and a British armoured brigade.

A few weeks after arriving Freyberg recorded in his diary in particularly blunt terms what the New Zealanders could expect. 'The situation is a grave one; we shall be fighting against heavy odds in a plan that has been ill-conceived, and one that violates every principle of military strategy.'

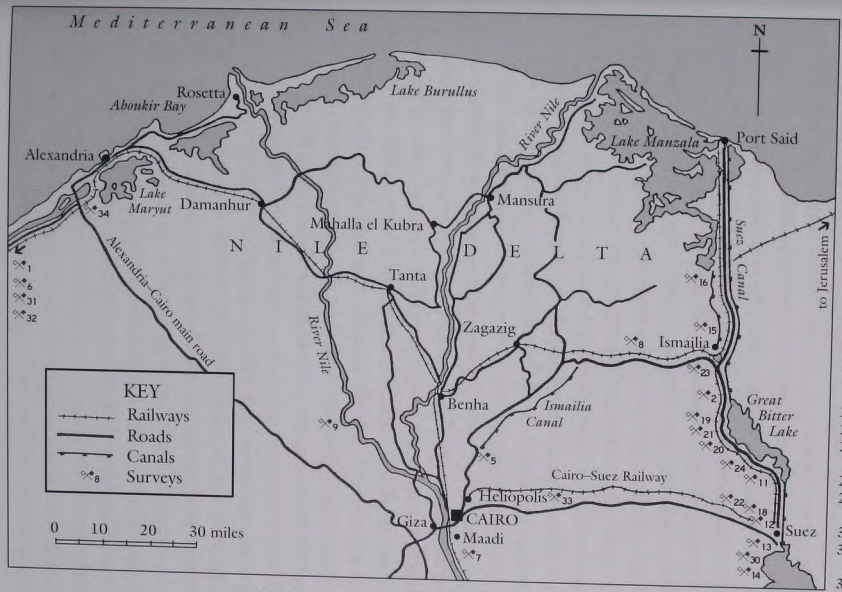
Then, on 29 March 1941, a composite unit commanded by Major Smith, which was to eventually comprise seven officers and 262 other ranks, was set to leave for Greece. Only the advance party, carrying valuable railway tools and equipment, arrived at Piraeus Harbour to be welcomed by heavy German bombing. On 6 April the German panzers streamed across the border against the combined New Zealand, Australian and Greek forces. They had greater numbers, superior weaponry and an air force which dominated the skies because the Allies' air cover was virtually nil. To try to hold the ground and fight against such

overwhelmingly superior forces would have been military suicide, so the Allies conducted a fighting withdrawal all the way back to the sea.

Greece clearly could not be held and the advance party of the composite unit of railwaymen was recalled as soon as it had arrived. Fortunately, all the irreplaceable tools and equipment, which was the responsibility of Sergeant Jack Molloy, was also returned to Alexandria and eventually to El Dabaa. Sapper L.E. Fischer was captured by the advancing Germans and became the first railway prisoner-of-war. All the other members of the composite railway unit were returned to their original units on 2 May 1941.

The Suez Canal Zone was another theatre of war that the railwaymen became involved in. All war equipment was shipped to Egypt via the Red Sea since the Axis powers had gained naval supremacy in the Mediterranean, thus the Suez Canal ports were absolutely vital to the Allied war effort. The series of ports along this waterway were linked by rail, which eventually joined the main Cairo–Suez line heading westward. Extending from Kantara, at Lake Menzala down to Suez, at the northern reach of the Red Sea, and along the Great Bitter Lake, ports were serviced by railway lines. As ships berthed alongside the wharves, rakes of wagons would pull alongside to be loaded and marshalled into trains, dockside workers unloading their cargoes by steam crane. The British War office could not rely on the Egyptians to keep the important docks functioning and in a delicate game of diplomacy arranged for units of the Railway Group to 'assist' in operations.

On 28 May 1941, the 17th ROC commanded by Major Poole, which had originally been dispatched to the desolate Bedouin village of Burg el Arab, was ordered back east to Geneifa, in the canal zone. Their colleagues in the 16th Company were sent to El Hirsh near the Suez Canal to run the shunting services. It was imperative that equipment be unloaded and transported as quickly as possible, and the New Zealanders were called upon to operate the shunting services required. Marshalling a train together is not a simple matter of coupling up individual wagons and then attaching them to a main-line locomotive. Certain wagons would be detached at stations en route so it was important that the train guard knew in what order wagons were marshalled. Those men not employed to operate the shunting locomotives or work



Map2: Eighth Army depots in the Nile delta

Survey sites

1. Western Desert Railway Extension
2. Abu Sultan No 9 BAD
5. Abu Zabal. Reconnaissance
6. El Hammam. Layout of BOD
7. Tura Caves. Sidingds
8. Qassassin. RE Depots
9. Katatba. Depot areas and camp
11. Geneifa. Depots, etc
12. Suez. RE Stores Depot
13. Suez. Petroleum Basin
14. Suez–Ataqa Rail connection
15. El Kirsh Depots
16. Qantara Bridge site
18. Cairo–Suez Railway
19. Suez–Ismailia (Dup.) Reconnaissance
20. Treaty Loop Siding K40
21. Treaty Loop Extension
22. Agroud Depot Extension
23. Nitisha Bridge sites
24. Fayid–Geneifa. Misc Sidings
30. Ataqa Foreshore
33. Daeb el Hagg. Contour Survey
34. El Amirya. Depot

in the marshalling yards were utilised as labourers or overseers of local labour, certainly not the most efficient use of skilled men. A former railway sapper recalls how Egyptian labourers would clamber up and over huge coils of barbed wire without any footwear. Their feet were so hardened and leathery, the sharp barbs could not penetrate. He also noted that they would run off screaming should an enemy aircraft fly overhead, returning a considerable time after the plane had departed. For many of the former railway sappers who worked in these regions, their memories are of legions of flies and general filth.

The Kiwi railwaymen found themselves working in places with exotic names such as Port Tewfik, Tel el Kabir, Fayid, Abu Sultan and where Army Service Corps (ASC) depots were located. This was not the all-important railway work for which they had volunteered. One particular task that fell to the railwaymen was the guarding of captured Italians who were usually relieved to be out of the war and only required token supervision. Most prisoners were put to use in digging slit trenches and providing labour for working parties. One pleasant aspect of having to guard the POWs was the Italians love of music, in particular, opera. A guard would frequently request a more able Italian to sing operatic arias with the remainder joining in the chorus. Many were extremely talented and the Kiwi railwaymen were treated to performances more often heard in the famous opera houses of Europe.

Not all the Italians were so cooperative however. On one occasion, a Black Shirt (the Fascist militiamen who formed part of Mussolini's personal bodyguard) who was among a working party, decided to try to escape. Edging out of sight of the guard, he eventually ran off. The railwaymen had been instructed to fire the first warning shot over an escapee's head, the second into the ground at their feet and the third into the buttocks should the first two fail to stop him. Two warning shots were adequate to halt the absconding Italian as he probably realised the futility of his actions and he did not return on any subsequent working parties. For the railwaymen guards, it was an alien reaction to shoot at an unarmed person, even if he was deemed an enemy.

The work was tedious in comparison to their experiences in the desert but the odd incident would occur and thus relieve the monotony. Despite warnings to the contrary about swimming in the Suez Canal,

the men would sometimes jump in to cool off. On one occasion, a group of railway sappers was enjoying a swim and some were even about to cross to the other side — 30-odd yards away — when they heard a strange blowing sound. Scanning their surroundings to ascertain the source of the noise, they observed a pod of Grampus whales coming towards them. They wisely made way for these large and impressive mammals, which blithely ignored the intrusive humans as they headed for the Mediterranean Sea.

The Germans regularly dropped magnetic mines into the canal at night in an attempt to sink a ship and block the canal to all traffic. To overcome this, the British equipped a Wellington (Wimpy) bomber with a huge magnet encircling the aircraft's nose, tail and wings. This modified bomber was then flown at about 50–100 feet over the waterway each morning before any traffic passed through, thus exploding the mines that may have been dropped during the night. The Germans had one success, however, when they sank the *Ranee* (a ship the railwaymen had seen anchored at Bombay while in transit). As the sunken ship could not be immediately removed or refloated, the canal was widened, enabling ships to manoeuvre around the wreck.

Another theatre that the railwaymen served in was Palestine, a biblical territory which, in 1948, was divided up into the modern states of Israel and Jordan. In 1517 Palestine was incorporated into the Ottoman Empire which then stretched from the Balkans to the Persian Gulf, the Caspian Sea to Egypt. During the middle of the nineteenth century Jews, who were often heavily persecuted in Europe, began migrating to Palestine where they settled in a more tolerant climate of religious freedom. When Turkey was defeated in the First World War, the British occupied Palestine and held a mandate there from 1922. Following the fall of France and the installation of the Vichy government, Churchill and his Cabinet felt that it would be a strategic advantage to reinforce their military presence in Palestine and defeat the Vichy forces in Syria. On 3 July 1940 Churchill ordered the Royal Navy to destroy the French fleet at Mers-el-Kabir in the Gulf of Oran, Algeria, after the French admiral refused to sail to the West Indies and surrender his ships to the American navy. This action strained Anglo-French relations and heightened the tension in the Levant. Added to

this was the incessant skirmishing between the Free French and Vichy forces with the opportunist Jebel and Druse tribes indiscriminately attacking both antagonists for their own gain. It was a confusing situation and thus potentially dangerous for British interests further south in Egypt. Therefore in May 1941, Australian troops were sent into the area and again the railway companies would play a role in supporting their activities.

On 3 June 1941 a contingent of the 17th ROC were sent to Palestine to operate trains on the Hejaz Railway network. Comprised of engine crews, fitters, shunters, guards and clerks, the New Zealanders travelled to Afula, a town located at the western end of the Jezreel Valley, halfway between Haifa and the River Jordan. The camp at Afula was in the centre of the town on what could be described as a show ground or reserve in New Zealand. This remained the 17th Company headquarters for the time they were in Palestine. The railwaymen found it very pleasant to see a change of scenery, for after the train journey over the canal, across the barren Sinai Desert and on to Palestine they saw greenery, notably crops, in stark contrast to what they had become used to in the Egyptian desert. The Jewish colonies (kibbutzim) which were spread around the country demonstrated what irrigation and hard work with modern methods could do.

Within a few hundred miles the railwaymen witnessed the transition from the past to the present, but not all they saw was revolutionary. In a scene reminiscent of biblical stories, they watched an Arab threshing his wheat: a tethered donkey walked continuously around in a circle crushing the wheatsheaves with its hooves, while the Arab, using a fork, tossed the sheaves into the air for the wheat and chaff to separate. Whereas the Jewish settlers preferred modern means and equipment, the Arabs retained their centuries-old traditional methods of ploughing fields, harvesting and threshing. Tractors were not about to replace the hardy donkeys that were an integral part of the Arab agricultural process.

It was often difficult for the Kiwis to understand the customs of the Arabs, particularly their attitudes and behaviour towards women. The railwaymen stationed at Samakh observed an Arab who had three wives. He was obviously a fisherman, casting his net in the same waters as had

his biblical predecessor, Simon Peter. This man would fish one day, sleep the following day, and then spend the third day beating his youngest wife, who was aged about 15 years. This riled the railwaymen who were unaccustomed to such marital practices, but they were advised not to become involved in case their intervention incited trouble with the local Arab population. It came as a shock to learn that a donkey or camel was accorded greater affection than many Arab wives.

The locomotives and associated Palestinian railway equipment were in poor condition, but the fitters soon had them in reasonable running order thanks to the two well-equipped workshops at Deraa and Haifa. Locomotive running gear is heavy and ungainly, but the fitters used their ingenuity to repair damage to worn parts. Without these valuable men, the whole railway enterprise could not have operated to the degree that it did during the campaign. The previous operators, the Vichy French, had allowed the locomotives and rolling stock to fall into disrepair and it was a credit to the New Zealand fitters that they managed to get them back into reasonable service order.

Being in closer proximity to water for locomotives' use was an advantage for the railwaymen in Palestine. The disadvantage was the presence of mosquitoes and the risk of malaria. Every morning the men were paraded and issued quinine tablets to prevent this dreadful disease, with the officer reviewing the parade ensuring that the men duly swallowed these bitter pills. In addition to this precaution, all men were issued with mosquito nets, a valuable possession in these regions. Another potential disease was sandfly fever with the precaution against this being to gargle Condys crystals. Ironically, one of the biggest causes of sickness in the Middle East was the ingestion of sand and dust, which caused many men to suffer diarrhoea problems, which often remained with them well into their old age.

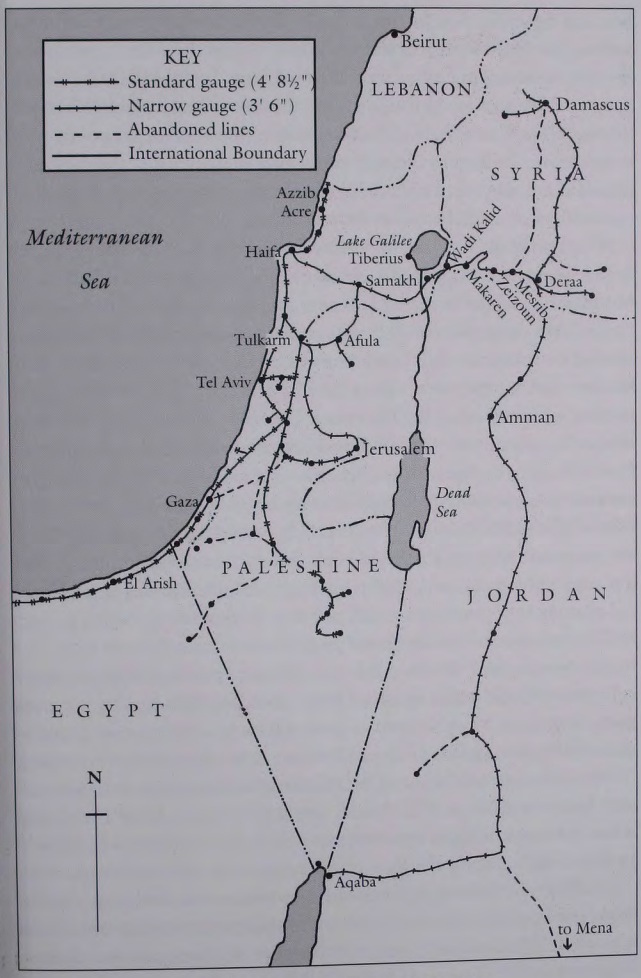
The line extending from Haifa to the Syrian border town of Deraa was known as the Samakh Line. Traversing the Plain of Esdraelon, it then wound its way along the floor of the Yarmuk Valley where it joined the main Beirut to Amman line at Deraa. The valley was quite narrow, varying between 200 to 400 yards wide, and incredibly hot in the height of summer. The Hejaz Railway had been financed by contributions from Muslims throughout the world. Construction began

in 1901 under the patronage of the Turkish Sultan Abdul Hamid, the Caliph of Islam, Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, Protector of the Islamic faith. Its primary purpose was to facilitate the transportation of pilgrims to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. The line was completed in 1908 with the network extending to a total length of 812 miles, covering some of the most desolate and inhospitable land in the world.

When hostilities broke out between the British and Ottoman empires in 1914, the Turkish Army quickly commandeered the railway — initially built for religious purposes — to use in the waging of war. The railway provided a means to transport troops southward in their attempts to take the Suez Canal. However, the British officer, T.E. Lawrence — who gained fame as Lawrence of Arabia — accompanied by his loyalist Arab partisans, would frequently destroy sections of this line and disrupt enemy rail traffic. Trains were attacked, locomotives, rolling stock, even the track and stations were demolished, to prevent the Turks using the line.

After the war, the Hejaz Line became unused and fell into disrepair until 1965, when British, German and Arab engineers began to supervise the restoration of the network at an estimated cost of £10,000. The original line extended from the Mediterranean port city of Haifa to Deraa, Syria, where it branched north to Damascus and south to Aqaba. The line again branched before reaching Aqaba towards its destination, the holy city of Medina. With the subsequent wars fought in these troubled lands, much of the line has since been taken up, particularly in Palestine, where a line extending into nearby countries was pointless. It was the section between Haifa, Deraa and Damascus that was of primary interest to the British army in defeating the Vichy forces during the Second World War.

In railway terms this was known as 'heavy country, with steep gradients and tight curves — aesthetically pleasing for railway enthusiasts taking photographs but hard work for those operating trains. The most difficult section of line was between Samakh (today known as Ma'agan) and Deraa. From Samakh, the railway line rose from 609 feet below sea-level to approximately 1400 feet above sea-level to reach Deraa. In a direct line this distance is 30 miles, however, the distance by railway



Map 3: Middle East railways, 1939–1943

line was 44 miles due to the necessity of the track having to wind its way up the incline. It was dramatic stuff. Near the Mezrib section of line, the tracks clung to a sheer cliff, with a rock wall of 200 feet above on one side and a 1200-foot drop on the other. Not a place to become derailed. The line switched back on itself rather tortuously as was demonstrated at Makaren where a train passed through a short tunnel, travelled a further five miles, then entered another tunnel situated almost 100 feet directly above the previous one.

Traversing such terrain took its toll on water and fuel and an engine driver who was not conservative in using steam, made hard work for his fireman and the brakemen. Trains over this section of the line were limited to a maximum of 230 tons and approximately 1000 tons were moved on a twenty-four hour basis. The locomotives the New Zealanders had to use were 1914 Borsig and 1917 Hauptman types, ironically manufactured in Germany. Complementing these were Italian Breda locomotives. The fuel used in these locomotives was a mixture known locally as 'masout' which was unfamiliar to the Kiwi engine crews and caused them a few problems. It was a friendly Arab driver who advised them to use it sparingly by deft control of the fuel taps and to ensure that the smoke be kept a grey colour for optimum steaming capability. Just one of the many trials and tribulations faced by the railwaymen when operating different equipment.

The railwaymen also operated another 60 miles of branch lines, one of which, was the Tulkarm–Afula line, with the junction being at Afula, approximately 25 miles north of Jerusalem. The railway was the same gauge as that in New Zealand — 3 foot 6 inches. Some stations along these lines were staffed by New Zealand railwaymen for the duration of this campaign. At Jenin, a small crossing station situated about halfway between Afula and Tulkarm, the British had a large fuel dump which was camouflaged by a blue gum plantation, fortuitously planted by Australians during the Palestine Campaign in the First World War.

Prior to the railwaymen beginning work on the line, a reconnaissance party was sent to check the line and to ascertain how much of it was suitable for military use. A locomotive with an attached flat-top wagon was duly dispatched with an officer, Lieutenant Brian Lucy, and several men. For protection the railwaymen also carried their rifles and

had a machine-gun with them. They departed from Samakh and traversed the steep and rugged country, climbing from 600 feet below sea-level to 1400 feet above sea-level, over viaducts and around curves which restricted their forward visibility. They knew that fighting had been taking place between Australian and Vichy French forces, but did not have the exact coordinates of where these battles were being fought.

Rounding a bend, the railwaymen were soon enlightened. Scruffy armed Arabs surrounded the small train and trained their weapons on the surprised Kiwis. They had driven right into the middle of an ambush and had no chance of retreating. One of the railwaymen, Pat Cowles, attempted to reach the machine-gun, but he was quickly discouraged by Lieutenant Lucy who realised the futility of their situation. Lucy realised that any resistance would result in a massacre and wisely advised the men to raise their hands above their heads in surrender while the Arabs disarmed them. No one could speak Arabic nor could the Arabs speak English and the situation seemed to reach an impasse as their captors milled around aimlessly. Eventually the railwaymen, tired of standing with their hands up, started to lower them. Noticing this, the militiamen jabbed the unarmed men with their rifle barrels with the unmistakable instruction for the Kiwis to maintain their uncomfortable posture. After 20 minutes of this, the railwaymen, growing tired of standing like this, defied the Arabs and lowered their arms.

Just as the situation reached crisis point, a Glub Pasha-type 'chinless wonder' British officer, speaking cut-glass Oxford English, arrived on the scene. The Arabs were from the Arab Legion, loyal to British interests and he was their commanding officer. The officer apologised profusely for his men's actions in 'inconveniencing' the railwaymen, whereupon Lieutenant Lucy, no doubt relieved that he and his men were not POWs, vented his anger on the British officer, telling him that it was due to his lack of control over the Arab irregulars that his railwaymen had been detained at gunpoint. Having read the riot act, Lucy and his men carried on with their reconnaissance. Travelling approximately 15 miles further on, the New Zealanders came upon signs of recent fighting, with corpses strewn about the line. Not wanting a repeat performance of the earlier incident, they decided to head back.

When they reached the site of their earlier ambush the Kiwis were

again stopped by the same Arab irregulars. A frustrated Lieutenant Lucy asked loudly, 'What do these bloody wogs want this time?' The reply was a request by the Arabs for a ride back. Lucy agreed and with much pushing and shoving, the 'wogs' clambered aboard the single wagon, dragging with them an unfortunate goat that was to be their evening meal. Arguing over who were to be the recipients of various pieces of the hapless goat, the Arabs were all set to slaughter the animal on the train. This was all too much for the railwaymen who turned the tables on their 'allies' and refused to allow the Arabs to kill the goat on *their* train. Fortunately they discharged their unwanted passengers further along the line and fervently hoped that they would never encounter them again.

Most trains were limited to around 150 tons and required a crew of between four and five men. With two men in the locomotive cab, the other two or three were given the unenviable task of applying and releasing hand brakes on wagons as instructed by the engine driver, through whistle signals. Each wagon was fitted with a small shelter at one end, and trains would be marshalled so that these shelters were adjacent to each other. The brakemen had to leap from one wagon to the next while the train was in motion and wind on and off individual hand brakes. This was a dangerous and taxing job and needless to say, very unpopular among the railwaymen. Unlike their locomotive crew counterparts, these men could not have a hot drink en route!

As with trains in the Western Desert, the Palestinian railways also received the unwelcome attention of enemy aircraft, although the aerial bombardment was not as sustained and effective as in Egypt and most railway installations remained relatively unscathed. On one occasion, a Vichy French pilot made a pathetic attempt to disrupt railway operations using a civilian aircraft. Flying over Deraa, he dropped a hand grenade from his aeroplane — a dangerous and usually ineffective manoeuvre, but on this occasion a railway sapper was wounded. Gerry Summers received shrapnel wounds to his buttocks, not serious enough to warrant hospitalisation but he was unable to sit for a while and was forced to eat his meals off a mantlepiece. He no doubt received a fair amount of ribbing for his inglorious injury!

Due to the unreliability of Arab loyalties, potential sabotage was a

very real concern, so armoured railcars were used to patrol the lines to deter enemy agents. One attempt of sabotage that could have resulted in tragedy occurred one night near Mezrib which, as mentioned, had a sheer drop of over 1200 feet on one side of the tracks. The potential for disaster was even greater because the train concerned was an ambulance train. Ironically, prior to leaving the station that night, the engine crew was ordered by a British officer not to carry their trusty Lee Enfield rifles and five rounds of ammunition, as they would be in breach of international law for a Red Cross train. The engine driver refused to take the train into hostile territory unless he and his fireman were armed. After debating the issue, the officer relented and the train departed.

The train was proceeding down the grade a mile past Ziezoun when the locomotive collided with a large rock that had been deliberately placed on the rails. At the moment of impact the locomotive rose up off the rails and the rock was sent careering away down the cliff into the valley far below. The locomotive did not derail but settled back onto the tracks. The crew immediately detrained to examine the damage despite it being a pitch-black night. A cylinder and connecting rods were bent and buckled rendering the locomotive immovable until they were disconnected and removed. After several hours of labour, the men had the rods off and tossed them down the cliff (where they possibly remain). With the locomotive being mobile again, they freewheeled the train down the slope onto Wadi Khalid, where they telephoned their colleagues at Samakh to explain what had happened. Headquarters then arranged for another locomotive to be sent out as a replacement. Sapper R.H. (Jock) Walker and Sapper N.W. (Twig) Leaf then settled down to spend the rest of the night next to their locomotive, nervously imagining every noise to be a saboteur.

While stationed in Palestine, many of the railwaymen made the most of their opportunities to visit ancient and historical places, particularly Jerusalem. They also had the unique opportunity to meet several members of the Trans-Jordan Arab Legion. The Legion was made up of Arab regulars but commanded by an English Colonel, Glub Pasha, and served by British, French, Australian and even New Zealand officers. The railwaymen first encountered the Arab Legion when one of their officers in splendid Arab dress blocked the station doorway at

Makaren. The Kiwi railwaymen approached the doorway with the attitude of 'out of the way, wog' when the Arab asked them in faultless English, 'Where do you come from Kiwi — Pakuranga?' (He was a New Zealander, who used to live in Auckland).

Despite being an officer, the railwaymen responded by asking the Arab legionnaire, 'What are you doing in that giggle suit?' To which the officer replied, 'Have applied to the division, but we are needed here. Do you have a canteen?' 'Sure,' replied the friendly Kiwi, 'at Samakh.' 'See you then,' replied the Arab, and left. He must have liked the response he received from the New Zealanders, for three days later, three Arab Legion officers, an Australian, a New Zealander and an Englishman, rode into the New Zealand camp at Samakh and remained for several days, enjoying the hospitality offered by the railwaymen.

As the railwaymen had not been granted leave for a considerable period, the temptation to indulge in 'unauthorised absences' became too hard to resist for the more adventurous. Liquor was fairly readily available to the men stationed at Samakh which led to one railwayman, Sheff Parris, taking some time off to enjoy the local concoctions (many of which were of dubious origin). But he was caught and put on cookhouse fatigues, his punishment to prepare breakfast for his mates. He was duly woken at 0500 hours despite being in a 'fairly fragile' condition. The morning menu was to include scrambled eggs, which were in very short supply. Sheff dutifully broke seven dozen pigeon eggs into a dixie but the sight of them made the already delicate sapper even more queasy. His nausea was worsened by the foul stench rising from the eggs as around ten percent of them were rotten.

It was then that the cook, Fred Stott, appeared, attracted by the putrid odour emanating from his kitchen. Fred took one look at the horrible mess and ordered Sheff to skim off as many of the rotten eggs as possible. As no more eggs were available, the cook had little choice but to carry on and make breakfast, even if it did contain contaminated eggs. The whole revolting mess was duly mixed and despite looking reasonably okay, it smelt vile. Knowing that the waking railwaymen would notice the smell, the cook cunningly decided to disguise this by adding copious quantities of curry powder. Fred then carefully cooked the eggs and garnished them with a strip or two of bacon. Both Sheff

and Fred wisely abstained from breakfast that morning, selflessly leaving more for their mates who were pleasantly surprised to find their scrambled eggs enhanced with curry. The meal was gratefully received and went down without complaint, even resulting in Fred and Sheff being complimented on their 'haute cuisine'!

The Kiwi railwaymen were also the recipients of Jewish hospitality when they were invited to the first ever kibbutz established in Palestine (Degania A), on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, originally founded by Joseph Baratz. The Jewish kibbutz was not only a communal farming centre where everybody worked and coexisted, it also provided a means of protection. The central accommodation and dining hall were surrounded by high wire-netting fences, with the gates being patrolled by female guards. Usually the gates were well lit, but the guards always stood in the darkness and the only indication a visitor had that they were there was a word, 'Halt!', and the click of a rifle being cocked. They would shoot those challenged if they were not satisfied with the response. The hostility between Jewish settlers and Palestinian Arabs necessitated such forms of protection. Separating the Arabs and Jews were the Palestinian Police Force (who were British); their job being dangerous and thankless. Whatever law they were obliged to enforce, could be interpreted as being to the detriment of either faction, with offence being taken. They endured a lonely existence.

One tragic event which marred the railwaymen's sojourn in the Holy Land was the untimely death of Sapper Geoff T. Gibbs, killed on the road between Samakh and Tiberias. The incident was never fully investigated to the satisfaction of the railway personnel, with his death being attributed to a car accident. The chance of causing offence to the Palestinian authorities took precedent and the matter was duly left unresolved by the military high command.

Sapper Gibbs is buried in Kayat Cemetery in Haifa.

Chapter 12

DESERT ENTERTAINMENT

Following the successful campaign against the Vichy French in Palestine and Syria, the 17th Railway Operating Company was again required in Egypt. Preparations were being made at a high level to drive the Axis forces out of North Africa and allow the Allies to gain unrestricted access to the 'soft underbelly of Europe', as Winston Churchill liked to call it. The 16th ROC had returned earlier to El Dabaa.

Life in the desert for the railwaymen could be extremely tedious when not on trains or under attack so they opted to expend more energy on entertainment, an absolute necessity when hundreds of young men are camped miles from the usual attractions and normal human activity. This situation was exacerbated by having to work well in excess of an eight-hour day under difficult conditions fraught with the danger of being bombed and machine gunned from enemy aircraft. The entertainment, of course, had to be self-created so the men set out to provide themselves with some suitable amusements. With the assistance of NAAFI canteens the troops soon arranged activities that talented — and not-so-talented — men could demonstrate their individual prowess at whatever took their fancy. For one young Kiwi it was the beginnings of a career that would make him a star.

Les Andrews had begun his railway career as a clerk at Timaru and soon volunteered for service with the Railway Group. He arrived in Egypt with the 5th Reinforcements in April 1941, being posted to the 16th ROC at El Dabaa. In the desert, however, there wasn't much clerical work to be done so he spent a great deal of time on fatigues, cookhouse, sanitary, canteen and guard duty. Peeling spuds and cleaning out the ablutions was not what he had anticipated when he volunteered to serve King and country. Les soon became bored and in

the search for something to relieve the tedium he requested permission to run a concert, which was duly granted. The Company had a large canteen hut with a stage, a piano and plenty of seating. Sadly, there wasn't a great deal of talent in the unit. Alfie Jones, the cook, played piano, Bluey Adcock the violin, Alec Davidson trombone, Roy Anderson could sing, Bill Bracegirdle told a good yarn, Peter Hunt, Bill Alexander, Jack Greenwood and Tim Board were willing to have a go at sketches, and that was about it.

The first concert was in July and celebrated the first anniversary of the Company's formation. There was a full house, including some invited guests from other units nearby. The commanding officer 'Swish' Aickin made an appropriate speech and, judging by the applause, everyone considered the show a great success. This encouraged the entertainers to stage more shows. Because of the shortage of talent they decided to ring the changes by introducing some novelty acts. At one concert the highlight was a beer-drinking contest. The beer ration was one or sometimes two bottles per week so the problem was one of supply. Part of Les's duty was to collect the weekly ration from the NAAFI depot some distance away. While on canteen fatigue with Bill Deerness, he discovered that if any bottles were broken but the caps were still intact they could have them replaced. Therefore they would collect the beer ration, drive out into the desert, break some bottles carefully and pour the beer into a 'borrowed' rum cask, return to the NAAFI and claim the replacements. As the beer had been transported long distances from overseas, the authorities weren't surprised that so much had been broken in transit. Back in the canteen the railwaymen poured the beer back into empty beer bottles as they became available.

Needless to say, there was no shortage of volunteers for the contest. Soon the concert organisers had selected 12 solid performers. The first to down a full bottle won a crate of a dozen beer. Captain Dick Pearse agreed to be the sole judge and present the prize. Bill Deerness opened a book and did a brisk trade, taking bets on the winner. As concert organiser and compère, Les lined up the lucky 12, interviewed each one about their training methods and aspirations to build up the excitement, and when all was ready he gave the 'One, two, three, go!'. To the raucous, at times ribald encouragement from the audience, 12

dry throats guzzled into it. Unknown to them two of the contestants, Jimmy Fisher and Bobby Macklan, could lay the neck of a bottle on their tongues, tilt their heads right back and pour the contents straight down. They'd have made good 'sword swallowers'. It became a race between these two, with Bobby Macklan winning by a short gulp. (The 17th Company also had its own beer 'guzzler': a sergeant who could simultaneously pour two bottles of Stella beer down his throat as if down a drain. No one challenged him to drinking competitions!)

Dick Pearse mounted the three steps at the centre of the stage with a crate of beer, made a suitable speech and presented the prize. Bobby, clutching the crate, seemed to be a little distressed but managed a smile, a word of thanks and acknowledged the applause. Dick Pearse turned to leave the stage and as he reached the second step Bobby Macklan vomited up what he'd just consumed in a great fountain, hitting Dick with a splash right in the middle of his back. Dick was a fairly belligerent fellow so everyone waited tensely for his reaction. Fortunately he laughed and went back to his seat. Les and his cohorts couldn't have planned a more dramatic end to the contest. Some of the punters were unhappy and thought Bobby should have been disqualified but the judge's decision had been made and that was final.

The main attraction for the next concert was 'The Dance of the Seven Veils' which was to be performed by 'Fatima, Star Belly Dancer from The Pam Pam Cabaret in Cairo'. From base-camp headquarters and with assistance from the Patriotic Fund, the concert organisers managed to get some dyed muslin for veils, theatrical makeup and a glamorous wig. Jack Greenwood who had played a dame in one of the earlier sketches agreed to be Fatima, while Alfie Jones arranged a medley of suitable belly-dance music. Invitations were sent to the nurses and staff at a nearby hospital and to other units in the area. It promised to be a glittering, memorable night.

About an hour before the show Jack Greenwood got cold feet. 'I'm not doing it,' he pined, claiming that 'everyone will think I'm a bloody queer'. No amount of argument or persuasion would make him change his mind. To leave Les in no doubt that his decision was final, Jack suddenly took off into the desert at great speed and was lost in the darkness. Panic. No one, of course, believed that an actual belly dancer

from The Pam Pam had been hired, but everyone was intrigued to know who would perform the dance. Les had to find somebody and he couldn't be too discerning about whom. It was a very tall order anyway, and at that late hour, not surprisingly, those asked — even begged — to perform, wouldn't have a bar of it, even though they had participated in other concerts. It looked as though the event would have to be cancelled despite that nurses and numerous officers from other units having had accepted invitations to attend.

In a last desperate bid, Les prevailed upon Shorty Collins, the company sanitary corporal. Being tent mates, Les knew his character and thought he would be game to don the belly-dancer apparel and perform in front of his mates. Shorty, dedicated in his work, was quite an extrovert at times and he seemed interested. Les, along with his cohorts, Alec and Bill, got to work on Shorty and gradually he warmed to the idea. 'All you have to do,' Les said, 'is put on these seven veils, the wig and a bit of makeup, go out on stage, do some PT, prance about a bit, throw off a veil, do some more PT and so on. It's a piece of cake, you don't have to be a dancer, you'll enjoy it once you're out there.'

Shorty, however, wasn't so sure and was still hesitant. Only twenty minutes to go before showtime he complained to his 'manager' Les, 'The blokes'll give me hell.' 'No they won't, they'll love it,' soothed Les. 'Look, we're stuck, you're the only one that could do it. I'll give you my week's ration of beer and cigarettes if you do it.'

That may have been the turning point. After some thought and a few deep drags on his cigarette Shorty agreed to do it. 'Right, I'll do it on one condition — that I wear my underpants under the veils.'

In Shorty's favour, he didn't mind showing off a little, and was reasonably enthusiastic; he had no hair on his chest and he was married so no one would think he was of an 'alternative sexual persuasion'. Against him were his total lack of stage and dancing experience, his height, and his countenance — he was just plain ugly. There was another aspect about his personage that went either for or against him, depending which way you looked at it, but that didn't manifest itself until later. Les had just enough time to get him backstage, into his wig, veils, bra and underpants and slap on plenty of makeup. At this

point, Shorty seemed to be looking forward to it.

The canteen was packed tight, nurses, their escorts and visitors occupied the front rows and there was a buzz of excitement in the air. For lighting, a row of pump-up Tilley lamps were placed all along the front of the stage. The show began on time and the usual entertainers, Les included, were well received. His most popular song then was 'At the Balalaika'. Alfie Jones, already well primed on his 'special' allowance of beer from the canteen, was also in good form.

Shorty, who was waiting in the wings, seemed to becoming increasingly nervous with each burst of applause. Les requested Bill Alexander, who was helping back stage, to keep a watch on him and make sure he didn't do a bunk. Then came Shorty's big moment, his stage début. Les went centre stage to announce: 'Ladies and gentlemen, at great expense we now bring you one of the classic dances of all time. This most passionate, captivating, alluring and sensual dance has been performed in the harems of the Pharaohs and Kings of Egypt for centuries. You will be amazed and aroused to heights of excitement you've never known before. For the first time in El Dabaa, direct from The Pam Pam Cabaret in Cairo, we proudly present Fatima, in "The Dance of the Seven Veils".' Loud applause rose from the audience and Alfie pounded the piano, but despite the magnificent build-up, Fatima failed to appear.

His 'manager' went to the side of the stage where he found Shorty trembling. 'I can't do it, Les,' he said.

Les went back to centre stage. 'She's very nervous ladies and gentlemen, give her some encouragement.' There was much louder applause and numerous cat calls. 'Listen to that,' Les said to Shorty, 'Now get on out there and do your PT.'

But Shorty wouldn't budge. Back onto centre stage went Les. 'One of her veils has slipped, just a little adjustment needed. Any volunteers?' Pandemonium ensued. 'I think she's ready now, give her a big hand: Fatima in "The Dance of the Seven Veils".' A big response as Les went side stage again to Shorty who was still balking.

At this point Les felt that more persuasive encouragement was required and told his 'act' to 'get on there you little so and so or I'll kick your arse in, you gutless wonder'.

'I'll show you,' he said. He whipped out his false teeth, upper and lower, and put them on the piano, raised his fists, jutted out his jaw, giving a such a good impersonation of Popeye that Les was convinced he was going to strike him. Before the whole act turned into a complete débâcle, Bill Alexander and Les Andrews gave Shorty/Fatima a great shove which propelled him/her onto centre stage landing in an undignified heap on his hands and knees in a smother of wig and veils. This brought a great response from the audience.

Some recognised him and yelled. 'Yeaaah Shorty, give 'er arseholes Shorty,' shouted a voice from the back. Slowly he got to his feet and stood there looking sheepish.

'Do some PT, ' Les yelled. With a sly, toothless half-grin he began to wave his arms about and wiggle his hips. The audience urged him on and, duly encouraged, he launched into some distorted callisthenic jumps. Tilley lamps throw a very bright light and Shorty's torso was plainly visible through the muslin veils. He, however, couldn't see the audience, blinded as he was by the brightness of the 'stage lights'.

Army issue underpants had a great vent in the front. There was a saying, common among servicemen: 'Big man little tool, little man all tool.' Shorty was living proof of its veracity. As he 'danced' more vigorously, his penis dropped out, unnoticed, through the fly and proceeded to flop up and down. There was uproar out front in the audience, the nurses and their escorts didn't know whether to avert their eyes or make the most of this unexpected display of 'erotic dancing'! Unaware of this graphic development, Shorty bounded about, gaining confidence.

'Throw off a veil,' yelled Les. He threw one away then struck what could loosely be described as the Eros pose — a kind of lunge with arms raised as though aiming a bow and arrow and providing a side view of his exposed genitalia. Throwing off another veil he sauntered side stage. 'How am I doin'?' he gasped.

'Marvellous, you're killing 'em,' stated his mentor. Back he went, with Alfie still pounding out his belly-dance music arrangement. Shorty must have then recalled some dance he'd seen back home for he executed what appeared to be a mixture of pirouette, *entrechat* and *grand jeté*. In the process he almost fell flat on his face and to cover some

embarrassment he tried to look coy and sexy. Batting his eyelids and pursing his lips he closely resembled a ruminating camel.

Out in front, blokes were rolling about almost paralytic with laughter. Reacting to the music and uproar he went into his final frenzy, leaping about the stage, leading with his still exposed penis and throwing off veils with exaggerated abandon. Stripped to his underpants he gave a great leap and landed side stage. 'How'd I go?' he gasped.

'You killed 'em. Get back out there and take a bow. Just listen to that applause,' said Les, as he slapped him on the back. 'You beaut.'

As Shorty bent low to make his obeisance all was revealed.'You bloody bastard!' he yelled, clenching his fists again and making a beeline for Les. Dodging him, Les sought refuge on stage where he made a rather long speech, giving Shorty time to cool off.

For the next concert Les and his fellow organisers planned a mock court and put men on trial for a variety of nonsense charges. For the court, Les enlisted the help of several stalwarts from previous concerts, Bill and Alec Deerness, Bill Bracegirdle, Bert Potts and Bill Alexander. They made a list of personalities in the company who they thought wouldn't mind being arrested on some trumped up charge, tried, found guilty or innocent and sentenced accordingly. Les was to act as the presiding judge, resplendent in a wig made from frayed rope, curled and treated with Blanco (a fabric whitener used on webbing equipment) to look authentic. Bill Deerness was clerk of court and the others acted as bailiffs and lawyers. As no one had very much they could afford to part with the fines were to be very modest, the main objective being a night of fun and entertainment. The 'criminals' and 'lawyers' entered into the spirit of it and came up with some ingenious and bizarre defences. The audience reaction was marvellous, so overall it promised to be one of our most successful shows.

For the finale they arrested their Major 'Swish' Aickin (nicknamed 'Swish' because he always carried a fly swatter on parade). The charge was 'dangerous use of a fly swatter on military exercises'. Various complainants and witnesses were brought forward. 'While the accused was returning my salute, your honour, he caught me behind the ear with his fly swatter.' 'When the accused was inspecting my rifle on parade, your honour, he shoved his fly swatter up my nostril.' 'Your honour, I

am also greatly bothered by flies but the accused has refused to issue me with a fly swatter,' and so on.

These were typical of the innocuous charges, which we thought would create a lot of amusement. As our commanding officer, Swish was respected and popular so we believed he would join in the fun. We planned to fine him three days CB (army parlance for 'confined to barracks') without his fly swatter. In civilian life Frank Aickin was a lawyer. The troops enjoyed his 'arrest' and looked forward to an entertaining trial. Unfortunately he couldn't forget his profession and did his best to confuse and defeat us with legal jargon and expertise. Possibly he thought that his authority would be undermined if the mock court were to ridicule him in the presence of the rank and file. The organising committee recognised this factor and thought it prudent to bring the trial to a conclusion. It was a tricky situation. The audience went quiet, and very soon, Les sensed the officer's mood and realised that soon they would be looking a bit stupid themselves. During a long speech being delivered by Major Aickin as part of his defence, Bill Deerness leaned across and whispered to Les, 'Fine him his bottle of scotch.'

One bottle of spirits was an officer's weekly ration. 'He won't like that,' Les whispered back. 'Go on, get rid of him,' said Bill. As Swish finished his speech, the 'judge' rose to his feet, banged the gavel and addressed the court. 'Order in Court. Members of the jury (the audience), you have heard the charge and the defence put forward by our learned friend the accused. Do you find him guilty or not guilty?'

Fortunately most of the chaps were still on our side so there were loud cries of 'Guilty'. 'Sir, you have heard the jury's decision and it is now up to me to pass sentence. You are fined one bottle of scotch which must be handed to the clerk of court within seven days.' The major was furious. The audience was ecstatic. Deerness looked smug and actually sought payment of the fine through the Major's batman. He was left in no doubt, however, that if he seriously wanted settlement he would have to apply to a higher court where the Major himself might be both judge *and* jury. Bill decided to flag it away.

The next day Les was transferred to Mazhud, a small station not far from the railhead north of Mersa Matruh. Along with six companions

he found himself stationed in the middle of nowhere, only desert to the distant horizons and nothing to do but watch trains go by. On the second night German bombers came over and dropped 76 bombs on them. The raids continued intermittently for several weeks until the arrival of an anti-aircraft unit. The ground was sandy on top but rock hard underneath so at first they had little protection. However, like the kangaroo rats which abounded in the area, they soon managed to burrow down and render themselves a modicum of protection from the aerial attackers. None of the isolated railwaymen suffered any casualties nor did the enemy aviators; the anti-aircraft artillery battery didn't hit anything either. Les, despite believing the whole mock court was a tremendous success, began to wonder if he had incurred the wrath of the god Thespis in the modern form of air raids — though the god was to look kindly on Les' talents in the future when General Freyberg requested that he be transferred to the Kiwi Concert Party. On his eventual return to New Zealand he would become a professional entertainer, radio and television personality and promoter.

Fun and hilarity was not limited to home-grown concert parties. Much later, after the general retreat back into Egypt, those men granted leave made the most of it in Alexandria. Bar owners soon became accustomed to the high-jinks of the New Zealanders and Australian troops. One bar that was very popular with the railwaymen was Penny's, owned by a sympathetic Greek who treated the men like members of his own family. Penny (they never discovered his real name) would look after the New Zealanders and tried to ensure that they never became too inebriated while in his establishment. If they did, he would retain their paybooks until they sobered up and could collect them. Paybooks were very much sought after by Egyptian thieves and muggers and those involved with the black market. He would even pay for taxis to take men back to camp rather than have them become targets of criminals. Many a good night was had by railwaymen on leave in Penny's bar.

Not all nightclub owners were pleased to host ANZAC troops. On one occasion a few railwaymen from El Dabaa, who were mates with some Australian airmen from nearby Fuka aerodrome, decided to visit a nightclub in Alexandria. The Australians were waiting to board ships to return home to defend their country against an imminent Japanese

invasion. They found a club and enjoyed an excellent meal, plenty of drinks and floor show. Knowing that they would soon be departing, the Australians devised a plan to avoid paying the bill for their evening's entertainment. Approaching the club's compère, they told him that one of the members of the ANZAC party was a renowned Australasian singer (Les Andrews) who was willing to sing and give a demonstration of his remarkable voice. This was a rare opportunity for the club, and the compère, duly impressed, agreed to Les giving a recital.

Les was duly introduced to the band and it was arranged for him to sing 'The Donkey Serenade'. The ANZAC plan was for the rest of the party to quietly sneak out the door and organise the getaway transport — 'gharries' (horse drawn coaches) — while the staff and remaining guests were enraptured by this antipodean Caruso. On completing his rendition of this difficult song, Les was to make his exit out a side door and join his companions while the applause behind him was still ringing in his ears. Les managed to escape as planned and none of the fleeing men was caught — a definite victory over the wily Egyptians. Believing that they had an excellent scheme for having cheap nights out, the band of friends tried the same ruse at another nightclub. However, word travelled fast among Western Oriental Gentlemen when money was at stake and the 'famous Kiwi singer' and his mates were confronted outside the escape door by angry staff and management who threatened to call the military police. Their plan had been foiled.

One fortunate aspect of being a transport service in the North African Campaign was being able to obtain fresh rations more readily than most of the other units. Desert conditions meant that fresh green vegetables were a rarity for most troops, but occasionally the railwaymen were able to purchase these commodities from local sources. One railway company had their canteen run by a representative committee: the men were required to buy necessities through it with the profits being used to purchase fresh produce. Surplus funds also enabled sporting equipment and musical instruments to be bought for the use of all.

While in Egypt, this same company spent an extra seven to twelve Egyptian pounds on vegetables and fruits. The comparatively low rate of illness, particularly scurvy, was largely attributable to this supplementary diet. Assisted by money from the Patriotic Fund, Christmas

and other celebrated occasions were well catered for.

Further to this enterprise, Major Frank Aickin devised a method of both entertainment and revenue gathering — all for the benefit of his Company. The venture was known as housie-housie, a gambling game similar to Bingo, approved by the army high command. The normal stake was one 'acker' (a piastre, the local currency) with the last round at night being a 'double header'. By prior agreement, the canteen held an agreed percentage of each 'house' as a contribution to company funds, with a small stipend being paid to each of the two 'house masters' for their services. During the game, the gambling instinct to place increasingly higher bets occurred with the amount in the 'kitty fund' — commonly known as a 'snowball' — building up gradually. When the snowball reached £5 the game was played out until this sum was won. On these evenings, all those not working would attend and good sales in the canteen resulted. Other units would let their snowballs reach £25 or higher. The Fleet Club in Alexandria had a pay-out of £80 on one occasion, quite a sum for the time.

Music and dancing was even organised while the railwaymen were still reasonably close to civilisation. At Similla, an orchestra was put together, which comprised of a piano, two trumpets, two violins, a trombone, a 'squeeze-box' accordion, and a set of drums. There was even a saxophone, but it was rarely heard due to a lack of expertise among the men. During one moonless night, nurses from the 2nd New Zealand General Hospital, encamped nearby at Gerawla, were invited over to the railway camp for a dance in the 'town hall'. Sand was packed onto the floor to provide an even and firm base with tarpaulins then stretched tightly over the sand for the actual dance floor. As much Johnsons baby powder and foot talcum powder that could be obtained was then liberally sprinkled over the canvas to ensure a slippery surface for the dancers. In what must have been an unnerving experience for the nurses, the dance was conducted under the watchful eyes of anti-aircraft gunners armed with six Bren guns who were charged with deterring any enemy aircraft that tried to 'cut in' on the dancing couples. Despite the event being voted a great success and no attacks occurring, no further dances were arranged due to the extreme danger posed by surprise attacks. The nurses were very valuable members of

the NZEF and needlessly exposing them to possible injury or death by attending dances in the combat zone was not worth the risk.

The YMCA also provided the railwaymen, along with all the others serving in the desert theatre, with entertainment. Travelling with a portable film projector and screen, the YMCA visited all the stations along the track showing a film somewhat temptingly titled *One Hundred Men and a Girl.* No matter how small the audience, the YMCA staff would screen the film. Their efforts to bring an element of civilisation to the lonely men in remote desert railway stations was always well received and appreciated. On one occasion the New Zealand Broadcasting service came and recorded messages to be sent home, and the Kiwi Concert Party gave one performance for the Railway Companies at El Dabaa.

Sometimes the entertainment took the form of a competition between the men. While at Fayid in the canal zone, two men were persuaded to engage in an eating contest. One of the contestants, 'Mac' McKechnie was rather naïve and subject to being 'had on' by his mates, while the other contestant, Steve O'Donoghue, was rumoured to have hollow legs, such was his propensity for eating. Goading Mac that Steve could 'out eat' him any day, an eating race was arranged to finalise the argument. Everyone became involved, including the officers, and in keeping with the culinary theme the army cooks donned traditional white hats while the 'waiters' draped towels over their arms.

Such was the entertainment value, a spectator stand was erected as was a totalisator board, with bets being made on the outcome. A long table was set up with the contestants at each end. The food comprised of one tin of bully beef, one tray of bread-and-butter pudding, another tin of bully beef and another tray of bread-and-butter pudding, with more being available if required. Once both men were ready, they were given the signal to begin. With much gusto they began to devour their respective tins and trays of food, but unbeknown to Mac, Steve had resorted to cunning in order to secure victory: he had stuffed an empty tin into the top of his shorts and as he scooped up his food he deftly shovelled one spoonful into the tin and the other into his mouth. Mac was so busy trying to clean up his portions that he never noticed what his challenger was doing. What Mac's supporters thought of Steve

cheating is not known, but it was a fun affair and it can be assumed that this form of 'winning' was treated in a light-hearted fashion. The result was Mac became ill on all the gorging and Steve won, thanks to his attached 'tin guts'.

Being New Zealanders, the sport of rugby was an essential part of the railwaymens' lives. Many had played in railway and provincial teams in their respective districts back home. Company funds were made available to purchase the required rugby boots, balls and jerseys, and various rugby clubs throughout New Zealand also donated equipment and jerseys. Rule books were obtained and referees selected based upon their knowledge of the game. Usually games were played within the companies, but there was a desire to compete with other companies and matches were duly organised. Wherever the railwaymen went, rugby games were played, even on the hard, unforgiving desert sand. While encamped at Similla, the men of the 16th ROC procured an Italian road scarifier, which was run over a flat tract of land deemed suitable for a rugby field. The scarifier brought the stones to the surface after which a small truck towing a wire-mesh screen raked off the stones, making the field passable for rugby matches. Their efforts were worth it when they played a match against a South African team, the Natal Caribineers, beating them 16–3. They later went on to defeat the tough Transvaal Scottish team 8–0. In total, this company played 11 matches between February and April 1942, winning seven games, drawing one, and losing three.

With various other rugby-orientated nationalities being present in the North African Campaign, matches were soon organised between South African, Welsh and English teams. The railwaymen also played against other New Zealand teams, some of which included All Blacks and rugby league representatives. The Kiwi railwaymen were not intimidated by the reputation of the Special Air Service (SAS) and challenged them to several games. Such was the prestige of the railway teams a demonstration match was arranged to be played at Beirut University, but the 'honour' was probably not appreciated as the primary sport at this institution was table tennis. Some of the railwaymen joined sports groups that would engage in a variety of activities. On one occasion, a sports competition was organised between the Officer Cadet

Training Unit (OCTU) and the SAS, with the SAS confidence course being the main event. It was a proud day for the Railway Group when 'Wog' Hansen from Dunedin won. The emphasis was on rugby but the railway companies always tried to encourage sporting activities among the men regardless of their age, rank or physical prowess. Being involved in organised team sports helped keep the men fit and morale high, particularly as their jobs were often extremely repetitive.

Following the 'rugby season', cricket became the focus of interest. Members of the Royal Army Service Corp. (RASC) kindly built a cricket pitch in the middle of the Similla rugby field. Using stones and a few inches of concrete, overlaid with coconut fibre matting, the railwaymen had a decent pitch on which to play. They enjoyed many games before being forced to retreat by the advance of Rommel's forces but later were able to resume their gentlemanly pursuit when the British offensive reclaimed the wicket, which not surprisingly had been unused in the meantime.

Golf was another sport played in the desert. With such an abundance of open space this seemed a logical game to take up, despite the lack of greens and grassy fairways. Near Similla, a nine-hole course was mapped out but the rules differed somewhat from those set down by the articles of the Royal and Ancient. If a player's ball hit a stone (of which there were plenty) and veered off course, the player generally just carried on using balls lost by previous players, as would those immediately following him. Eventually the players began to paint the golf balls red, as this colour stood out more readily in the dun coloured sand.

Chapter 13

THE DESERT RAILWAY CONTINUES

Shortly after the of the Desert Railway extension began it appeared that it might not be required after all. Wavell's initial offensive of December 1940, which pushed the Italians well back into Libya and enabled the ports of Tobruk and Benghazi to be used for landing supplies, pre-empted the need for the extension and so it was deferred on 8 Jan 1941. But with Rommel's counter-offensive driving the Allied forces back and re-occupying those ports, the Middle East high command deemed the extension the number one priority of the campaign. The go-ahead was given for work to resume on extending the line as planned. By the end of May 1941 the 10th and 13th RCCs were reunited with their precious equipment and the extension of the Western Desert Railway began in earnest.

The next stage of construction involved extending the line to Misheifa, 92 miles west of Similla, known by those who came to inhabit this place as 'the oven of the desert'. Being the furthest railway point from the Mediterranean, it did not benefit from the cooler coastal temperatures. With preparations being made to take the fight as far from the canal zone as possible, Colonel Anderson, officer Commanding the Railway Construction Group, promised the senior military planners that his companies could extend the line faster than originally anticipated. Once again the very able Indian pioneer troops were called upon to provide manual labour alongside the New Zealanders.

In an age when imperialism was still very much alive, it is interesting to note how hostility between races was put to worthwhile use. The Italian fascists in Libya had tended to treat the local populace with barely restrained contempt and harshness, which had engendered an

uncooperative hostility towards them. Among the prisoners taken in Wavell's successful offensive were a number of Libyan soldiers. And because they harboured a deep resentment towards their former fascist overlords, the captured Libyans required only token guarding and even formed themselves into voluntary work gangs for the railway companies, even though they were not required to work under the rules of the Geneva Convention. Even captured Italians seemed happy to be out of the war and were relatively easy to guard. These prisoners were used for railway work only on the depots in the canal zone where there were POW camps nearby.

It seems the New Zealanders displayed far more tolerance of the local peoples than that displayed by the regular British Army whose antipathy served to increase hostility and even led to pro-German sentiments developing among politically polarised Egyptians. This was later transmuted into acts of sabotage against the Allied forces. When the men from the railway companies had been working in Palestine, their 'neutrality' meant that they were more accepted by the indigenous, religiously divided populations. This did not mean, however, that the New Zealanders weren't prejudiced; most railwaymen would admit to referring to the Egyptians as 'wogs' — a derogatory term towards a people whose ancestors created great civilisations when Britons were still living in caves.

The first major railhead of the desert extension was at Mohalafa, close to the intersection of the main road from Mersa Matruh to the Siwa Oasis in the south. Siwa Oasis was an important strategic outpost in the desert that served as the 'backdoor' to the Qattara Depression. The western road was along the well-established route which took British Army convoys towards the Libyan border and the British units named this major road intersection 'Charing Cross' — no doubt as a reminder of home. The Kiwis took this up and the new railhead also became known as 'Charing Cross'. It was at Charing Cross that the railwaymen mistook a German Messerschmitt Me109F fighter (which had squared wing tips) for a 'Brewster Buffalo' fighter, operated by the Royal Australian Airforce. Fortunately the New Zealanders were able to get under cover as the planes came in for their strafing run, but several Libyans and ex-Italian pioneer troops were killed.

Due to the steep gradient out of Similla, banking locomotives were used to assist trains up to Charing Cross. These locomotives would be coupled to the rear of west-bound trains to help 'push' them up the incline, and then detached once the trains were on the flat plateau that constituted the true desert terrain.

A large marshalling yard was constructed at Charing Cross as a staging post for trains that would eventually travel westward. This was the result of an initiative by Colonel Anderson. Rather than build conventional railyards with loop sidings and shunting roads all parallel to the main line, Anderson chose to build a large balloon type of yard with service spurs branching off at varying distances. The three major commodities serviced by these spurs were petrol, oil and lubrication, hence they became known as 'POL' sidings. Other spur lines were specifically designed for rapid unloading of armoured vehicles. This method of yard construction had been experimented with earlier at Wadi es Serar in Palestine by 3 Section, 9th Survey Company. Such a widely dispersed yard made it a far more difficult target for aerial bombardment. As there was no lack of space in the desert, Anderson's design was adopted for further major railway yards with some yards having up to nine miles of service tracks.

While both companies were employed on constructing the line, it was generally decided that as one company worked on the extension, the other would then lay out marshalling yards and build accessories to the yards.

When completed, up to seven trains a day carrying in excess of 4000 tons of supplies, were brought daily to this new railhead, a considerable amount when the port of Tobruk could only manage a maximum capacity of 900 tons per day. If motor transport had been the only means possible, consumption of rubber, fuel and manpower would have been enormous. Later on in the campaign, trains hauled armoured vehicles from the Suez Canal ports to this yard from where they travelled under their own power to Siwa. Having the railway to bring the tanks all the way from Suez in less than 24 hours saved the British hundreds of tank transporters and the tanks themselves from desert-induced wear and tear.

The next stage of the extension was to Misheifa and the surveyors

The devasting results of German bombing and machine gunning.

Above and right: *An unexploded 2000 lb bomb is awkwardly removed from the camp.*

Below: *A bomb crater is filled with water when it rains.*

Right: *A pick-up truck freshly converted to a rail patrol car.*

Below: *You never know when a bomb crater is ahead of the patrol car.*

16th Company South Island rugby team.

16th Company North Island rugby team.

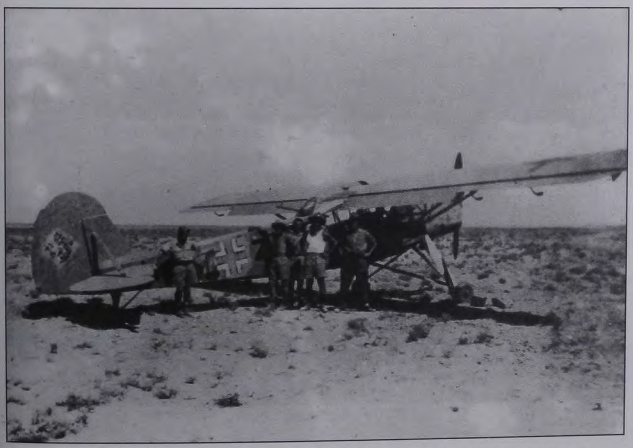
17th Company seven-a-side team which defeated an English side in Alexandria. Back Row: Gerry Summers, Tom Hayward, Max Wilson (capt.), Olie Reid, Frank Warren. Front Row: Ginger Morgan, Bill Tolley, Cliff Bradley, Ernie Pickerill, Joe Franklin.

17th Company and their South African opponents after the match.

16th Company Orchestra. Left to right: N.R. (Bluey) Adcock, (name unavailable) E.C. (Tim) Withy, Major F.W. (Frank) Aickin, R.S. (Roy) Anderson, C.O. (Clarrie) Smith, P.F. (Peter) Moir, J.W. (Jim) Cleary, M.J. (Mike) Quinn, (name unavailable) A.M. (Alex) Davidson.

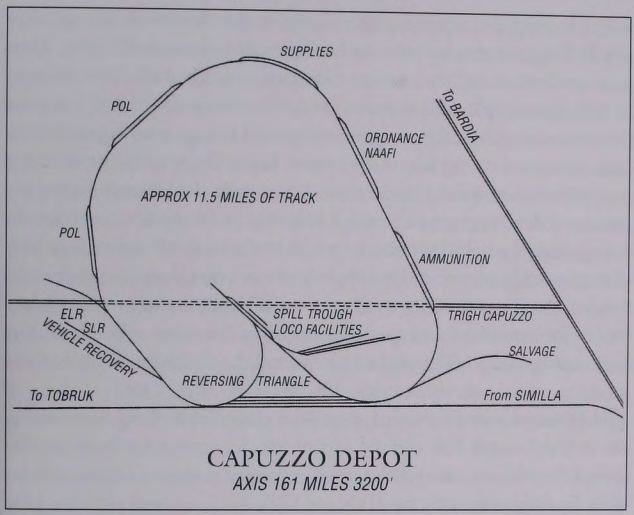
Bath time in the desert for members of the 10th, 16th and 17th Railway Companies.

Preparing a barrage balloon to fly above the train to protect it from German fighters.

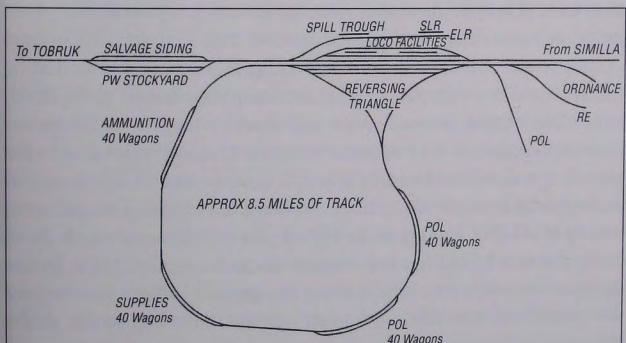


Captured Fieseler Storch 156 aircraft used by German saboteurs to blow up the track.

Earlier stations were built with corrugated iron; later the method changed to sandbags as added protection from aerial attacks.



CAPUZZO DEPOT
AXIS 161 MILES 3200'



MISHEIFA DEPOT
AXIS 92 MILES 0100'

Balloon Loop Sidings at Capuzzo and Misheifa were developed to reduce damage by enemy bombs. These were progressively constructed at all marshalling yards.

began to map out the most suitable route that would enable the sappers following them to build the line without too much difficulty. They were well aware that the construction companies had a limited amount of heavy mechanical equipment for earthmoving so tried to plan the line to avoid the need for large cuttings and fillings which would slow down progress on the whole operation. Ironically, major obstacles that had to be taken into consideration were washouts. Desert it may be, but the coastal regions of North Africa receive heavy rain and this rain falling onto the baked ground formed a myriad run-off channels, which in turn would become sudden rivers and wash out any man-made earth formations. To overcome this, culverts of large diameter were placed under the track-bed and spoil bulldozed in from the sides to anchor them into position. This served to channel the floodwater and prevent scouring of the valuable track.

As the route was surveyed, pegs were driven into the ground along the defined centre-line and the earthworks formation for the track followed. Bulldozers, carry-all scrapers, and graders (most sent over from New Zealand) operated by 10th and 13th RCC sappers were used for this work. After the formation was completed to its final level, construction trains driven and crewed by 16th and 17th ROC personnel would deliver track material (sleepers, rails, dog-spikes, fishplates, fishbolts, and so on) to the limit of the completed line — the railhead. Unloading of this material was undertaken by sappers of the Indian Pioneer Companies. The timber sleepers were unloaded longitudinally onto 3-ton army trucks (driven by RCC sappers) and distributed as uniformly as possible along the completed formation. The rails were usually in 30-foot lengths and weighed about 700 pounds each. After being unloaded from flat-top wagons on to stock-piles by the Indian sappers, the rails were sledged along the ground by light tractors and distributed uniformly along the formation in a similar manner to the sleepers.

With the sleepers in position the sappers could then begin the task of scribing the position of the rails on them and drilling the holes to take the dog-spikes. Tractors towing compressors moved along slowly to keep pace with the sappers who were using pneumatic augers to drill the holes. Indians would then place the rails in position ready for

bolting together with the fish-plates. Teams of sappers would then drive home the securing 'dog-spikes' with ten pound 'dogging' hammers — hot and tedious work under the desert sun. Where the rails joined, the fish-plates were bolted between the head of the rail and its foot. The protruding end mated up to the opposite rail and secured in the same fashion. As rails can serve as low voltage electrical conductors, flexible bond wires were then connected between each rail joint.

All the above work was followed by the 'reserve' construction company (either the 10th or 13th) doing the final lifting and packing and ballasting (with whatever material was available on site) and generally making the track ready for normal railway traffic. The two construction companies would 'leap-frog' ahead alternating between forward track and plate-laying and the follow-up lifting and packing into final alignment. This leap-frogging would take place at about two-week intervals to allow for the shifting camp to keep pace with the rapid advance of the line.

This routine repeated itself every day. While the process may seem simple to the layman, it involved a great deal of forethought and planning. Trains bringing the construction materials to the railhead from the Suez ports were loaded in a manner that allowed them to be accessed in the correct sequence as needed at the railhead.

Blinding hot sun and continual glare made this task backbreaking enough, but when the dreaded khamseen winds blew, work had to cease as the sappers could not see what they were doing in the billowing dust. The khamseen also provided another headache for the construction gangs. As the rails were raised above the natural ground level, they became an obstacle for the shifting sand. Wind-driven sand would build up on the exposed side of the rail until it reached the crown before falling in between the sleepers. This posed a danger to trains; if enough sand built up, locomotive and wagon wheels were vulnerable to derailing. Therefore, in the more prevalent areas the sappers were required to build low walls on the weather side of the tracks in order to provide a shield against the moving sand. Periodically sand had to be manually cleared from tracks and the specially designed walls. Another consideration the construction sappers had to take into account was level crossings. As bizarre as this may appear, there had to

be designated access points for road vehicles to cross the line. With the height of the combined sleepers and rail reaching approximately 8 to 10 inches, a laden lorry would be struggling to traverse such an obstacle, and risked 'bottoming out' if it tried. Tanks had no difficulty crossing, but risked spreading the rails with their weight and cleated steel tracks.

Despite the planning and frequent deliveries of track-building materials, the railway sappers were constantly frustrated by having to construct the line with mismatching components they had been supplied with. In wartime Britain priority was being given to produce aircraft, artillery pieces and armoured vehicles to re-equip the army which had lost the bulk of their heavy equipment when they were evacuated from Dunkirk. Producing railway construction materials was not deemed overly important. Instead, any suitable railway materials were hastily assembled from around the Empire and dispatched to Egypt. And because of the vagaries of war tracklaying equipment did not always arrive as expected, in which case the sappers just carried on working with whatever materials were available and the schedule was maintained.

As a result, the railway sappers found themselves trying to align rails into fish-plates that were either too small or too large, and butting together differing gauge rails. This was improvisation at its best and the line proceeded inexorably westward. During a working day, the Indians and New Zealanders laid out about 2000 sleepers, set onto the sleepers 350 rails, drilled 2000 holes, drove 8000 dogspikes and turned 1400 bolts. In order to meet the set daily targets it was necessary to transport approximately 400 tons of railway construction material from the supply dumps, unload and then 'snigged' into place. This would have been a significant daily achievement in ideal working conditions, but it was remarkable under the circumstances. Initially the railway sappers thought that they were making excellent progress when they managed to complete a mile of track in one day. Provided the sappers building this extension were regularly supplied with the appropriate materials, the line was sometimes extended at a rate of over two miles per day in a twelve-hour shift.

Such was the ability of the railwaymen they frequently outstripped the supply trains. Getting the track laid quicker than materials could

be brought from the Suez indicates how much vigour the men applied to extending the line. As the line progressed, soldiers who were sent to the front on troop trains, and from there by lorries, were frequently surprised when they returned to find new sandbagged 'railway stations' where there once was only bare desert. Long Range Desert Group commandos were also forced to check their precision desert navigation. Using sextants and compasses, they usually took their bearings from the stars and any significant land feature. Imagine their surprise when they found a railway line when their original intelligence indicated only featureless desert terrain!

In addition to the actual track being laid, the construction of railway buildings, platforms, telephone sheds and loading banks was required before trains could operate safely and regularly. Once the track was completed, it fell to the 13th RCC to effect major repairs or maintenance, as they possessed a mobile workshop.

The railwaymen pushed the track through to Misheifa where the station was completed on 5 Nov 1941 in time for the 'Crusader' campaign and proved invaluable to the army as masses of equipment was railed directly from the Suez ports to the recipients in pristine condition. Wear was practically zero on armoured vehicles as they never had to travel over long stretches of sand and hard ground before going into action.

Ironically, despite its nickname of 'the oven of the desert', it rained in Misheifa for a week shortly after the station and sidings were completed. The railwaymen had erected their tents in dugouts approximately three and a half feet deep into the ground with sandbags placed about the remainder above ground level. Despite the torrential rain, they remained dry inside, testimony to the quality of canvas they were manufactured from. It was with some humour that they observed a duck calmly paddling around in puddles that surrounded their living areas. The desert was proving to be a place of great contrasts and contradictions. With the volume of rain falling, the railwaymen knew they had to contend with another serious track feature — culverts. These had to be situated at intervals to allow rainwater to flow under the track to lessen the risk of washouts.

The enemy knew of the strategic importance of the extension, of

course, and embarked on a sustained bombing and strafing campaign to try to halt or impede its construction. Ordered to destroy the line — and the men building it — German airmen risked their own lives to carry out their commands. On one occasion, two Junkers Ju-88 bomber aircraft flew in so low that when the first one discharged its deadly ordnance, the second plane flew right through the blast of the preceding plane's bombs. The German airmen seemed to be more of a danger to themselves, as none of the railwaymen were injured in this particular attack. The Germans persevered, however, and did have successes against the railway construction gangs. After one such attack, a gang of railwaymen worked throughout the night to repair damage caused by bombs. At daybreak they decided to have a 'brew up', but their break was noticed by a young subaltern (a second lieutenant) who took exception to their 'idleness' and demanded they return to work immediately. His demands ignored, he drew his service revolver and fired it into the air with the expectation that this would see the railwaymen smartly obey his commands. Again he was ignored and a veteran sergeant, George Sherman, escorted the young officer back to the CO's quarters to explain the situation. Henceforth, this young officer was nicknamed 'Two Day' by the railwaymen as that was the total length of his service with the 10th Construction Company!

Further west of Misheifa was an ancient well called Bir Abu Mazhula, which was to become an important water-pumping and unloading station. It was also a target for German aircraft on Christmas Eve, when several railwaymen were celebrating the birth of Christ by consuming a keg of fiery South African brandy. Unperturbed by the aerial attack outside, the Kiwis continued with their party until they were interrupted by a South African soldier appearing in their dugout carrying several cluster bombs in his miraculously still-connected arms! These munitions had time delay fuses and could explode at any second. What the *Luftwaffe* couldn't stop, this naïve soul could, and the railwaymen persuaded the man to walk out into the desert and gently put the bombs on the ground and walk away — quickly. Fortunately for all, the peace of Christmas must have been with them for the bombs did not detonate.

Along with building serviceable railheads, the construction crews

built dummy railyards to regular configurations in an attempt to deceive enemy pilots into bombing the wrong targets. The decoys were made more believable with false wagons, fuel, accommodation, anti-aircraft guns and other assorted rail-depot equipment provided by the Mobile Section of 85 South African Camouflage Company. Considerable ingenuity was used in building these dummy yards, even to the extent of having 'furnace glow' special effects designed to imitate a hot locomotive, and 'straw dummies' placed in slit trenches. To enhance the deception, some of the Bofors guns defending the false railyards were real. One former railwayman who witnessed many of these attacks conservatively estimates that for every ton of bombs dropped on the real railhead, four tons were dropped on the dummy. Moreover, German propaganda consistently reported the total destruction of the railhead complex!

There was a high proportion of enemy bombs that failed to detonate which often perplexed those tasked to defuse them, until a message was found scrawled on a bomb which read: 'From a friend in Czechoslovakia'. Undoubtedly a slave labourer had risked his/her life to ensure the bomb was relatively harmless before it left the factory.

In their enthusiasm for trying to lure the enemy aircraft away from the real railway yards, the sappers sometimes lit prepared fires around the dummy depots even before the enemy airmen had discharged their bombs. This alerted some of the pilots who would then seek out the real targets elsewhere. On one occasion later in the war a German pilot, defying the myth that Teutons are humourless, flew in low over Capuzzo and dropped a wooden bomb, launching what was, no doubt, his version of a decoy.

Chapter 14

HOW THE RAILWAY WAS OPERATED

By November 1941 the campaign against the Vichy French was successfully concluded. The railwaymen of the 17th ROC were ordered to pack their equipment and be prepared to return to the desert to relieve the 16th ROC who had returned to El Dabaa on the previous February. The men of the 16th ROC were now moving to operate the new Similla–Misheifa section of line, which had been recently completed by the construction companies. The construction companies were now preparing to extend the line beyond Misheifa to Fort Capuzzo and El Adem.

During the closing months of 1941 the railways came under enormous strain because of the increasing demands requested by the fighting forces. The senior military planners were extremely conscious that they possessed a reliable transport facility and knew the men operating it would not compromise in meeting demands. It became a double-edged sword for the railwaymen. The greater effort they exerted in delivering vital war materiel created a precedent which resulted in men working extremely long and arduous shifts to satisfy demands. However, being a war situation, the railwaymen were acutely aware of their responsibilities to supply their comrades and did so unstintingly. Despite the duration of shifts, lack of sleep, and stress, they never complained and completed shifts lasting days at a time. 'Sleep' was often whatever could be had on a hard steel floor of a locomotive, or lying in a stifling tent during the day, plagued by flies and other more dangerous insects. Meals were always irregular, particularly for those railwaymen who were posted to block-stations or operating trains. Cooks could not set regular meal times as the men were frequently working during 'normal'

eating times. Needless to say, many meals that were prepared fell well short of the cordon bleu standard!

During November 1941, torrential rain created washouts along the line, resulting in many train delays. Trains had to run at reduced speed, between five and eight miles per hour, making long shifts even worse. When the railway operating companies took over completely from the Egyptians, it was the older engine drivers who shouldered the bulk of the driving duties as the younger drivers were gradually worked into the general operational roster. It should be explained, the process of gaining a steam engine drivers qualification, in New Zealand, was an involved and lengthy exercise. It often took an aspiring engine driver up to ten years to gain his ticket after passing complicated examinations and satisfying his superiors that he was capable of safely operating a locomotive and all the intricacies required to brake and accelerate a train. Even if he passed all his air brake, mechanical, rules and regulation examinations and gained his second grade engine driver's ticket, it did not necessarily result in him becoming a driver. Although qualified he would remain a fireman pending a driving vacancy. As experience was deemed a vital aspect to being assigned a driving position, it was with considerable trust that the military railway authorities consented to the less experienced engine drivers being used to relieve the older and more seasoned men.

Delays were also brought about in the desert by the incessant aerial attacks. One engine driver was driving a train which was attacked three times on one trip, making the forty-mile journey take about six hours. During the khamseen, train crews were often working in nil visibility without respite for hours or even days on end. Locomotive crews did not always know whether their trains were still intact and the guard was not able to signal to them at regular intervals to assure them his van was still attached. Trains breaking in half was a nightmare scenario for all those working the railway system. If the rear half began to roll backwards it could either collide with a following train or run back into the previous station and possibly injure the blockman on duty if he failed to notice it coming toward him in the billowing dust. Trains that parted caused mayhem when they rammed into stationary wagons loaded with flammable liquids and caught fire.

The trains that the New Zealanders found themselves operating were not equipped with brakes other than on the locomotives, let alone the 'fail-safe' Westinghouse brake system that most modern railways were then using. The Westinghouse system would automatically apply the brakes on a train if it broke in two and it became a simple matter to re-couple the train, recharge the air brake and resume the journey. As the desert trains only had brakes on the engine and guard's van, great care and skill was required in 'lifting' (starting a train's forward motion) and in slowing or stopping it. If the locomotive brake was applied too hard, the concertina effect could result in wagons derailing — not an ideal situation when enemy planes were lurking about and heavy lifting equipment was not readily available. Similarly, if locomotive power was increased too quickly, coupling hooks or draw-gear could fail, again causing delays. The guard who rode in his van at the rear of the train could also apply a brake to assist the driver in slowing or stopping; however, this required both men to know when to stop and unexpected halts could not be anticipated by the guard.

During normal visibility, a system was initiated that enabled an engine driver to check whether or not his train had parted while in motion. In midsection, between stations, the driver would give a prearranged whistle signal, and on hearing this the guard would lean out of the van and show a green flag or light. When the khamseen blew, an engine driver had to trust to luck and the 'feel' of the train. Usually an engine driver can appreciate the weight and feel of his train and would normally realise if this altered in the course of a journey. Then he would stop and he or his fireman would walk back to inspect that everything was in order.

As mentioned, locomotives were blacked-out with tarpaulins to avoid the light from the firebox alerting enemy aircraft that may in the vicinity. It also meant that headlights and tail-lights were not used. To drive a train under these circumstances was extremely testing on the train crews. Track faults caused by washouts, sabotage or bomb craters were impossible to see in the dark and drivers had no warning of such until they felt the locomotive lurch or derail. Being flung against all the projecting levers and pipes with the possibility of being badly scalded or burnt, was not a prospect that anyone wished to experience.

Armoured vehicles and even heavy trucks were supposed to cross the railway line at marked intervals where provision had been made for them. Due to their weight, tanks could easily 'spread' the rails or damage the track to the extent that it caused derailments. At the correct crossing points, the tank crossing was raised above the rails to protect damage to the track. But in combat situations these points were ignored and the track would have to be repaired before trains could once again travel safely over that section of the line. There was also the danger of sand drifts covering the rails.

As railways are generally controlled by the use of fixed colour lights or semaphore signals, the desert railwaymen had to devise other methods to safely control the movement of trains. Signals were not present in the desert for obvious reasons. Fortunately, all the railwaymen who worked in the desert had previous experience and training in New Zealand in how to keep trains moving in the event of a signal failure. Signalling was facilitated by the use of hand signals and coloured flags during the day and specially modified low-light lamps at night. Rules were adopted and agreed upon and they worked very well. The station blockmen had the responsibility to signal a train to enter his station and walked many miles during a shift to do so. In New Zealand, he would simply 'pull off' a signal (usually a semaphore signal) which informed the engine driver that he had permission to enter the station.

The blockman would be required to walk at least 600 metres from the facing points (the first set of diverging points that a train would encounter upon approaching a station) and display a 'caution' signal. This was an orange flag by day or an orange light at night. If the khamseen was blowing and visibilty was so poor the engine driver risked not seeing the blockman, then he would place detonators on the rails as an additional precaution. The engine driver, upon seeing the caution or hearing the detonators explode, was required to bring his train under such control as to be prepared to stop should this be necessary. If a train was a through train, such as an ambulance or armoured vehicle train (one conveying tanks to the front), the blockman would then exhibit a green flag or light indicating that the train was to proceed. A red flag or light indicated that a train was to stop.

Eventually, Kiwi ingenuity came to the fore and a rudimentary

signal was devised and put into operation. The system differed somewhat to the regulations specified in the Military Railway Manual, but it was designed to offer greater safety in the conditions faced in the desert. It was enthusiastically embraced by the higher authorities once they were made aware what was being done and how it worked. The idea was to avoid a multiplicity of rules, and therefore a uniform practice with simplicity being the key word. The railwaymen obtained some guard's van tail-lamps, into the base of which were fitted a screw socket. This screw was set into a lump of concrete so that the lamp could be securely fixed in correct alignment with the concrete acting as ballast in the event of strong winds. The lens was painted orange, creating a caution signal. In order for the station staff to be able to ascertain whether the lamp was lit, a small aperture was made in the rear side of the lamp thus providing a white back light. Ever conscious of aerial attacks, the signal lens was shaded by hand fashioned metal cowls soldered onto the lamp body. No light was visible from above. Finally, the concrete bases were seated into bitumen drums that were filled with rocks for stability. The drums were situated 800 metres from the facing points at each station. The caution signal then warned approaching trains that a station was immediately in front. When visibility was particularly bad, the blockmen would not depend on the signal being visible and placed detonators on the rails.

On observing the caution signal or hearing the detonators explode, the locomotive crew were made aware that another warning apparatus was only 200 metres further ahead. The engine driver then knew that the facing points were 600 metres ahead and that he must have his train under such control as to be prepared to stop should he be signalled to do so. This 'Station Limit Board' warning was a white board three feet square, with a large black diamond painted on it. On the reverse side were the letters 'SL', in large lettering. This indicated to engine drivers the authorised station limits and that he must not proceed past that point, unless he was in possession of the proper authority to do so. Immediately before the facing points was a further signalling device, a 'flag board'. During daylight the locomotive crew could see the track ahead clearly and the blockman would exhibit a flag authorising or denying entry into his station as the case may be. Once more,

ingenuity played a role to help in the smooth operation of train movements.

Many delays were attributable to trains being held outside stations until the proper authority was given. If the blockman was busy shunting a train he would be unable to bring another train into the station on a clear track. Fixed to the flag board were two shunter's hand lamps. These lamps could show three colours, green, white and red. A central white light inside the lamp body illuminated coloured revolving lenses, which was operated by a shunter according to what signal he was giving to the train crew. When these two lamps were placed one above the other, effective station signals were available. In railway signalling practices, one particular colour exhibited above the other represented a certain signal requirement of the engine driver. For instance, red over red indicates stop, green over red indicates proceed on the main line and red over yellow would tell the train crew that they were diverging off the main line and onto a loop or secondary line. The desert railway stations were now equipped with 'Home Signals' with a Station Limit Board representing the Outer Home Signal. However, the regulations differed somewhat on the WDE (Western Desert Extension). If both lights were showing red, the lower red informed the engine driver that he could not pass the Station Limit Board (Outer Home), and the upper red light, being the Home Signal, told him that he could not pass the Flag Board. If the upper light was red (that is, the Flag Board Home) and the lower (Station Limit Board or Outer Home) aspect was green, the engine driver could come on past the Station Limit Board (600 metres out from the station) and approach and stop at the Flag Board (Home Signal).

The Military Railway Manual authorised a 'through' signal (green over green) but this was discarded from general use by the desert railwaymen, their reasons being that a train required a 'line clear ticket' before it could enter the next section in advance, and secondly, a train would usually be inspected at the station in order to check everything was in good running condition and the whole train was attached. When receiving a line clear ticket, the blockman would relay any relevant information regarding the next section of line to the crew that was scheduled through. Such through trains would usually travel past the

station at walking speed only. To avoid stopping trains, the blockmen manufactured a 'bushman's tablet' which comprised a stout fencing-wire loop attached (soldered) to a tobacco tin. Most of these tins bore the picture of the silver fern which was associated with a certain brand of New Zealand tobacco. The ticket was placed in the tin and the contraption held out, loop foremost, to the oncoming train. Either one of the locomotive crewmen put his arm through the loop as he passed the blockman, and so received his new ticket, at the same time holding out to the blockman his own sling containing the ticket for the section he had just passed over.

This method also served as an excellent means of communication with important information being relayed to train crews travelling towards the front, often preventing trains from driving into raids taking place further up the line. On a westbound train destined for Capuzzo one night, the train crew could see the flash of anti-aircraft fire and exploding bombs on the horizon in the clear night air. Capuzzo was still 20 miles distant, but even from that distance they could see it was a particularly heavy raid. All men in the locomotives shared the same thought, *Hopefully the raid will be over before we are due to arrive.* At the next station, they received a note in the sling informing them that an 'Air Raid Red' — proceed only to the next station — was in effect. The next station where they were to stop and wait for the raid to finish was Musaid. Here they waited with two other trains that were laden with high-octane petrol (for aircraft), bombs, ammunition and foodstuffs destined for the front. All three train crews, and their ack-ack crews, stood outside in the bright moonlight watching events on the horizon. Suddenly they heard what sounded like a 'Wimpy' (a Wellington medium bomber) approaching. This particular aircraft sounded very similar to the German Heinkel He-III bomber that was widely used by the desert *Luftwaffe.*

Several of the railwaymen stated, 'It's one of ours', with others disagreeing. Their debate was soon settled when an aircraft emblazoned with the black cross and swastika, suddenly appeared at approximately 100 feet above the desert. The surprised railwaymen could even see the crew in their perspex cockpit. If there was any doubt about the aircraft's origins, it was soon dispelled when machine-guns both fore

and aft opened fire at the men below with tracer rounds. The railwaymen hit the ground as one and began to frantically dig their own personal slit-trenches in the soft sand that had been loosened by previously bogged-down trucks spinning their wheels to get free. As each man was hastily digging, he didn't realise that the spoil he was displacing was falling into the depressions of his mates alongside. Good luck was with them that night, for none of the men was hit despite the fury of the gunfire directed at them. The aircraft, having spent its bombs over Capuzzo, flew off towards the German lines.

For the blockmen, trains meant news, food and —very important — reading material. It was a lonely and often tedious existence being isolated in the desert with little or no other human company. And when they did receive 'visitors', they were not always welcome. It became preferable to allow some trains full of troops to pass by without stopping. If these trains were given permission to enter a station, several hundred men would detrain and make use of the opportunity for a 'comfort stop'. The blockman, quite naturally, had reservations about so many men using his surrounds as a toilet — the fly problem was bad enough without exacerbating the situation. Therefore, he would hold these trains outside the station and the troops could then foul the desert well away from the blockman's quarters.

At the more significant stations, those that were more than just a crossing loop — usually major railheads — even larger warning boards were erected. These resembled farm gates and consisted of two eight-foot high posts, ten feet apart with seven horizontal slats, each one six inches wide, nailed to the vertical posts. The gate design was to prevent strong winds from blowing the structure over. Painted white, these signs gave approaching engine drivers plenty of time to have their trains under control and be ready to stop if required.

The perennial problem of equipment being unavailable resulted in more ingenious methods being devised to overcome this handicap. There were insufficient lamps for use as outer caution signals so they had to be manufactured from whatever materials were available. Four-gallon petrol tins were ideal for this purpose. Equipped with home-made glass lenses and shaded by custom-made cowls, hurricane lamps were placed inside to provide the necessary lighting. Much of the glass was

obtained from downtown Alexandria where it was used to make small lamps for religious displays during Islamic festivals.

Authority for trains to proceed from one station to the next was given in accordance to the reliable and safe system known in railway parlance as the 'telephone and ticket system'. It worked thus: when a train was ready to depart the blockman would telephone the next station in advance of the train and request permission to dispatch the train from his station. If the receiving blockman gave his consent for the train to proceed to his station, then a ticket was written out by the blockman where the train was waiting to depart. This ticket was then handed to the locomotive crew as their authority to enter that section of track. As blockmen were not on duty 24 hours a day and others would relieve them while trains were approaching, all train movements and receipts of issued tickets were written in a train register book to provide an accurate record of trains in that vicinity. As each train reached its destination, the register would be adjusted accordingly. While it might appear a very basic procedure, it was imperative that mistakes were not made. During raids or when rail traffic was particularly frequent, it would be easy for a blockman, otherwise preoccupied with other duties, to omit an entry into the train register. If another train was dispatched into the path of an oncoming train, especially at night or in poor visibility, the consequences could be disastrous. As previously noted, the ticket would be passed to a moving train via the sling method.

The section of line between Similla and Misheifa was worked under the Electric Train Tablet System, a system familiar to the railwaymen as it was in widespread use throughout New Zealand at that time. The desert ETTS instruments originated from India, specifically the East India Railways system. After the Western Desert Extension reached Capuzzo and beyond, the telephone ticket system in combination with the home-made signalling system was the primary method of train control from Misheifa westward.

At Similla, the trains had to be marshalled into units according to the movement priority. At the larger depots it was necessary to have gangs of railwaymen of all categories on duty day and night. A great deal of their work, both at Similla and Misheifa (and previously Mohalfa)

was done at night under the strictest blackout conditions. Shunters were required to use their hand lamps with most of the lenses blacked out, leaving only a small circle of light in which to signal to locomotive crews what movement was required

At Similla and Misheifa, foremen working 24-hour shifts supervised shift teams who prepared locomotives for service. As the locomotives arrived off duty, men would begin the task of cleaning out fire-boxes, oiling mechanical working parts, refilling the tender with coal and water and generally examining the locomotive for signs of wear or damage. Any major repairs entailed the locomotive being sent back to railway workshops at Gabarri where specialist fitters and equipment were available. When the locomotive was serviced, it would again be utilised to haul trains.

Misheifa was a busy railhead before the line was extended and shunting gangs worked around the clock, shunting sidings and marshalling trains ready to be hauled away. When locomotives were replenished with coal at Similla, Egyptians were the primary source of labour. Occasionally Libyan POWs also volunteered for this duty — assisting their 'enemies' to help drive out the hated Italians! Since the age of the Pharaohs, Egyptians had become accustomed to carrying heavy burdens and they had little difficulty in carrying baskets of coal up steep planks from the wagons to the locomotive tenders. In contrast, the Libyans were frightened to walk along a plank even if it was only a few feet above ground. African native soldiers were also employed for this arduous task, and to make the work interesting they competed to see who could get the job done in the fastest time. Despite the Libyans 'co-operation', they always required four times the number of men than the other groups to complete the same task. With the Libyans, one quarter was always making tea, another facing towards Mecca praying, and the third quarter would be visiting the latrines, providing the sentries were vigilant enough to stop them from fouling the surrounding desert; the final quarter worked half-heartedly. In comparison, the Libyans made the Egyptians look like paragons of efficiency. The railway officers deemed them highly overpaid at a shilling a day.

Chapter 15

THE DESERT RAILWAY COMPLETED

By February 1942 the railwaymen building the desert extension had reached the border with Libya at Fort Capuzzo, 160 miles west of Similla. New Zealand POWs who had originally been captured near Capuzzo by Italian forces, were totally amazed to find themselves being transported back to rear echelon bases by trains — and trains crewed by fellow New Zealanders.

The next stage of the desert extension, the 72 miles from Capuzzo to Belhamed, began on 3 April 1942. Belhamed was a village just to the south of Tobruk (which had survived Rommel's siege when, on the 27 November, the garrison had broken out and linked up with the 2nd New Zealand Division). The railway sappers were expected to complete this section of track by 10 May, which was the second anniversary of Italy declaring war on Britain and her Allies. There was no compulsion to prove their abilities, but the men felt they'd like to extend the line as fast as supplies would allow. Their well-practised routines paid off and even the delivery of mismatching materials did not slow them down. They were ably supported by the 18th Army Troop, New Zealand Engineers, who did sterling work in keeping the construction gangs supplied. Without their valuable assistance it is doubtful that the line would have reached its destination in the time taken. As they became more proficient the RCCs started to push the limit of their capabilities, so that the laying of one mile of track in a day was no longer anything of note. It was during the Capuzzo to Belhamed section that they set the record for miles of track laid in a single day.

Production had been building until the day before the record-breaking day when they were unable to work due to severe sandstorms, even

with heavy clothing and motor-cycle goggles for protection. But the construction trains driven and crewed by 16th and 17th ROC personnel still arrived and had to be unloaded, dust storms or not, so that there was an accumulation of materials ready for a record-breaking attempt the following day if the weather was kind. That night, prior to this record-breaking achievement, an air of excitement prevailed in the camp of the 10th RCC, conscious of the fact that never before had any wartime railway construction company been presented with the kind of terrain that would enable a record to be set.

One hour from starting the 750 Indian and New Zealand construction personnel had laid one mile of track! By midday they had laid two miles. Now the supply train could move forward and deliver yet another load of materials. The railwaymen went at it with a will and by the time they had finished for the day, they had laid out a remarkable four miles of track: 8000 sleepers, 1400 rails, 5600 fish plates, 5600 fish-bolts, and drove home 32,000 dog-spikes. It has been estimated by a former construction sapper that it took approximately four strikes with a hammer to drive home the dog-spikes, equating to about 132,000 blows in the four miles of track. It was not surprising that the railway construction sappers all had excellent physiques.

The track reached Belhamed on 31 May 1942. It took the construction companies only 59 days to have the line ready for trains, averaging 1.2 miles of line a day along the 72 miles. The total length of track laid on this military extension of the railway was 275 miles, of which 250 miles was completed in 265 days — an average of nearly one mile per day. The army was delighted to have this additional railway line as it enabled more of their valuable lorries to be utilised to distribute war materiel to the widely dispersed fighting troops in the desert.

The railwaymen, appreciating being near the coast again, set up a camp at Gerboa Bay, east of Tobruk Harbour, where they proceeded to enjoy all the pleasures that the beach offered. The place even had a bit of scrub surrounding it thereby offering some shade from the sun and a place to hide should an enemy plane start investigating their activities.

In recognition of the united efforts of various nationalities involved

in the extension, subsequent stations were often named in honour of places in their respective countries. The Australians were delighted to see Gungadai station appear along the line, as were those of Irish ancestry when Killarney was 'christened'. To honour the contribution being made by Maori troops in the campaign, 'Waikikamoukau' station was named for them. Often these names were accompanied by fairly graphic illustrations by Eric Anderson, a New Zealand Government Railways signwriter from Wellington. General Freyberg visited the railway construction men and praised them for their unceasing toil and granted them an afternoon off work, which was greatly appreciated by the weary railwaymen.

Praise is also due to the Indian pioneer troops who ably assisted the New Zealanders. They stated that they preferred to work with the New Zealanders more than any other allied nationality in North Africa. When the extension was completed and the Indian companies were to be sent elsewhere, their commanding officer wrote to his counterpart of New Zealand Railways Group to express a desire to 'accompany the New Zealanders in their new enterprises'. He also thanked the New Zealanders for their 'sympathetic feeling, kind disposition' and stated that he hoped the same courtesies would be extended to them from the South Africans whom they would assist next. No other unit who served alongside the Indians ever received such a letter of commendation.

Such was the prestige accorded to the New Zealand railwaymen they were requested by the Middle East Transport Command to take full charge of the line from El Dabaa to Belhamed. When the 17th ROC returned from Palestine, they replaced their counterparts, the 16th ROC at El Dabaa in operating trains over the El Dabaa–Simillа section. The 16th ROC were then sent forward to operate the new section between Simillа and Misheifa. When Capuzzo became the railhead on 20 Febuary 1942 the 17th ROC operated from Misheifa to Capuzzo. The El Dabaa to Simillа section was operated by the 193rd (English) Royal Engineers who had replaced the 17th when they moved on. One former railway sapper recalls that the reputation of the 193rd ROC did not match the New Zealanders in their ingenuity and resourcefulness, for if some railway equipment was damaged the English would declare it unserviceable, whereas the Kiwi railwaymen would

endeavour to repair faulty machinery or find another part that would get things mobile once more. The control of the Desert Railway from El Dabaa to Capuzzo, and then to Belhamed now came under Lt. Col. Sage.

At this time, the plan was to take the desert extension even further and two railwaymen, Bill Borlase and Jim Goodison, were tasked with surveying the next ten miles for the extension and a likely railhead. While carrying out their survey, three German Mark IV panzers began to shell a convoy of trucks close to where the two men were working. Hastily packing up their precious 3½-inch enclosed-circle Cook, Troughton and Sims theodilite, they took cover. Although used to aerial attacks, being shot at by tanks was a whole new and unpleasant experience. A pick-up truck was sent out to retrieve the beleaguered railway surveyors. On the journey back to the junction of the Axis road, the men watched as a Hurricane fighter, streaming white smoke, made an emergency landing on a flat stretch of ground. They immediately went to the pilot's aid and he informed them that he had run out of glycol coolant, which probably caused the aircraft's engine to seize up. The railwaymen took the young pilot back with them to their camp where a message that the pilot was safe and uninjured was relayed to the airbase at El Adam. As the Germans had begun their advance, the pilot was informed that his base was being evacuated back east and that he to would have to find his way back also. The railwaymen were ordered by the CO to return to the Hurricane and destroy it to avoid the enemy capturing it intact.

Due to the imminent threat of the enemy advance, the railwaymen were required to 'stand to' that night as it was thought that German troops could attempt a beach landing and encircle the unsuspecting railwaymen. This never eventuated but the Indian pioneer troops were already being evacuated by motor transport with the remaining railwaymen following them the next day.

Despite the Allies being in possession of the Western Desert Railway and the Suez ports, the Middle East Transportation Director was anxious to improve the line of communication along the Nile Valley by linking the Egyptian and Sudanese railway systems. In conjunction with this idea, senior military planners also requested a rail connection

between Upper Egypt and the Red Sea. When the Germans advanced on Alexandria in 1941, the British High Command was acutely aware of how vulnerable they would be should the Germans take Alexandria prior to staging an attack on the Suez Canal. Such was the state of flux, British administrators in Cairo were ordered to destroy important documents lest they fall into enemy hands. Those Egyptians sympathetic to the Germans even went so far as to display swastika flags from their houses and offices.

Two officers from 9th Survey Company, Captain Halley and Lieutenant White, were sent to investigate the validity of such a proposal. The port selected was the phosphate mining town of Safaga, 250 miles south of Suez. A route was located along the wadis and hills from Safaga to Qena, on the Nile. The 9th Railway Survey Company was then directed to survey the 110-mile route for railway construction and the port for further development. After the barren terrain of the Western Desert, the port of Safaga had at least something going for it — seafood! The railwaymen soon fashioned lobster pots and were supplementing their austere diet with succulent, fresh lobsters that were, by all accounts, prolific in the warm waters.

Sappers from No. 1 Section quickly pegged the route that the railway would follow through the steep and difficult terrain, but owing to commitments elsewhere, New Zealand construction troops were unable to build the line. This task was given to the Egyptian construction workmen. Fortunately for the Allies, the Axis forces were halted at El Alamein, and the Qena–Safaga line was not required either as an evacuation point or as a supply route. Despite the time and money invested in this project, the line was never used and the track was taken up after the war. Yet again, the versatility of the railwaymen was demonstrated as the terrain between Safaga and Qena is very rugged and tested the surveying skills of the Kiwis.

In another attempt to utilise the Nile as a supply route and to relieve pressure on congested Suez ports, war supplies were being railed from Port Sudan on the Red Sea, to Wadhi Halfa on the Nile. These supplies were then barged down-river to Shallal where they were once more loaded onto railway wagons. This method of transportation worked well, but when the Nile was low, often for periods of up to

three months, sandbanks below Wadhi Halfa were exposed, making it difficult for river barges to navigate

To overcome this problem, it was deemed important enough to construct a railway link between Wadhi Halfa and Toshka, 63 miles up-river, where the water once again became suitable for river transportation. No. 3 Section of the 9th RSC were sent to survey a rail link with Toshka and to find a way to connect the 3-foot 6-inch Sudan Railways to the standard-gauge Egyptian Railway at Shallal. The New Zealanders then proceeded to survey the route. However, their efforts were not popular, either with local farmers or politicians. As the proposed route traversed ancient burial grounds and areas of cultural importance, the men were frequently opposed by various interest groups. Because of the political suspicion between the Sudanese and Egyptian Governments, and difficulties in obtaining permission from landowners and the Antiquities Department, the railway never got beyond being surveyed and planned.

Chapter 16

WRATH OF THE *LUFTWAFFE*

The war in the Western Desert had continued to rage even as the railwaymen, who were largely isolated from the land battle, continued to build the desert extension. Tobruk had remained under siege despite two rushed and unsuccessful British offensives to relieve it ,which resulted in Wavell being replaced by General Claude Auchinleck. Aware that his predecessor's downfall had been due to an enforced lack of preparation, Auchinleck built up his forces before launching the 'Crusader' offensive on 18 November 1941, with Lieutenant General Cunningham at the head of the newly formed Eighth Army. But Rommel made a counter-offensive on 24 November and mauled the British badly at Sidi Rezegh where the New Zealand Division suffered severe casualties. When Cunningham requested Auchinleck's presence to authorise a withdrawal, Auchinleck responded by replacing him with his deputy chief-of-staff, Major General Neil Ritchie. Rommel had also suffered casualties and was forced to make a partial withdrawal so that on 27 November the Allies were able to make a break out at Tobruk and link up with the 2nd New Zealand Division. Rommel was able to reimpose the siege on 1 December, but only for one week before he was forced to withdraw his forces back to El Aghelia.

The Allies were able to re-take Benghazi and on 5 January 1942, 27 railwaymen, workshop and locomotive personnel, under the command of Lieutenant McLenaghin, arrived in the town. The railwaymen's job was to repair the railway that had been damaged both by deliberate demolition and aerial bombing, to get shunting services operable and to move military stores from ships unloading in the port. The Italians were very bitter about the loss of Benghazi and their aircraft were directed to disrupt the occupying enemy with frequent and heavy

bombing attacks. The numerous 'Bomba Inesploda' notices around Benghazi were testament to the fact that the RAF had taken a similar attitude after the Allied withdrawal of April 1941, requiring the railwaymen to be cautious in their movements. McLenaghin reported to Headquarters that the line was serviceable between Benghazi and Lete depot on the Barce line, and between Berka and Guarsia on the Soluk line. Several locomotives were available, with one lightly damaged and several others requiring more serious repairs with spare parts being obtained by 'cannibalising' wrecked machines and even powerhouses. The small steam locomotives were only capable of hauling trains of 200 and 180 tons respectively. Only light loads of about 120 tons could be hauled over the hilly track from Benghazi to Barce, and even then the trains required an assisting engine for the first eight miles. Two small diesel locomotives and a railcar were found to be intact, but diesel fuel was unavailable at the time.

Having effected minimum repairs, the railwaymen began to move thousands of 250-pound bombs to a deep quarry about two miles distant, for storage. The Royal Navy, having requisitioned the small stockpile of approximately 400 tons of coal, it appears that rail operations on this line were very tenuous and not viewed by the Director General of Transportation as a vital necessity. In any case Rommel launched a counter-attack and the town was abandoned on 29 January. The bombs that the railwaymen had stored were captured by the Axis forces and then used against the Allies. The Eighth Army withdrew to the Gazala defensive line and Rommel's advance came to a halt between Mechili and the coast. Both armies then spent time recovering from the battles and building up their supplies and resources in preparation for the next.

Though there was a lull in the land battle, there was no let-up from the skies. Rommel's senior in the German forces was Field Marshal Albert Kesselring who, as C-in-C South, essentially gave him command over the Mediterranean theatre, though he was also technically under the Italian High Command. Known as 'Smiling Albert' because of his cheerful manner, Kesselring was an able soldier who had served on the Army General Staff during the First World War and between the wars was chief of the Reich aviation ministry's administrative office

and thus one of the founders of the Luftwaffe. During the fighting that led to the fall of France in 1940 he was C-in-C of the Second Air Fleet. For that success he was promoted to Field Marshal. He nearly won the Battle of Britain for the Germans by his tactic of bombing British airfields. Now, during the lull in the land battle, Kesselring ordered the wrath of the German *Luftwaffe* and the Italian *Reggia Aeronautica* to pour down on the Allies. They found easy targets in the railwaymen who were to suffer the most intense period of aerial bombardment as trains were attacked incessantly with the intention not only of disrupting rail traffic, but trying to destroy the whole railway infrastructure.

While attacking virtually defenceless trains was both an operationally sound idea and exciting for the pilots, it was a terrifying and sometimes lethal experience for the train crews. As has been pointed out, steam locomotives offer limited vision for their crews, even forward, and virtually none at all from the rear as the tender restricted their view. The only real view the crews had was out to their sides, but generally their concentration was on the track ahead, as this poses the greatest danger for a moving train. Enemy pilots also took advantage of the bright African sun and usually attacked from the sides, as this quarter presented them with their largest target area. Combined with the low ground haze and dust, this made it very difficult for them to be seen. On almost all occasions when trains were attacked by aircraft, the first warning the crews had of the peril they faced — because of the noise in the locomotive cab — was the horrific sound of machine-gun or cannon fire striking the boiler and running gear of their locomotives. As trains did not travel at fast speeds, the crew would usually apply the locomotive's brakes and then jump clear during the attack, trying to find whatever sparse cover the desert offered, even old wheel ruts partially filled with sand.

Maintaining blackout conditions was a priority for the railwaymen in order to hamper these nightly raiders. During the desert campaign, railwaymen were somewhat unnerved to learn from RAF pilots that the railway track stood out in stark contrast to the surrounding desert during clear moonlit nights. To the airmen, the rails resembled silver ribbons in contrast to the blackness of the ground, and wherever the

rails were darkened a train was traversing this section. All the airmen had to do was to line their guns up with the shadow and fire. To eliminate the risk of a pilot spotting the flash of light coming from the firebox whenever the fireman opened the doors to stoke the fire, a tarpaulin was stretched between the tender and locomotive. This certainly reduced the risk but created a hot and claustrophobic atmosphere in which to work. Moreover, the locomotive did not display a forward headlight, a total contradiction to normal railway regulations. Trundling along with a loaded train of heavy armour behind you and only darkness in front, being unaware of potential hazards such as washouts or bomb-damaged track, put the locomotive crews under enormous stress. The only light used was a small hand-held lantern to check the water level in the sight glass. And without lights, it was difficult to judge your speed.

The simple way to reduce the hazard of aerial attack was to run trains at night when there was no moon, except the trains had to run every day for the supplies to get through. The threat of aerial attacks created a tense atmosphere whenever train crews ventured out onto the main line. The drone of bombers, the unnerving swiftness of low-level fighters and even the terrifying scream of the occasional Stuka dive-bomber attacks, soon became routine for the railwaymen. When the Germans intervened in the North African Campaign to assist their erstwhile Italian comrades, attacks on trains out in the open became increasingly effective. The German aviators had had experience in close support operations during the Spanish Civil War and they put their experience to lethal effect in this theatre. Low-level strafing was a specialty of many of the *Luftwaffe* pilots who served in North Africa.

Former railway fireman Bren Campbell was firing a locomotive on the line when a German aircraft attacked his train. Leaping clear from the cab, he clambered under the locomotive tender to avoid being machine-gunned. The enemy aircraft fired into the boiler and as the boiling water poured out through the holes, Bren was forced from his position of relative safety. Looking for sanctuary, he dived into an old wheel rut and squirmed into the protective sand as best he could. Glancing up, Bren observed the enemy plane banking and watched fascinated as the sun glinted off the perspex canopy. The enemy pilot lined up for

another strafing run and Bren realised that he would probably be killed by high-velocity rounds, but to his immense relief, the pilot did not fire. Whether the pilot had consumed all his ammunition or decided to spare the railwayman's life, remains unknown.

Rail yards also became dedicated targets for the *Luftwaffe* and the Germans were so determined to knock out the railway that they began to use valuable 2000-pound bombs on the rail yards. All those working in these widely dispersed yards would often have to sprint for whatever scant cover was close by, usually little more than a slit trench in the sand. Hiding under trucks or railway vehicles, wagons laden with petrol, aviation spirit and ammunition, were definitely not safe havens. The most dangerous commodity conveyed by the Desert Railway was high octane fuel for aircraft, transported initially in purpose-built tank wagons. Locomotives could haul trains of 1500 tons of this highly flammable distillate, tempting targets for enemy aircraft. As the track was often rudimentary, train speed was limited to 25 miles per hour as derailments or collisions were as much feared as strafing. Fortunately none of the fuel trains was ever seriously damaged through aerial attack as the planning authorities always ensured that these trains only ran on the darkest of moonless nights and were safely unloaded before sunrise.

But the prime targets for the *Luftwaffe* were the locomotives, especially when their reconnaissance informed them of British supply build-ups. Machine-gun or cannon rounds puncturing the boiler caused steam pressure to escape. Once this pressure was lost, the locomotive came to a halt. Luckily, cannon rounds failed to explode on impact as the boiler steel was not hard enough to cause the rounds to detonate and they passed right through (this assumption is open to question as doubtless some cannon rounds found targets hard enough to trigger their detonating devices). Had cannon rounds worked as intended, the damage may have been serious enough to completely destroy the locomotives. Punctured boilers had to be reamed out and plugs inserted into the holes at the Gabarri workshops near Alexandria. New Zealand artificers displayed their expertise in repairing such damage with whatever equipment was available.

Locomotives were being knocked out at an alarming rate: in one

week alone 14 main line locomotives were rendered unserviceable by bombing raids. Prior to the 'Crusader' campaign the enemy launched repeated attacks against trains in an effort to halt supplies reaching the troops. Eventually 17 of the 23 available Class 8F (built in Britain specifically for war service and classified as WD in the desert) locomotives were rendered unserviceable by aircraft fire. Therefore new strategies had to be found to halt this destruction. Sandbag protection barriers were designed for locomotives in yards and depots but these had a limited value. Locomotives are workhorses and they were rarely stationary for very long. Only when they were being replenished with coal and water or having minor repairs effected, did they remain stationary for any length of time.

One method employed to protect the locomotive was to shroud the boiler with armour plating. This protection consisted of half-inch steel armour plating and splinter-proof asphalt blocks (as used on shipping), or concrete blocks, increasing the weight of the locomotive by eight tons. The addition of this armour plating had the effect of making locomotives unstable at speeds above 30 miles per hour, trials proving that it created more problems than it solved. Locomotives are not the super-strong, indestructible behemoths most people would assume them to be. They are finely engineered machines that can be easily damaged by altering their configuration in any major way. By placing increased weight onto the locomotives, delicate white-metal bearings would wear out very quickly and the all-important centre of gravity would alter stability. Even though engine drivers were supposed to limit the speed of their trains, the threat of aerial attack and the necessity of meeting timetables meant that trains frequently travelled faster than specified. When extra weight was added to the locomotive, bearings wore out very rapidly. And by sheathing the boiler with armour, the locomotive's crew had their forward vision seriously reduced — not a particularly safe method of operating a train.

The military authorities initially resorted to arming trains with specially adapted wagons. The wagons were old box-cars that had most of the roof removed to accommodate 50-millimetre Browning machine-guns. These wagons were then hauled either behind the locomotives or at the rear of the train. The idea was for gunners to deter enemy

pilots with return fire. Good in theory, but for a gunner on a slow-moving train, an undoubtedly unsteady platform, trying to hit a fast-moving aircraft with the sun behind it, was asking the nearly impossible. The next variation on this idea was to mount captured Italian Breda machine-guns on to flat-top wagons located at the front and rear of trains, but though an improvement this still proved largely ineffective. The railwaymen were such easy targets on a fixed track without any ability to dodge or evade the attacker, let alone fight back, and the very real terror and helplessness they experienced is exemplified by the following personal stories.

On Thursday 26 March 1942, four New Zealand railwaymen on leave were travelling on a Kiwi-crewed train to Alexandria. They knew that the *Luftwaffe* had been showing more than a passing interest in the new extension by the increased vapour trails in the sky by day and by night. The train was a composite assembly with flat decks up front loaded with damaged tanks coupled to a passenger carriage, followed by about eight steel box-wagons and guard's vans with Breda guns (manned by South Africans) on the front and rear of the train.

The New Zealand railwaymen soon installed themselves in the front of the passenger car that was empty except for some British officers in the rear of the carriage. Whereas the British officers enjoyed the comfort of travelling in the passenger carriage, they had ordered 200 of their subordinate soldiers into the extremely uncomfortable steel box-wagons for the journey eastward. Shortly before commencing their journey, a smart-looking British officer appeared and demanded to know why such lowly and scruffy-looking soldiers had dared to occupy part of 'their' carriage. Perhaps he had not met up with New Zealanders but he soon learnt how unwise it was to try to enforce the English 'class system' on the hard-bitten desert veterans. The officer retired, defeated, back to his fellow 'gentlemen officers' with his tail between his legs, having been assured in plain language that railway staff were not being treated as second-class citizens on their own railway.

The train commenced its eastward journey as the moon rose and reflected on the steel rails, the engine and that white carriage. The railwaymen settled down, curled up as best they could despite the cold. Suddenly, above the noise of the locomotive, they heard the

unmistakable whine of an aeroplane. In the stark moonlit brightness they knew that if the aircraft were hostile they would be caught out like sitting ducks. The plane flew closer but passed over them. With pounding hearts, the men on the train were relieved to hear the menacing sound of aero engines receding. Then suddenly, with no warning, the aircraft was directly overhead, causing the anti-aircraft gunners to open fire before anyone could even attempt to abandon the train. Immediately following the burst from the Breda guns, they all heard the terrifying whistle of falling bombs. After the initial response of the gunners, the Breda fell silent, the gun had jammed — captured enemy ammunition did have its drawbacks! It was evident that sympathetic workers, many of them forced into labour from occupied countries, would deliberately sabotage their own work to register their passive resistance.

A series of deafening explosions sent glass and woodwork showering in on the railwaymen, who by now had flattened themselves on the floor of the carriage. The train lurched to a halt, and the Kiwis all rose as one and jumped pell-mell from the carriage to lie prone in the desert sand at what seemed a safe distance from the train. They then began to hear awful sounds, moaning and screaming, coming from the steel box-wagons, and watched in horror as British soldiers ran, limped and crawled desperately away from the target. The plane made another pass, but did not drop any further bombs, presumably having discharged its full load.

For the New Zealand railwaymen their wounds were minimal — a few cuts from flying glass was all that they sustained. Sadly, the British soldiers did not escape so lightly. The shrapnel from the bombs had ripped through the steel box-cars as if they were made of cardboard. The New Zealanders quickly went to their aid and assisted in removing 19 dead soldiers from the wagons that were awash in blood. A further 79 were injured, some with serious multiple wounds. While removing the dead and injured, the men feared another attack and had their ears cocked for the sound of aircraft engines. On several occasions they heard aircraft overhead and quickly moved away from the train, carrying the wounded as best they could, to relative safety. Once the train was able to resume its journey, the wounded men were made

as comfortable as possible in the passenger car, previously occupied by the railwaymen and officers. The only succour they could offer the wounded was from water bottles that were replenished from the locomotive supply tank. Finally, the engine driver started the train towards Mersa Matruh with the railwaymen having abandoned their carriage to the wounded. The New Zealanders were very relieved that they hadn't given in to the officer's command to travel in the box-cars.

As with any armed conflict, there are always casualties sustained by 'friendly fire'. Due to a train's capacity for transporting men, the railways were used for extracting prisoners of war from the forward areas. On one tragic occasion the *Luftwaffe* strafed a train carrying German and Italian prisoners. Approximately 120 POWs were killed and many wounded. Most of the Germans were in locked wagons and could not readily escape the hail of fire directed at them. It was sickening to see men trapped like rats with little hope of escape. It is generally accepted that captors must ensure safe passage of their POWs, but as these trains were not of a 'humanitarian' type, as hospital trains were, they did not display the internationally recognised Red Cross emblem.

Hospital trains were painted white with the distinctive Red Cross emblazoned on both the carriage roofs and sides. Former passenger carriages were used for transporting the wounded due to their superior riding qualities. Enemy airmen usually respected these trains and abstained from attacking them. There were, however, occasions when either zealous or callous pilots did open fire on them with the expected results. In another incident in which a train was attacked (1 April 1942), Indian troops showed a distinct contempt for two German Messerschmitt fighters which strafed their train. The Indian soldiers, being conveyed in 60 wagons, were destined for Alexandria for some well-earned leave. They had been briefed on the hazards they were likely to encounter from marauding enemy fighters and what to do should the worst happen. Again the train was 'protected' by gunners mounted on flat-deck wagons at each end of the train, armed with two Italian 20mm Breda machine guns. At the 131-mile peg, two fighters were spotted and the engine crew quickly halted the train for the Indian soldiers to disembark and seek whatever cover they could. Instead of a mad panic, the Indians trotted a few yards away from the train and

mounted their own Bren guns into a defensive position. Every man aimed his gun skyward and gave the fighters a 'hot reception'. The German pilots made three passes, firing on the locomotive and the troops. The concentrated fire from the plucky Indians paid dividends as one aircraft was hit and hurriedly departed with smoke pouring from its engine. No one on the ground was injured and even the locomotive escaped serious damage. This minor victory cheered the New Zealanders and Indians and raised morale accordingly. The railwaymen thought very highly of the tough Indians whom they served alongside during the whole campaign.

Sadly, not all of the aerial attacks left the railwaymen unscathed. During a ferocious attack that occurred without warning just a few days after the Indian episode, enemy fighters streaked towards a train between Misheifa and Capuzzo. The train was at the 109-mile peg, between Hirsha and Habata stations, the closest point on the whole line to a *Luftwaffe* aerodrome. As cannon and machine-gun rounds stitched lines of holes along the boiler and cab, the driver, Bob Yeatts, slammed on the emergency brakes and dived out the door on the 'sunny' side of the locomotive. As he exited the cab, he was struck in the abdomen by a 20mm cannon shell, killing him instantly. His mate, fireman Harry Mettrick, jumped clear from the other side of the locomotive and bounced on the sandy ground, scuttled between the wheels of a wagon and, before the train had even stopped, attempted to seek cover. Harry was a most fortunate man, for he escaped being hit by machine-gun fire and survived rolling under the moving train. His railway colleagues were very surprised that his antics never resulted in his death.

Several of the South African anti-aircraft crew were injured in the attack. Bob Yeatts' body was buried by his railway mates.

No matter what rank and specific job they were responsible for all the railwaymen showed exceptional courage and humility when subjected to frequent aerial bombardment, carrying on with their duties, uncomplainingly, fully realising that so many relied on their services. Four railwaymen, all from the 17th ROC, were Mentioned in Dispatches for Gallantry on 1 May 1942. Sapper A. W. Bennett, Sapper R. Graham, Sapper R.S. Simons and Lance Sergeant M. D. Walsh, risked their lives when they detached burning petrol wagons from a train that

had sustained fire from an enemy aircraft at Mersa Matruh. Their actions saved another valuable train from being destroyed and denied the enemy a success.

The following day engine driver Percy Isitt and his fireman Laurie Jones had just arrived at Capuzzo from Misheifa and were temporarily away from the locomotive when several bombers appeared overhead. Despite the darkness, the locomotive crewmen realised that if the steam pressure were not reduced, the boiler would eventually 'howl off' once pressure had built up. If the boiler vented in this way, then the white steam would be visible to the enemy pilots, and when they dropped their flares they would be seen from a great distance. That would make them an easy target, putting the train and the other railwaymen at risk — a 2000-pound bomb would obliterate them if they received a direct hit.

To reduce the pressure from the safety valve, it was necessary to allow cold water to enter the boiler via the injectors, which cooled the boiler and reduced the steam pressure. The only way to do that was for someone to return to the engine — except that nobody usually dared leave the shelter of a slit trench during a raid until the all-clear had been given.

Laurie Jones told his colleague that he was going back to reduce the steam pressure. Percy Isitt informed him that there was a raid in progress and that the bomber was making its first run. When Laurie insisted on going, Percy tried to talk him out of it.

'Percy,' Laurie said to him, 'do you want to be blown to hell? He'll hit this place direct.' Percy replied, 'If you go, I go too.'

Together the two brave men rushed to their locomotive as the bombers made their first run. There were massive explosions on both sides of the station. The ground shook like an earthquake and to the other railwaymen waiting in the slit trench the roof seemed to move and the floor appeared to rise up. After the explosions all was very quiet and, not knowing if they were just deafened or the raid was over, they ventured outside to inspect the damage. To their horror, the locomotive was flattened on one side from the blast caused by a 2000-pound bomb and both Percy and Laurie were dead in the cab. The two men had tragically been killed in attempting to minimise the risk to their

comrades. The following morning the two men were buried in their army blankets by their friends, who were deeply saddened by their deaths. Many actions and deeds of heroes often goes unnoticed during the course of war, but comrades never forget and to this day, still appreciate the heroism of Percy Isitt and Laurie Jones.

The railwaymen were able to achieve some degree of protection from an unexpected source. In a display of co-operation between the services, two RAF officers boarded a locomotive driven by Jack Smith with fireman Norm Leaf, as it headed out of Misheifa. The railwaymen were both impressed by the amount of gold braid both airmen displayed on their sleeves and decided that these two definitely looked like 'armchair boys'. One of the officers asked, 'Don't you get scared — you're like sitting ducks, even at night?' After their initial questions, the two RAF officers departed without offering any real remedies. However, within days, items previously only seen over the beaches of Dunkirk and the docklands of London appeared in the desert — barrage balloons.

The cable for the balloon was chained behind the locomotive's tender and also at the rear of the train, with the barrage balloon floating 600 feet above. A small percussion explosive device was attached to the cable, which was designed to detonate and shear off if any sudden strain was applied to the balloon. From the underside, further stringer wires hung down from along the whole length of the balloon. The balloons, despite their passive nature, proved very effective (though some locomotive crewmen were not so impressed with their performance). The enemy pilots may have treated the machine-guns with disdain, but like all flyers were terrified of striking 'static' obstacles that could render their aircraft into scrap metal in the event of a collision. Any aircraft hitting a cable (or the balloon) could have its wings torn off or propellers sheared — a catastrophic situation under any circumstance — but highly fatal at low level. As a result, the enemy pilots were forced to respect the balloons and their cables and thus make their attack approach from a higher altitude and a steeper angle. This severely affected the trajectory of the aircraft's firepower, which reduced the amount of damage sustained to locomotives and rolling stock. For the railwaymen waiting at a station in the desert, it was an

odd spectacle to see a huge balloon approaching them long before they could see a train!

Despite the seriousness of aerial attacks and bombing, the railwaymen were sometimes able to see the funny side of being the targets. A former locomotive fireman, Ernie George, serving with the 16th ROC, recalled an occasion when an enemy aircraft dropped a 'massive bomb' on Similla that failed to detonate. As it fell through the air, it made a 'musical sound — something like the opening bars of an orchestra'. It landed in the ground with its tail-fins projecting from the sand. Ernie, being a conscientious soldier, immediately reported this event to the sergeant major who promptly ordered him to stand guard and keep curious comrades at bay. But his fellow railwaymen, seemingly unaware of the possible consequences, were soon sitting on the bomb as their erstwhile mates photographed them for posterity (shortlived had the device exploded!). On his return, the senior NCO was aghast at the moronic behaviour of his charges and laid into them with his tongue, as is the practice of enraged sergeant majors.

George's wartime friend and fellow railwayman, Bill Muir, informed the author that had the bomb exploded, casualties would have been exceedingly high because the railway encampment at Mersa Matruh was in a depression. The concussion resulting from this bomb detonating would have killed many of the railwaymen even if they were taking cover in slit trenches as they were supposed to during an air raid.

As well as aerial attack, a railway line is peculiarly susceptible to sabotage. One of the great advantages the railway gave the British was the ability to load brand-new armoured fighting vehicles and tanks directly onto flat-top wagons from the ships at Suez ports, and rail them straight to the front line. These trains ran as 'express trains', such was their value. On reaching their destinations, they were rapidly unloaded and dispersed, ready for battle. The enemy wanted these trains disrupted or halted completely, and saboteurs must have gone out of their way to impede their progress as much as possible. Evidence of sabotage carried out by 'fifth columnists' became apparent after one such train that Jack Burke and Max Wilson were running had even poorer braking than normal. This particular train consisted entirely of Sherman tanks, along with the usual accompaniment of anti-aircraft gun crews. This was a

very important cargo and they expected to get some attention from the enemy during the trip. (It was obvious at the time that the enemy were gaining information on what freight was being carried.)

Wilson recalls:

> Jack Burke (the engine driver) was a good mate, but was inclined to be very excitable. The track we were running on to Misheifa was reasonably flat, without any steep grades, which was just as well. During the trip we noticed the braking of the locomotive didn't appear to be very good, becoming more apparent as we progressed. Eventually, on a lengthy down-grade the train gathered momentum with the speed rising to a dangerous level. As the speed increased, the locomotive's brakes became less effective, almost to the point of being useless.
>
> Realising the potential of the train 'getting away' on us, Jack decided to use reverse thrust. The locomotive was an elderly British design, with a wheel rather than a lever system of selecting forward or reverse. The wheel had to be turned clockwise for forward and anti-clockwise for reverse. However, due to the stress, Jack became a little confused about which direction to turn the wheel and shouted, 'What way does this bloody thing have to be turned?'
>
> In hindsight it seems rather amusing but it was far from funny at the time. Finally the 'reverser' wheel was turned in the correct direction and by opening the regulator, speed was reduced.
>
> Later inspection revealed that the locomotive had been sabotaged. The pins that held the brake blocks to the brake frames had been partially cut through prior to the train's departure. After several subsequent brake applications, the pins sheared off resulting in the brake blocks dropping off. Of eight original brake blocks, only one was still attached to the engine after the train was eventually brought to a halt.
>
> On this particular trip, we were not harassed by enemy aircraft. However, on arrival at the railhead all hell broke loose. We arrived during a very heavy air raid; with bombs exploding and retaliatory anti-aircraft guns firing, the noise was deafening. The usual relief crew were nowhere to be seen and who could blame them? Jack took off into the night in the direction

of the dugout, a decision he could not be criticised for either. I was not so fortunate as I couldn't allow the boiler to 'blow off' — the escaping column of steam was a great signal to aircraft. To sit up in the cab while the boiler filled, was too risky, as one felt very exposed six feet above ground and with no protection. So I decided that caution was wiser than stupidity. The water tanker that was attached to the rear of the locomotive seemed a safer haven, so I got under the belly of that and positioned myself as near as possible to the bogie.

While feeling considerably safer I was still very apprehensive due to all the noise and the shaking of the ground. Therefore I was only too pleased to crawl out from my sanctuary when I thought the boiler was near enough filled. I shut off the injector and made a dash for the air-raid shelter where Jack had sought cover earlier. It is amazing how much safer one feels below ground level when being bombed, rather than above it.

During this phase of the campaign we lost several locomotive crew, either killed or wounded. These casualties made us rather short of crews, and it was not unusual to arrive at your home destination to find your name at the top of the list to be out again on the next train. The position became so serious that Colonel Sage insisted that our trains be given better air cover.

The next trip after the Sherman tank train episode also had its moments. (The driver was a sergeant who will remain nameless.) We hadn't gone very far when each time I went to put on a fire [add coal to the firebox] he would shout, 'Don't open the firebox door, they'll see us,' meaning of course enemy airmen. It was more than difficult to get anywhere without opening the firebox door. Degrees of nervousness showed up more in some than others; I was not only nervous myself but very often bloody scared.

One night, stationed at Arad, railwaymen Sgt. Ken Jeffries and sappers Bill Herlihy and Clutha McKenzie heard explosions down the line. They armed themselves and drove off to investigate. As they approached the site Germans who had landed there opened fire with a machine-gun, which was later identified as a 'Spandau' type. The railwaymen beat a hasty retreat and regrouped. When they again advanced, the German airmen had gone, no doubt accompanied by a demolition

expert who had been intending to plant mines beneath the track.

In another attempt to damage the railway line, German aviators were discovered to be landing light Fieseler Storch aircraft and demolishing sections of the track. On one occasion, they landed at the 142-mile peg between Arad and Halfaya and placed gun-cotton explosive under the rails and between the sleepers. Twenty-seven feet of rail was blown out and required urgent repair to avoid delays. This was completed by our efficient construction company men.

On another occasion Arthur Rutherford, who was stationed at Gambut, heard two planes following the railway line. As they were not bombers and certainly not fighters he knew they were up to no good, so he notified the next station. The message was passed on to Hirsha station, near which the planes eventually landed. Sapper Walker who was a bit of a dare-devil dashed out with his acquired Spandau and sprayed bullets in the direction of the nocturnal friends. They obviously believed that caution was the better part of valour, for their departure was so abrupt they left behind a plane with its motor still turning over.

Hirsha made immediate contact with S/Sgt. Gordon King of train control who contacted Lt. George Hayman. George knew the CO was a solicitor in private life and would want to know why an aircraft had made an unauthorised, unwarranted and illegal landing on what must be deemed railway or military property. Lieutenant Hayman and Sapper Morgan Lewis left immediately for an inspection of the line which was eight miles of loop and had tons of goods and equipment for the Eighth Army. They also inspected the eight miles of track between Misheifa and Hirsha, but found no damage or interference to any part of the line.

At Hirsha they found the Fieseler Storch looking lonely and forlorn with the engine still ticking over. When interviewed about it 60 years later, Hayman was still wondering if he had been seeing things. Back then, the plane was placed with its tail in the pickup truck and towed back to the Hirsha station — with the motor still running.

Hayman then reported his findings and the matter was referred all the way up the ranks to GHQ Middle East, who were advised that members of the Railway Company had captured a Fieseler Storch aircraft. 'What do you want us to do with it, sir?'

GHQ evidently thought this was a joke. They could not believe that the railwaymen had a German aircraft in their possession and sent an officer to investigate and confirm that such a plane existed. The result was that the aircraft was taken over by the RAF, the German markings painted over and replaced with RAF markings. Air Commodore Cunningham used it as his private plane for the rest of the war in the Middle East.

While relations between officers and men were generally very good, with mutual respect being shown from both sides, the rank and file were occasionally presented with the opportunity to 'get one over' their immediate superiors. One incident that happened shortly after the 17th ROC arrived in Fort Capuzzo involved an officer demonstrating self-inflicted, but unintentional, wounding.

Having unpacked the bulky army tents, the men were soon busy digging themselves 10-foot by 10-foot squares and 3-foot deep trenches over which they erected their tents. Set around the rims of their trenches were sandbags, adding an additional foot of protection to their sleeping quarters. An angled slit-trench with steps cut into the sides provided access to the dug-out quarters. The end result was a low-profile tent that afforded the men a modicum of camouflage and protection from aerial raiders. However, the ubiquitous slit-trench was still the primary shelter when a raid occurred.

Officers were excused this tedious duty of digging tent trenches, a task that fell to those sappers not otherwise engaged in railway operations. By this stage of the war, all the railwaymen were very adept at using a shovel. Sapper 'Big' Dave Robertson was duly instructed by the officer to arrange for their quarters to be excavated. Dave inspected the site they had carefully chosen and noticed several holes in the sand, the home of furry creatures already domiciled in the spot selected. He suggested to the officer that another site might be more suitable.

His recommendations were rejected: that is where the tent would be for the officer and his fellow officers' accommodation. Dave never mentioned the furry occupants, known as kangaroo rats, who were in residence and did nothing further to revisit their decision. The officers' tent was duly erected over a 4-foot deep trench with the mandatory sandbags placed around the perimeter. The tent was inspected by the

officer-in-charge and pronounced an excellent job.

Later that night, after the day's rigours, the illustrious leaders were enjoying a few beers and conversation, stretched out on their palliasses. Suddenly, an inquisitive furry desert dweller poked his head out from his burrow wanting to know what had happened to his regular neighbourhood. The little mammal's unexpected appearance was spotted by an excitable lieutenant, who promptly drew his service revolver and took aim at the gatecrasher. Whether the officer was a bad shot or had imbibed a few too many, we don't know, but he missed his target and blew off part of his own big toe. Not wanting to tarnish the reputation of this officer, the incident was not mentioned to the rank and file, but the bush telegraph which worked with remarkable rapidity, soon had the sappers grinning and sniggering.

It was not only the officers who provided everyone with the opportunity to laugh. A fireman with the 17th ROC, Earle Roberts, recalls how he and engine driver, Jack Burke, were 'bombed' with baked beans. Departing on a train from Capuzzo to Misheifa on 15 April 1942 that was conveying some of their comrades to Alexandria for leave, they were given two tins of South African baked beans in tomato sauce to heat up for their fellow railway passengers. The journey to Misheifa was 70 miles, at which point the passengers would enjoy a hot supper of beans. Nearing their destination, Jack lifted one of the tins off the boiler where it had been placed, to check whether it was hot enough. After five hours the tin was very hot and the contents under pressure in its sealed container.

For whatever reason, Jack fumbled and the hot tin dropped onto the locomotive's steel floor. The seams of the tin could no longer contain the pressure and it exploded with a bang, showering the two 'chefs' with hot beans and sauce. As they were operating under strict blackout conditions and only had a dim shunting lamp with them, they could feel but not see the effects of the exploded can. Realising the danger the other tin posed, they threw it out the cab door, resulting in no one enjoying a hot meal at Misheifa. The next day, the two engine men inspected the cab of the locomotive and couldn't believe the extent of the mess. Dried beans and sauce was sprayed all over the cab interior.

Chapter 17

THE RETREAT OF 1942

On 26 May 1942 Rommel launched another offensive in an attempt to outflank the British to the south of Bir Hacheim, but his move had been anticipated and he was met by strong resistance The railwaymen had begun to sense that all was not well with regard to the military situation and that something 'big' was imminent. Gib Anderson, a sapper with the 16th ROC, recalls how the number of empty wagons being sent to the forward areas increased. Only a few had been informed of the reason: these wagons were being sent up to ensure all vital war materiel and equipment could be railed well back to the rear echelons if the need arose. And arose it did. On 28 May all personnel west of Capuzzo were given warning that they were to be evacuated as part of a retreat.

The railwaymen, accustomed to working long and arduous shifts, began to work back-to-back shifts with very little time off to recover from the previous shift. Shovelling tons of coal in a single shift was exhausting and they required some rest before resuming work on the next urgent train. All types of machinery, munitions and fuels were carted back, lest they fall into the hands of the enemy. Damaged field guns and armoured vehicles, both enemy and British, were important booty as many could be repaired and go back into action at a later date. To the surprise of Gib and his mates, an extraordinary amount of road-building machinery was being hauled back too — a legacy of the work done by the construction companies and the 21st Mechanical Company. Most railwaymen had no idea that so much plant equipment was in the forward zones.

On 30 May Rommel was forced to hole up about halfway between Bir Hacheim and Gazala, where he waited for the British to attack.

The attack came on 5 June and was easily repulsed. Six days later Rommel counter-attacked, forcing the Allies to back-pedal, so that on 14 June a general retreat warning was issued. The New Zealand railwaymen were among the longest serving soldiers in the North African Campaign and had seen the fortunes of war change quite frequently. Therefore it was of no great surprise to them when, after having just extended the line 275 miles into the desert, they found themselves beating a hasty retreat from the advancing Germans. The two officers responsible for the immediate control of the withdrawal were Lieutenants Cliff Chapman and Hec. McLenaghan.

Norman Leaf recalls:

> A small detachment was sent to El Adam (a small hamlet south of Tobruk, near Belhamed) to organise the retrieval of surplus equipment. Several hours later they were in position to observe withdrawing British armour preparing a defensive line to try to stem the German advance. The railwaymen were only armed with Lee Enfield .303 rifles and a handful of rounds each — not ideally prepared to take on the might of the German Afrika Korps! They were seen by British tank crews who in amazement asked them, 'What in the hell are you doing here with those pop-guns? Don't you know that Jerry is right on our tails?' But the railwaymen were also soldiers and were not about to abandon their position until ordered to do so. Shortly a dispatch rider arrived with orders to withdraw to Capuzzo as the whole company was moving out.

For some of the railwaymen, the situation deteriorated at such a rate that they were nearly cut-off by rapidly advancing German flying columns. Dave Robertson, accompanied by Pat Cowles, Alan Vaudrey, Arthur 'Judge' Rutherford and Eddie Raisbeck, was being sent to Belhamed shortly after Rommel began the offensive. Dave and his mates travelled by railcar to assist in loading a train that was to bring out all serviceable rolling stock and sundry equipment. They soon realised how serious the situation was once they arrived. An artillery barrage was in progress with shells landing uncomfortably close to Belhamed. Pat Cowles was in charge of the field telephone. He hooked up his

portable communications equipment to the main telegraph wires, which were about half a mile from where the rest of the railwaymen were loading up the train. Approximately an hour later Pat rejoined his mates with some grim news. He told them, 'What do you know, I've just been talking to Riso (their Regimental Sergeant Major) and he tells me that we've been cut-off by the Germans.' 'You've got to be kidding,' was the response from the rest of the men to this startling piece of news. 'Fair dinkum,' replied Pat, and he told us to use our own initiative to get back home if we could. Despite such dire circumstances, and thinking all this was a bit rough, the men continued to load up what they had been sent to collect. When they completed their task, they decided to risk running into the enemy and set sail back towards Capuzzo. None of the men seemed overly worried and even found the situation rather exciting. In hindsight, they hadn't really considered the consequences had they been captured by the flying columns.

They were uncertain as to whether shelling or tanks fighting in the area had damaged the track which would have made it impossible for the train to get to Capuzzo so a small group of men went ahead in a light railcar which acted as a 'pilot' vehicle. About 15 miles east of Belhamed the men came across a battlefield with several knocked-out tanks littering the desert. Their concerns became a reality when they discovered that tanks had indeed crossed the railway track and had caused damage to sections of rail. It was impossible to traverse the damaged rail with their light railcar, let alone the heavy mainline locomotive and train.

With typical Kiwi tenacity, the railwaymen grabbed their trusty crowbars from their vehicle and set to work repairing the track. When the train arrived those on it also threw their muscle into effecting the repairs. Everyone knew what they faced should they fail to make it back — capture or take their chances in walking back — while a mobile battle raged all around them. Neither option was very encouraging. However, they managed to make the temporary repairs and moved the train safely over the damaged rails and on to Capuzzo. Further along, they happened across more scenes of battle and saw the remains of a Free French light armoured unit that had been badly mauled by German panzers. Twice during their eastward retreat their train was shelled

by long-range field artillery of the German flying columns but they managed to make it back safely back to Capuzzo without further incident. When they arrived at Capuzzo, the whole camp was hurriedly packing up and leaving. Dave and his companions still remained in their trusty railcar to lead the way.

It was an awe-inspiring sight for everyone as they watched the whole of the Eighth Army in retreat as far as the eye could see. On the other side of the line there were clouds of dust, vehicles, trucks, tanks — everything moving away from the enemy. Further down the track they came across a motorcycle despatch rider. He had fallen off his bike and was in a sorry condition so the always willing-to-help railwaymen bundled him and his motorcycle onto the rail trolley. According to his rescuers, he was one of the happiest motorcyclists in the Middle East. He informed Dave and his mates that he had been going for days, delivering messages to units which had vacated their supposed locations.

That evening Dave and his mates pulled into a station where there was a large Arab monument or tomb. Just as they arrived, a German aircraft appeared and began to rake the area with machine-gun fire. Dave's companions decided that the railcar was too likely a target so decided to spend the night in some derelict Arab dwelling further out in the desert. Dave was going to accompany them but had misplaced his boots — again — and was left behind as his mates hurried off into the deepening gloom. As the planes came down to strafe the tracks Dave decided to evacuate his exposed position, and having no idea where the others had taken refuge he headed off to the nearby Arab tomb. The grave was a perfect air raid shelter as it was constructed with large rocks, in the centre of which was the coffin of the Arab for whom it had been built. There was just enough room to squeeze in between the deceased and the rock wall and that was where Dave spent the night.

In the morning, his mates came searching for him and asked where he had been. He nonchalantly replied that he had 'curled up alongside my mate Abdullah here — the only Arab I had any time for, and he was dead!' Dave was well known for his dry sense of humour.

The others had been hit during the night with a bomb demolishing

part of their shelter, so despite his decaying companion, Dave had the best shelter after all.

It was not only the train-running staff who felt vulnerable during the retreat, which had all the hallmarks of being more of a rout than an orderly 'strategic withdrawal'. A shunter named Harry Clausen recalls what it felt like to be among the last of the traffic staff to leave beleaguered Capuzzo as the enemy advanced. Orders were received that Harry was to travel to Capuzzo to assist in marshalling trains so that all serviceable rolling stock could be brought back to Egypt and out of enemy hands.

Realising the remarkable advantage that a functioning railway system gave to an army in the field, the New Zealand railwaymen were determined not to leave any serviceable locomotives or rolling stock for the advancing enemy. They had ensured that any working wagons were taken back towards British lines well out of reach of the enemy. What couldn't be railed back was destroyed by either using explosives or cutting off vital pieces of equipment that could not be easily replaced in the desert. Locomotives that were unable to move under their own steam or be towed back, had explosives placed into their fireboxes and detonated, effectively wrecking them beyond repair. If explosives could not be used, the men set about smashing working parts with sledgehammers, paying particular attention to the critical mechanical components that could not be readily repaired.

As Harry travelled westward in a truck to Capuzzo he saw that all manner of vehicles were heading in the opposite direction. It seemed that he and his driver were the only soldiers going towards the enemy. Having reached their destination he was dropped off and the driver made a hasty return towards friendly lines. Spying a tent — most tents by this stage had been collapsed — Harry went inside to find Lt. Bryan Lucy, still nursing the big toe which he had inadvertantly shot the tip off. (Ordinarily, a self-inflicted wound was deemed to be a court-martial offence, but in Bryan's case this was overlooked.)

Bryan informed his gallant companion that they had lost communications when the signallers had cut the only telephone lines on their departure. The situation was looking rather grim. Harry went and inspected the railway yard to gauge how long it would take to marshal

the remaining rolling stock to take back east. He had just finished estimating that it would take about an hour when he was startled by two resounding thumps. 'What the hell was that?' he asked. Bryan nonchalantly informed him that they were German shells gradually creeping closer.

When the locomotive arrived, the fireman on it was Sheff Parris who, instead of promptly marshalling the train, informed Harry that he wanted to 'clean his fire' before joining the exodus east. Due to the urgency of the situation Harry politely requested that they complete the shunting before he cleaned his fire and Sheff agreed. They marshalled all remaining rolling stock into a train to return to Misheifa and once all the shunting was completed, Sheff decided that he could clean the locomotive's fire. However there was suddenly a loud explosion nearby, Sheff let out an expletive about cleaning the fire and Harry, Bryan and the train crew quickly departed for Misheifa, leaving Capuzzo to the advancing Germans.

Unfortunately for Harry, his work was not yet finished in the dangerous forward zones. Having reached the relative safety of Misheifa, Harry was ordered to marshal up all the remaining rolling stock again before heading towards Similla. With all the stock being railed back ahead of the German advance, the marshalling yard at Misheifa became extremely congested. As the retreat continued, the same problem was to plague Similla. And in an apparent contradiction of effort the railwaymen were still busy operating trains westwards, as the retreating army still relied heavily upon the railways to provide them with food, petrol and munitions as they fought desperate rearguard actions. Recognising how vulnerable the congested yards were to air raids, anti-aircraft defences were increased around Misheifa and Similla. The railway authorities were rather baffled at the enemy's lack of foresight in not choosing to take the opportunity to bomb Misheifa and Similla while there was such a concentration of railway vehicles loaded with so many valuable supplies. The enemy must have been very confident that the British forces would not be requiring a railway system in Egypt again.

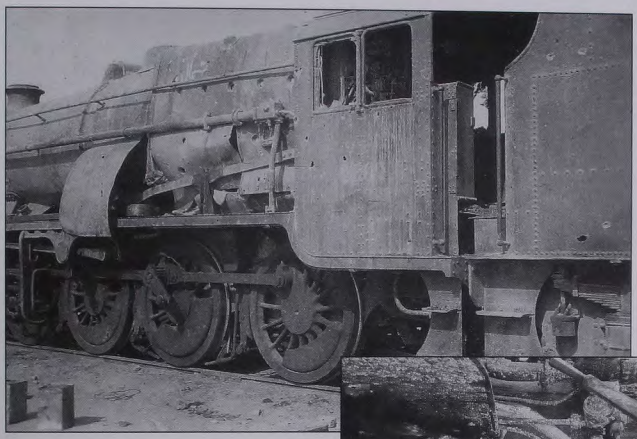
Being the dedicated men that they were, Harry and his colleagues again risked their lives, to sort the remaining rolling stock that could

have been used by Rommel's advancing forces, as a train. Leaving Misheifa, Harry then went to Similla where he repeated the whole process again.

Despite the seriousness of the whole situation, the railwaymen of the 16th ROC kept up their morale by challenging their mates from the 13th RCC to a game of cricket! And while all this activity was taking place, a section of the New Zealand Mobile Dental Company ventured to attend to the men's dental requirements.

Despite the setbacks facing the Allies and their ignominious retreat back into Egyptian territory, the British Middle East Command were loathe to destroy the Western Desert Extension as they retreated along it. While the retreat seemed a mortal blow to British aspirations in North Africa and threatened the Suez Canal, Churchill and his generals felt that Rommel would never make it all the way to the canal. The Germans had long lines of communications, their shipping was regularly intercepted by Malta-based submarines and Rommel had a constant need for resupply of fuel if he was to successfully occupy and hold Egypt. Therefore it was decided not to deny themselves future use of a railway when, as was likely, the fortunes of war swung back in their favour and the ground and the railway was recovered. And so it was decided by senior military planners that the railway should not be destroyed, but merely rendered useless.

The principal methods employed by the railwaymen to sabotage their own work was done by the constuction companies ploughing up segments of the track with a giant hook device hauled behind a locomotive. This smashed up the essential sleepers and distorted the rail gauge. Although the damage caused by this method was severe the construction companies were very adept in replacing short sections quickly. Thanks to washouts and bombs, they had gained all the experience required to effect rapid repairs. Conversely, it was highly unlikely that the German engineers would be in possession of the necessary equipment for carrying out even temporary repairs and the retreating railwaymen had ensured all such tools were taken with them. Another clever strategy was to remove the 'frog' segment located in switching points. This V-shaped piece of steel was the critical junction within a set of points and trains could not switch track without it. Without a



Above and right: *The engine on which Percy Isitt and Laurie Jones were killed by a bomb at Fort Capuzzo.*

Below: *One of many locomotives put out of action by machine and cannon attack.*

Left: *Train control at Similla in the Western Desert.*

Above: *17th ROC Camp at Misheifa (the hot spot of the desert).*

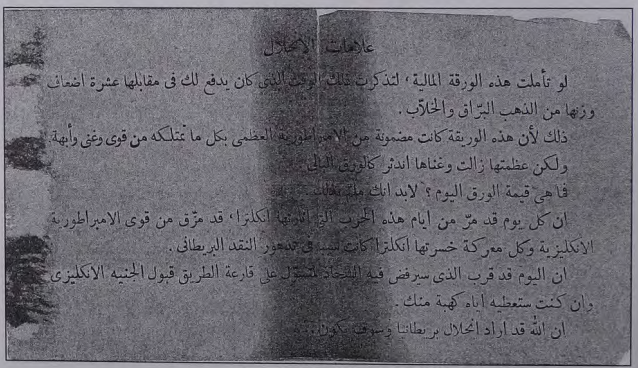
Left: *Mobile workshop.*

Above: *One engine we left behind. A demolition charge was put in the fire box to render it useless to the Germans (E.S.R. 590).*

Right: *One of the American diesel electrics received on lease land. (This relieved the water problems.)*

Below: *Wagons converted by the Germans to use as an ambulance train.*

A German propaganda note ready to distribute in Cairo and Alexandria, but Alamein changed that.



علامات الاحتلال

لو تأملت هذه الورقة المالية، لتذكرت ذلك اليوم الذي كان يدفع لك في مقابلها عشرة اضعاف وزنها من الذهب البرّاق والخلاّب.

ذلك لأن هذه الوريقة كانت مضمونة من الامبراطورية العظمى بكل ما تمتلكه من قوى وغنى وأبهة.

ولكن عظمتها زالت وغناها اندثر كالورق البالي.

فما هي قيمة الورق اليوم؟ لابد انك ملمّ بذلك.

ان كل يوم قد مرّ من أيام هذه الحرب التي اشتبكت انكلترا، قد مزّق من قوى الامبراطورية الانكليزية وكل معركة خسرتها انكلترا كانت سبباً في تدهور النقد البريطاني.

ان اليوم قد قرب الذي سيرفض فيه البنك المستقل على قارعة الطريق قبول الجنيه الانكليزي وان كنت ستعطيه اياه كهبة منك.

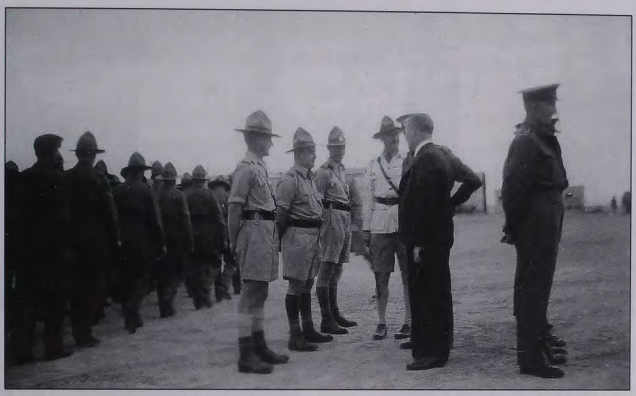
ان الله قد اراد انحلال بريطانيا وسوف تكون

Members of the 17th Company at Alamein station.

Members of the 16th Company at Alamein station.

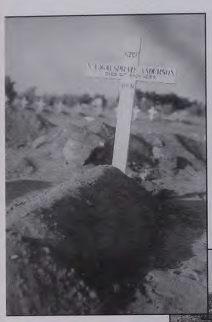
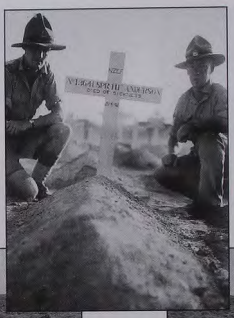
Above, left and right: 10th and 13th Railway Construction Companies at work on a tunnel in Lebanon.

Left: *The line built by the 10th Railway Construction Company in Palestine. Today a sign acknowledges their efforts.*



Final parade at Maadi prior to embarking on the Niew Armsterdam *at Tewfik, 1943. Left to right: Lieuts. (name not available), J.M.B. Lockett, J.C. Chapman Maj. F.W. Aickin, Lt.Col. A.H. Sage (obscured), Mr. F. Jones, Minister of Defence and Cpt. D.A. Clarke.*

Mr F. Jones, Minister of Defence, with Lt. Col. A.H. Sage and Maj. F.W. Aickin in the 16th ROC mess at Maadi camp.


Those we left behind

WE SHALL REMEMBER THEM

Alamein Cemetery in 1998, quiet and peaceful.

foundry to manufacture such items, the railway was almost worthless. Moreover, points switchblades were either removed or destroyed rendering marshalling yards and crossing loops unusable.

While the Germans did make limited use of the railway, it was extremely minor in comparison to its usefulness to the British. Rommel arranged for several light Italian diesel locomotives to be shipped over from Italy, but these machines were of low horsepower rating and were of little value, having difficulty even hauling the little rolling stock that he had managed to commandeer for his own use. Whereas the British had used comfortable riding passenger carriages for ambulance trains, Rommel was forced to use converted box-cars to ferry his wounded back to his field hospitals. Without doubt, the railwaymen had excelled themselves in ensuring that 'their' railway, created with much hard work, blood and sweat, was going to be of little benefit to the enemy.

Sapper Anderson was the fireman on the last train to Capuzzo. The train was comprised of approximately 60 empty wagons and hauled by two locomotives. Running a 'double-header' was a very rare event in desert operations. Gib, along with Bob Webster in the rear locomotive and Bill Cochrane and Van Brown in the leading locomotive, departed Similla assisted up the escarpment by a banking locomotive coupled to the rear of the train. Their departure was initially delayed due to the uncertainty of the current military situation. There was some confusion as to the extent of the German advance and the authorities did not want to dispatch a train into the unknown. Eventually the train left nearly three hours later and passed five opposing trains heading eastward loaded with equipment from the front. On reaching Mazhud station, 72 miles west of Similla, at about 7.00pm, the train was ordered to return to Similla. The leading locomotive was detached and run up the main line to be reattached to the rear of the train and haul all the empty wagons back to Similla. Gib and his mate were ordered to remain at Mazhud and cover trains as they returned from up the line.

While waiting for something to happen, Gib spent a couple of hours cleaning out the firebox. Thick ash from the Indian coal had caused excessive build-up, which had to be emptied out for efficient burning.

Both men were quite jittery as many aircraft could be seen and heard overhead but they were relieved to learn that most were friendly, with the RAF having gained a temporary supremacy over the *Luftwaffe*. While they waited to be given a task, four trains passed through Mazhud, all travelling quite slowly as regular signalling and train control had been suspended. Instead of the ticket system, as described previously, trains were now running under 'open section' regulations. Under this system, trains were dispatched at strict 15-minute intervals. However, no allowance could be made for any delays further along the line. Working trains under these conditions was a very stressful experience, a situation that was made worse by the volume of retreating trucks that chose to use the railway line as a guide eastward. The dust thrown up by all these trucks reduced forward visibility for the locomotive crews. Hauling trains that were fully laden without the benefit of knowing the whereabouts of the train in front took courage, but these men knew that the situation required such measures and did what was asked of them without question.

Nothing could be left for the enemy; two small diesel shunt locomotives were coupled to a train and to assist their free running, they both had their gearboxes isolated. Another locomotive was also limping back with one side of the running gear damaged, so it was uncoupled from the main driving rod and the locomotive was able to be run, albeit with some difficulty, back to a repair facility. Eventually, at about 1.00am, the last train out reached Mazhud and Gib and Bob were ready to assist in getting the train back to Similla.

The train was quite long, approximately 50 wagons and conveying a great quantity of the Quartermaster's stores. Wherever the train was stopped, Gib and his colleagues invited the retreating soldiers to help themselves to the rations on board. No doubt the railwaymen were popular chaps with the infantry! At 8.30am the following day, the train reached the top of the Similla escarpment. Before the banker locomotive was attached to assist them in braking down the grade, two old wagons were uncoupled from the train and their axle-boxes packed with explosives. Once the train was clear, these were detonated, creating a blockage on the line.

After a gruelling 28 hours on duty, Gib and Bob were finally able to

leave their locomotive. Both men were exhausted and headed off to their tents for a well-deserved rest. However, such was the urgency to depart Similla, their tents and respective equipment had already been packed and loaded aboard a train. Before being dispatched back east, the two men lined up with the remaining railwaymen to receive their pay. Gib was so tired he did not snap to attention quick enough for the captain who was dispensing the money and was sharply reprimanded for his unmilitary behaviour! Had the officer known that Gib and his mates had just returned after a 28-hour shift, he may have excused their lack of interest. Relief was tinged with regret as the New Zealand railwaymen were then conveyed — by train of course, but crewed by British railwaymen from the 193rd British ROC — back east to link up with their comrades who had already left Similla.

During the 19-20 June, the 16th and17th Railway Operating Companies withdraw to Gerawala where the 2nd New Zealand Division passed them, returning from Syria. One of their members was heard to say: 'What the hell — everybody's going down and we're the only idiots going back into the desert!'

After holding out for so long, Tobruk finally fell on 21 June, preventing the Allies from forming a defensive line west of Tobruk. On 23 June the 17th ROC was withdrawn to Burg El Arab. Three days later the 16th ROC withdrew to Alexandria. By the end of the month the 17th was withdrawn once again. As the defensive line would be formed at El Alamein they were pulled back to Amirya on the 1 July, where they were to remain, awaiting the next swing in the fortunes of war.

Chapter 18

RAILWAY CONSTRUCTION IN THE LEVANT

At the time of the Allied retreat in the Western Desert, Russia's dictator, Joseph Stalin, was demanding that the British and Americans launch an invasion on the western front in an effort to ease pressure on his eastern front. Churchill and Roosevelt both knew that it was not feasible to attack Hitler's *Festung Europa* at this stage and required more time to build up adequate forces in Britain. However, the war effort in Russia was being partially sustained by British supply convoys plying Arctic waters to the Russian ports of Murmansk and Archangel. These convoys were suffering horrendous losses from German U-Boat wolfpacks, and another route was sought to deliver these vital supplies to Germany's former ally. A rail link via the Middle East seemed one option. If the various rail networks of Palestine and Lebanon could be linked with those of Turkey and Persia, trains, instead of ships could ferry vital war supplies to the beleaguered Russians through the Caucasus. It was envisaged that ships would sail up the Red Sea from the United States and Britain thus avoiding the concentration of U-Boats in the North Atlantic and Barents Sea.

A wide-gauge line had been constructed from Kantara, in the Suez Canal Zone, to Haifa under the auspices of the British Army between 1916–18 to assist in General Allenby's campaign to wrest Jerusalem from the Turks. This railway connected Beirut with Haifa and Nazareth via the Syrian town of Deraa. However, the Hejaz Line was a narrow gauge and could not be expected to cope with the volume of rail traffic required to keep Russia adequately supplied. If a new line from Haifa could be constructed to incorporate the Lebanese network, it could be ultimately feasible to rail goods from the Suez ports to distant Russia.

Work on extending and upgrading this line had been started by Australian engineers until they left to fight the Japanese in the Pacific, and were replaced by South African engineers. Between them, they had constructed approximately 120 miles of the line, including boring two tunnels and building several major bridges.

In June 1942 the 10th and 13th RCCs were finally withdrawn from North Africa and dispatched to Palestine with orders to assist in completing the line. The construction men who had been evacuated to Gerawala following the enemy offensive were entrained from there for a long journey to Haifa. Their route took them over the Suez Canal and across the inhospitable Sinai desert. Arriving in Haifa, the railwaymen were transferred onto civilian-operated buses for the continuation of their journey north to Beirut, as the normal military transport used by the sappers had not yet arrived. On reaching the Lebanese border, the Palestinian drivers were replaced by amateur bus drivers from among the ranks of the sappers. These drivers were very inexperienced, and it showed. As they negotiated the narrow and winding roads of Lebanon, they scared the living daylights out of their fellow sappers.

For a time the Kiwis worked alongside the South Africans. To avoid the worst part of the coastal cliffs, a mile-long tunnel was bored through the limestone that comprised the rugged shoreline. This was done by the 21st South African Tunnelling Company, as many of these men had gained extensive experience in the Witwatersrand gold mines. The South Africans impressed their New Zealand counterparts with modern mining methods, including the use of shields in conjunction with the placement of explosives. The tunnel had six ports, two at either end for the railway to enter and exit, and four sets transversely facing the sea. The New Zealand railwaymen assisted with the disposal of spoil and they were given the difficult job of lining the inside with precast concrete arches that had to be fitted into the central beam. Concrete for the beams and footings was mixed in a tank 200 feet above the cliffs and brought down under gravity in a flexible rubber hose, placed where the concrete was needed. The limestone tunnel portals were beautifully crafted by local stone masons.

In times of war, skilled engineers are always in great demand and soon the South Africans were required elsewhere. So the New Zealand

railwaymen were given the task of completing the final stages of the 143 miles of track begun by their predecessors. First on the agenda was to prepare a strategic plan to identify all the resources that would be required for the completion and maintenance of the line. They had to plan for suitable watering locations for steam locomotives, solve problems regarding drainage and tunnel linings, find places where ballast rock could be readily obtained for regular track upkeep and source local labour for track maintenance — all to a strategic timetable with very little help from the authorities.

The line to Tripoli had to follow the Mediterranean coastline as the interior was far too mountainous for a new railway to be built rapidly. The track linking Beirut and Haifa began on the Syria–Palestine border near the coastline. The village of Azzib was the starting point with the New Zealanders beginning their work by constructing a major marshalling yard and locomotive servicing facility. Immediately north of the village was a headland called Ras el Nakara that the line was required to pass through. A 200-metre tunnel was built to overcome this obstacle. Further along the line a longer tunnel was required to enable the line to follow its surveyed route. The railway line was to closely follow the coastline, but erosion from wind, rain and the sea meant another tunnel would be necessary to avoid future problems with the line.This involved formation work, drainage and culverts, station yards, tunnel alignment and lining, levelling and some plate-laying.

One major difficulty confronting the construction gangs was the very fine-grained soil which was predominant along the railway corridor. This soil had an almost infinite capacity to absorb moisture but when it reached saturation point, it became too soft to support the weight of trains. After torrential rain the track would begin to subside and lose its cant (the camber which enables a train to negotiate a curve at a higher speed than if the track were level). Finding suitable rock for re-ballasting the track, and labour to transport it, proved difficult. An inefficient system of mule pack trains was tried but was soon disbanded. Where the track ran parallel to the road, trucks could be used to deliver the crushed rock. Local labour, not involved in the annual olive harvest, were employed to carry rocks from fields or wherever they could be obtained, and feed them into portable crushers that had been

designed to travel along the rails, which in turn deposited ready ballast onto the track. Progress was frustratingly slow, but no other method was available.

During this period, six officers and 52 other ranks from the 9th Survey Company left for Iraq to assist in surveying suitable railway routes from the Persian Gulf ports to Russia. For these men, it was a tour of Old Testament regions and the origins of Persian civilisation. They camped at Ur, where evidence of a flood of biblical proportions remain, then travelled onto Basra, the principal river port on the Shatt al-Arab (the single waterway formed by the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates). They eventually reached Khorramshahr, a port from which Middle East oil was shipped to Britain. Here the railway survey men carried out topographical, rail marshalling yards and rail depot surveys. They also pegged new rail routes from the port but work came to a halt in December when heavy snow blanketed the area!

Meanwhile, railway surveyors were also occupied in surveying and planning future railway routes further north, near Baghdad. After the heat and dust of the Western Desert, the cold and snow of Persia was in complete contrast to what they had grown accustomed to. Despite their valuable presence in Persia, the survey sappers were called back to work on the Haifa–Tripoli line, to help ease the chronic shortage of local labour.

The next big towns the railwaymen came to as they progressed along the route were the ancient Phoenician centres of Tyre and Saida (Sidon). At Tyre the railwaymen marvelled at the causeway to the small island immediately off the coast built by the Macedonian conqueror, Alexander, when the city refused to capitulate to his army. At Saida they were struck by the timelessness of the region as they watched wooden ships being constructed to the same design used by the Phoenician seafarers thousands of years ago. These vessels were hand-hewn from timber, with ribs and spars being carefully shaped with ancient tools.

Soon they reached Beirut, 87 miles north of Haifa. The Kiwis thought Beirut, often referred to as the 'Paris of the Mediterranean' due to its wide boulevards and stylish buildings, a delightful city. When the railwaymen reached Beirut, the drivers headed for the main square, La Place des Canons, but then made a navigational error took them

into a typical biblical-era one-way street. This particular thoroughfare had been in existence long before motor vehicles required space to turn around, so the drivers were required to reverse out of the crowded street. Much to the delight of the weary railwaymen, the street turned out to be part of Beirut's red light district, and the prostitutes quickly seized the opportunity to turn a navigational error into financial gain. The ladies appeared naked on the balconies of their multi-storeyed dwellings, offering their wares to the men below. There was a general exodus from the buses with the men being encouraged by the ribald calls from above. To the disappointment of both parties, the railwaymen had no money, so lustful desires had to go unsatisfied. It took over an hour to round up all the men and reverse the convoy of buses back into a busy traffic intersection.

For the men travelling along this coastal route, it was a spectacular trip, with dramatic views of mountains reaching right down to the coastline, ancient biblical sites, high cuttings and railway embankments. North of Beirut was the ancient city of Byblos, which gave its name to the first recorded books and subsequently the Christian Bible. At Navere el Kebb the Kiwi railwaymen saw the monument erected to commemorate the Australian contribution in the Palestine Campaign during the First World War. At Ras El Chaka a huge headland jutted into the sea. The railway line and a road both pierced this obstacle but a permanent threat of slips necessitated some radical thinking to reduce the risk. A bit of 'West Coaster cunning' was employed to rid the headland of loose shale and debris. The New Zealanders rigged up a pressure pump and sluiced the loose stone off the firmer bedrock and into the sea below.

Various other historical sites captured their imaginations. They marvelled at the Roman aqueducts at Haifa and the Roman water-mill at Tyre, the cave village of Adloun, the Byzantine palace at Beit el Dine and the snow-capped Mount Hermon. They were aware that this ancient land had long been fought over and saw evidence of this when they were shown a 100-foot high artificial hill built by Napoleon's Grand Armee to shell a Crusader-built fortress at Acre. While the work was carried out to fulfill a military strategic plan, the railwaymen who were sent to the Levant enjoyed their time immensely. Despite work-

ing six days a week, they still found time to use explosives to stun fish along the coast and visit the historical sites already mentioned. One railwayman, Jim Goodison, even purchased a Purdy shotgun off a departing South African and went hunting for partridge in the hilly scrubland of the area he worked in.

When the Haifa– Beirut–Tripoli Railway was completed in 1943, it became theoretically feasible to travel by train from Cairo to any European city.

With the introduction of long-range maritime aircraft, the Battle of the Atlantic turned in Britain's favour and soon the U-Boat menace was being reduced by the efforts of Sunderland and Catalina flying boats and their crews. With the tide also turning against the German forces on the Russian front, the railway line that had been proposed to ease the supply situation to the Soviet Union was no longer an urgent priority. However, once again the New Zealand railwaymen demonstrated that they were ready and able to carry out any railway task given to them. A monument still remains at Azzib commemorating the work undertaken by them.

Chapter 19

THE LULL BEFORE THE STORM

After the retreat the railway companies operated the line from Alexandria to El Alamein behind the defensive line at El Alamein which, it seemed certain, was the last bastion where the war in North Africa would be won or lost. Home for the 17th ROC was Amirya, a pleasant date-palm grove approximately 30 miles from El Alamein and 90 miles from Alexandria, Once again the railwaymen were reminded that east is east and west is west as they watched the extremely unhygienic manner in which the Egyptians processed and packed the dates. Eating dates suddenly lost its appeal for many after seeing swarms of flies infesting the freshly picked dates as they were being readied for distribution to local and international markets.

The British hierarchy had differing reasons for a sense of unease in Egypt. In what was to become known as the 'flap of '42', senior British officials began the task of preparing to evacuate Alexandria and Cairo. Important documents and military logistical diaries were burned, and families of diplomats and government officials were told to prepare to leave at very short notice. Not since the German summer offensive of 1941 had the Middle East Command felt so threatened. Once again many Egyptians sympathetic to the German cause were jubilant on learning that General Rommel was advancing on Alexandria and openly showed their support by draping swastika flags from their homes and office buildings.

So confident too were the Nazis, they even provided their troops with Egyptian currency for them to enjoy the flesh-pots and other exotic delights offered in Alexandria and Cairo. In preparation for their victory parades through these two ancient cities, German military bands had been assembled to lead Rommel's army in the processions.

To further undermine British influence and induce the Egyptian population to rise up against their British-controlled government, the Nazi propaganda ministry produced cheap reproductions of British £1 notes for distribution among the local populace. Written in Arabic on the back of each note was the following:

> When you look at this banknote, you will remember the time when on presenting it you would have been paid 10 times its weight in bright gold. That was because the note was backed by a great Empire with all the power, pomp and riches which it could command. But its power has waned and its riches vanished like a scrap of paper. And what is the value of the note today? No doubt you know well enough. Every day that passes of the war which England began some of the might of the British Empire passes away and every battle which England loses is due to the decay of her currency or is the cause of the decay of her currency. The day is near when the beggar in the street will refuse an English pound-note even if you gave it to him as a gift. God has willed the destruction of Britain and it shall come to pass.

The British were well aware of the impact of such propaganda on the Egyptians, particularly as many of them were quite aware of how the crisis was being treated within the upper echelons of Cairo's British society. Therefore, the military authorities set about collecting these notes and incinerating them before the message could have any real effect on those Egyptians who held anti-British sentiments.

The tasks assigned to the railway companies after the retreat were twofold. One objective was to organise supply trains for the various armed forces, with the other primary role being that of organising an evacuation plan should the defences fail and Rommel break through. Many steam locomotives, both oil- and coal-fired, along with many thousands of wagons, were expected to be removed from enemy-occupied areas at extremely short notice. South African engineers were detailed to work with the operating companies as there were important railway structures designated for demolition in the event of an enemy breakthrough. The ESR (Egyptian State Railways) locomotives, used for hauling goods trains for that locality, were stabled in a large

depot at Gabbari, and the passenger locomotives in a depot at Hadra on the other side of the city. At Gabbari there was also a large and up-to-date railway workshop in which about 800 carriages and wagons were in various stages of construction or undergoing repair, as well as a dozen locomotives.

A large amount of this work, in various stages of completion, was for the British Army. It was not intended that any of this rolling stock or other equipment should fall into the hands of the enemy, and the same applied to the workshop machinery, wharf cranes, signal cabins, telephone exchanges and other important facilities. Accordingly, plans for demolition were on a grand scale but another eventuality had to be taken into consideration in planning the mass demolition of the railway infrastructure. It was thought that enemy sympathisers could flood the railway yards and prevent the railwaymen and demolition sappers from carrying out their tasks. It seemed an unlikely possibility (especially given the Egyptians' notoriety for fleeing any form of danger), but taking into account the uncertainty of the situation at the time caused the authorities to plan for all scenarios.

The Railway Group did not possess anything approaching a sufficient number of men required to cope with a railway network as extensive as that of the Delta area, but desperate situations called for desperate measures and short-cut methods were devised to deal with the labour shortage. The thought of a determined attack by the enemy would completely disrupt the ESR — the railway staff would evaporate like smoke — so plans were made on the basis of this assumption. Immediately after their arrival at Alexandria, a skeleton staff was rushed by road to each vital point. Shunters were dispatched to the marshalling yards at Gabbari where there was a complicated network of interlocked sidings and their job was to 'learn the yards' and devise quick methods of getting wagons through to the main lines and out of Alexandria. Similar arrangements had to be made for the evacuation of wagons from the docks and from the ammunition and other sidings in the environs of the city. As the various routes were controlled by half a dozen signal cabins, signalmen were posted to each cabin in order to 'learn the boxes' in record time. The language difficulty constituted a handicap at first, but within a few hours the men had grasped the com-

plexities of their assigned cabins and the areas they controlled. Within a short period they were confident of being able to take over should the need arise.

At this stage in the campaign, the Kiwi locomotive crews were competent to operate any ESR locomotive once they had familiarised themselves with the specific class, but had yet to 'learn the road'. All their experience had been driving further west and now they were in unfamiliar territory. Learning the road is an integral aspect for an engine driver as without this knowledge he cannot be expected to know when to brake for grades or signals, with possible fatal results. With that in mind local ESR crews were detailed to travel with the New Zealanders and point out operating features such as gradients, curves and signals. However, when the railway officers asked their Egyptian counterparts to supply pilot engine drivers for the first few trains from Gabbari up to the temporary railhead at El Alamein, the request was 'misunderstood'. Instead of providing the Kiwi crews with experienced ESR engine drivers, they provided a locomotive crewed by ESR men to run ahead of the Kiwi-manned trains. The Egyptian-manned train departed before this mistake could be rectified and the New Zealand railwaymen were left behind at the station. It was important to get trains moving again so, without delay, the Kiwis decided to dispense with the pilot engine drivers and make the journey unaccompanied. They accomplished the trip without incident and quickly familiarised themselves with the route, thus being able to advise others about all relevant features along the way. Within three hours of arrival in Alexandria, the Kiwi railwaymen were running trains forward from Gabbari, through Amirya, to Burg el Arab in the direction of El Alamein, instead of rearwards. From humble beginnings when they were originally obliged to work alongside the unreliable Egyptians, they were now operating as the premier transport system for the desert armies.

By now American servicemen were arriving in Egypt. Being somewhat naïve and trusting of those who had been fighting for two years, the Americans were easy prey to street-wise Kiwis. For many of the young American servicemen — just like their Australasian counterparts — they were rather awed by the exotic location they found themselves in. Egypt was nothing like anything they had experienced

at home and for some the prospect of visiting a brothel was a new and unique experience. They certainly wasted no time in sampling the alluring women who constantly made themselves available. While on leave, a New Zealand railwayman noticed several long queues outside brothels. Among those lining up to be received by the fancy ladies were a few Kiwis and Australians. He inquired from the Kiwis their reasons for standing in a queue to visit such a place and was told that good money was to be made from the comparatively rich Americans simply by standing in line until they reached the head of the queue and then 'selling' their place to a prospective client. As the New Zealanders were paid seven shillings a day, and four shillings of that was automatically paid into an account back in New Zealand, it was a lucrative and easy method of supplementing their income.

The Americans certainly added colour to the railwaymens' lives after the austerity of living under very real wartime conditions. One railwayman remembers one night being on picket duty while at Amirya station, prior to the counter-offensive. The station was unlit and very dark in accordance with the strict blackout orders, when a train full of American airmen arrived. Within seconds of disembarking from the train the station was 'lit up like New York City' as the US servicemen switched on their powerful five-cell torches. Being only too aware of the marauding *Luftwaffe* being attracted to light like moths to a flame, the railwayman was horrified by the spectacle and alarmed that at any moment a Messerschmitt fighter could dive in and strafe the station. This conscientious railwayman promptly sought out the American officer in charge of these manifestly ignorant fellows to 'advise' him of the consequences of exhibiting lights at night. The American officer was quite unconcerned about the warning from the New Zealander — whether out of bravado or stupidity — but the railwayman was extremely worried. Despite the Americans continuing to flout the blackout regulations, no enemy aircraft showed up to welcome Uncle Sam's airmen that night.

With an attitude that was to earn so many American servicemen a reputation for being arrogant and unduly confident in their abilities, the US airforce personnel started to ask the railwaymen questions about their German adversary. When told that the Germans were a tenacious

and dangerous enemy, the 'Yanks' told the Kiwis how they were going to show the Germans what real fighting was all about and 'teach them a thing or two'. Unfortunately the Americans' belief in their abilities was disproportionate to their combat skills as the Germans would soon demonstrate.

The American Air Force started flying sorties shortly after arriving, but in testimony to their inexperience, they frequently returned to base in aircraft that had been badly shot-up, with many killed by their seasoned *Luftwaffe* opponents. The New Zealand railwaymen knew something of the protocol of aerial warfare and noticed that the American pilots flew in the same formation as the RAF. They would return to base in exactly the same formation, the gaps signifying the loss of the plane in a gesture of honour to a fallen comrade.

Also, when they returned to the airfield, the American airmen often commented that they had never seen such fast moving troops as those close to the defensive line. Unbeknown to the Americans, the Germans would withdraw from overnight positions as they knew from their intelligence source that US aircraft would bomb that area. Friendly troops would move forward into the vacuum only to be carpet-bombed by trigger-happy Americans. There was obviously a major flaw in communications between the separate forces and those who commanded them. Troops on the ground were thereafter told to take cover whenever American aircraft appeared overhead. An oft-quoted observation on being bombed from the air in the North African theatre was: 'When the Germans bomb, the British take cover; when the British bomb, the Germans run for cover, but when American bombers appear, everyone runs for cover!'

With the build-up of munitions and other paraphernalia of war stocked within the railyards, the Germans began to send over very high-flying reconnaissance aircraft attaining altitudes of approximately 33,000 feet. One morning the railwaymen noticed vapour trails very high in the sky but did not run for the slit-trenches as they knew it was an unarmed Jerry keeping an eye on their activities far below. As they watched, they saw another vapour trail closing with the previous aircraft, leaving them wondering what was happening so far above them. Two days later they learned that the second aircraft was a stripped

down Spitfire flown by a South African pilot who had earlier gained permission to remove all extraneous components and equipment from the aircraft to enable him to fly to the same altitude as the prying German. But the South African pilot could not quite reach the intruder's altitude, so the German managed to return to his own airfield with valuable photographs of developments beyond El Alamein. The next day the German aircraft returned, no doubt under the impression that he was invulnerable to attack, as even the anti-aircraft shells could not reach him. However, the plucky South African pilot had further lightened his Spitfire by removing the bulky radio set. It was enough to allow him to attain the same altitude as the reconnaissance aircraft and he fired a short burst into the German plane causing it to lose pressure and reduce height. The South African pilot then set about destroying the unarmed *Luftwaffe* aircraft. Upon landing the South African pilot was bleeding from his eyes, nose and mouth, a consequence of flying so high in a non-pressurised cockpit. His efforts were not in vain — the Germans discontinued their reconnaisance flights.

The failure of the retreat had occasioned another change in generals. Churchill had originally decided to remove Auchinleck and appoint Lt. General William Gott in August as commander of the Eighth Army, but Gott died and instead Churchill chose a little-known career officer called Bernard Montgomery. Montgomery had been commissioned into the Royal Warwickshire Regiment in 1908 and was badly wounded at the beginning of the First World War. He served out the rest of it as a staff officer, developing a philosophy of meticulous planning and using forces and resources to maximum efficiency and therefore minimal loss of life. He also appreciated the value of timing and had sufficient strength and guile not to be rushed into attacking too early by an impatient Churchill in London.

The railwaymen were an effective component of Montgomery's plans. During the build-up prior to the counter-offensive, trains were constantly being loaded with goods destined for the front line where troops were being assembled for the attack. Fearing aerial attacks, men from the Motor Transport Companies (Army Service Corp) and the railwaymen devised methods whereby trains at El Alamein station would be rapidly unloaded and both train and trucks dispersed or departed

before any enemy aircraft arrived on the scene. A train would pull into the station and ASC trucks would back up to both sides of the wagons where soldiers would quickly unload and have the supplies off the train and into the trucks within ten to twenty minutes. Catching one of these trains would have been a rich prize for any German aviator, but fortunately the *Luftwaffe* never became aware of what was happening and none of these operations was attacked. Still, the men operating the trains and those unloading them worked under the threat that at any moment a gaggle of Messerschmitts could come tearing out of the sun with guns blazing.

On the importance of supply, Jim Dangerfield recalls:

> On the afternoon before the big push I was called before the company CO and given an outline of what would be required of myself. With a detachment of fellow railwaymen I was to go forward to the nearest suitable railhead, known as El Hammam, and prepare for a busy evening. A copy of General Montgomery's 'Message to the Troops' was handed over for my perusal. Then I was informed that I was to take charge of El Hammam and prepare for the arrival of trains bringing the necessary requirements for supporting the offensive.
>
> Our detachment arrived at El Hammam in the late afternoon with instructions not to show ourselves outside any more than was absolutely necessary so as not to give any watching planes an inkling that anything out of the usual was about to happen. I occupied my time looking around the sidings, making plans on how best to receive the trains after dark. I found a main line, a crossing loop and four dead-end sidings each capable of holding 30 four-wheeled ESR rolling stock.
>
> It later became very obvious that there had been some meticulous planning done back at base so that the evening's operations could be carried out with the least delays. Because those dead-end sidings could hold only 30 wagons the trains were kept down to size. The road transport was on site, ready and waiting. Once darkness fell and it was too late for hostile aircraft to sight our activities or take photographs, the first of four 30-wagon trains was ready to be admitted to the station yard.
>
> My plan was to berth each train on the main line, run the

locomotive from end to end via the loop siding, then pull the train back sufficiently far to enable it to be pushed into one of the sidings. Almost before the wheels had stopped turning there was a huge number of vehicles alongside, their crews tearing at the wagon door fastenings to get at the stores within. That shunting procedure was repeated with the other three trains and again the lorries were waiting to offload the essentials of war.

There were a number of brass hats moving around, each with his own idea of how the trains should be handled, but I had my plan of campaign and I stuck to it. Later in the night I was congratulated for the speedy placement of the trains and the despatch of the empty wagons to be refiiled at the depots near Alexandria. But I was only one of a willing team of fellow Kiwi railwaymen.

This procedure continued for several days until the forward line had been checked for any sabotage and a further railhead could be established. We heard the noises of the big barrage and saw the flashes in the sky but we were busy with our particular duties. It has been calculated that to keep one division of troops fully supplied requires about 1000 tons of stores of all kinds daily. About 500 tons is water, a heavy and bulky commodity that requires special attention. The balance is made up of food, ammunition, petrol, clothing, mail and the many other basic necessities for waging war.

Once another forward depot was established our importance at El Hammam was greatly diminished and before long we, too, moved forward, but that's another story. All trains stopped at El Hammam to take on water and we saw many prisoners of war travelling back to POW camps in wagons that had previously carried our supplies.

I never did find out just how many vehicles and soldiers were employed in El Hammam station on the night of the big barrage — all doing their part towards an Allied victory.

Still on the sublect of supply: it is on record that in an earlier campaign about 100 German troops surrended to British forces simply because they had not been supplied with drinking water in the previous 36 hours. They had, in fact, overrun a branch supply pipe still being installed by our troops. Gleefully, the Germans broached this pipeline and drank freely of its con-

> tents. Too late they realised that they were drinking salt water which was intended only for testing for leaky joints. That salt water, combined with thirst and desert heat produced a degree of delirium among the German troops who surrendered to their foes in order to get good drinking water and some relief for their afflictions.

In an attempt to interrupt the flow of Eighth Army ammunition and petrol being transported by the railway, a group of Italian commandos staged a raid on the railway line. One evening, a couple of fast torpedo boats arrived off the coast not far from Burg el Arab, loaded with Italian marine commandos, whom Mussolini referred to as being his 'Daring Desperadoes'. However, it seemed that these men knew that Italian aspirations in North Africa were never going to match the successes of the former Roman Empire. In keeping with the reputation that dogged the Italian fighting forces during the campaign, most refused to leave the boats when they reached the shore. Hoping to boost flagging morale and lead by example, two of the commandos jumped overboard into the water and began swimming for the beach to secure a bridgehead on the understanding that the remainder would follow.

What the two hardy swimmers didn't appreciate was the strength of the tide, and they had to be rescued. Although waterlogged and shaken by their experience they managed to convince several of the others to push ahead with their mission for the glory of Italy. Eventually about twelve of them boarded inflatable boats which half-filled with water, but they managed to stay afloat long enough to gain the shore where set off to find the railway line.

They found it a few miles inland and duly laid their charges. But their efforts were to no avail. The saboteurs placed their explosive charges on the inside curve and blew out approximately one foot of rail, no doubt under the impression that this would be enough to derail a train and block the line. They appeared to have scant understanding of the dynamics of how a rail vehicle traverses a curve. As the wheel flange presses against the crown of the rail, the outward force of trains negotiating the damaged track meant that the inside wheel, while dropping momentarily into the gap, did not cause the train to derail. Several trains, including an ambulance train, passed over the blown-out section

before construction company sappers effected repairs.

These Daring Desperadoes had been told that Rommel would advance on Alexandria that night (which was his intention) and presumed that having carried out their mission, all they had to do was hide until the Axis forces came along, then collect vast quantities of medals from an adoring *Il Duce*. Heroics were certainly not in the minds of the torpedo boats' crews, for having delivered the commandos they made off at a great rate of knots for the safety of their own base. The stranded commandos, meanwhile, waited, bedraggled and shivering in a native hut awaiting the arrival of their army. Instead of being liberated by victorious Axis soldiers and treated as heroes, they were ignominiously apprehended by a solitary military policeman who found them hiding in the flea-infested hut.

With the threat of similar attempts of sabotage uppermost in the minds of the railway officers, a vehicle resembling a flat-top lorry was modified by having railway wheels fitted in place of the normal rubber tyres and armed with a Bren gun. This vehicle ran ahead of the trains checking the line.

One of the benefits of being back close to civilisation was being able to temporarily enjoy the night-life offered in Alexandria. Some of the railwaymen erected a camp in a place called Noosa Gardens. Located within these gardens was a restaurant with an accompanying bar. A group of railwaymen decided to visit the bar and start spending their leave pay. Before long the barman had no change for the notes being given him in payment for the beer so the thirsty railway boys decided to 'relieve' the hapless Egyptian barman and began to serve themselves. Enraged at having been deposed from his job and watching the Kiwis enjoying free beer, the barman called the police. Unfazed by the imminent arrival of the police, the railwaymen continued with their party. But before the police managed to reach the restaurant, all except one of the railwaymen had departed. This poor fellow had a conscience and was trying to pacify the outraged Egyptian barman when the police arrived. The outcome of this episode is not recorded.

The same group of men also enjoyed swimming at the beach at Stanley Bay and the facilities offered at the local YMCA and Fleet Club. One night, after a few beers at the Fleet Club, some of the railwaymen

were returning to their camp. They tried to hail a gharry but none would stop. One of the men, Ernie Hammond, had always said he was good with horses and could handle those temperamental beasts. When the next gharry came trotting along, Ernie dived off the footpath and tackled the horse around its fetlocks. Notwithsatnding his enthusiasm and obvious rugby skills, Ernie's efforts resulted in a stay in hospital with a broken collarbone. He was lucky not to have sustained more serious injuries.

A return to some semblance of normal living was short-lived, however. Towards the end of October one of the most famous battles of the Second World War took place.

Chapter 20

THE LAST ADVANCE

On 23 Oct 1942 the second Battle of Alamein began with one of the most sustained military barrages carried out during the Second World War. The attack came as a surprise to the Germans — Rommel was in Germany on leave. At 9.30 pm that day a concentrated effort of 1000 guns opened up on the German and Italian positions.

For many of the railwaymen, seeing the British field guns firing a continuous creeping barrage that would last for three nights and days was a sight many had never seen or would see again. The whole battle front from the Quattara Depression to the Mediterranean Sea was lit up like the sunset, and the continuous roar of gunfire could be heard from 30 miles away. The earth shook and shuddered from the onslaught of hundreds of artillery pieces. Despite being at war with the German Afrika Korps, many of the railwaymen felt a certain degree of sympathy for those on the receiving end of such a concentrated attack.

Half an hour after the barrage began, three British Corps launched the infantry attack in the north. The next day the British attacked in the south and the Axis forces suffered an unexpected blow when General Stumme, acting commander in place of Rommel, died of a heart attack. His body fell from his armoured car unnoticed by the driver and was not found for several hours. By the time Rommel got back to Italy on 26 October the fighting had been severe and the battle was poised at a crucial point. The next day, in typically audacious style, he launched a series of counter-attacks, but by the 28th Rommel knew that the superior numbers and resources of the British and Commonwealth forces was grinding down his own. Attempts to regroup and counter-attack were further balked by the incessant pounding of the RAF. The next day, knowing that the mass of German forces were

concentrated in the north, Montgomery decided to aim the breakthrough in the southern sector manned by the Italians. The battle continued to rage with fierce and desparate fighting and on 31 October Montgomery's senior C-in-C of British Armed Forces in the Middle East cabled Churchill: 'Enemy is fighting desperately, but we are hitting him hard and continuously and boring into him without mercy.'

At 1.00 am on 2 November Montgomery launched 'Supercharge', the breakthrough offensive at the forefront of which were the 2nd New Zealand Division. A new corridor was opened through the enemy minefields allowing the 9th Armoured Brigade to advance. By 3 November the sustained pressure of the Allies caused Rommel to order a withdrawal. But at 10.30 that morning he received a telegram from Hitler exhorting, 'Not to yield a single step.' As the Allied pressure increased, the intervention of Kesselring was enough for Hitler to authorise a withdrawal and the Germans began a fighting retreat, closely pursued by the Allies.

This was a crucial time for the railwaymen who had to maintain regular supplies to the fighting forces so that they could sustain the pressure on the retreating enemy. Had the counter-attack faltered because of poor transport supply, Rommel may have had the breathing space to mount a further counter-attack. It is reputed that shortly after the battle commenced, General Montgomery stated: 'Well, now it's railways versus Rommel.' Once again the New Zealand railwaymen found their services in the desert campaign indispensable.

As the enemy was forced back so the New Zealand railwaymen started to advance forward along the railway line. Two railway sappers, A. Bowen and J. Kelman, were among those who brought the first trains past El Alamein station following the barrage and advance by the Eighth Army. The trip was fraught with danger as the Italians had used the railway track formation to dig shelters from artillery fire and RAF aircraft. These dugouts were filled in by bulldozers before rail traffic was given permission to proceed, but the ground was still soft and not really compacted enough to fully bear the weight of trains. Had the formation collapsed completely, locomotives and wagons could have derailed and temporarily blocked the critically vital line.

However, good fortune was in store for the two intrepid railway-

men: as they were passing El Alamein station a post office money-box rolled out of the banked coal onto the shovelling plate of the locomotive. The coal being used was from Wales, and it was surmised that someone in a Welsh mine had accidently dropped the box in the coal and lost it in the darkness. On opening the box, the two men were rewarded with £6-10s-6d in British sterling. No doubt this money was put to good use on their next leave!

As the railwaymen operated their trains further westward they saw at first hand the devastation wreaked by the intense fighting. The desert was littered with destroyed tanks, trucks and abandoned equipment left by the fleeing enemy. Such was the swiftness of the advance, corpses had not yet been buried and the stench of decay was prevalent everywhere. When Kelman and Bowen reached Similla, they discovered a terrible mess. A train carrying Libyans had been attacked by the RAF with devastating results and the bodies had not yet been buried. Even though it was satisfying to learn that the Germans had been on the receiving end of strafing aircraft, it was very unpleasant seeing boots with human remains still inside, and the nauseating stench was a memory that remained with these men for a long time afterwards.

The Allied advance into western Egypt and eventually Libya, was a resounding success and spelt the end of Axis aspirations in this theatre of the war. Due to the rapid advance, the railwaymen were soon back in the depots they had so hurriedly evacuated in June. On 2 November, Alamein station was restaffed. On 5 November the 17th ROC handed over the line from Alexandria to El Hammam to the 16th ROC and on 11 Nov the 17th moved up to their old stamping ground of El Daaba. From there they ran trains (without signals) every 75 minutes to Mersa Matruh. A week later they handed over the El Dabaa–Matruh section to the British 193rd Royal Engineers. On 20 Nov the 16th ROC moved to Similla. At this stage the whole of the Desert Railway was under the control of Lt. Col. Sage. Construction gangs were fully occupied in repairing track and railway infrastructure that had been either damaged during the British counter-offensive or by the enemy as they retreated.

One of the young engine drivers, Bren Campbell, vividly remembers his first journey into the desert after the enemy rout. Over the

350 miles from El Alamein to Tobruk, the wreckage was mute testimony to the savage battles that had preceded the return of the New Zealand railwaymen. Burned-out tanks, particularly Italian — facing westward as if still in full retreat — were still smouldering, as were destroyed road transport vehicles and half-track troop carriers.

Everywhere to be seen were temporary graves with wooden crosses and German or Italian helmets marking their locations. At Fort Capuzzo, where a rearguard action had been fought, enemy defence emplacements were nothing more than a 3-foot-high wall of stones and rubble. The railwaymen were sickened at the sight and smell of the enemy dead, shredded by artillery shellfire. Evidence of the hasty Axis retreat, was provided by ammunition dumps that had hardly been used. Enemy airfields were littered with aircraft that had been destroyed by a departing enemy; everywhere there were signs that the battles had been overwhelmingly in favour of the British Eighth Army.

The main danger facing all those returning to the desert was the possibility of booby traps. The retreating Germans and Italians would often wire explosives to corpses, so that when the burial parties went to lift them they exploded, killing or wounding those tasked with this grisly job.

The irascible Dave Robertson and his companion of earlier adventures, Eddie Raisbeck, were dispatched to Similla shortly after the advance to take charge of an old steam crane. The crane had originally belonged to the Egyptians but had been left behind by an English company during the retreat. Their orders were for them to get the crane operational again and use it to clear the yard in preparation for increased rail traffic.

Suspecting that it may have been booby trapped, the two mates cautiously checked around the crane and carried out a cursory examination for any obvious signs of tampering. Not finding anything external, Eddie clambered onto the roof of the cab to have a look around. Glancing down, he noticed that the firebox was already prepared to light. He told big Dave what he saw but Dave was still wary and was not comfortable with Eddie poking about in what was a potential trap. Eddie climbed down and the two friends decided to find a long length of rope to tie around the firebox door handle and open it

from a safe distance. Before they put their plan into action, the men stopped work to have their lunch. They sat down in the shade of a wagon and tucked into their bully beef and 'dog' biscuits.

As they enjoyed their typical army meal, a truck pulled up close by and two English soldiers climbed out. One of the 'poms' told his companion that he was qualified to operate this type of crane. Hearing this, Eddie commented to Dave what a cheeky sod he was. Ever the pragmatist, Dave replied, 'No, he's a Godsend — put your hands over your ears in case there's a loud bang.'

They heard the firebox door open and both tensed, clamping hands over their ears, expecting to hear an explosion at any second. When the expected bang did not come, Dave had a cautious look around the corner of the wagon to see how the two pommies were progressing. Noticing smoke coming from the smokestack, Dave turned to Eddie and said, 'I'll give them ten minutes and if this thing doesn't blow up I'll boot them out of it.' The two English sappers had just solved their problem.

After the two Englishmen had left, and knowing that the crane was safe from booby traps, Dave and Eddie returned to give it a thorough examination. Even though it had been in the middle of a major battle it was in quite good condition. Initially Dave had difficulty in priming the boiler, but after some swearing and cajoling he managed to get the crane steaming efficiently. The only real problem was that the reversing lever was missing, having probably been blown off by a stray piece of shrapnel. Being ever-resourceful Kiwis, they soon fashioned a temporary lever and had the crane mobile again.

Once the yards at Similla had been cleared, the crane was transported to Mersa Matruh to assist in the clean-up operation that was required there. An Indian labour party arrived to carry out necessary work around the place which was a total shambles, with several thousand tins of bully beef lying around in the hot sun. Many had been perforated by shell and gunfire: the stench was unbelievable and the clouds of flies worse. Before starting with the mammoth task of clearing the debris, the Indians built up little fires and brewed tea for themselves. One of the Indians had built up his fire over an unexpended bullet which resulted in it discharging, sending the unsuspecting

man rocketing into the air. Luckily for him he only sustained a few scratches and a huge fright!

In charge of the Indian work party was an English officer, recently graduated from Sandhurst Military College. He epitomised the stereotypical British officer that the Kiwis loved to hate. He was extremely pompous with a superior demeanour, wore kid-leather gloves and refused to drink anything except distilled water. He was to have the harsh realities of war brought home to him very soon! Having finished their tea, the Indians set about the job they had been given. In the course of their work, they coupled up to a wagon that had been bombed and now resembled a flattened cardboard carton. As they did so, a headless and armless torso dropped out from the wagon, landing at the feet of the effeminate officer. According to the Kiwi eyewitnesses, he rapidly changed colour — 'like a chameleon'. He quickly excused himself and disappeared, not to be seen again for the remainder of the day.

An interesting find for the railwaymen and Indians at Similla was tanks of bone oil that had been brought in by the Germans. The Germans poured this oil into wells thus making the water undrinkable.

With America now entering the fray more resources became available. Prior to the counter-offensive, the question of locomotives requiring water in the desert was solved by the introduction of diesel-electric locomotives. As these locomotives only required water for the engine's cooling system, the necessity of providing thousands of gallons of clean water for steam purposes was solved. However, despite their suitability for the desert railway, they lacked the hauling power of their steam counterparts. Before they were introduced to the railway operating companies, selected railwaymen were sent to the huge army storage depots around the Suez region to familiarise themselves with this new type of locomotive.

The new locomotives were manufactured by the Whitcomb Locomotive Company of Rochelle, Illinois, USA. The War Department originally placed an order for 25 of the diesel-electric locomotives in May 1941 under the Lend-Lease agreement between Britain and the United States. In October the same year another 27 were ordered, with two from this order to replace two that had been lost at sea when the vessel they were being shipped in was sunk. In May and June 1942,

another 40 and 60 respectively, were ordered, with the intention of using them on the Italian railway network once the invasion took place. The locomotives weighed 67 tons, and were powered by two Buda, 650hp engines, situated on each side of the centrally located driving cab. To prevent sand entering the engine compartments, all the air was passed through oil-bath filters as well as the conventional air cleaners. From past experiences of aerial attacks, the railway authorities had the cabs constructed of case-hardened steel and even had armour plating fitted to the engine compartments. As diesel-electric locomotives do not emit tell-tale smoke, some of the locomotives were camouflaged to resemble ordinary box-wagons and situated in a relatively inconspicuous position within the centre of the train. However, with enemy air activity severely curbed by the RAF, it soon became apparent that trains did not require such elaborate countermeasures, and soon two of the new locomotives were running as 'double-header' units with very long trains being hauled.

For most of the Kiwis, this was their first contact with diesel-electric locomotives, and even upon returning to New Zealand, those who remained with the Railway Department would not operate diesel-electrics until the English Electric locomotives were introduced in the mid-1950s. Those who went to learn about the new diesel-electric locomotives were engaged in shunting in the Suez ports dotted along the canal. Some even travelled along the western bank via ESR routes until they reached the new swing-span bridge at El Firdan to work the new military line constructed from El Kantara to El Shatt, where another large military supply dump was located. Trains left here were bound for El Alamein and even Turkey. When the new locomotives were delivered to the operating companies, the experienced operators set about training the remaining crews to operate the diesel-electric locomotives.

After Fort Capuzzo was firmly back in British possession the 17th moved there on 26 November to once again run trains right up to Tobruk, where the Germans had extended the line a few miles further to an escarpment overlooking the port. While at Capuzzo, the New Zealanders once more worked alongside American military railwaymen from the 760th Railroad Engineers Company. The Kiwis were

not impressed with their allies. To the New Zealanders who had been working in the desert for over two years, their hard work and dedication in ensuring that the Western Desert Railway was a success was simply not appreciated by the Americans. To the New Zealanders, the Americans were brash and overbearing. They often ridiculed the antiquated equipment which the New Zealanders had been forced to use, and by no means appreciated the efficiency of the men they were working with.

When the Americans arrived at Capuzzo, the New Zealanders offered them some friendly and potentially life-saving advice, which was ignored. The Kiwis recommended that the first priority was to dig slit-trenches in the event of enemy air strikes. The Americans were also advised to dig their tents in as a further precaution. Scorning the recommendations, the American 'railroadmen' pitched their tents at ground level, then erected their beds complete with sheets and blankets, and completed their boudoir ensemble with canvas wardrobes for their spare clothes. The New Zealand railwaymen were astounded at the level of luxury accorded their American colleagues after living rough for so long.

The first night after the Americans arrived, as if to reinforce what the Kiwis had told them, about a dozen German Heinkel He-III bombers appeared overhead. The arrogant Americans had no slit-trenches in which to take cover and were forced to flee into the surrounding desert. The following morning, the New Zealanders were required to go out and round up their colleagues, as the desert is a very big and confusing place for the inexperienced. One American was duly lost and suffering the effects of the harsh desert sun when he was eventually found.

When the enemy was pushed back toward Benghazi, the Americans set up an air base at Gambut, approximately 16 miles east of Tobruk. Trains would then haul about 650 tons of bombs and aviation fuel daily to enable the Liberator B24 bombers to attack targets in Libya, Tunisia and Italy. For the railwaymen, watching these mighty four-engine aircraft taking off was quite a sight. The dust thrown up from their propeller wash would hang in the air for up to an hour after take off. Some of the railwaymen even witnessed these aircraft bombing Axis shipping.

While at Tobruk, the railwaymen discovered the 12 or so diesel-mechanical locomotives brought over by the Germans to operate on the Western Desert Extension. Unfortunately for the *Afrika Korps*, much of the German heavy main line locomotive fleet was fully engaged in transporting supplies to the Russian front or the death camps in Poland. The locomotives sent to Libya were rated at between 500–750 horsepower, not nearly powerful enough to be of any real use to their transport requirements. Like the New Zealanders, the Germans destroyed most equipment before vacating the port, and the few locomotives that were still operable soon broke down through rough handling or lack of spare parts. They ended their working lives pushed up back-shunts on spur sidings to serve as stop-blocks.

After the rigours and horrors of warfare in the desert the railwaymen still retained their robust sense of humour and enjoyed the fruits of being transport troops. Being able to 'cliftie' (borrow — on a permanent basis) the odd treat was a perk of the railway soldiers. During December 1942, a group of railwaymen at Capuzzo heard a rumour that a vast quantity of Canadian beer was sitting in wagons in the NAAFI siding. Being hot, dry and dusty, the railwaymen thought that they would celebrate Christmas in a truly memorable fashion. The necessary information as to exactly which wagons contained the amber beverage was obtained, at a pre-negotiated rate of reimbursement, from shunters who had placed the wagons in the siding. A collaborating truck driver, Allan Caird, was arranged to rendezvous with the 'cliftie' specialists at moonrise and the contraband transferred to his truck for 'delivery'.

At the appointed time, the plan was put into operation and the appropriate railway wagons had their seals broken and 25 cases, each containing what was estimated at being four dozen bottles of beer, were manhandled into Allan's truck. Then followed a careful drive back into the camp where the cases were surreptitiously distributed to certain tents where thirsty railwaymen eagerly awaited their Christmas present. Many of the cases were then buried for later occasions, but it was also decided to sample some of the contraband, in the spirit of the festive season, so several cases were broached and the booty revealed.

Instead of gleaming bottles of delicious Canadian beer, the cases

were packed with Christmas puddings, thoughtfully packed in beer crates! There was to be no celebrating the Yuletide season that night!

By Christmas 1942, most of the railwaymen, like so many other Kiwi soldiers, had been away from their families and loved ones for several years. The 16th ROC was the second longest serving unit in the desert. In contrast, most of the Australians serving in North Africa had returned home to prepare to defend their homeland from the Japanese threat. Many of the Kiwi railwaymen were beginning to wonder what their futures held, as they knew that soon the war would be over in North Africa and their services no longer required in Egypt. Most were speculating that they would follow the New Zealand Division to Italy and take over railway operations there. Others envisioned being seconded into the infantry battalions or the various support corps. Rumours within the army are a staple component of military life, and by now they were flying thick and fast. However, it was events back in New Zealand that would ultimately decide the future of the Railway Group.

Chapter 21

A JOB WELL DONE

As the British forces pushed the Germans inexorably westward, the running of trains became uneventfully normal — even air attacks ceased to be a threat. The railwaymen were able to take advantage of having a reliable system by running 374 trains during December 1942, pulling approximately 14,762 wagons and 140 coaches (for troop transport). Over 65,000 tons was sent to Tobruk alone, with many thousands of tons unloaded at various other railheads.

The Allied advance also opened up ports such as Tobruk and Benghazi. Supplies could now be shipped directly to these ports from Britain or the United States rather than being unloaded at Suez. The desert railway extension terminated at Belhamed and as the fighting moved deeper into Libya, coastal shipping gradually superseded the need for the railway.

The pressure finally came off the desert railway with the occupation of the port of Tripoli in Libya on 23 January 1943. The New Zealanders of 16th ROC were relieved by 115th (Indian) Railway Operating Company, and returned to Maadi Camp. However, men from 17th ROC and Headquarters, Railway Operating Group, remained for the duration of the desert winter, finally relinquishing their train-running duties to 193rd ROC, Royal Engineers, on 14 March 1943. The New Zealanders' connection with the Western Desert Railway Extension, which they had constructed, maintained and operated, came to an end. They knew that their main objective had been achieved. They had kept the fighting soldiers well supplied during the hard-fought battles for places that had previously just been difficult-to-pronounce Arab names on maps. Eventually, all the railway companies which had been spread over a wide area were reunited at Maadi Camp.

Two American Railroad Units were among those sent to North Africa to complement the British railway company now operating the railway. With the arrival of the railroad companies, combined with the almost unlimited resources of the United States, it seemed unlikely that the New Zealand Railway Group could have retained their unchallenged superiority in the Middle East. However, their future was still being discussed at very high levels.

As the battle receded through Libya and towards Tunisia, the railwaymen speculated about their futures. Unknown to them, high-level discussions involving the British and New Zealand governments, and General Freyberg, were trying to decide what to do with the Railway Group. Many of the railwaymen were considered too old to be drafted into the infantry battalions and most assumed — quite naturally — that they might be drafted into the Engineers Corps.

Despite the rumours and speculation no one really knew what the future held. As it transpired it was events in New Zealand that would determine their futures. Some of the railwaymen felt that their services would still be required in the forthcoming campaigns in Europe. Most of the men were under the impression that they were to be sent to Sicily and, later on, to Italy, to carry out railway operations after the invasion of Europe. With this prospect in mind, the railwaymen were given serious training to ready them for the rigours of another campaign — should it eventuate. The training they received was more relevant than the rudimentary desert training they were given prior to being sent to Egypt in 1940. Since then the railwaymen had been exposed to enemy booby traps, mines and aerial bombardment. They were experienced and hardened men.

However, it was not all work and no play, for the usual route marches and parade-ground drill was interspersed with cricket matches, baseball (probably influenced by the Americans) and trips to the baths for swimming. Some of the railwaymen did volunteer for service in the fighting battalions and duly departed for more in-depth infantry training before being posted to their new units. Most of these men went on to become part of the horrific Cassino campaign.

Combined with the speculation came rumours of leave back to New Zealand. The older railwaymen who had left wives and families behind

started to think and talk of returning home. Many of these men had been caught up in the excitement following the call to arms at the outbreak of war, but the realisation that they had families and responsibilites at home was beginning to enter their consciousness. They would nostalgically sing 'Home Sweet Home' while dreaming of their loved ones but, believing that such music and singing could lower morale and cause dissension within the ranks, the military authorities discouraged it.

In the end it was events back in New Zealand that precipitated the disbanding of the Railway Group and their return. Unbeknown to them their absence from New Zealand had caused considerable debate in Parliament. The manpower shortage had become a major issue in New Zealand's domestic political agenda, in particular, that of skilled railway workers. Over 7000 railwaymen or 27 percent of the total pre-war staff was engaged in military service. The Railways Department faced its worst-ever staffing crisis between February and March 1943. This was primarily due to the influx of American servicemen and the heavy demands being made on freight traffic. In the early stages of the war there were approximately one million troop movements by rail. Between 1942 and 1943 rail movements reached their peak with over five million troops being transported by railways. In total, during the war, 32,000 special trains were provided to move troops and 17 million individual journeys for members of the Armed Forces were made on these trains. All this was carried out with staff levels over a quarter below pre-war numbers. Inevitably, this led to increased working hours for many within essential industries, railway locomotive drivers being some of the worst affected.

Such was the concern about railwaymen working excessively long hours, that questions were raised in Parliament to the Minister of Railways, Bob Semple, about the problem. The question put to Semple concerned the fact that engine drivers were working an average of 60 hours per week, putting them under extreme strain. A former artillery soldier and career railwayman, Ray Munro, recalls observing, while on leave from the army, how exhausted his engine driver father was while working long shifts during the war years. He stated how 'grey' and 'worn out' he had become in trying to meet the demands placed upon

those engine drivers and firemen who remained in New Zealand.

The general manager of the Railways Department had outlined the problems they faced in January 1942. He argued that in wartime the railway system becomes somewhat of an extension of the military services. He stated:

> It is generally conceded that an efficient railway service is a vital adjunct to the defence organisation of the Dominion and the Department feels that the time has now arrived when it is essential that a limit be placed upon the release of its employees for service with the Armed Forces. The Railways Department must be regarded as an integral part of the defence system and in a national emergency the demands upon the national transport system would, in all probability, be still further increased.

On a later occasion when concern was raised in Parliament about the excessive strain being placed upon the remaining railway work force, Bob Semple conceded that the situation required rectifying. He stated that steps had been taken as early as April 1942 to have engine drivers serving in the Armed Forces released and returned to their civilian occupation.

On 19 November 1942 Peter Fraser cabled Winston Churchill to discuss the future of the 2nd New Zealand Division. This cable set in motion the final stages of the role the Railway Group would play in the war. At this juncture of the war, pressure was being exerted on the New Zealand Government by Britain and even the United States to keep the 2nd New Zealand Division in the Middle East in anticipation of the Allied invasion of Europe. In contrast, many New Zealanders perceived the Japanese as a greater threat to New Zealand and thought the government should follow Australia's policy and bring the Division back to fight alongside the Allies in the Pacific region.

But Fraser's primary concern was the acute shortage of available manpower in New Zealand industries. He informed Churchill that it was the decision of New Zealand's Parliament to replace 20 percent of the longest serving personnel of the 2nd Division. The railway companies were among those to be returned to New Zealand though military planners in the Middle East were anxious to retain their services. Fraser

argued that many of the railwaymen were highly skilled and had also been among the first to volunteer for overseas service, and therefore deemed them too important to risk as fighting soldiers should they be absorbed into the infantry battalions.

The railwaymen were unaware of these high-level negotiations until March 1943. Those who were already at Maadi Camp received a visit from New Zealand's overall Commanding Officer, General Freyberg; prior to his arrival, the railwaymen were subjected to the usual square-bashing that accompanies such military occasions. The NCOs bawled out commands for the men to left and right wheel, stand to attention, stand at ease and so on, while the hot desert sun beat down on them .

When General Freyberg arrived, he acknowledged the railway officers smart salutes with a friendly wave and promptly made his way to the formed-up ranks of railwaymen. Freyberg's first words to the assembled railway sappers were to apologise for his lateness and for them to gather around him as he had some important news. He proceeded to thank the railwaymen for their valuable contribution to the North African Campaign but he reserved the best news until last; that the railwaymen were being sent home to New Zealand. Needless to say, this information was received with a rousing cheer. Having told them of their imminent departure from Egypt, Freyberg went on to stress the importance of keeping this news secret. He told them about the increased submarine activity in the South Pacific now that Japan had entered the war. The prospect of a troopship, crowded with returning soldiers, being torpedoed if the enemy were to learn of their home-coming, was not something Freyberg wanted on his conscience.

The railwaymen also received a visit from another VIP, the honourable Fred Jones, New Zealand's Defence Minister. He announced that the men would be leaving for New Zealand on or about 26 March 1943. Now that the railwaymen were about to return to New Zealand, they were formally disbanded.

However, many of the men from the railway units felt their expertise and presence were still essential to the war effort. Their obvious disappointment at being disbanded was summed up in a letter sent from Lieutenant Colonel Smith, Officer Commanding 13th Railway

Construction and Maintenance Group, to Brigadier Stevens at Headquarters 2NZEF. Smith raised the point that when the war was eventually taken into Europe, the New Zealand fighting troops would be best provided for their lines of communication by fellow New Zealand railway troops. He stressed the point that his unit had more than adequately proved itself in North Africa, and that adaptability and resourcefulness would be essential in the 'rain lands of Europe.' Furthermore, he claimed that New Zealand railway troops were more capable than their British counterparts.

Such was his desire to keep his company intact that he maintained that: 'There is no evidence to show that skilled Railway Construction men are required in New Zealand in civil capacity, nor does it appear likely that they will be required in any Pacific military operation.' Stevens replied sympathetically, but stated that little could be done to retain a military railway presence in the Middle East, particularly as Freyberg had received instructions by this time to repatriate the railwaymen to New Zealand. There was a genuine feeling of sympathy among the senior officers of Headquarters 2NZEF over the manner in which the disbanded units were informed. While they realised that their repatriation to New Zealand was justified, they understood the attitude felt by the officers and men in question, 'who by that time had acquired a pride in their units and their work'. Some did remain behind and there was a trace of resentment among them for some time.

These were the views of some officers, of course, and did not necessarily reflect the views of all the enlisted men. The Railways Department had convinced the government that men from the railway companies could better serve the war effort by returning in New Zealand. The total projected gross number of furlough troops to be repatriated (in what was known as the Ruapehu Draft) was predicted to be 2600 men, 713 of them railwaymen from various units.

German forces finally surrendered at Cap Bon, Tunisia on 10 May 1943 and the North African Campaign was formally concluded. It was decided that all the men from the First, Second and Third Echelons should be granted furlough leave back to New Zealand. A system determining who would return first was devised, with each man drawing a marble from a bag. As the railwaymen were desperately required back

in New Zealand for reasons of 'essential industry', they were exempt from the draw. Despite the warnings for secrecy, it soon became public knowledge of the impending departure of the first furlough leave ship. It was not uncommon for a young Egyptian wallad to look up while busily polishing the soldier's boots and say, 'You drawn a marble Kiwi?' Even the shopkeepers were in on it and they would sidle up to a Kiwi soldier and inform him that certain items were difficult to obtain back in New Zealand. The wily Egyptians would then try to sell these hard-to-obtain items to the soldier, telling him that he would capitalise on his purchases once he reached home. As is typical with most soldiers, they liked to know what was happening and would ask each other, by means of a coded question such as whether he was a Ruapehu, or had he drawn a marble?

According to official records the British Admiralty, charged with the safe return of these men to New Zealand, was furious at the laxness shown by the Kiwis and almost relinquished responsibility for the voyage. They had also experienced the same problem when the Australians had returned home earlier. Not all the New Zealanders were planning on going home with the Ruapehu draft; those who could prove that they had relatives living in Great Britain, or had good reason to visit there, were given the opportunity. As no one wanted to miss the troopship by risking military arrest, everyone behaved themselves — to such a degree that caused some NCOs and officers to wonder why they had never tried a similar ruse before!

On 15 June 1943, under cover of darkness, men from the illustrious New Zealand Railway Group boarded the *New Amsterdam* at Port Tewfik — where they had originally disembarked in 1940 — along with approximately 5500 New Zealand soldiers. While many felt that their services were still required in the European theatre, they were happy to be sailing home to their families. The railwaymen knew that they had done their duty to the best of their abilities. In reality, they had far exceeded what had been expected of them.

The railwaymen who remained in Egypt came under the command of Major Pearse as part of a composite group given the grand name of New Zealand Operating Detail. They primarily supplied labour in and around the Suez region as part of their 'normal routine'. Most days

they had a short route march in the morning and were given the afternoons off. These men sailed home as part of the Wakatipu Draft in January 1944.

The *Niew Amsterdam* sailed down the Red Sea and, three days after leaving Port Tewfik, briefly docked at Aden, the British base guarding the entrance of this vital sea lane. The men were not permitted to go ashore and suffered the intense heat as best they could. Some of the men remember it being so hot, they watched the deck caulking bubbling up between the timbers. The troopship was to join a naval escort at Aden, even though the ship's master knew that the speed of his vessel would be the best defence against possible submarine attack. It was a condition requested by the New Zealand Government that such ships be escorted by warships.

The ship also called at Fremantle where the troops were allowed to disembark. Once again the New Zealanders headed for Perth, where their Australian hosts welcomed them as they had three years previously. After so many years of being in the presence of Middle Eastern peoples, it was refreshing for the New Zealanders to once more associate with their colonial cousins. But they were now eager to get home. At Perth, an administration party from New Zealand met and boarded the ship for the purpose of arranging disembarkation and travel to homes in New Zealand.

The whole voyage home was uneventful until the ship arrived off the Tasmanian port of Hobart on 8 July. One railwayman, Ernie George, was standing at the ship's rail watching the land come in to view when he saw a torpedo, fired from a Japanese submarine, miss the bow by approximately 20 feet. The escorting corvette, committed to protecting the troopships, quickly moved in and circled the convoy like a speedboat, all the while dropping depth charges. The troopships took evasive action by increasing their speed, while the gunners went to action stations. No tell-tale oil slick appeared, which usually signified the destruction of a submarine, and no more attacks were made on the *Niew Amsterdam*. It was a reminder to the men on board, however, that the war was still a very real concern, even many thousands of miles from the desert. The only disruption caused by the submarine scare was a delay in breakfast being ready, as all the stewards had rushed off

to their action station posts.

For some inexplicable reason, the military transport authorities seemed to have acquired a vast supply of ingredients suitable for making custard. While the meals aboard the ship were adequate and nutritious, the desserts were monotonously the same — custard with every meal! It soon became the standard joke to use the expression that the 'ship was so many custards out from New Zealand'.

After leaving Hobart, the ship sailed on a southerly course, probably to avoid Japanese submarines that may have been lurking closer to New Zealand's main sea lanes. The troops on board were not informed of this detour and many began to wonder about their destination when the temperature dropped alarmingly. Staying up on deck started to lose its appeal as it got increasingly colder. Wags on board even suggested that they would soon encounter icebergs! Before venturing out on deck the men would don heavy greatcoats, gloves and balaclavas and wonder when they would reach New Zealand.

On 11 July, the convoy sailed up the east coast of New Zealand to berth at Wellington on the 12th at 9 am. After an absence of over three years emotions would have been twofold: happy to be home, mixed with the realisation that some of their mates and comrades would never be returning.

As travel arrangements had already been taken care of, it was a relatively quick procedure to get the troops onto trains for their final destinations. For most of the railwaymen, their contribution to the overseas war effort was over.

Chapter 22

READJUSTING TO CIVVY STREET

Like all soldiers returning from war, adjusting back into home life could be, and for many, was, a difficult transition. Having travelled to exotic locations and experienced many new feelings, the young — and even the many of the older men, could not always understand why life was not what it had been when they departed. New values had emerged and returning soldiers were often shocked by what they encountered. For the railwaymen, it took some getting used to seeing women carrying out railway duties that had previously been exclusively male occupations. The fairer sex were very much in evidence on railway station platforms as porters (inexplicably known as 'budgies') and as 'clippies', punching rail-travellers tickets. They were also driving buses and trams, carrying out repairs on farm and road vehicles, and working in road gangs when necessary. Even buying underwear became a whole new experience, as women now manned the counters in shops that sold men's clothing!

Rationing was evident and the returning soldiers soon found ways of 'obtaining' goods if the necessary ration coupons were not available. With transport being severely curtailed by rationing of both fuel and rubber, valid requests for these commodities had to be supported in writing to the rationing authority. Jim Dangerfield recalls how a local priest could be bribed into parting with valuable petrol coupons provided the recipient made a donation to his parish coffers. No doubt this priest salved his conscience with the thought that he was working for the greater glory of his church! For shift workers, such as railwaymen, commuting to work after public transport ceased to operate, usually meant riding a bicycle — in all weather and conditions.

Many men who volunteered for military service had postponed marriage because of the uncertainty of their eventual return home. For those men fortunate enough to survive and return to their betrothed, marrying during wartime meant that weddings were not lavish affairs. Photographic film was unobtainable for private use and many couples' wedding pictures were taken by professional street photographers who were permitted a limited amount of film. The scarcity of consumer goods also posed a problem for those trying to purchase gifts for the bride and groom. Gifts of money and wooden bread-boards were common. Even such basic items as dinner sets were difficult to obtain and many returning servicemen were forced to use whatever they could beg or borrow. Strangely enough, Pyrex dishes were readily available and one railwayman and his bride received a dozen such dishes as wedding gifts, which they were unable to exchange for other household items. The same man recalls having his total travelling distance being restricted to 100 miles after special permission had been received. More distant relatives and friends were unable to attend many nuptials and newlyweds' honeymoons were frequently limited to staying a single night in a local hotel.

When they left for war in 1940 the only uniforms to be seen were worn by patriotic New Zealanders, so it was disconcerting to see so many American uniforms in evidence. They had already felt a degree of disquiet about American troops arriving in New Zealand following the United States entry into the war. In Egypt, American troops who had travelled via New Zealand voiced their appreciation of what that country had to offer — and that included the female population. Stories had percolated through to the Kiwi soldiers from their British comrades how young American soldiers had proved irresistible to English girls who were fascinated by their glamorous transatlantic cousins, particularly in the midst of a dreary wartime Britain. Luxuries like silk stockings and 'candy' were often used to entice young girls to put on hold any previous vows of fidelity to men fighting elsewhere. If a young woman was seen wearing silk stockings, she risked hearing the comment being made that she 'had been kind to a Yank'.

Now it was the New Zealand troops who felt threatened by the presence of American servicemen. Resentment was barely concealed

when it was remembered how Britain and her Allies fought against the might of Nazi Germany, America entering the war only after the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. After being told by girlfriends and fiancées — and even some wives — that their affection was now directed elsewhere, this resentment frequently turned to outright hostility. The returning soldiers, wearing baggy and ill-fitting army uniforms, felt upstaged by the US soldiers in their immaculate dress uniforms. How could they compete when the Americans appeared to have unlimited supplies of candy, stockings and money? For some Kiwi soldiers, the mere sight of an American soldier was enough to cause a street brawl.

But not all felt that way. Many of the returning New Zealanders were relieved to have the United States as a visible ally in the region, particularly after the Japanese success in the Pacific theatre. Despite American money and glamour most young men were reunited with their girlfriends, fiancées and wives and could finally start leading a normal life. During the long years away, letters from sweethearts and wives were the threads that kept servicemen going, even at times of great despair. For some, re-uniting with their partners was strange, and relationships required some rebuilding to regain the romance threatened by long separation.

The relief and happiness of being home was also tainted by the awkwardness some men felt when walking along busy streets in their uniforms, as anxious parents, wives and other family members would stop them to ask whether they knew their loved ones, especially if they had been killed in action. Some men avoided main streets for this reason. Even visiting homes where sons and fathers were still overseas had an effect. Feelings of guilt at being alive and home surfaced when they learned how other families faced dreadful uncertainties with men still fighting overseas.

Visiting the families of mates who had been killed was a harrowing duty. Having been hardened to death and violence didn't make the task any easier: hearing a mother's anguished cry when she opened the door to see her dead son's friend standing there, or recounting face-to-face how their son or husband had died made many quail. It was moments such as these that really brought it home to those who re-

turned what it meant to a family to have a son or father killed in war.

Many servicemen, including the railwaymen, were shocked to discover the numbers of fit young men working in 'reserved' occupations that, in their opinion, were not all that essential, and certainly not deserving the term 'reserved'. While serving overseas, the soldiers were under the impression that all able-bodied males had been drafted into the forces, with reserved occupations being temporarily manned by those deemed too old for active service or by women. To further inflame their anger, many of those who had not volunteered for war service implied that only 'mugs' and fools had signed up for military service. Ironically, men working on the wharves received danger money for handling bombs and explosives, which greatly increased their pay and far exceeded that which the servicemen had received when on active duty. It was inevitable that such issues would cause resentment and anger. Soldiers on leave began to exchange stories of what they had discovered after returning to their home districts. The consensus was soon reached that they were expected to fight the war while other able-bodied men remained safely in New Zealand earning good wages.

General Freyberg, meanwhile, had made it clear to Peter Fraser that he wanted his experienced battle-hardened troops back to resume the fight against the Nazis. The men on furlough were less enthusiastic to return to the war having been made aware of the manpower situation in New Zealand. The discontent and protests resorted to outright mutiny with hundreds of men from the New Zealand Division refusing to return to the war in Europe. They reasoned that eligible men who had avoided conscription so far, for whatever reason, should take their places instead. The situation grew very ugly but wartime censorship meant the mutiny was quelled before it got out of hand.

The situation was different for the returned railwaymen. Their unit, the New Zealand Railway Group, was completely disbanded and the railwaymen re-absorbed into the domestic railways. They were able to avoid the contentious issue of whether they should return to Europe. It soon became apparent to the railwaymen that their colleagues who had stayed in New Zealand were also working excessive hours and under considerable strain. Being working men, most railwaymen liked to socialise over a couple of beers. Yet such was the exhaustion many

suffered, alcohol merely exacerbated the problem. Sleep deprivation made the railwaymen irritable and often temperamental. One newly returned locomotive fireman had sympathy for his driver after he fell asleep shortly after departing the terminal station at the beginning of a shift. On waking the engine driver close to their destination, the driver berated his mate for allowing him to sleep, despite the fireman driving the train safely to its destination.

Not all the railwaymen who returned with the Ruapehu Draft resumed their pre-war careers with the Railway Department. Having served abroad, they were entitled to apply to the Rehabilitation Board for assistance into an occupation they thought would suit them. One railwayman, Lyndon Evans, who applied to the Board was told that he had 'rehabilitated' himself by obtaining his second-class engine driver's ticket while serving in North Africa, and had therefore 'disqualified' himself from receiving a ballot farm. Although eager and better qualified in farming employment, he was refused the opportunity and had to remain with the Railways Department. Lyndon persisted with his application for a ballot farm, and finally in 1949, his protestations earned him a forced transfer to Ohakune Junction, on the North Island Main Trunk Line. This depot was one of two that were considered 'punishment' postings for disobedient railway employees. A somewhat disappointing conclusion for a man who had readily signed up to 'fight for his country' three years previously. Lyndon eventually acquired a farm in 1952 and worked his land until disabled by a stroke in 1995.

After their return, servicemen were entitled to join the exclusive Returned Services Association (RSA) 'club' that had been a sanctuary for veterans of the Great War for 25 years. Ironically, some of the younger 'new' veterans were not made very welcome by some of the original members, but this was not a common occurrence and most of the returned servicemen were happy with the services the RSA provided for them.

As the railwaymen returned in mid-1943 and most resumed their pre-war employment with the Railway Department, they were almost forgotten by the time victory in both Europe and Japan was secured in 1945. The return of the main body of New Zealand servicemen in 1945 was heralded with accolades while the exploits of the Railway

Group were generally overlooked. Like most returned soldiers, they were, and still are, humble about their actions and did not seek any particular attention regarding their wartime endeavours. And though they never received the same degree of recognition as other military units, the contribution made by the New Zealand Railway Group in North Africa and the Middle East can justifiably be listed as being one of the most significant contributions made by a New Zealand military unit in the Second World War.

Appendix 1

BOARDING LISTS

10th RAILWAY CONSTRUCTION COMPANY

Andes, Wellington, 2 May 1940

Spr. W.H. Adams
Sgt. F. Adamson
Cpl. J.R. Addison
Spr. J.A.A. Aitken
Spr. D.F. Alcock
Spr. I.E. Allcock
Spr. R. Allan
Spr. T..H. Allen
Spr. E. Alpin
Spr. A. Anderson
Spr. C. Anderson
Spr. E.A. Anderson
Spr. C.S. Arbon
Spr. B. Armstrong
Lt. F.R. Askin
Spr. G.P. Baggstrom
Spr. D.B. Bagust
Spr. C.R. Baines
Sgt. N.A. Bannatyne
Spr. D. Barwood
Spr. W.C. Baylis
L/Cpl. W.H. Beel
Spr. T.B. Begbie
Spr. W. Bell
Spr. C. Bellingham
Spr. T.H. Bennett
Spr. L.C. Bilderbeck
L/Sgt. W. D. Blair
T/L Cpl. F. Bougen
Spr. G.B. Bowler
Spr. R.W. Bowman
Spr. J. Breen
Spr. G.H. Bregmen
Spr. J.W. Bregmen
Spr. J.J. Brien
Spr. A.J. Briggs
Spr. W.T. Browning
Spr J.A. Bruce
Spr J. Caldwell
Spr. J. Cantrick
Spr. N.G. Carpenter
Spr. G.A. Carrington
Spr. L. Casey
Spr. J.W. Chadderton
L/Cpl. E. T. Chatman
Spr. F. Chatman
Spr. N.J. Cheyne
L/Cpl. W.H. Child
Spr. W.C. Christie
Spr. P. Chrystal
Spr. A. Clark
Capt. C. Clark
Spr. D.W. Clark
Spr. G.M. Clark
Spr. G.W. Clark
L/Cpl. J.W. Clark
Sgt. P. Clark
Spr. P.W. Clark
L/Cpl. R. Close
Spr. A.H. Cochrane
Spr. G.W. Cockburn
Pvt. W.T. Cockerell
Spr. T.R. Colebrook
Spr. B. Conway
Spr. F.R. Cocneigh
Sgt. R.B. Corlett
Spr. S.A. Cormack
Spr. H.A. Cornthwaite
L/Cpl. A.J. Craig
Spr. H.M. Crarer
Spr. R.J. Creighton
L/Cpl. J.T. Crowasdale
CSM F. Crompton
Spr. D.R. Crosby
Spr. J.R. Crossland
Spr. C.M. Cumming
Spr. S.W. Dale
Lt. D.B. Dallas
Spr. A.T. Davidson
L/Cpl. F.W. Davidson
Cpl. P. Delaney
Spr. A.J. Dickey
Spr. J.J. Dilworth
Spr. A.E. Dixon
Spr. E.G. Drake
Spr. T.P. Ducey
Spr. R.A. Dunbar
Spr. A.E. Dutton
Spr. F.C. Earley
Spr. T. Earley
Spr. L.M. Edwards
Spr. F. Ennion
L/Cpl. R.M. Farrell

Spr. A. Featonby
Spr. L.E. Fischer
Lt. W.M. Fisher
L/Cpl. T.S. Flenwell
Spr. E.J. Flynn
Spr. M.J. Forde
Spr. H.J.R. Gale
Spr. J.H. Garvan
Spr. P. Gaul
Spr. S.J. Gavan
Spr. J.C. Gelbard
Spr. C.E. Giddens
Spr. W.R. Giles
Spr. J.M. Giltrap
Spr. A.C. Glastonbury
Spr. T.G.C. Glynn
Spr. R.J. Goodison
Spr. J.A. Grattan
L/Sgt. C.E. Green
Spr. A.C. Greener
Spr. G.W. Griffiths
Spr. R.A. Hales
Spr. D.D. Hamilton
Spr. C.M. Hanson
Spr. M.M. Hart
Spr. T.T. Hart
Spr. C.R. Hawley
Spr. C.J. Hennessy
Spr. J. Herbert
Spr. M.J. Hickey
Spr. R.G. Holland
Spr. J.F. Holly
Spr. W.J. Jane
Spr. C.J. Jobbitt
Spr. R.W. Johnston
Spr. J.E. Jolly
Spr. C.F. Jones
Spr. C.L. Jones
Spr. G.E. Keating
Spr. R.H. Kehoe
L/Sgt. A.A. Keller
Spr. W.J. Kennedy
Spr. A.M. Kidd
Sgt. G.S. Knightly
Spr. R.A. Lang
Spr. B. Laurent
Spr. J.M. Laws
Spr. A.W. Lawson
Spr. D.M. Lawton
Spr. W.R. Lealand
Spr. A.G. Lees
Spr. C.J.B. Le Prou
Cpl. H.B. Lewis
Spr. V. Lewis
Spr. N.L. Lingard
L/Cpl. N.B. Little
Spr. J.H. Lloyd
Spr. C.A. Lovett
Spr. S.C. Lowe
Spr. M.R. McClelland
L/Cpl. R.S. McCombie
Spr. J. McCrae
Spr. I.A. McGreevy
Spr. T. McGuire
Spr. R.A. McKeany
Spr. W.H.L. McLaren
Spr. J. McLaughlin
Spr. G.L. McLean
Spr. C.H. McLellan
Spr. R.F. McLennan
Spr. M.C. McMillan
Spr J. McNeill
Spr. D. McRae
Spr. H. Maloney
Spr. S. C. Manson
Lt. D.S. Marchbanks
Spr. R.E. Marshall
Spr. J.A. Martin
Spr. N.A.J. Martin
Spr. D.V. Mason
Spr. O.V. Mason
Spr. T.E. Millar
Spr. J.J. Miller
Spr. S.G. Mills
L/Sgt. B.J. Molloy
Spr. E.R. Morris
Spr. D.A. Mouton
Spr. R.P. Moyle
Spr. D. Munro
Spr. J. Murphy
Spr. P. Murphy
L/Cpl. A.G. Murray
Spr. K.G. Murray
Spr. J.J.J. Neale
Spr. G. Neame
Spr. P. Neame
Spr. H.V. Neilsen
Spr. L.A. Nelson
Spr. H.G. Nyhane
Spr. R.M. Oldham
Spr. E.B. Oliver
Spr. J.G. Parker
Spr. D.G. Parr
Spr. D. Paterson
Spr. H. Paterson
Spr. B.J. Pearce
Spr. R.W. Pearse
L/Cpl. E.A. Penno
Spr. W.G. Perfect
Spr. T.E.K. Pitt
Spr. V.C. Pivac
CQMS G.J. Pratt
Spr. J.K. Provan
Spr. R.W. Pumpa
Spr. J. Purvis
Spr. P.S. Quirke
Maj. T.C.V. Rabone
Spr. C.F. Reed
Spr. G. Render
Spr. W. Reynolds
Spr. A.E. Richards
Spr. H.R. Rickard
Spr. J. Robertson
Cpl. R.M. Robertson
Spr. G.A. Rockell
Spr. H.J. Rogers
L/Cpl. G.A. Roper
Spr. F.M. Rowsell
Spr. W. Rumsby
Lt. G. Rushton
Spr. J.A.M. Ryan
Spr. H.E.C. Scanlan
Spr. I.E. Scouler
Spr. T.S. Sharp
Spr. W. Sharp
Spr. A. Shaw
Spr. D.J. Sheffield
Sgt. G. Sherman
Spr. J.A. Shone
Spr. M. Silich
Spr. A.C. Sim

Spr. A.P. Simmons
L/Cpl. J.H. Skinner
Spr. J.R. Sloan
Spr. A.D. Small
Spr. A. Smith
Spr. R. Smith
Spr. S.C. Smith
Spr. H.J.M. Saffe
Spr. E.T.O. Somers
Cpl. H.L. Spencer
Spr. A.W. Stevenson
Spr. E. Swinburne
Spr. E.E. Taaffe
Spr. A.L. Taylor
L/Sgt. A.V. Taylor
L/Cpl. C.A. Thomas
Spr. A.E. Thompson
Spr. D. Thomson
Spr. W.J. Thorne
Spr. T.P. Timlin
Spr. J. Tinetti
Spr. J. Topia
Spr. V.F. Townsend
Spr. E.B. Tregoweth
Cpl. C.H. Turner
Lt. C.J. Tustin
Spr. W.R. Walker
L/Cpl. C.C. Watson
L/Cpl. A.R. Wells
Sgt. L.C. Whinham
Spr. M.P. Wilkinson
Spr. L.N. Williams
Spr. G.E.H. Wilson
Spr. I.J. Wilson
Spr. N. Wright
Spr. N. T. Wright
Spr. J.L. Wylie
Capt. W.F. Young

13th RAILWAY CONSTRUCTION COMPANY

Empress of Japan,Wellington, 28 August 1940

Spr. J.W. Aitcheson
Spr. C.A. Allan
L/Cpl. N. Allen
Spr. I.A. Allison
Spr. P.H. Anderson
Spr. E.W. Ansley
T/Lt. G.K. Armstrong
Spr. E.W. Barnes
Spr. B.D. Barrett
Spr. L.J. Beattie
Spr. J.L. Beighton
Cpl. E.T. Belhamine
Spr. A.R. Bentley
Spr. C.C. Beswick
Spr. W. Black
Spr. E.G. Box
Spr. H. Boyle
Spr. D. Brady
Spr. H.J. Bredesen
Spr. R.A. Brewster
L/Cpl. D.C. Bricknell
Spr. J. Brown
Spr. A. Buchanan
Sgt.C.G.Buckworth DCM
Spr. L.I.G. Bullock
Spr. H.J. Burgess
Spr. E.W. Burrell
Spr. S.F. Burton
Spr. C.G. Cameron
Spr. G.P.S. Campbell
Spr. J.A.C. Capper
Spr. M.J. Carroll
Spr. G. Cave
Spr. I.L. Cayford
Sgt. K. Chandler
Spr. A.E. Chapman
Sgt. J.B. Christensen
Spr. A.M. Christie
Spr. W.J. Clark
Spr. J.H. Coates
L/Sgt. A. Cole
Spr. L.W. Coleman
Spr. N.F. Collyer
Spr. A.A.L. Cooper
Spr. W.L. Coote
Spr. G.W.. Cope
CQMS F.C. Corlett
Spr. F.T. Coughlan
Spr. J.B. Cowen
Spr. J.A. Cross
Spr. J. Crowley
Spr. D.L.W. Cunningham
L/Cpl. L.H. Curtice
Spr. W.P. Cuthbert
Spr. A.E. Daly
Spr. A.E. Dando
Spr. G.I. Daniels
Spr. J. Darcy
Spr. V.R. Davey
Spr. J.T. Davidson
Spr. W.S. Dellow
Cpl. M.G. Dines
Spr. F.K. Dixon
Spr. H.D. Dobson
Spr. R.F. Dodds
Spr. B. Donaldson
Spr. F.L. Donaldson
Spr. B.E. Drevermann
Spr. T.H. Dunn
Spr. J.L. Dunwoodie
Spr. J. Dutton
Sgt. W.F. Egerton
Spr. A.A. Ellis
Spr. R.P. England
L/Sgt. C.R. Ensor

Spr. E.L. Evans
Spr. E.R. Evans
Spr. L. Evans
Spr. P.H.E. Evans
Spr. G.D. Farquharson
L/Cpl. J.E.T. Fenn
WO2 J.A. Fenton
Spr. R. Fletcher
Spr. T.E. Fowler
Spr. D. Fraser
Spr. K.J. Fraser
Spr. J.C. Frew
A/Sgt. C.P. Furber
Spr. W.J.T. Gadsby
Spr. A.G. Gameron
Spr. N. Gibson
Spr. H.H. Giles
Spr. R.B. Giles
L/Cpl. J.G. Godwin
Spr. H.R. Gordon
Spr. S.F.L. Gould
Spr. T.W. Grieve
Spr. J.R. Griffiths
Spr. J.N. Grimley
Spr. R.E. Groves
Spr. R.J. Haggerty
Spr. A.H. Hale
Spr. T.L.J. Hallinan
Cpl. J.M. Hanger
Spr. H.S. Harding
Spr. J.S. Harding
Spr. J.D. Harland
Spr. A.E. Harrad
Spr. R.L. Harris
Spr. S.F.J. Hawkins
Spr. G.C. Hawthorn
Cpl. R. M. Hay
Sgt. R.E. Hermans
Spr. C.J. Hill
Spr. G. Hill
Spr. J.J.A. Hoare
Spr. C.R. Hodgson
Spr. J.F. Hoey
Spr. M.J. Hogan
Spr. R.C. Hogg
Spr. R.C. Horsfall
Spr. J.K. Hoskin
Spr. K. Hutchins
Spr. G. James
Spr. W.H. James
Cpl. W.A. Jameson
Spr. A.J. Jarvis
Spr. E.P. Jenkins
Spr. R.C. Jerrom
Spr. E.S. Johnsen
Spr. P.M. Johnson
Spr. J.G. Johnston
L/Cpl. M.R. Johnstone
Lt. B.T.J. Jones
Sgt. E.M. Jones
Spr. H.D. Jones
Spr. J.A. Jones
Spr. J.C. Jordan
Spr. M.P. Kavanagh
Spr. R.D. Kennard
Spr. J.R. Kerr
L/Cpl. T.N. Kerwin
Spr. C.J. King
CSM T.J.Kirk-Burnnand
Spr. A.A. Kitto
L/Cpl. F.W.E. Kurth
Spr. G.M. Kurth
Spr. J.R.M. Kuzman
Spr. D.H. Laing
Spr. R.B. Laing
Spr. W.R. Langdon
Spr. R.C. Laugesen
L/Sgt. E. Ledger
Spr. J. Lockhart
Cpl. H. Lowcay
Spr. L.F.J. McAloon
Spr. H.A. McColl
Spr. J.R.W. McDonald
Spr. L.S. McFarland
Cpl. E.G. McGeorge
Spr. F. McGreevy
Spr. L. McInnes
Spr. J.H. McKay
Spr. R.J. McKenzie
Cpl. J. McMichael
Sgt. C.S. McNamara
Spr. B.R. McPherson
Spr. H.C. Main
T/Lt. L.C.E. Malt
Spr. E.M. Marshall
L/Cpl. M.J. Marshall
Spr. R. Marshall
Spr. P.E. Martin
Spr. R. Mason
Spr. R.E. Mason
Spr. C. Mercer
Spr. A.H. Miller
Spr. E.C. Morton
Spr. E.W. Morton
Spr. S.O. Morris
Spr. J.W. Muir
L/Cpl. A.C. Munro
Spr. L.F. Murphy
Spr. M.J. Nash
Spr. R.P. Nesbitt
Spr. H.G. Nicholson
Spr. C.W.H. Nieper
Spr. T.G. Nolan
Spr. H. Northcroft
Spr. G.H. Nuttal
Spr. E.A. O'Brien
Spr. J.A.V. O'Hagan
Spr. D.D. Osborne
Spr. J.W.B. Palatchie
Spr. G.C. Palmar
Capt. A.G. Park
Spr. H.W. Parker
Spr. G. Paterson
Spr. J. Paterson
Spr. G.W. Paul
Spr. C.D. Payne
Spr. M.D. Pocock
Spr. K.J. Pointon
Spr. C.W. Porteous
Spr. F.T. Powick
L/Cpl. W.R. Price
Spr. F.A. Ramsay
Spr. W.F. Rennie-Hynes
Spr. H.T.L. Rice
Spr. H.O. Ries
L/Sgt.W.P. Rillstone
Spr. L.C. Ringdahl
Cpl. J. Risk
Spr. A.S. Ritche
Spr. A.K. Robb
T/Lt. F.K. Roberts

Spr. J. Robertson
Cpl. J.E. Robinson
Spr. J.W. Robinson
Spr. H.C. Rodgers
Spr. A. U. Ross
Spr. J.W. Ross
Spr. R.L. Roud
Spr. W.C. Ryland
Spr. J Saggers
Spr. W.R. Sayer
Spr. V. Sayers
Spr. G.V. Scanlan
Spr. M. Scannell
Spr. G.V. Schroder
Spr. R.C. Seymour
Spr. G. Shann
Spr. A.S. Shaw
Spr. H.J. Shepherd
Spr. S.G. Shepherd
Spr. C.C. Skett
L/Sgt. E. Smith
Spr. E.A. Smith
Maj. R.T. Smith
Spr. W.G. Smith
Spr. T.V. Southon
Spr. L.F.H. Stevens
Spr. P.E. Stiver
Spr. D.C. Stewart
Sgt. C.R.A. Stichbury
Spr. W.D. Street
Spr. A.C. Swainson
Sgt. H.M. Sullivan
Spr. A.L. Taylor
Spr. D. McK. Taylor
Spr. F.R.C. Thomas
Spr. G. Thomas
Spr. G.L.S Thomas
Spr. R.W.J. Thompson
Spr. R.S. Thorn
Cpl. E. Topp
T/Lt. A.A. Treloar
Spr. C.S.E. Trichon
Spr. P.J. Vaughan
Spr. E.L. Vincent
Spr. S.F. Wade
Spr. C.W. Waite
Spr. E.L.F. Walker
Spr. M. Walters
Spr. W.J. Ward
L/Cpl. J.E. Ware
Spr. H. Warman
Spr. G.C.J.D. Watson
Spr. R.C. Weavers
Spr. J.L. Whitson
Spr. R.J. Whittakar
Spr. D.N. Whitten
Spr. O.J. Whittington
Spr. L.H. Wilhelmsen
Spr. A.F. Williams
L/Cpl. H.M. Williams
Spr. O.H. Wilton
L/Sgt. J.J. Woolcock
L/Sgt. D.R. Wright
Spr. J.H. Young

Record Sergeants in Ship's Orderly Room

Sgt. J.S. Garner
Sgt. R.F. Leighton

16th RAILWAY OPERATING COMPANY

Empress of Japan, Wellington, 28 August 1940

Spr. B. Adams
Spr. B. H. Adams
Spr. C.W. Adams
Spr. W.E. Adams
Spr. N.R. Adcock
Maj. F.W. Aickin
L/Cpl. R.H.J. Alexander
Spr. W.J. Alexander
Spr. F.E. Anderson
Spr. R.W.M. Anderson
L/Sgt. J. Anisy
Spr. E.W. Arnold
Spr. F.P. Austin
T/Cpl. S.W. Baker
T/Cpl. M.F. Barlow
Spr. W.B. Barnes
T/L/Sgt. D. Barr
Spr. G.D.Bartlett
Spr. C.V. Barton
L/Cpl. S.A. Bates
Spr. B.R. Beattie
Spr. J.E. Beattie
Spr. A.H.W. Beaver
Spr. C.O. Beehre
Spr. J.S. Begg
Spr. L.W. Bell
Spr. D.T. Benseman
Spr. H.M. Bernard
Spr. N. Bercich
Sgt. P.H. Betts
Spr. J.R. Bindon
Spr. F.W. Bird
2/Lt. C.H.B. Bishop
CQMS W.A. Blair
Spr. F.K.Bloy
Spr. T. Board

Spr. R.H.R. Bolderson
Spr. S.R. Boldt
Spr. A.G. Bone
L/Cpl. J.H. Boneham
L/Sgt. H.J.S. Borland
L/Cpl. H.M. Borwick
T/Cpl. A.C. Bowen
Spr. W.J. Boyle
Spr. W.A. Bracegirdle
T/L/Sgt. S.R. Braddock
Spr. A.J. Brady
Spr. A.J. Bramley
T/Cpl. J.K. Brennan-Holton
Spr. D. Brosnan
Spr. J.D. Brown
Spr. J.L. Brown
Spr. I.D. Buckett
Spr. H.J. Burborough
Spr. D.H. Burns
Spr. N.G. Burten
Spr. C.J. Burtenshaw
Spr. R.J. Cain
Spr. B.L. Campbell
Spr. S.R. Carey
Spr. R. Carkeek
Sgt. J.G.E. Carr
Spr. W.P. Carroll
Spr. A.C.H. Carter
Spr. P.J. Casey
Sgt. J.F. Cheadle
Spr. E.A. Child
Spr. L.P. Church
CQMS E. Clark
T/Cpl. I.A. Clark
Spr. A.W. Clode
Spr. E.D. Cockburn
Spr L.H. Coley
Spr H.H. Collins
T/Cpl. A.A. Cook
Spr. J.G. Cook
Spr. W.J. Cooper
Spr. C.C. Couchman
Spr. M.J. Crosby
Spr. F. Cudby
Spr. A.E. Cummins
Spr. E.C. Currie
Spr. W.P. Curtin
Spr. T.H. Coventry
Spr. F.W.M.Christiesen
Spr. K.G. Cunningham
T/Cpl. T.J. Daly
Spr. A.W. Davey
Spr. A.M.Davidson
L/Cpl. C.W. Davidson
Spr. C.A. Davies
Spr. J.A. Davies
Spr. C.H. Davis
Spr. B.A. Deacon
Spr. J.P. Deerness
Spr. W.S. Deerness
Spr. R.T. Dellow
T/L/Sgt. G.R. Dickson
Spr. E. Dolheguy
T/Cpl. F.R. Dow
Spr. M.M. Doyle
Spr. T.R. Durry
Spr. A.C. East
Spr. F. Edlin
Spr. W.H. Elliott
Spr. L.E. Evans
Spr. L.G. Farr
T/Cpl. B.R. Ferguson
Spr. A.G. Figgins
Spr. J.W. Fisher
T/Cpl. A.J. Fiveash
Sgt. C.J. Flannery
Spr. G.S. Forbes
Spr. M.P. Forrester
Spr. D. McG. Fraser
Spr. L.C. Fraser
Spr. S. Fraser
Spr. C.J. Frazer
Spr. A.R. Frew
Spr. A. Furlonger
Spr. E.H. Furness
Spr. C.A. Gallagher
Spr. G.M.B. Gardener
Spr. J.J. Gardiner
Spr. J.H. Gardner
Spr. C.H. Gare
Spr. F.H. Garland
Spr. A.E. George
Spr. N.A. George
Spr. R. Gibbons
CQMS H.J.S. Gilbertson
Spr. W.J. Glasgow
T/Cpl. C.H. Gledhill
Spr. C.W. Grace
T/L/Sgt. J.N. Gray
Spr J.R.C. Green
Spr. G. Gregory
T/Cpl. H.V.Gregory
Spr. G.V. Grice
CQMS R.G. Gyllies
Spr. E.G. Haines
T/Cpl. H.J. Hallinan
Spr. E.E.J. Hammond
Spr. K.H. Hankin
T/L/Sgt. L.H. Harford
T/Cpl. J.P.J. Hayden
2/Lt. G. L. Hayman
T/Cpl. V.F.A.H. Haynes
Spr. F.J. Hayward
Spr. J.H. Hearn
Spr. E.W. Henry
L/Cpl. C. Heward
Spr. F. Heywood
Spr. R.P. Hill
T/Cpl. W.J.B. Hobbs
L/Cpl. C.E. Hollick
Sgt. H.T. Hoskin
Spr. G.P. Hosking
Spr. L.B. Hope
Spr. E.F. Hoy
Spr. H.G. Hurcomb
Spr. E.J. Hurst
T/Cpl. J.C. Hutchins
Spr. E. Huxtable
Spr. C.A. Ingram
T/L/Sgt. T.N. Jack
T/Cpl. W.L. Jackson
T/Cpl. W.F. Jameson
T/Cpl. S. Jermy
Spr. B.A. Jesse
Sgt. N.W. Johnson
Spr. C.C. Johnston
Spr. J.T Johnston
Spr. A. Jones
Spr. A.L. Jones
T/Cpl. F.W. Kaye

Sgt. E.D.R. Keatley
Spr. R.E. Kells
Spr. F.P. Kelly
Spr. J. Kelly
Spr. J.O. Kelman
Spr. L.W. Kerr
Spr. T.I. King
Spr. G.G.Knight
Spr. E.A. Kruskopf
T/Cpl. G.E. Laming
Spr. F. Langstone
Spr. H.S.B. Leighton
Spr. H.M. Lewis
Sgt. M.E.A. Lindsay
2/Lt. J.M.B. Lockett
T/Cpl. A.G.R. Longman
Spr. L. Longman
Spr. F.O.C. Lubbock
L/Sgt. T.B. Lucy
Spr. L.T. Luhrs
Spr. C. Lyons
Spr. K.W. Macfarlane
Sgt. H. Mackay
Spr. R. Macklan
Spr. L.G. Madsen
T/Cpl. T.F. Marshall
Spr. K.P. Marslin
Spr. W.A. Mason
Spr. W.D. Matheson
Spr. A.E. Maunder
Spr. J.J. McCaffery
Spr. D. McCallum
Spr. R. McCorkindale
Spr. W.J. McCown
Spr. J. McCreadie
T/Cpl. J.E. McDermott
Spr. R.E. McDonagh
Spr. J.K. McDonald
Spr. J. McGaffney
Spr. C. McGrail
Spr. T.G. McGrath
Spr. A.R. McGregor
Spr. T.J. McIntyre
Spr. R.C.H. McKay
Spr. P.J.A. McKeown
Spr. I.J. McKenzie
Sgt. C.H. McLaren
L/Cpl. C.W. McLaughlan
T/Cpl. R. McNeill
Spr. H.M. McWhinnie
T/Cpl. R.F. Melrose
Spr. S.H. Merriman
Spr. J. Mills
Spr. H.R. Mitchell
Spr. R.D. Mitchell
Spr. V.C. Moloney
Sgt. F.W. Moroney
Spr. C.E. Morris
T/Cpl. A.F.H. Morrow
Spr. W.C. Moses
Spr. E. Moss
Spr. W.J. Muir
Spr. H. McK. Munro
Spr. E.W. Murdoch
Spr. C.H. Murray
L/Sgt. J.H.L. Neill
Sgt. O.R. Nelson
L/Cpl. C.T. Nolan
Sgt. J. Noonan
T/Cpl. P. O'Halloran
Spr. J.H. Oids
Spr. E.L. Packer
Spr. H. Padlie
Spr. K.W. Palmer
Spr. P.C.H. Paul
Spr. F.J. Payne
T/L/Sgt. W.G. Pearce
Capt. R.O. Pearse
L/Sgt. J.P. Peneamene
Spr. K.G. Penney
Spr. E.F. Perrin
Spr. D.W. Petch
Sgt. C.A.E. Petersen
Spr. A.L. Pettitt
Spr. F. Place
Spr. J.A.H. Pluck
L/Cpl. F.W. Pope
T/L/Sgt. J.B. Porter
Spr. R.H. Potts
Spr. J.H.J. Poulter
Spr. C.L. Powell
Spr. F.F. Price
T/Cpl. W.R. Pritchard
Spr. J.A. Proctor
Spr. M.J. Quinn
Spr. E. Rack
T/Cpl. L.T. Ranford
T/Cpl. N.W. Ransom
Spr. L.W.A. Redshaw
Spr. W.J.F. Reeve
Spr. R. Reid
Spr. H.G. Rhodes
Spr. J.K. Riordan
Spr. H.B. Robertson
Spr. J.E.A. Robertson
Spr. A.L. Robinson
Spr. J.W. Robson
Cpl. P.H. Roussell
Spr. R.P. Roux-de-Buisson
Spr. R.B. Rowe
Spr. J. Ruru
Spr. R.J. Russell
Spr. E.M.J. Ryan
L./Sgt. J.J. Ryan
Cpl. W.D. Schildt
T/L/Sgt. J.H. Schroder
Spr. H.M. Scott
Spr. S.M. Searl
Spr. H.F. Seaton
Spr. T.W. Shaw
T/L/Sgt. G.R. Sherlock
Spr. M.D. Sherwood
Spr. J.M. Simmonds
Spr. N.A. Simonson
Spr. N.F. Skeen
T/L/Sgt. H.G. Sloan
Spr. I.J. Smart
Spr. I.R. Smith
Spr. L.B. Smith
Spr. T.W.B. Smith
Spr. A.T. Sparks
Spr. C.A. Spiers
Spr. A.J. Spratt
Spr. W.G. Squire
Spr. A.J. Stenhouse
Spr. E.K. Stephens
Spr. G. Stobie
Spr. W.N. Strachan
Spr. H.G. Strang
Spr. F.J. Stubbs
CQMS J.S. Sutherland

Spr. L.F. Sykes
Spr. D.B. Symonds
Spr. C.R. Taylor
Spr. C.M. Thomas
T/L/Sgt. J.R. Thomas
Spr. J.J. Thompson
RSM S.M. Thomson
Spr. W. Thomson
Spr. K.J. Thorburn
Spr. C.D. Thorn
Spr. V.L. Thorn
Spr. W.A. Thornton
Spr. T.T. Tietjens
L/Cpl. B. I. Tonks
Spr. R.B. Townsend
Cpl. K.C. Treanor
Spr. T.C. Tregurtha
T/Cpl. A.P. Tuckey
Spr. A.V. Tull
Spr. A. McG. Turnbull
Spr. W.E.B. Valentine
Spr. I.V.W. Vince
Spr. M.J. Voss
L/Cpl. W. E. Waite
T/Cpl. E.F. Walsh
T/Cpl. P.B. Walsh
Spr. J.H. Ward
T/L/Sgt. F.J. Wardrope
Spr. R.E. Warnock
Spr. C.H. Watt
T/Cpl. L.C. Webb
T/Cpl. A.R. Webster
Spr. P.L. Wells
Spr. E.S. Westbrook
Spr. G.A. Weston
Spr. F.L. Westwood
Spr. J. Wilde
Sgt. A.G. Wiley
Spr. A.H. Williams
Spr. F.C. Williams
Spr. S.G. Wills
Spr. E.V.R. Wilson
Spr. G.F. Wilson
Spr. S.A. Winyard
Spr. E.C. Withy
Spr. R.G. Wood
T/Cpl. G.W. Wright
T/L/Sgt. G.W. Wright
CQMS A.J. Wyeth
Spr. G.J. Wylie

17th RAILWAY OPERATING COMPANY

Empress of Japan, Wellington, 28 August 1940

Spr. H.C. Addison
Spr. F.E.H. Allison
Spr. G. Alves
Spr. A. Anderson
Spr. J.S. Anderson
Spr. W.J. Anderson
Spr. F.H. Ansley
Spr. N.H. Anstis
T/L/Sgt. J.H. Astwood
Spr. B.E. Auger
T/L/Sgt. J. T. Ayrton
Spr. D.A. Bailey
Spr. J. Bain
Spr. A.D. Barker
CQMS J.A. Barr
Spr. P.W. Barron
Cpl. E. Bateup
Spr. C.A. Bayley
Spr. A.J. Bell
Spr. F.W. Benfell
Spr. R.H. Bennett
Spr. W. Bennett
Spr. R.C. Berryman
Spr. E.G. Bishop
Spr. W.H. Bishop
Spr. D.D. Black
Spr. J. R. Black
Spr. C. Bond
Spr. F.J. Bond
Sgt. L. Booker
T/Cpl. A.J. Bourne
L/Sgt. C.F. Bowden
Spr. R.L. Bowen
Spr. E.C. Bower
Spr. F. Boyle
Spr. S. Boyle
Spr. P.C. Bradley
Spr. J. Breen
Spr. G.W. Brown
Sgt. L.W. Brown
Spr. F. Buck
Spr. J.W. Bunting
L/Cpl. J.H. Burke
Spr. P.J.M.. Burke
Spr. J.F. Burrow
Spr. A.J. Burton
Spr. K.H. Butler
Spr. A.J. Caird
Spr. A.D. Campbell
Spr. J.H. Campbell
Spr. R.N. Carpenter
Spr. T.V. Carpenter
Spr. M.H. Chalder
Spr. J.M. Challis
2/Lt. J.C. Chapman
Spr. M.J. Chapman
Spr. N.S. Chapman
Spr. C.V. Christiansen
Spr. L.G. Christie
Spr. L.A. Church
T/L/Sgt. R.L. Clareburt
Capt. D.A. Clarke
Spr. H.G.W. Clausen

CQMS C.S. Clemens
Spr. G.E.E. Cleveland
Spr. G.W. Collins
Spr. J.C.W Comber
Spr. R.D. Comfort
Spr. R.C. Conley
Spr. A.A. Connolly
Sgt. H.N. Cook
Cpl. J.R. Cook
Spr. W.R. Cornelius
Spr. C.E. Corrigan
Cpl. H.E.E. Corston
Spr. W.F. Coutts
Spr. N.H. Cowles
Spr. D.E. Coxhead
Sgt. T.A.A. Crack
Spr. T.W. Craigie
Spr. D. Craw
Spr. C.A. Crombie
Spr. S. Cronshaw
Spr. H.W.J. Croxson
Spr. J.D. Crutch
Spr. B.R. Crutchley
Spr. H.J. Cuff
L/Cpl. I.D. Cullen
Spr. J.A. Dangerfield
Spr. W.G. Davie
Spr. J.E. Dawson
Spr. E.J. Delargy
Spr. W. Dent
Spr. J.F.V. Depree
Spr. A.C.Devery
Spr. D.M.Dickson
Spr. F.O. Doran
Spr. T.H.T.Duff
Spr. H.J. Duffy
Spr. J.M. Duggie
Spr. J.B. Dunn
Spr. W.H. Elliott
Spr. K. Emery
Spr. T.M. Evans
Spr. E.G. Ewart
Spr. R.J. Ewart
Cpl. D.L. Farmer
Spr. D.F. Ferguson
Spr. F. Firth
Spr. J.E. Fleming
Spr. J.W. Fleming
Spr. G.R. Foley
Spr. M.L. Follas
Spr. R.J. Forman
Spr. P.F. Francis
Spr. J.R. Franklin
Spr. C.A. Fraser
Spr. S.V. Frost
Spr. R.M. Fry
Spr. F.A. Fryer
Spr. J.H. Gallagher
T/Cpl. M.G. Gardner
Spr. A. Garrood
Spr. J. Gavey
Spr. A.R. Gibb
Spr. R.B. Gibbons
Spr.G.T.Gibbs
L/Sgt. R. Glen
Spr. L.W. Goldring
Spr. R. Graham
Spr. J.E. Gray
Spr. J.M. Griffiths
Spr. L.H.A.Gosden
Spr. P.E.Haddock
L/Sgt.J.M.Haggo
Spr.F.C.Hague
Spr.R.C.Hardaker
Spr. H.V. Harold
Spr.T.H.Harrison
Spr.A.W.Hartshorne
Spr.A.M.Hawes
Spr. H.J.Hawke.
T/Cpl.H.T.Hepburne
Cpl. C.J. Herbert
Spr. W.J. Herlihy
Spr. G.W.S. Hesselyn
Spr. P.F. Hickey
Spr. W.I. Hildreth
Spr. J.E. Hill
Spr. D.C. Holyoake
L/Cpl. C.S. Hooton
Spr. D.G. Hopkins
Spr. W.J.H. Hopkins
Spr. P.S. Houlihan
Spr. E.T. Hudson
Spr. W.A. Hughes
T/Cpl. A.W. Hunter
Spr. R.J. Ingram
Spr. P.R. Isitt
Spr. R.G. Jackson
Spr. L.A. Jans
Spr. M.D. Jeffrey
Spr. J.K. Jeffries
Spr. W.A. Jenkins
Sgt. T.S. Jensen
Spr. L.F. Johannis
Spr. J. Johnston
Spr. T.G. Johnstone
Spr. E.A. Jones
Spr. H.A. Jones
Spr. L.M. Jones
T/Cpl. T.J.K. Kennedy
Spr. K.T. Kershaw
Spr. J.H. Kilmister
Sgt. G.J. King
Spr. L.A. Knight
Spr. E.J. Lane
Spr. W.S.C.W. Langley
Spr. C.F. Larcombe
Spr. J.L. Lawson
Spr. N.W. Leaf
Spr. R.J. Le Bas
Spr. H.G. Ledgard
Spr. H. Lee
Spr. G.G. Leggett
Spr. G. Leitch
Spr. R.W. Lett
Spr. A.K. Lines
Spr. H.K. Little
Spr. A.F. Lonergan
Spr. A.F. Loose
Spr. E. Lurman
Spr. J.F. Lyons
Spr. T.M. Mackay
Spr. K. MacKenzie
Spr. R.E. MacKenzie
Spr. B.F. Mahony
Spr. J.V.M. Martin
Spr. W.L. Martin
Spr. T.E. McAlister
Spr. P.S. McAllister
Sgt. J. McArthur
Spr. A.W. McAuslin
Spr. C.W. McCallum

Spr. A.R.J.P. McCarthy
Cpl. R.C. McCartie
Spr. J.J. McCormick
Spr. R.E. McCullough
Spr. A.G. McDonald
Spr. L. McDonald
Spr. W.J.D. McElphinney
Spr. D.A. McGregor
Spr. R.A. McGregor
Spr. J. McGuinness
Spr. E.D. McKechnie
Spr. M.A. McKibbin
Spr. A.D.C. McMurtrie
2/Lt. A.T. McMurtrie
RSM J.J. McNearney
Spr. U.H. Mettrick
Spr. W.K. Middlemass
Spr. R.A. Miller
Spr. F.L. Milne
CQMS R. Milne
Spr. G.J. Mitchell
Spr. J.R. Mitchell
Spr. R.A. Mitchell
Spr. R.S. Moffett
Sgt. F.J. Mohr
L/Cpl. P.E. Moir
Spr. A.G. Monaghan
Spr. A.G. Moore
Spr. G. Moore
Spr. G.B. Morgan
Spr. J.G. Morgan
CQMS J.W.Morgan
Spr. L.W. Morgan
Spr. S.T. Morrison
Spr. W.D. Morrison
L/Cpl. A.H. Mudgway
Cpl. A.C. Munroe
Spr. D.H. Murray
T/Sgt. A.E. Nicholls
Spr. P.F. Norton
Spr. C.F. O'Brien
L/Cpl. J.C. O'Brien
Spr. L.S. O'Donoghue
Spr. C. O'Rourke
Spr. H.F. Oliver
Spr. N.J. Osborne
Spr. R. Osborne
Spr. F.S. Parris
Spr. M.J. Pearcey
Spr. G. Penketh
Spr. H.D. Petherick
Spr. R.E. Pilkington
Maj. G.T. Poole
Spr. J.W. Porteous
Spr. T. Porter
Spr. L.D. Prain
Spr. C.M. Price
Spr. I.B. Rae
Spr. G.E. Raisbeck
Spr. P.D. Ralph
L/Sgt. A. Ramage
Spr. R.J. Ramsay
Spr. J.G. Randle
Spr. J.G. Rea
Spr. A.E.C. Reed
Spr. J.W. Reid
Spr. O.C. Reid
Spr. R.J. Renwick
Spr. G.E. Revell
Spr. D. Richards
Spr. R.G. Richards
L/Cpl. R.R. Ritchie
Spr. B.D. Roberts
Spr. E.B. Roberts
Spr. A.W. Robertson
Spr. D. Robertson
Spr. G.W. Robinson
Spr. J. Robinson
Spr. C.A. Rodger
Spr. W.D. Rose
Spr. C.R. Ross
Spr. D.E. Ross
Spr. D.F. Ross
CQMS L.P.Rossiter
Sgt. H.W. Rowley
Spr. T.J. Roxborough
L/Cpl. L.H. Ruddy
Spr. F.A. Rutherford
L/Sgt. D. Scott
Spr. W.M. Scott
Spr. J. Sharp
Spr. A.E. Sheehy
Spr. R.S. Simons
Spr. R.C. Sinclair
Spr. J.B. Small
Spr. G.H. Smith
Spr. R.J. Smith
Spr. S.C. Smith
Spr. V.J. Smith
Spr. G.H. Southby
Spr. R.L. Spargo
Spr. V.A. Spence
Spr. F.E. Stanbridge
Spr. W.G. Steadman
Spr. J.A. Stephenson
Spr. E.L. Stevenson
Spr. C. Stewart
Cpl. C.E. Stewart
Spr. F.A. Stott
Spr. J.C.M. Stringer
Spr. L.T. Stuart
L/Cpl. I.R. Summers
Spr. W.H. Summerton
Spr. A.E. Sutton
Cpl. R.A. Swanson
Spr. T.M. Tangney
Spr. A.B. Taylor
Spr. C. Taylor
Spr. M.T.T. TeMiha
Spr. D.C. Thomas
Spr. E.J. Thomas
Spr. H.J.A. Thompson
Spr. J.A.R. Thomson
Spr. W.A.J.. Thurling
Spr. W.R. Tolley
Spr. C. Tombs
Spr. L.G. Tosswill
Spr. T.H. Towler
Spr. A.D. Vaudrey
Spr. P.V. Veale
Spr. G.B.N. Verdon
Spr. J. Walker
Spr. R.T. Walker
Spr. W. Wallace
Spr. M.D. Walsh
Cpl. D.G. Walton
Spr. W. Warner
Spr. F.T. Warren
2/Lt. H.J.H. Waterhouse
Spr. C.F. Waterworth
Spr. F.E. Waterworth

Spr. A.E.R. Watson
Spr. F.C.D. Watson
Spr. G.A.E. Weston
Spr. P. Wiles
Spr. I.G. Williams
Spr. J.L. Williams
Sgt. J.B. Wills
Spr. A.W.H. Wilson
L/Cpl. E.D. Wilson
Spr. I.M. Wilson
Spr. P. Winders
Sgt. A.R. Wisnesky
Spr. B.J. Woodham
Spr. R. Wright
T/L/Sgt. R.C.M. Yeatts
Spr. W. Young
Spr. N.D. Zein

Attached Personnel

Sgt. J.G.E. Carr
S/Sgt. T.E. Foley NZAOC
Cpt. R.H. Forder (Attached 17th ROC)
S/Sgt. E.L.George NZAOC
Cpl. J.T. Hawke
Pte. G. Johnson NZAOC
Cpt. H.B. Lange NZMC
Capt. W.R.K. Morrison (Attached 16th ROC)
CSM B. Parsons
Pte. L.R.W. Tait NZAOC
Pte. E.A. Watts NZAOC

HQ RAILWAY OPERATING GROUP

Empress of Japan, Wellington, 28 August 1940

Spr. C.E Anderson
Spr. J.F. Black
RSM R.O. Brebner
Sgt. G.W. Brown
Spr. J.M. Bryson
Cpl. E.R. Cheers
Cpl. G.P. Couch
CQMS W.J.H.Dashwood
Spr. H.R. Farrell
Sgt. L.E. Griffin
Spr. W.L. Hutchinson
Sgt. I.S. Johnston
Maj. J.A. Jull
Cpl. R.C. Kilgour
Spr. E.T. Kilmister
Spr. I. McDonald
Spr. W.A. Marten
CQMS A.H. Martin
Cpl. R.A. McDougall
Cpl. S.G. Muir
Capt. J.N. Nicholson
Sgt. R.J. Rinaldi
Lt.Col. A.H. Sage
Spr. R.W. Teal
Spr. D.H. Thomlinson
Spr. A. Whiting
Spr. E.C. Williams

Appendix 2

LEST WE FORGET

Railway personnel who served in the Middle East and never returned to New Zealand.

Reg.	Name	Co	Date of death	Age	Where buried
13641	H.T. Anderson	16	20/06/42	41	El Alamein War Cemetery Egypt
27805	D.A. Bailey	10	28/03/42	26	Halfaya Sollum War Cem. Egypt
27436	M.F. Barlow	10	28/05/41	33	Perth[Karrakatta] Cem. Australia
28705	R.C. Baxter	17	27/12/42	25	Halfaya Sollum War Cem Egypt
27165	E.T. Belhamine	13	25/07/44	30	Florence Cem. Italy
27347	A.J. Brady	16	18/11/40	23	Cairo War Memorial Cem. Egypt
27255	H.J. Bredesen	13	15/04/42	36	Halfaya Sollum War Cem. Egypt
27514	M.J. Crosby	16	03/02/41	27	Alamein Mem. Egypt
27116	J. Dutton	13	23/12/42	40	Tripoli Cem. Libya
27284	A.G. Figgins	16	04/09/41	40	Tobruk War Cem. Libya
11320	F.S. Fuller	HQ	08/03/42	32	Halfaya Sollum War Cem.Egypt
11165	J. Galloway	10	26/07/42	26	El Alamien Cem. Egypt
11265	S.J. Gavan	10	28/03/42	26	Halfaya Sollum War Cem. Egypt
28043	G.T. Gibbs	17	10/05/41	22	Khayat Beach War Cem. Israel
27259	R.E. Groves	13	28/11/40	39	Alexandria Mil. Cem. Egypt
27284	E.G. Haines	16	04/03/42	26	Halfaya Sollum War Cem. Egypt
11251	C.J. Hennessey	10	13/07/42	34	Khayat Beach War Cem. Israel
27714	C.J. Herbert	17	02/02/41	46	Alexandria Mil. War Cem. Egypt
27250	R.C. Hogg	13	29/06/41	41	Fayid War Cem. Egypt
43130	J.R. Holland	10	08/03/42	36	Halfaya Sollum War Cem. Egypt
38478	B. Hornig	13	06/03/44	30	Cassino Cem. Italy
27920	P.R. Isitt	17	02/05/42	43	Halfaya Sollum War Cem. Egypt
27106	L.M. Jones	17	02/05/42	23	Halfaya Sollum War Cem. Egypt
27454	H.S.B.Leighton	16	25/10/41	21	El Alamein Cem. Egypt
12320	W.J.McCowen	16	08/07/41	22	El Alamein Cem. Egypt
28035	W.J.McElhinney	17	10/06/42	26	Helioplis War Cem. Egypt
11209	R. F. McLennan	10	02/04/42	33	El Alamein War Cem. Egypt
34738	G.K.Miller	10	25/10/42	32	El Alamein Cem. Egypt
27049	J.W.B. Palatchie	13	10/05/42	5	Alamein Mem. Cem. Egypt
27357	J.H. Schroder	16	05/02/43	41	El Alamein War Cem. Egypt

27269	H.J. Shepherd	13	11/07/42	28	Beirut War Cem. Lebanon
11452	W.R. Walker	10	29/03/42	34	Halfaya Sollum War Cem. Egypt
27113	D.R. Wright	13	25/04/43	33	Enfidaville Cem. Tunisia
27753	R.C.M. Yeatts	17	10/04/42	37	Halfaya Sollum War Cem. Egypt

Every endeavour has been made to locate their graves and record them; should we have omitted any we apologise to their families. Further information is available on the internet: www.cwgc.org.

MEMORIES

As we leave this Western Desert, gladness fills our hearts,
For we hope that this time, 'twill really be the last
Time that our fate will land us in such a barren spot,
We're looking for green pastures, where sands will be forgot.

Yet ever in our memory, these sands will hold a place,
For 'neath their burning drabness, lie several of our mates
Men who cursed the desert, as much as you or I.
But now beneath these shifting sands forever do they lie.

They knew in their hearts that some would pay the price
Of men who serve their country, through laying down a life.
They face their task undaunted, they each gave of his best;
That thought was upon us as we laid them down to rest.

Will our memories end there, or shall we recall
Those who were amongst us, but have answered the call
Of He who rules our destiny, who gives us life and takes
That precious gift from us, when we have run our race.

Even as He remembers, then let us too retain
The kindnesses they showed us, the honour of their name,
The smile upon their faces that cheers our memories yet,
Yes, help us to remember – lest we forget.

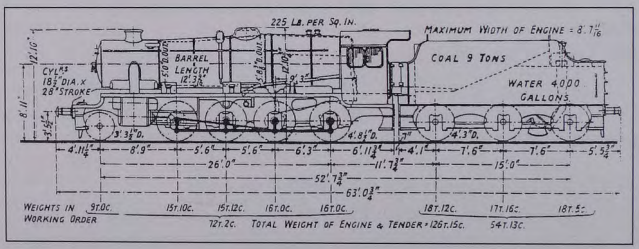
Lest we forget, when all else is forgot
Those graves beneath the desert, that simple wooden cross,
A cross that turns the desert to a hallowed sacred ground
That neither time nor shifting sands will our memory confound.

L. A. Church

Appendix 3

THE LMS STANIER 8F LOCOMOTIVE

The following vital statistics are given to show some points of difference between the British War Department's Stanier 8F and the New Zealand Railways' K-Class locomotives. The particulars of the WDs (as we called them) are shown in the left-hand column while those of the New Zealand engines are at the right.



	WD LMS 8F	NZR K-Class
Wheel arrangement	2-8-0	4-8-4
Engine and tender weight	127 tons	135.6 tons
Weight on driving wheels	72.10 tons	54.25 tons
Diameter of driving wheels	4 ft 8½ ins	4 ft 6 ins
Height of rail to chimney top	12 ft 10 ins	11 ft 6 ins
Cylinders bore and stroke	18½ ins x 28 ins	20 ins x 26 ins
Total heating surface area	1895 sq ft	2413 sq sft
Boiler steam pressure	225 psi	200 psi
Fire grate area	28.65 sq ft	47.70 sq ft
Tender type	6 wheels rigid	8 wheels bogie
Coal bunker capacity	9 tons	7¾ tons
Water tank capacity	4000 gallons	5000 gallons

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In 1940, as a result of Britain's request to New Zealand for help with the North African Campaign, the New Zealand Government called on the country's railwaymen for volunteers to construct and operate a railway network in the Western Desert. This was seen as absolutely necessary to supply the bulk of the Eighth Army's requirements to an ever-shifting front line in the event of a major offensive. Over 1300 men answered the call and, with a minimum of military preparation, were soon on their way. Thus began an adventure that culminated in the Battle of Alamein, during which Field Marshal Mongomery stated, 'Well, it's now the railway versus Rommel.' In his memoirs, Rommel says that 'the greatest advantage the Eighth Army had over the Afrika Korps was the desert railway'.

This is the story of those men, forgotten men — the railway builders, the shunters and the drivers, the firemen and the engineers — and the Rats of Tobruk.

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