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My Story

When 18 years of age I volunteered and joined the Queen Alexander Mounted Rifles in 1940 at Hawera New Zealand.

While training in the basics of infantry we waited for our horses to arrive, but instead we got Honey and Valentine tanks and in the following two years I became in turn a qualified wireless operator and tank commander and as we expected the Japs to arrive we were taught the basics of mine laying.

When asked if I would like to go overseas, my answer was an easy one as our training had become repetitive and we were in fact over trained.

Leaving N.Z. on the Dominion Monarch in May we called briefly at Fremantle, before sailing into monsoon weather and which may have saved our bacon, as the submarines were known to be in the area at this time. I took my turn as a submarine lookout one night in very stormy weather.

Without incident we arrived at Tufic after a very brief call at Aden where I saw the stream of men unloading a dhow with sacks of grain all at a run. At Tufic a Beaufighter roared overhead and I saw at sundown a local unfold his small carpet, kneel down and pray facing Mecca.

The following day we were loaded onto trucks for our trip to Cairo. The sun was stinking hot, the road was melting and when we stopped the flies loved us.

During our crossing our Colonel gave us a pep talk on the dangers of V.D. and made a point of telling us that should we have the misfortune to run over a civilian, to make sure we reversed over the body to make certain it was dead. An injured person had a hundred dependants and a dead one was disowned as know one wanted the cost of a burial.

We moved into Mena camp not far from the Pyramids, as the 51st Highland Division came back from Tobruk. The Aussies were going straight back to Australia.

Shortly after we paraded and the order came, all those who can drive a truck, take a step forward, and so I became a gunner in 46th Battery of 4th Field Regiment (artillery). No vehicles were available as they were being recovered from the desert campaign and serviced. Until October when the Americans started their invasion of Sicily, we were kept occupied either foot slogging or with anything that killed time until we moved up towards Alexander to Berg-il-arab, late in October. While there we had a severe sand storm, I could see the solid wall of sand about 500 feet high moving down on us for five minutes before it swamped us, only lasting a few minutes. Sand got into everything.

Came November 1943 and we embarked at Alexandria for Italy. Landing at Taranto in the rain, we had a footslog to a rocky roadside tent camp about 5 miles up the road, where we had to wait while our transport was being unloaded.

Within 10 days my truck arrive, a Chevrolet 4 wheel drive without a windscreen (all windscreens had been removed during the desert campaign because they reflected sunlight). I was given a gun crew, gear and two men to care for, with the other two men travelling with the quad that hauled a 25 pounder. It started to snow as we convoyed across towards the Adriatic, literally crawling at times because the Germans had blown all the bridges and at several places we had to take our turn at being winched up the far side, meanwhile the three of us in the cab wore beards of snow on anything uncovered.

It was three days before we passed over a bridge that the Germans had missed, pulling up on the far side by a stone building on the left. It was late evening when walking around the corner from the kitchen holding a mug of cocoa when a shell blast scared hell out of everyone and I found myself holding the mug handle only.

That night we heard machine gun fire coming from up river (the Sngro), Germans were caught coming down the riverbed to blow the bridge. It was shortly before crossing this bridge that a priest spoke to me, he had been at the side of the road. I realised that my Italian that I had started to learn, together with my mate Howard Kinsett (who hailed from the Hawkes Bay) was better than that of the priest and mentioned this to someone that evening. It transpired that the priest was in fact a German who rang the chur bells at the oddest times. Later we had no need to wonder why the shellfire was so close. They told me the priest was shot.

We pulled into a small valley just short of Chieti, inland from Pescara on the coast. The brickworks with the tall chimney was on the top of the hill about 800 yards away. Howard and I put up our pup tent on the riverbed and had just settled in when the Sergeant Major came by and said “Palmer I want you to take up some petrol to the Observation Post early in the morning, you had better sleep tonight at Headquarters (which was only 300 yards away consisting of a house and barn). The observation Post was a Honey tank they didn’t want moving about too much.

During the night shells landed fairly close and I could only press myself down into the bedding as I heard the shell fragments flicking through the rush walls of the barn. We lost five men that night, including Howard. Our pup tent had been flattened and a piece of shrapnel had penetrated his neck. The Major held a service later that morning on a nearby hillside. The only name that I recall apart from Howard Kinsett was the surname Savage. Graves had been dug and the few of us who had been close to those killed were standing in a group when we could see a plane flying low coming towards us. The Major called ‘Stand Fast’ and we did for about 5 seconds, before to a man we piled into the graves. One of our lot fired at it with a machine gun without scoring. The plane no doubt had a camera, but we didn’t know that.

It was just after I had gone to bed this time in my pup ten which I had over a trench (after losing Howard I always dug in), when I heard the call ‘Take Post’ and being nearest to the gun I shot into the seat to register the bearings as they were

called. We rotated as time went by to spell the ones with the more physically demanding. I was clad in only a pair of briefs and it was snowing, so why we hadn't been warned I'll never know because we spent several hours firing 600 shells (our four guns) at about 3 a minute each to send the message 'Happy New Year Fritz'. Later we huddled around the most useless fire I've ever seen. It was too cold for the cold virus I was told. It was now 1944.

It snowed steadily the next night and it was midday the following day before I was dug out – they couldn't find me or my flattened tent!

When everyone ducked as shellfire came close and I didn't they thought I was putting them on until it was realised I was as deaf as a post. They called for a volunteer to do a short and urgent course in mine lifting. Feeling useless on the guns I put my silly hand up.

A Sergeant of the Engineering Squad who did this work was the instructor and I asked him "Where are your own men?" and he said his 32 men had blown themselves up and I was admonished to take the course seriously. There were mines we knew of just in front down in the gully and with the Major and a few others watching from the low hilltop at a safe distance away my instruction began.

Using a wand we found our first one and he said to me, "As others are watching we will do this by the book". And "Using a shovel we usually just flick them out, we need a rope or a piece of wire will do to tie onto the handle on top and bending down we pull it out of the ground". We found about 10 feet or so of wire and secured it to the top of the handle and bent down taking the strain saying, "bend lower" and I did so, as the mine exploded.

The thing had to have been booby trapped with another mine anchored below. Through the black smoke and turf that was thudding down around us I could see the mob on the hill running down, they thought be had bought it. This demonstration undoubtedly saved my life many times as I always just blew them up in situ. Mostly they were telemines, not the R that had a globule of mercury floating in a shoebox, which only became dangerous when the endpins were removed, or the S mine which detonated below a canister of ball bearings, which in turn exploded waist high.

While looking at the chimney of the brickworks I was thinking what a lovely Observation Post it would make when the top was shot off. The Germans had thought the same. Shortly after we were moved to take over positions held now for three weeks by the Americans fronting the Monastery of Casino. They were moving to the western end of the Gothic line towards Anzio and Napoli.

We found they had been living in the lap of luxury in secure dugouts and the PK rations they left behind made my lot the envy of others not so fortunate. A brand new GM truck had been abandoned on the railway line. Two of us dug down three feet or so, cut down a biggish tree and laid the trunk in sections across the top. The monastery was about a mile away and in front of us was the railway station, which our boys were to take.

Tiny Freyberg (our Divisional Commander) thought the monastery should be destroyed because high on the top of a hill it dominated the whole area we were

trying to take and the German gunfire was deadly accurate. I believe we had 2000 guns to the Germans 700, but the advantage was with the Germans as they not only held the high ground all around, but their guns were calibrated. In a measure to compensate we had an Auster aircraft floating around near to the front line and occasionally a German aircraft would swoop down whereon the spotter plane would come down to the deck and fly between the treetops. I never saw it shot down, the Auster was a much more agile plane with a staying speed of only 45 knots.

It was around 9 in the morning when 4 groups of 4 bombers came from the south, probably Foggia or Bari. One plain dropped his load upon the Indians, the others were spot on and after the monastery looked a mess, but more advantageous for the Germans as the broken slabs of masonry offered much more cover. At night when the Poles attempted to storm the face of the hill below, the Monastery fire cascaded down of mortar and nebelwefer (This shell measured 3 feet long and would split like a banana skin on detonation) which would flick across decapitating. They sounded like an elephant trumpeting.

Within a week the Sergeant Major came running “Palmer the Maori are within 50 yards of the railway station and they want smoke and we only have enough for 20 minutes”. Not waiting for my helper, I sped back to the quarry that held all ammunition about 5 miles away. I had to go back down the railway line (well, that’s what it used to be, because the sleepers and iron had been stripped by either the Germans or the Italians) turn left for three miles to a cross-road and then right for another three miles, with the quarry on the left.

When I came to the second cross-road there were several trucks on fire, I cut the corner and swooped into the quarry to find no one there, as there is usually a team there to help, load. Fortunately I knew where the smoke shells were stacked and pulling up I realized that the dump was erupting from the far corner and looking around the top edge of the quarry I could see several heads. I threw in the fastest load higgledy-piggledy trying to keep bent low. I could hear the canvas being torn by shrapnel. A pommie MP was on the crossing holding his hand up, which I ignored as I sped across the corner on the way back. I never did find out if I was in time. Our boys were being plastered again and I saw a cabbage flying through the air, only to find it was someone’s head. Within three days we lost an entire gun crew.

One night some clown called “GAS” I looked out from my dugout to see white smoke billowing up from twenty yards away. Without a word my mate and I galloped for my truck parked within some trees 200 yards away for our gas masks. Nearing the truck we heard the first of shells coming and we dived into 9” of water under the engine and then only to find later that it had been a smoke shell.

The next morning I had just finished shaving when I could hear some more fire coming. I could see two men about 50 yards away laying telephone cable in a ditch looking for somewhere to hide themselves. I called to them saying we had enough room – just. Tightly packed we lay alongside each other and listened to a restonk. The nearest landed directly in front only 3 yards away. I saw the whole

roof lift 6 inches, but the shell was a dud and didn't detonate. It had gone right under us. One of the men yelled "hell I've been hit" I said "where?" and he said, "I don't know, I can feel blood running all over me". Our pee-pot that had been perched on a shelf at the far end had fallen over. He left our dugout a happy man. Our pee-pot was a 25-pounder shell casing.

On another eventful day I had to take some more of the boys killed and bury them in a temporary grave not far from the quarry. I had to pick up our Padre from H.Q; next the first cross-road which I normally did. This was a job I hated as their warm blood made the blanket I buried them in slippery. From there they were later shifted to a permanent site near to the Sangro River.

We had turned into the second cross-road (the first coming back) when a shell landed behind me, I planted my foot down and a second shell landed behind me. I realized then that I had been targeted and took off like a scalded cat. Two more shells landed before I had to slow down for the railway line. The Padre said, "Don't stop" as he swung out onto the running board and as I cornered he took off at a gallop across the road to the H.Q dugout. When I pulled in the Sergeant Major was waiting, "Palmer, you have to go back and bury the Padre".

Germans or their agents were getting through our lines and were pilfering straws of gelignite from a random selection of the explosive pouches that were stacked not in the quarry after the blow up, but at the side of the road. When our guns were targeted close to our troops, some shells were inexplicably landing short onto our own.

Several months later I met a Maori at the Pescara Hospital who had been shot in the chest at the Railway Station and had to walk half a mile back for aid. I was impressed. They had accomplished in three days what the Americans had been trying to do for three weeks.

Moving around Mt Casino the Poles needed supplies and found that the Germans had the exposed road facing Mt Casino well targeted, as they would time the time it took to travel from the hidden sections of the road to where they could treat the Poles to a 'Turkey Shoot'. About 5 miles or so very high with sheer drops of 800 – 1000 feet and several hairpin bends where one had to go back and forth several times to get around and so a convoy system was devised and I became part of this convoy.

The trip each way took about 3 hours, no lights at the dead of night. The searchlights that had played upon the clouds to light up the battlefront were not turned on and we departed at 9PM and timed our departure from the other side at 1AM. Such were the conditions we were losing eleven vehicles a night that went over the side. The road was edged with a low 2-foot high wall in most places with stones.

Leaving at the head of a returning convoy, midway to the top I had rounded a left hand turn when I was confronted by a long tank transporter driven by some Poles. He was coming down and I was going up and driving on the right hand side. Neither of us could reverse so I edged onto the outside low wall and going very slowly he edged past with his right hand side against the cliff wall.

As he started his turn to follow the road down his lengthy trailer bellied against the wall and his rea wheels were being pushed outward. I felt my truck front being pushed and the low wall of stones went over the edge. My mate couldn't get out his side, as the side of the transporter was jammed hard against the door and we were being steadily pushed further out at the front. Looking down I could see no bottom. My right wheel dropped over the edge and we sagged as my rear was slowly going the way of the front.

My mate couldn't open his door, it had jammed and the transporter had gone. He had been held up by the numerous hairpin bends. I managed to reverse onto the road and drove very carefully for a long time after. That scared the hell out of me, nearly as much as when I cadged a lift to Rome months later with a Negro driver who only had one speed. For many years I thought of that ride.

We broke through the Gothic line and took a break. I saw Naples (and didn't die) took in the sights of Rome, which had been declared an 'open city' by the Germans before pulling out. Was visited by the King, my gear was too ripe for any inspection so I hid myself.

We went onwards past Frosinone where our cooks fed half of the population when we had eaten. The German Army had confiscated all livestock and food they could carry. Our next engagement came at Isolodiliri, the road to Florence (Firenzo).

The engineers had festooned camouflage across the road in this valley and we were exhorted to travel at no more than 8 miles an hour to keep the dust down. We were literally surrounded by the Germans who held the tops of the hills on both sides.

Because our Army travelled by mechanical transport and the German Army were relying heavily on horse and cart (petrol shortage) we often found ourselves ahead of the enemy travelling by another road and we were shot at from behind.

The Germans had two Tiger Tanks blocking the road ahead where the hills ahead pinched together and gunfire was coming from both sides. Our cook was shot sitting on the dunny. My clothing was shot to pieces as I was trying to have a swim in the small river. We suffered heavy losses and pulled back to go around them.

Just short of Florence in a village we found dead bodies everywhere and the first of several booby traps. One house with many paintings on the wall had one painting hanging crooked which one could be tempted to straighten. I warned others (looking for souvenirs) not to touch anything. I scouted around and found in the passageway backing onto the room with the paintings, two Telemines with a wire attached that led to a small hole in the wall and no doubt onto the crooked picture. I left a note precariously and in German 'Achtung Minen' and from here on all houses were suspect.

All bridges in Florence were down except the Ponte Vechio (old bridge). We pushed on to Rimini. Short of the coast, traffic was congested and our lot was ordered off the road onto an adjacent paddock. Attached to the fence were signs 'Achtung Minen' and I was given the job to be done in a hurry.

I commandeered a scout car with tracks and accompanied with a mate we drove round and round this paddock sitting on our helmets (I don't know what we were trying to protect) and there were no mines.

We were the first troops into Venice (Venezio) and souvenirs were cheap as they had been throughout Italy when we were there first, but only week's later prices went through the roof. The American boys had arrived. We envied their pay packet against out 4 shillings and sixpence a day (plus something we were given when discharged).

One of our lot was shot crossing the Po River and that was virtually the end of the war. Ended up facing off Marshal Tito's forces at Trieste. He had ambitions of acquiring territory down past Caael Raimondo to Montefalcone, which Churchill wasn't happy about. Our Forces were pulled back to Egypt where I was again hospitalised this time with Yellow Jaundice at Helwan and came home on the Stirling Castle in February 1947.

A Postscript of Forgotten Events.

I was born 16.11.21 and I remember the tassels on my pram, being restrained by my mother on the Princess (before the Cobar or the Muritai), which travelled across the Wellington Harbour from Eastbourne as ferries. We had gone out to greet the visiting Italian Navy warships. Each had four funnels belching black smoke. I attended Wellington College for two years and Flock House as Bulls (an agricultural school for the sons of British seamen and returned ex-servicemen) one year. The warships came in 1923.

Near to the Senio River two events come to mind. It was snowing and the Germans threw snowballs across the low embankment, our boys retaliated and great fun was had by all until one spoil-sport put a hand grenade inside. No more snow fights. The other, we had pulled back leaving several Poles behind that I had become friendly with and I was hitching a ride to make a visit. An English Sergeant with another picked me up and in conversation said "Where do you come from?" (I was in plain khaki wearing no insignia) "Eastbourne" I said. He pulled out his pistol thinking he had caught a spy when I couldn't describe the Eastbourne of England to him and was saved by the Poles standing at the roadside. I couldn't speak Polish and they couldn't speak English, so we all spoke in Italian.

On one attack by the Maoris they came across a colleague who had been out scouting and had failed to return. They found him castrated with his hands tied behind his back. After this the Maoris took no prisoners and were greatly feared by the Germans. When I was asked by an Italian "Where do you come from?" and I said "Nuova Zelanezi" he couldn't understand because I wasn't a 'Cannibile'. The Germans had told the populace that the cannibals were coming.

On our first day at the Sangro, we could see coming towards us two ladies carrying a wardrobe on their heads (this seemed to be a common practise throughout Italy where water is carried from the communal water outlet back to the house – all by the womenfolk) In front came a smallish man leading. When

they reached us, we made the women put the wardrobe on the ground and to the merriment of the women; we placed this wardrobe onto the back of the man and sent them on their way. They travelled over a rise and down out of sight with the man staggering under his load until when they came into view on the other side of a hollow, the two women again had the wardrobe.

In the later stages of the was I entered the Field Security Service as an interpreter, an estimated 2000 people a day were streaming back through or lines and with them were people we wanted to catch. I was en route to Syria on an encoding course when I became ill with Jaundice.

When discharged I worked at many varied jobs before going back to farming. I share milked for a Frank Foster at Taikoria for 2 years and settled on my own place at Reporoa (near Rotorua) in 1952. I sold in 1958 and joined a pest control firm before learning the fibreglass business, making moulds and motorcar bodies for the Prefect chassis (98 inches long). I came to Australia in 1967 with my wife and two children.

When I was 4 or 5 years of age, Dad was pushing my brother Peter in a pram around the rocky coastline down to Pencarrow Lighthouse about six miles away south of Eastbourne. From there we had a clear view of the South Island. There was no road. I remember helping to push in the sandy bays.

When I was 7 or 8 years of age a man who was known as uncle Toby who had had donkeys that he took to any local fair. I was kicked by one. I can still remember the long 7-mile walk home leading a donkey from Lower Hutt to Eastbourne.

At 10 years I helped deliver milk for the Golans who farmed south of Eastbourne. With another boy we met the spring cart milk wagon down at Tawa Street and bringing the receptacle left near the front gate, usually with money in the bottom which determined how much milk was ladled out. On reflection, it wasn't very hygienic, but no one died that I recall. At 8.30 I would leave the milk cart wherever it was and gallop home for breakfast and on to school. For this I earnt 2 shillings a day.

The merry-go-round came to Eastbourne and we boys sneaked in under the back of the large tent to see the acrobats perform and the lions. The merry-go-round had horses that went up and down while a barrel organ played, all brightly lit up. The local Constable Squires rode around on his pushbike. We had to go to him once when my dog Laddie bit someone, to show that Laddie was not a dangerous dog, dad lifted Laddie up by his tail. I lost Laddie when someone gave him meat laced with strychnine, I buried him at the bottom of our yard with much tears and placed a tone with his name marked and date. Uncle Bill had given Laddie to me when he was only 3 months old for an Xmas present and within days Laddie disappeared. We found later he had walked home to Island Bay an incredible 16 – 17 miles away around the harbour and through the city. Though I had many dogs in later years not one of them could replace Laddie.

In 1932 Wellington had a bad quake and with dad I walked past the debris that had fallen off the high buildings. The wooden cobbles of Lampton Quay, the

trucks with solid rubber (instead of tyres) chain driven (instead of drive shafts) and with a large rubber horn. The men wearing bowler hats and the ladies with feathers in their hats and wearing furs.

Horse drawn wagons were everywhere and often one had to negotiate a passage through the horse droppings. Old Mazzola would regularly drive past in his spring cart selling fish. He called out 'fisha, fisha' and once when the horse lifted its tail he called 'fresh fisha' and 'fresh manure'. He was an Italian who had a vegetable store.

My younger brother Peter found his way to cigarettes by using washers in the vending machine in Wharf Street. I tried them once but they made me sick. I don't think Peter got much past the first puff, they were Woodbines.

My first night at the Crown Theatre to see 'Cat and the Canary' it was so spooky I galloped all the way home avoiding trees at the side of the road. A fat lady played a piano and the screen bounced when apple cores were thrown at the baddies. I was 8 years old. The 5th November was one of our big events to see who could build the largest bonfire on the seashore, Guy Fawkes was well celebrated.

I made my own Chrystal set so I could listen to the ABC station on Mt Victoria with a pair of earphones. I recall the smoke that came over Wellington from the bush fires in Australia in 1932-33, when we had a big earthquake and my cousin Ted was killed at Napier by a falling chimney.