

GREEK CAMPAIGN

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From "Tell Them We Were Here":

Tell Them We Were Here

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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Compiled from memories and notes submitted to the WAR CRIMES PANEL on return from being a Prisoner of War in May 1945.

23-24 MARCH 1941. Sailed on SS CAMERONIA with a Maori NZ Brigade from Alexandria to Piraeus Docks, Greece.

At Glyphada Staging Camp I was posted as chief clerk, to HQ 41 Base Sub Area and after 2-3 days in Athens went to Larissa by train.

The 'camp' consisted of tented accommodation outside Larissa. On Good Friday, 1941 there was a minor earthquake in the town below us. On Easter Monday, 1941 two flights of Italian aircraft bombed the town. Presumably to avoid attracting the Germans who appeared remote from our area we remained on the hills above the town.

General 'Jumbo' Wilson visited our apology for a HQ and demonstrated lavishly how we were to hold the hills. As he indicated Mount Olympus to be south of Larissa (it is to the north) I charitably conclude he was completely overtired.

Australian and New Zealand troops were struggling south and a bellicose General Blarney, AIF told us to set to hell out of it.

L/Cpl Lee RASC was our Dispatch Rider and was sent to Volos to warn of our embarkation on 20 April but never returned (after the war the Red Cross and his mother, Lady Lee,

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made enquiries about this gallant volunteer).

Mid-APRIL. We evacuated Larissa by truck, joining long lines of transport fleeing south. Stukas attacked us several times and our CQMS, C/Sgt 'Johnny' Belcher, Essex Regt, was killed and we buried him in a cliff side.

Back at Glyphada Camp all was a shambles. I was treated for pieces of shrapnel in my groin and upper legs by a NZ Ambulance Station.

21 APRIL. Left Glyphada with Brig. Parrington and staff. I had been told to trim the staff down and a Sgt. SPARROW, RASC and a Cpl. REYNOLDS, RASC volunteered to stay with a Sgt. SWIFT.

23 APRIL. We evacuated AIF infantry and various non-combatants from 'T' Beach, which was near Argos.

24 APRIL. At Nauplion I saw the ULSTER PRINCE ablaze having been bombed (Twelve months previous the little Irish Sea ship had taken me to the abortive campaign in Norway).

APRIL. At Kalamata. We evacuated more infantry, some wounded, and non-combatants (I was bludgeoned by a revolver on the back of my head by an Australian WO but this information I gave after the war to a War Crimes Tribunal, when the WO was discharged and imprisoned for aiding the Germans).

APRIL. I was in a 'gully' with portable typewriter and giving messages to Liaison Officers. I'd lost my steel helmet and Brig. Parrington insisted on my having his. He deliberately wore his red-braided cap to identify himself. He was a rather remote but very gallant personality.

28 APRIL. Morning. A Greek Priest was shot, as he was found communicating with the Germans. We were strafed at times by Stukas. In the evening our Camp Commandant, a Capt. Sassoon, sailed off with a RN officer to a British ship standing off. We were told to hold the pier (or mole). The two did not return and the ship vanished in late evening.

At about midnight a Major Guest (not a relative of mine),

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who was one of the Brigadier's General Staff, told us to hold the section of the beach against the pier until day-break. If we heard nothing contrary at 5.30am all resistance to the German Forces would cease and we would be Prisoners of War unless we tried to escape down the peninsula.

At day-break two of us went back to the gully (or ravine) of the day before for some of our packed rations, etc. but our bags had been ransacked. Nearby, in a semi-cave, some score of Jewish Palestinians, who had been in a voluntary (?) AMPC had apparently committed mass suicide. Poor devils, their throats had been cut.

A German shouted, "Hands up!" and "Come here!" from a cliff above us. As we scrambled up we managed to throw away the bolts of our rifles and the ammunition belts.

More Germans appeared. One told us in excellent English, "For you the war is over." Under menace from a machine-gun we gave over our watches and papers to a German 'feldwebel'. For us, captivity had begun.

FOUR YEARS OF CAPTIVITY

In the four years of captivity I worked on two farms, made two attempts to escape, in Yugoslavia met Colonel Fitzroy-McLean who was aiding Tito and not interested in Other Ranks, met an old hero 'Bill' Payne a South African ex-Springbok who was taken POW in Italy; had a farcical court-martial in Munich and sentenced to 5 years for trying to escape: was in Graubenz, a strafe-lager for three months or so. This was a punishment camp for the military, mostly Colonials (South African, Kiwi and Aussie), Free French, a few ex-Royal Guards of Yugoslavia and even some Ukrainians. In between roll-calls which lasted much of the night I learnt chess from a Ukrainian and a South African (Afrikaan he was): then finally to Luneberg in the April/May 1945.

After being released from POW in Poland (by the Russian troops who aided us until we could return to the Elbe) I had a

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period of recuperation and retraining. I remained in the Army, saw service in the Gold Coast, in Korea and finally in Malaya, before a period of about a year in Ulster and final discharge to a cold civilian world.

WOI (SSM) RON GUEST

Edwin
Horlington

(EDITOR'S NOTE: BRIGADIER PARRINGTON: Within the context of this book Ron Guest is the only contributor whose account makes mention of personal encounter with that senior officer. As such, his tribute contained in this chapter is of particular importance and interest.

The Brigadier's decision to surrender at that particular time' and under the circumstances prevailing that day, was criticised by some who felt that much more might yet be done to delay a German advance into the town, thus paving the way for larger numbers to be rescued from the beaches. Communications had been botched, rearguard delaying tactics sadly neglected, chances lost.

Justly or unjustly, in his role as the last 'Brass Hat' in command on the spot at Kalamata, the Brigadier would be first in line to collect the inevitable flak of criticism. His personal diary, written during captivity, details his defence.

Reflecting on these aspects a half-century after the event Ron Guest makes this comment: "I would only add again that while Brigadier Parrington always seemed aloof - or lonely? - He certainly never showed physical weakness and had a horrible job to do (with a scuttling GHQ and a poor Intelligence staff but that is only my humble guess)." He goes on to summarise his notes as follows: "I have written them with depression at the sacrifices so needlessly made. My personal opinion is that the Greek campaign was only a divertissement of politicians.").