

*Charles Towsey of Henley upon Thames in the County of Oxford Gentleman*

*Mary Harriet Sparks*

*H. B. Moorhouse*

# TOWSEY TALES

**NAME:** Arthur Charles Towsey  
aka Arthur Van Towsey (from 1945)

**BIRTH DETAILS:** 13 January 1913 Hamilton NZ

**DEATH DETAILS:** 12 February 1985 Auckland NZ

**CHART REF:** Towsey Chart A1

**MARRIAGE DETAILS:** 1st M: mid 1935 Auckland

**SPOUSE:** Marie Aline Pageau (divorced 1946)

**MARRIAGE DETAILS:** 2nd M: 17 October 1947 Melbourne

**SPOUSE:** Peggy Evelyn Knibb

**MARRIAGE DETAILS:** 3rd M: 19 October 1979 Sydney

**SPOUSE:** Sylvia Dorothy Smith

## PART 2 OF 5

At the start of 1935, we see Arthur back where he started after leaving school in 1929, with Campbell Motors. His diary finished at the start of January, 1935.

In March of that year, Arthur, who had recently passed his twenty-second birthday, conceived the first of the next generation of Towseys, Arthur Paul Towsey, with a thirty year-old French Canadian businesswoman, called Aline Marie Pageau, from Quebec, who had been posted to an administrative position in a Canadian company in New Zealand.

Auckland was not Aline's first posting outside Canada. She had been in Australia in the late 1920s, as evidenced by her arrival by ship in San Francisco, from Sydney, on 17<sup>th</sup> October, 1929. Her job on the passenger list is shown as 'Sales Lady'.

The fact that Arthur did not mention her in his diary, indicates that they must have met after his return to Auckland and that Paul therefore, was conceived within two months of that meeting.

I have not yet discovered the date of their marriage, but I remember Arthur telling me that before the marriage, he was having serious doubts about the wisdom thereof, but that the priest convinced him to go ahead with it.

Aline was already four months pregnant when she and Arthur arrived in San Francisco aboard the American Matson Line's new luxury liner, the S.S. Mariposa, via Hawaii, have departed Auckland on 29<sup>th</sup> June.

It is most likely that Arthur and Aline were on their way to Quebec to meet her family and San Francisco seemed to be the main port at which all passengers for North America would arrive. From there they most likely travelled by train.

Arthur came to deeply resent the priest for pushing him into what turned out to be an ill-fated marriage, but I wonder if the priest's urging, when the couple had obviously met very recently,



*Aline Towsey (nee Pageau), with Mamie & Pat Towsey, 1935*

was based on the fact that Aline was already pregnant.

Arthur Paul Towsey was born on 14<sup>th</sup> December, 1935.

In the photo of Mamie with Aline and Pat, the expression on Mamie's face says a lot about her personality. She was not one to waste time on small-talk and her expression here is saying "come on, Arthur, hurry up and take the photo!" We also see in her face, her great strength of character and the trace of a wry smile. In other words, we see here the seeds of certain personality traits, such as restlessness, dynamism, and in some instances gregariousness, that came down particularly from her father, but also through the O'Connor line, and have since manifested in many of her descendents, most particularly in her son, Arthur. Pat on the other hand, was the epitome of the quieter Towsey genes.



In October of 1936, Arthur and two partners registered a new company: Bay Motors, in Napier. Arthur and one partner had 450 each of the one thousand one pound shares. The other partner had one hundred.

The events of the years from 1936 to the end of 1939, in the life of Arthur, are not clearly described.

Arthur claimed that he had spent one year in America at the Studebaker plant in South Bend, Indiana. This might have been after his arrival in San Francisco in mid 1935, with Aline.

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Dear Bob, -

You've missed the time of your life if you haven't taken a ride in a new 1935 Studebaker. I wasn't so sure about all of the claims the factory made about the new "Miracle Ride" until I tried it myself, but, believe me I'm convinced now. I've been demonstrating these cars for several weeks and I still get a big kick out of it. Imagine going over railroad tracks, around sharp turns and over the roughest, toughest roads at speeds you've always reserved for only the straightest and smoothest of high ways! It's a thrill words can't describe!

Yours Sincerely,  
**ARTHUR TOWSEY.**

**CAMPBELL MOTORS, LTD.**  
(AGENTS),  
LORNE STREET. 42 974. 22



Perhaps she went to visit her family in Quebec, whilst Arthur went to the Studebaker factory. However much time Arthur spent in Indiana, it is unlikely to have been a whole year. Even if he had missed the birth of his son, we see from the photo taken at Paul's christening, that he was obviously still very small, so this must have been in the first months of 1936.

Arthur was certainly back in time to start his new Studebaker dealership in October 1936.

We know that Studebaker took salesmen from all over the world to their plant in Indiana. Unfortunately, the Studebaker Museum does not have lists of these trainees.

Arthur told me once, that when he was a salesman for Studebaker, he set up a test track out behind the showroom, where he would take prospective buyers on hair-raising test rides that included going over a jump. The customers might have been scared witless, but at least they were impressed by the durability of the car. Or, maybe they just bought the car to escape the clutches of the maniacal salesman.

Arthur was always a great, and inventive salesman, as evidenced by the quirky 'letter' advertisement above, from 1935.

I believe that Bay Motors was a part of the Campbell Motors Group, which would tie in with his statement upon enlisting in the army, that his current employer (as it had been in 1935), was Campbell Motors.

The marriage between Arthur and Aline broke down very quickly, probably as early as 1936.

Arthur did go back with Aline at the start of 1939, but this lasted just long enough to conceive their second son, Michael.

I do not know the specific details of what went wrong in their relationship, but we can be sure that the root of the problem would have been Arthur's insatiable wanderlust and that he was, like most men of such an age, just too young to have married in the first place.

But then, as we tend to learn with the wisdom of years, common sense does not often play a part in the starting of a relationship. Arthur should not have been so irresponsible as to get himself into a position where he had to 'do the right thing', and Aline, at thirty, should have known the folly of allowing herself to get romantically involved with a restless twenty two year-old.

Arthur explained to me, that when the war started, he expected (quite rightly), that everyone would be pulled into it and that if he were to get in early, he would be able to choose some sort of construction job, well away from the front line; presumably building airfields and the like.

Oh, how wrong he was!

As all soldiers quickly learn, an army works to a mind-numbingly plodding, simple logic all its own. A logic that is so firmly rooted in Standing Orders that there is no space whatsoever for free thought or initiative and, despite whatever you might think are your greatest assets, the army is sure to view you from an entirely different perspective. And thus did Arthur's scheme for a comfy rear echelon job, come to nought.

Britain declared war on Germany on 1<sup>st</sup> September 1939. Arthur had a medical examination on 5<sup>th</sup> October and entered the training camp on 9<sup>th</sup> December, 1939.

On his 'Registration For Active Service' sheet, Arthur places much emphasis on his range of engineering experiences, including having spent a year at the Studebaker plant in the U.S., where he learnt much about engineering. He also mentions experience of driving tracked vehicles.

TELEPHONES  
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PRIVATE 507

P.O. Box 234

ARTHUR C. TOWSEY

Managing Director  
BAY MOTORS LTD.  
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NAPIER



I remember also, asking him, when he was explaining his plan, that did he not think, that if he was claiming experience with tracked vehicles, that they might well have him leading the charge into battle in a tank?

One of his statements that must have been true, as it was immediately verifiable by the army, was that he had been in the Engineers Corps of the Territorial Army, (otherwise known as Weekend Warriors), for five years. This then, must have been from 1935.

When Arthur entered the army, on 9<sup>th</sup> December, 1939, this was exactly one week after the birth of his second son; Michael. This proximity would have been coincidental, but Aline was seven months pregnant when Arthur went for his medical.

Arthur entered the army camp at Narrow Neck, in the north of Auckland, on 9<sup>th</sup> December 1939. He was amongst an intake of men who had either had previous military experience, or who showed leadership potential, to be fast-tracked as non-commissioned officers (NCOs).

Under normal circumstances, a soldier will progress slowly through the ranks, taking probably at least three years, minimum, to reach the rank of sergeant.

After Christmas leave, Arthur was reposted down to Papakura Camp, south of Auckland and promoted to Temporary Corporal exactly one month after enlisting. This was when the rest of what became the 21<sup>st</sup> Battalion entered the camp to commence training.

Six weeks later Arthur was promoted to Temporary Sergeant and three weeks after that, in March 1940, he was made a permanent sergeant.

One problem encountered with a sudden and massive expansion of the army, was a shortage of uniforms and of weapons. The stores of the Territorial Army were cleaned out, but this mainly provided the recruits with a choice of two uniform sizes; Too Large and Way Too Large.

Another problem was in getting the newly enlisted rabble to understand the necessity of doing whatever the NCOs told them to do, without question or hesitation.

Such unquestioning submission to authority was not within the DNA of these sons of colonial pioneers.

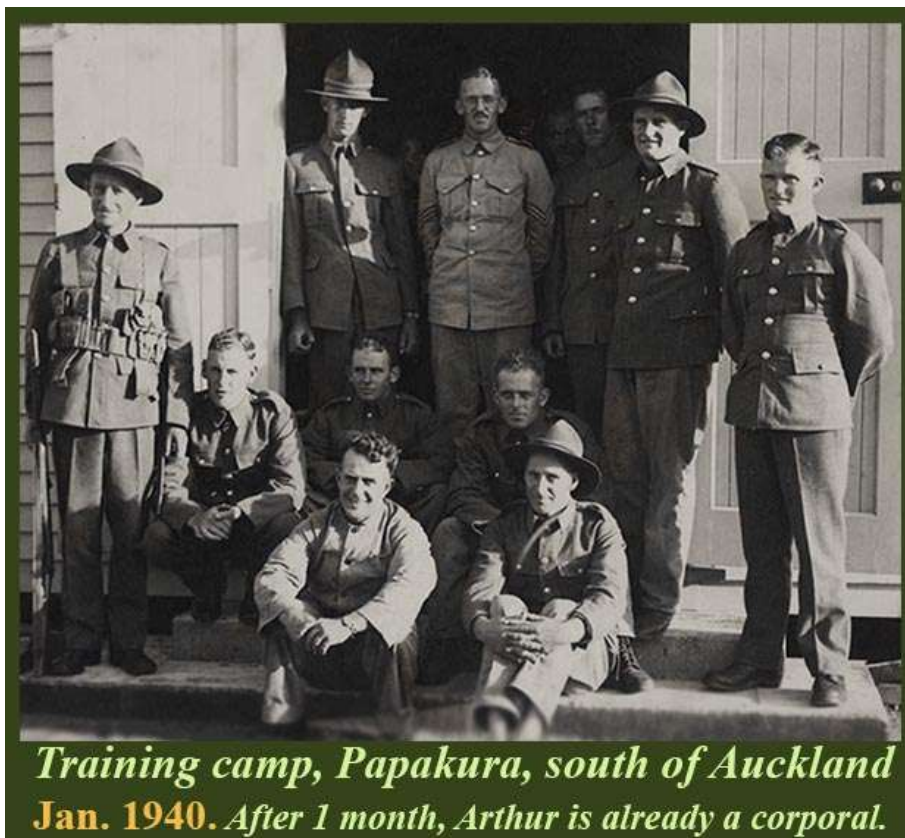
Of particular annoyance to the recruits was that, apart from the expected loss of civilian freedoms, the government banned soldiers in uniform from buying bottled alcohol and taking it away from hotels which, in those days, were the only legal outlets for liquor.

This news was met with banners hung from the barrack building stating; "No beer, no drill".

When some of the recruits gathered on the parade ground in protest, the commanding officer stood on the back of a truck and told them in no uncertain terms that their protest was illegal. The grumbling men then dispersed and that was the end of that.

By the end of April, the rag-tag bunch of civilians had been shaped into something resembling an army unit. Military transport ships began to appear in Wellington Harbour and on April 27<sup>th</sup>, there was a farewell parade through the streets of Auckland, after which the men were given a final few hours off, before having to report at the Queen Street Wharf, from whence they would march to the railway station to entrain back to Papakura.

The sight of hundreds of drunken soldiers, interspersed with drunken civilians, wending their way towards the station was, apparently, a spectacle to behold!



Oh! How very different to the celebration of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, at which Arthur's grandfather, Arthur John Towsey had conducted the singing of God Save The Queen at that same assembly point, after which everybody marched up Queen Street; their eyes wide; their upturned faces glowing with the reflected glory of the Empire as they sang Rule Britannia.

## Goodbye to New Zealand

On 1<sup>st</sup> May, the 21<sup>st</sup> Battalion marched out of Papakura, behind a band, to the railway station for the ride down to Wellington, where they boarded the passenger liner "Empress of Japan" that was far more comfortable than they had expected or that one might see portrayed in a war film.

Other battalions boarded the Empress of Britain and the Aquitania. As they left the harbour, they were joined by four warships for the crossing to the coast off Sydney, where the convoy was joined by the Queen Mary and Mauritania, filled with Australian troops.

The Empress of Canada joined them as they passed through Bass Strait on their way to Fremantle, in Western Australia, where twelve hours shore leave became, as expected, a great drinking binge.

The convoy was scheduled to stop in Ceylon, but with the possible danger of Italian naval attention, by ships out of the occupied Horn of Africa, they opted to steam straight for Cape Town instead.

It was something of a surprise for the citizens of Cape Town, as they opened their eyes on the morning of May 26th, to see their harbour filled with mighty passenger liners and war ships, from which disgorged 7,000 soldiers all looking for a drink.

The convoy was in harbour for four days and during three of these, the South African liquor industry was put under tremendous strain. The people also did their bit, by offering the soldiers tours in their cars and home-cooked meals, which the Antipodeans were at first nervous about accepting, as they had been warned that South Africa was a divided society, where not everybody was sympathetic to the British cause.

Whilst the focus of these soldiers was, as ever, on how to consume as much beer in as short a time as possible, the role for which they were heading towards Britain was changing dramatically.

When the word went out to the far-flung Empire, that Britain needed help, it was for the purpose of stopping the "Beastly Hun" from overrunning Europe. But, on the day that Arthur and his comrades disembarked at Cape Town, the British Expeditionary Force, whom they were on their way to reinforce, was desperately embarking on whatever craft was available at Dunkirk, on the French coast, to escape the unstoppable onslaught of the German army, which had pretty-much already succeeded in conquering Western Europe.

As the convoy steamed up through the Atlantic Ocean, escorted by additional Royal Navy ships, including the ill-fated Hood, the realization quickly filtered through the ranks that their role was not going to be to conduct a war in remote, foreign lands, but to fight a desperate battle against invading Germans on British soil.

The proximity of this war was brought very much home to the men as they drew closer to Britain, when one of the convoy launched a depth charge at what might have been a German submarine.

The shock waves from the explosion, reverberating through the hulls of the convoy, generated images and premonitions in the minds of soldiers, of what lay ahead for them.

After disembarking in the Firth of Clyde, on the west coast of Scotland, on June 19<sup>th</sup>, the 21<sup>st</sup> Battalion was moved by rail down to Mytchett Camp, near Aldershot, in the south of England.

It was just as well that it was the height of summer, because there was certainly not enough accommodation to house everyone indoors. The Battalion was therefore, accommodated in eight man tents scattered about under trees. The



Farewell march through Auckland, 27 April 1940



haphazard arrangement and shelter of trees, designed to conceal the presence of large numbers of troops from possible German aerial reconnaissance.

After four days of shuffling about, getting organized and digging slit trenches for protection from air raids, the men were given leave to go and visit the centre of the Empire, in London.

Many of the locals were unsure what to make of these uniformed men, who were obviously foreign, judging by the way that they stood gawping at the iconic tourist sights that until then, they had only known from black and white photographs in books.

The older Londoners though, recognized the distinctive pointed hats of the New Zealanders and slouch hats of the Australians, from 26 years earlier, when they had come over to fight in The Great War.

It gave the English great reassurance to know that they had not been left to fight the German invasion alone. Of course, if they had known just how ill-equipped the new arrivals still were, they might not have been quite so encouraged.

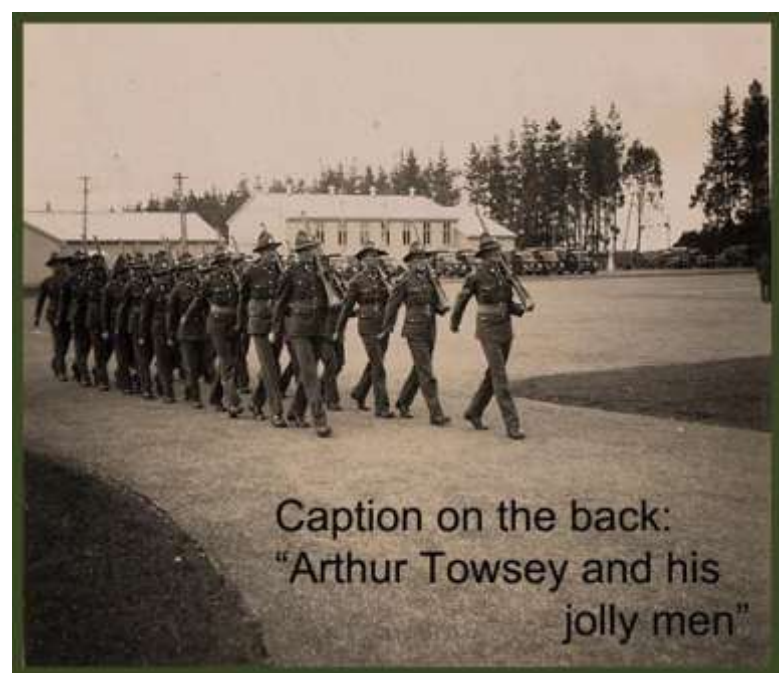
Whilst the 21<sup>st</sup> Battalion was at Mytchett, in Surrey, south-west of London, the King came to visit and, for some reason, Arthur got to meet King George during his tour of inspection.

On 15th July, 1940, Sergeant Arthur Towsey was posted as Provost Sergeant at the Headquarters of the 21<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 2<sup>nd</sup> NZ Expeditionary Forces.

Most people are familiar with the idea of military police. This is a separate corps in the army (in the navy they are called Shore Patrol), dealing with law and order of military personnel in the community and as the overall police force in a military controlled zone. These people have the 'MP' band on their arm.

The police within a particular army unit, are called the Regimental Police, who wear an 'RP' arm band. These police deal with discipline purely within that battalion or regiment.

Arthur Towsey was posted as the sergeant in charge of the platoon of Regimental Police. This platoon is a part of the battalion headquarters staff and the officer to whom the RP Sergeant answers, is the Adjutant; the officer in charge of administration.



Camp at Mytchett, England

It was also not until July, that the New Zealanders finally got their new, properly fitting Battle Dress uniforms.

The main occupation of any army, is not fighting wars, it is hanging about with nothing useful to do, waiting for something to happen.

The time is occupied with lots of marching back and forth, lots of cleaning and polishing of kit and scrubbing, polishing and painting of the camp.

It is said in the army; "if it moves, salute it. If it doesn't move, paint it."

In the case of 21 Battalion, there was also much training, particularly with a number of new weapons arriving from America and being produced locally.

Gradually everything was sorted out and problems resolved.

Training continued throughout July for what was presumed to be the imminent invasion. Barges were apparently being assembled for this purpose, on the other side of the Channel and there was intense air to air combat in what came to be known as the Battle of Britain. Most of this activity though, was a bit further east, over Kent and Essex.

The climax of all the training was a 100 mile route march along country lanes through the southern counties of England. Each time the soldiers noticed an approaching church spire, indicating a village, they would burst into song, finishing with loud choruses of "Oh How Dry We Are", rendered with enough emotion to stir the sympathies of the locals. Sure enough, snacks and drinks were supplied and, as the foot-sore Kiwis mounted the trucks for the ride back to Mytchett, there was a long line across the countryside, of empty pubs awaiting resupply from the breweries.

At the start of September, great numbers of British and New Zealand troops were moved over to the south east coast, to confront the expected German invasion.



The dog fights between German and British fighter planes had been going on above the area for a couple of months, but by the time Arthur arrived in Kent, the German attention was being redirected from trying to destroy airfields, to targeting cities and towns.

The 21<sup>st</sup> Battalion was sent to an area near the small village of Leeds, in Kent, and the soldiers were billeted around the area in various private houses.

The timing of this move into warm, dry housing, could not have been better as the weather turned considerably cooler and wetter in September.



Caption: Rotten wet cold day. Doris Smith in her "land girl" outfit and Self in Duty Rig. Leeds, Oct. 1940



Dave Sweeney (the RSM) and Self, Leeds, Oct. 1940



We see that Arthur does not seem to have pined for very long over the demise of his marriage to Aline. Unfortunately, Doris Smith was later killed during an air raid.

Arthur's closest friend in the battalion, was Dave Sweeney, the Regimental Sergeant Major, or RSM, who is the most senior non-commissioned officer in an army unit, with the rank of Warrant Officer 1<sup>st</sup> Class.

By November it was clear that, with unpredictable autumn storms in the English Channel, there could be no German invasion until the following year, so the 21<sup>st</sup> Battalion moved back to winter barracks at Camberley, in Surrey, close to where they had been before. Because Camberley was only forty miles from London, up to half of the battalion might be up there on leave each weekend.

This was the height of The Blitz, so it would in fact, have been safer to stay out of London, but, that was where the attractions were and besides, The Blitz offered a chance to overstay the weekend pass and avoid a charge (with



corresponding fine), for being AWL (that is; Absent Without Leave, which in most instances was the result of being late back to camp, after the leave period had ended).

Owing to public commendation of the action of some of the New Zealand soldiers in helping the city fire-workers to rescue people from blazing buildings, the shrewd soldiers were quick to recognize a good excuse to overstay leave and get away with it.

The number of people allegedly rescued from burning buildings rose steadily, while the AWL list grew to such proportions that Colonel Macky (the commanding officer) had to point out firmly that it was not the battalion's duty to do



Miss P.Woods  
17, Beresford Rd.  
Gillingham  
Kent

Dear Mrs.Towsey,

For the past few weeks your son Arthur has been billeted in a small village in the S.E. of England.

I have also been here on holiday and during my stay here I have made friends with many New Zealanders. Before Arthur left he asked me to send these postcards on to you. He also asked me to tell you that he is in excellent health and spirits.

And believe me he is! The village folk have become very attached to the boys from "way down under" and tears were shed at their departure. We feel humbly grateful to the men who have come so many miles to help our beloved country out of its trouble.

With Best Wishes,  
Pauline

this noble work but to ensure that they were back in camp by the appointed hour.

We can be sure that Arthur, as Regimental Police Sergeant, would not have been one of those breaking these rules. It is also likely that it was at about this time that Doris Smith was killed, probably in London and, because she was a Land Girl, working in the relative safety of rural Kent during the week, it is likely to also have been during a weekend off.

As the year drew to a close and the first snow, on December 23<sup>rd</sup>, gave them all a white Christmas, the time of 21 Battalion in Britain was quickly coming to an end.

## Goodbye to Britain, Hello to Egypt

It was with a sense of relief that they would no longer be just sitting about, that the battalion boarded trains on January 3<sup>rd</sup>, heading for Newport, in Wales.

They were to be shipped to Egypt as reinforcements of the troops already there, fighting the Italians in Libya.



The passenger ship on which they would be making the seven week voyage, was called The Duchess of Bedford, on which 2,800 men were eventually loaded, their hammocks packed together like sardines.

This was nothing like the comfort that they had enjoyed on the voyage over, but by then, they had not only been transformed from an indisciplined rabble of recruits into a well trained fighting force, but had also witnessed the privations of war on the home front and heard stories from those who had already confronted the better equipped German army in Europe.

Rather than whinge about their sorry lot, as they would have done previously, 21 Battalion quietly accepted that this must be the best that could be arranged under the circumstances.

As the ship left the calm of the harbour for the swells of the open seas, the men quickly discovered why she was nicknamed "The Drunken Duchess".

They were joined off the coast of Northern Ireland, by another 21 troopships carrying 42,000 troops. They were to be protected by a battleship, two cruisers, and twelve destroyers, with the RAF overhead.

During all of this time, there was no communication between Arthur in Britain and Aline, who had taken the children back to Canada during 1940. Aline did though, send pictures, from time to time, to Mamie in Auckland.

The first bearing of the convoy was straight out to sea, beyond the range of enemy aircraft but not, of course, outside the range of submarines. The men were therefore, obliged to remain in their battledress 24 hours per day, keeping their helmets with them at all times whilst in the North Atlantic danger area.

The seven weeks that it took them to sail the relatively short distance to Egypt; being twice as long as it had taken to come all the way from New Zealand, was because of the slow speed of many of the troop ships that had been gathered together and because they would have to sail around the bottom of Africa. It was far too dangerous to take so many troops through the Mediterranean.

The five days during which they stopped in Cape Town, were a time for renewing old acquaintances and enjoying a respite in the warm weather, where the streets were lit at night and there were no restrictions on how much butter you could have on your bread or how many sugars in your tea.

Now that the New Zealanders were properly trained and disciplined, with experiences of the hardships of Britain at war, their time in South Africa was a far more sober affair than the previous invasion,

The convoy steamed up to the Red Sea and then to the southern end of the Suez Canal, reaching Port Taufiq, at Suez, on 5<sup>th</sup> March, 1941.

From there, 21 Battalion was carried west, by train, to Helwan, on the banks of the Nile.

They were given plenty of leave to go and explore the sights of Cairo, 26 miles north of Helwan and told to make the most of it, as they would not be there for long. Exactly where they would be going next, they were not told, not just because it was a secret, but because it was still not entirely clear.

## Going to Greece

Apart from any strategic considerations, it was felt in London that Britain should help to protect Greece from a German invasion.

By the start of 1941, Greece had already been invaded by Italy, who expected a quick and easy victory. But superior Italian ordnance and exquisite tailoring proved no match for Greek resolve and by March, 1941, the Italians had been pushed all the way back into Albania and were in danger of being flicked right back across the Adriatic from whence they had come.

If Italian strategy had been guided by anything more than Mussolini's chin-thrusting arrogance, they would have understood that with centuries of brutal dominance by the Ottomans still within living memory, there was no way that the Greeks would be defeated without a level of carnage that would seriously upset the seams of Italian Designer uniforms.

The Germans meanwhile, had invaded Romania and Bulgaria, in preparation for their assault on Russia.

Although the British had offered assistance, the Greeks were still hoping that the Germans would not invade and hesitated in accepting British troops, in case the Germans saw their presence as a provocation.

Greece did though, offer the island of Crete as a base for British forces.

It soon became obvious though, that the Germans would invade, not so much to control Greece, but to help out their ineffectual Italian allies.

Meanwhile, in North Africa, Italy had controlled Libya for thirty years, until they decided to invade British controlled Egypt in September, 1940. This strategic miscalculation saw them pushed almost completely out of Libya by February, 1941, at which point they asked Germany for help.

This sequence of inglorious defeats, was the genesis of the now famous jokes about Italian tanks having one forward and five reverse gears,

So, whilst the British, Australians and New Zealanders were focussed on moving men and materiel into Greece, the Germans slipped their army across into Libya.

On 16<sup>th</sup> March, 21 Battalion moved by train 140 miles north, to a camp just outside Alexandria. They stayed there until 23<sup>rd</sup> March, when they were moved up to the coast and stuffed into a small Greek transport ship called the *Ionian*.

At least Arthur was allocated a position on the open deck, which was better than being cramped below.

They joined another three transport ships and were escorted by three destroyers.

Crossing from Alexandria to Athens took three days because of several apparently illogical changes of course that could not be attributed to weaving through the Greek islands of the Aegean Sea.

It was later learnt that an Italian fleet of 23 warships had planned to intercept the troop convoys bound for Greece. Fortunately the Allies had decoded their signals and a force of 29 British and Australian warships confronted and severely damaged the Italians. This was the Battle of Cape Matapan.

After disembarking at Athens on 29<sup>th</sup> March, Arthur and his battalion moved through to a hilltop on the east of the city, with spectacular views across the city to the coast with the Acropolis standing in the centre.

Most of the British and New Zealand troops were being moved north by truck, to stop the impending German invasion as it came through the three passes through the rugged mountains that formed the northern Greek border. The 21<sup>st</sup> Battalion though, was told that they would be staying in Athens for the important role of protecting the ports, ordnance stores and aerodromes from invasion by German paratroopers.

Having already missed out on fighting the Italians in Libya, the troops were not at all happy about being sidelined again, making sardonic jokes about becoming the Greek Home Guard.

Their new hilltop home with the spectacular views was also too good to last and the following day they were moved to Kamatero, a village just north of Athens, which has since been absorbed into the suburbs.

As a member of Battalion Headquarters, Arthur got to know the Greek interpreter, Costa Tantos. They exchanged addresses and promised that whichever of them survived the war, would try to get in touch with the other.

In 1946, after years of hardship under German and Italian occupation, Costa sent a letter to Mamie, in Auckland, writing about how nice Arthur had been to him during their time together.

I believe that Arthur visited Costa in Greece, in 1966, during a business trip to Europe.

Germany declared war on Greece and Yugoslavia on 5<sup>th</sup> April and one of the first encounters was an air raid on the port at Athens, during which several platoons of 21 Battalion got the chance to let rip with their machine guns at the low-flying aircraft as they came in on their bombing runs. They did not bring anything down, but seemed happy with the chance of some action, at last.

With the German army advancing unhindered through Yugoslavia and rushing down from Bulgaria towards Thessaloniki, on the north-west corner of the Aegean Sea, 21 Battalion was rushed north to form one small part of a new





defensive line from just south of Mount Olympus, across to the pass which came down from Serbia.

None of these positions were ultimately able to stop the German advance, but 21 Battalion did slow them down considerably with their defences and fighting on 16<sup>th</sup> April, in a mountainous area near the Aegean coast at the mouth of the Pinios River, within view of Mount Olympus, near Platamon Castle.

Withdrawing up the steep gorge of the Pinios River, where the Germans would be obliged to advance because of the steep terrain, 21 Battalion established defensive positions at the upstream end of the gorge, near a village called Tempe. They had been given instructions to hold this position at all costs, until 19<sup>th</sup> April, giving the rest of the British, Australian and New Zealand forces time to withdraw.

As this was an important strategic position, 21 Battalion were joined by large numbers of Australian soldiers as well, but by 18<sup>th</sup> April, the Germans, with their unstoppable tanks, had broken through and there was nothing for it but to escape south by whatever means were available.

At this time, communication with 21 Battalion was lost and, as had been agreed beforehand, the various units of the battalion tried to make their own way, by whatever means could be found, to a certain rendezvous point.

Arthur, with about 150 men from various New Zealand and Australian units, was lucky enough to reach this point by hiking through the foothills. Trucks were waiting, but they had not gone far when they were ambushed by a small group of Germans who had advanced well ahead of the rest of their comrades.

As it was then dark, and with trucks destroyed, they managed to disappear into the night, find the main road south and reach their next rendezvous point, at a town called Molos, north of Athens, by the middle of the next day.

This was to be the next line of defence against the German advance, but on the following day, Greece surrendered and it was then a question of the ANZAC troops evacuating as quickly as possible.

At this stage, only about a quarter of the men of 21 Battalion were accounted for; the rest being either dead, captured or still trying to make their way south, whilst avoiding German forces.

For this reason, the remnants of the battalion were amongst the first to be moved down to a point near Athens for evacuation. From there they travelled through the night by truck to Rafina, which is on the eastern side of the peninsula on which Athens sits. Again they had to remain under cover in olive groves during the day, to avoid being spotted by German aircraft. That night, they made their way down to the beach and were ferried out to a troop ship, the HMS Glengyle. They clambered up the sides on nets, to the blackened decks, where they were fed on coffee and bread rolls, before lying down to sleep wherever a spot could be found.

By 4am, a total of 5,700 men had been evacuated from Greece.

In total, 21 Battalion in Greece lost 14 killed and died of wounds, 26 wounded, 235 prisoners of war (of whom nine were wounded and eight died). A total of 275.

By the time the battalion settled down in Crete, it was comprised of just 237 men of all ranks.

Over the next couple of weeks, another fifty or so men of 21 Battalion managed to find their way to Crete, all with stories of crossing the Aegean either by stealing boats or being helped by Greek fishermen.

Colonel Macky, the CO, who had been missing in Greece, arrived with one such group and Arthur's friend, RSM Dave Sweeney, turned up with the battalion padre (usually referred to as the official God Botherer), and several others, after hopping from one island to another.



Loading up a donkey between Platamon and Tempe



Crete is a long, narrow island, running east/west and certainly not an easy place to defend. The soldiers though, all assumed that they would be there just long enough to regroup and move back to Egypt, where they would help to defeat the Germans and Italians who, since the arrival of Rommel and the Afrika Korps, were rapidly pushing the Allies back across Libya into Egypt.

In support of this notion, it was assumed that as the Royal Navy still controlled the eastern Mediterranean, the Germans would be unable to get across to Crete, unless they all came by air.

In this light, the order to dig defensive emplacements, in the rocky soil, without proper tools, was seen as just another of those bright ideas dreamt up by commanders to keep the troops busy.

If this were indeed the case, it would have been entirely warranted, because as soon the troops got settled, they, as is always the case with any soldiers, immediately started seeking out ways to circumvent the petty, inane procedures of proper military order, in pursuit of having a good time.

21 Battalion, being under strength to the point of being unable to perform adequately in a forward defensive role, were stationed a couple of miles inland, on a ridge, above the airport at Maleme, on the north west of the island.

Apart from digging in, their time was occupied with some training, a bit of swimming and a limited amount of leave to the bustling town of Khania, a few miles east, along the coast.

Life was generally quite relaxed and one Captain even set up a small canteen, financed by loans from a couple of soldiers who had been lucky at gambling, stocked with supplies bought at the YMCA in Khania and transported in a truck borrowed from a Welsh unit.

As the numbers of soldiers nicking off to Khania without permission was rapidly increasing, it was considered necessary to set up a Field Punishment Centre in which to detain them. A lieutenant from one of the companies was put in charge and Sergeant Towsey, along with whatever remained of his Regimental Police platoon, were assigned to guard them.



**NZ troops arriving in Crete from Greece**

## THE ISLE OF DOOM

*Here I sit on the Isle of Crete  
Bludging on my blistered feet.  
Little wonder I have the blues,  
With feet encased in great canoes.  
Khaki shorts instead of slacks,  
Living like a tribe of Blacks.  
Except that Blacks don't sit and brood  
And wail throughout the day for food.  
Twas just a month ago no more,  
We sailed to Greece to win the war.  
We moan and groan beneath our load  
While bombers bomb us off the road.  
They chased us here they chased us there,  
The bastards chased us everywhere  
And while they dropped their load of death,  
We cursed the bloody RAF.  
Yet the RAF were there in force;  
They left a few at home, of course.  
We saw the entire force one day  
When a Gladiator flew the other way.  
And then we heard the wireless news  
When portly Winston gave his views.  
The RAF, he said, in Greece  
Are fighting hard to bring us peace,  
And so we scratched our head and thought;  
This smells distinctly as it ought,  
As if in Greece the air force be,*

*Well, where the bloody hell are we?  
And then at last the Hun we met  
At odds of more than three to one  
And though they made it pretty hot,  
We gave the blighters all we got.  
The bullets whizzed, the big guns roared,  
We howled for ships to go aboard.  
At last they came and on we got,  
To hurry from that cursed spot.  
And then they landed us on Crete  
And marched us off our bloody feet.  
The food was light, my stomach crook.  
I got fed up and slung my hook.  
Returned that night full up with wine  
And next day copped a ten bob fine.  
My credit was behind to hell,  
When pay was called I said "of well!"  
They wont pay me, I'm sure of that  
And when they did, I smelt a rat.  
Then next day when no rations came,  
I realized their wily game.  
We spent our pay on food that day.  
And now it looks like a sitting shot;  
We are staying here until we rot.  
So spend our days in darkest gloom  
On Adolph Hitler's "Isle of Doom".*



On Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> May, General Freyberg, who was in charge of the whole thing, inspected 21 Battalion and told the men that they should expect an attack on Monday 19<sup>th</sup>. This attack would probably begin with strafing and bombing, to be followed up an invasion by paratroops and maybe gliders.

No doubt the men were all standing there thinking; "thanks for the warning, General, but a couple more days notice might have been nice! I'll hardly have time to pack all of my souvenirs and party clothes and get the hell out of here by the first cruise ship!"

The attack on the 19<sup>th</sup> commenced with dive-bombers. These Stuka aircraft would dive out of the sky at 300 miles per hour, to the accompaniment of high-pitched screaming from sirens attached to the wings, dropping their bombs at low altitude whilst levelling out for their escape.

This attack was mainly concentrated around the Maleme airport, defended by 22 Battalion, who responded as best they could with a limited number of Bofors Guns.

When this was not followed up by an invasion, the men might have breathed a sigh of relief whilst making snide comments about Freyberg, but the intelligence had in fact been correct. It just took the Germans a day longer than expected to get organized.



## German paratroops bound for Crete



The men whom Sergeant Towsey was guarding, tended to be the regular troublemakers. Such men were more rebels than criminals: men who could never entirely reconcile themselves to blindly following stupid orders. As it is generally agreed that most military orders are stupid, such men were constantly being marched in front of the CO on charges related to breach of military discipline.

The only difference therefore, between the individualistic Arthur Towsey and his charges, was that Arthur could at least play the game.

It was after the first air attack, that the prisoners approached Sgt Towsey and suggested that he should try to have them reposted to their units to fight off the invasion. This, they said, was because they all planned to escape and did not want to get Arthur, whom they liked and respected, into trouble.

As to the plan to escape; to where, exactly, they thought that they might escape, had probably not been thought through. Besides, escape would soon enough be the plan of every Allied soldier on Crete.

On the morning of May 20<sup>th</sup>, as the men were lining up for breakfast, there was a rumble like thunder in the east. The rumble became a roar as two dozen Messerschmitts, Dorniers and Stukas passed over the valley towards Maleme. The sky, black with planes, together with the thunder of explosions, the chatter of machine guns, and the quick bark of Bofors Guns, removed any doubt about the invasion.

Just as quickly as it had arrived, the noise and confusion disappeared, to be

replaced by a deeper throbbing sound in the sky, which grew in intensity until the ground shook, as the sky filled with long lines of large, lumbering Junkers 52s, followed by the ghostly outlines of gliders, almost as large, that they were towing.

The first wave of paratroops fell close to Maleme airport on the coast, but subsequent waves also jumped further inland, closer to the 21 Battalion positions.

Arthur and his prisoners became a fighting unit and managed to kill many of the German paratroopers before they even touched the ground. Arthur himself killed three.

The Germans though, were also firing back as they came down.

After the first day of fighting, all of the prisoners were returned to their own units and their sentences remitted after the campaign.

It may well have been during the first day of the invasion, that Arthur was shot through the stomach. At that time evacuations of the wounded were being conducted without much trouble.

Any vehicle displaying a red cross, might be observed by German aircraft, but they were left alone. During those first days also, there was a red cross hospital ship anchored off Khandia, its lights were left blazing all night and it too was avoided by the bombers.

As the German occupation of the island expanded over the following ten days, all of the Allied troops were gradually pushed back towards various evacuation points.

21 Battalion were required to trek over the White Mountains in the centre of the island, down to the small village of Sfakia, on the south of the island.

Most of this hard march was achieved during the dark hours of one night, with the soldiers then hiding from spotter planes, under trees during the day.

Having been warned to avoid exposure during the day, the men were somewhat surprised to see a group of about fifty soldiers strolling casually into their position in broad daylight.

They explained that a German prisoner had told them that if they removed their helmets and walked with a red cross flag, they would not be fired upon.

This apparent strict adherence to the Geneva Convention, was because of German concerns about how their own comrades who had been captured, would be treated.

As the bedraggled remnants of the 21<sup>st</sup> Battalion made their way over the mountains, they encountered many soldiers who had been too weak or injured to go on and left behind by their own units, as well as those who simply should not have been in that area, indicating that they had deserted.

These men tried to fall into the ranks of those making an ordered retreat but those without weapons were quickly pushed out again.

It was expected that there would be limited capacity for evacuations, so those who were still capable of forming fighting units would be given priority.

Deserters are always held in low regard by any army and this brutal treatment of them showed the disdain in which they were held by those who had "held the line".

When the bedraggled soldiers of 21 Battalion reach the coast at the small village of Sfakia, they joined the lines of those waiting to be ferried out to the ships that slid in under cover of darkness.

These lines were formed in the order in which they would be moved.

Those left behind included many Greeks and foreign labourers from Palestine, as well as Allied soldiers who had thrown away their rifles whilst retreating. Some of these men might have been removed later, but the priority was to rescue those still capable of fighting.

The remnants of 21 Battalion climbed into the boats just before midnight on 31<sup>st</sup> May. They arrived in Alexandria at 16.45 on 1<sup>st</sup> June.

In Crete, 21 Battalion lost 33 killed or died of wounds, 33 wounded and 80 taken prisoner. Of those 80, 32 were wounded and five of them died. This was a total of 146, leaving not a lot of the original intake.

It was said that five years after 21 Battalion had boarded the ship in Wellington Harbour, there were just five of those original men left in the battalion.