**MILITARY SERVICE RECORD – RAYMOND ALFRED ARTHUR BURNETT**

**WWII Service**

6th June 1940, enlisted at the Volunteer Enlistment Recruitment Booth outside the GPO in Queen Street, Auckland. Falsified birth date by 2 years.

Called up and entered Hopa hopa Camp, Ngaruawahia with the 30th Battalion on 3rd October 1940.

Missed sailing with the Battalion due to illness, and was transferred to the 2nd Section of the 4th Reinforcements at Papakura Camp.

Sailed from Wellington on the Emperor of Russia in December 1940 for Sydney, Australia. Because of atrocious conditions aboard the ship, was transferred to the Trans Tasman passenger liner Awatea in Sydney. Sailed for Freemantle in Western Australia to join a convoy of Australian troops aboard the Queen Mary and Aquatania and sailed for the Middle East.

The Awatea left the convoy and docked at Colombo, Ceylon on , and the troops transferred to smaller cargo boats and sailed for Egypt.

Landed at Port Tewfick, Suez and travelled by rail to the NZ Base Camp at Maadi, near Cairo.

On the 3rd March 1941, Private RAA Burnett was posted to the 24th Infantry Battalion at Helwan Camp.

On the 5th and 6th March 1941 the 24th Battalion moved by rail from Helwan to Al Amiriyah near Alexandria which is on the Mediterranean Sea.

Left Al Amiriyah on the 17th by rail for Alexandria and embarked on HMS Ajax. After a high-speed trip across the Mediterranean they arrived at Piraeus the port for Athens in Greece. The Battalion disembarked to march about 16km through the streets of Athens to a camp on Mount Hymettus.

On the 21st the transport and carriers started on a 480km journey to Katerine in the north while the rest of the Battalion boarded a train with the officers in carriages and the other ranks on open flat top wagons.

On the 26th the Battalion moved just south of the defensive line we were to occupy. The Italians had invaded Greece from Albania some months previously, and the defending Greeks had inflicted heavy losses on them but at a tremendous cost to themselves. There were 19 German Divisions in Bulgaria on the Eastern side of Greece so to meet the anticipated attack from them the British forces moved up to support the three Greek Divisions. The Allied Line extended from the sea on the Gulf of Salonica towards the frontier with Yugoslavia, with the New Zealand sector stretching from the coast west to the area occupied by the Greeks, a front of about 24km. By the 27th the 4th and 6th Brigades were in position with the 24th Battalion holding a position astride the main road and railway down to the sea.

8th April 1941, Germany declared war on Greece and attacked the Greek Army on defensive line. The Greek Army collapsed and NZ and Australian divisions started to withdraw.

The 24th Battalion were the last organised Army unit to depart Greece when on the 29th April 1941, during the early morning they were evacuated aboard numerous Navy ships. Private Burnett’s section were aboard the HMS Hotspur.

The Hotspur sailed for Crete where the troops were transferred the SS Commliebank, an elderly cargo ship, which sailed for Port Said in Egypt.

The troops joined the Battalion at Helwan Camp and when the German Paratroopers took Crete the Army Chiefs were concerned they would also attack the Suez Canal, so troops were sent to the Southern End of the Canal for guard duties.

Later the Battalion transferred to Islamea and while there Pte Burnett and Pte Carol, two of the Greek campaign veterans were given 14 days leave and travelled across the Sinai desert by rail to Tel Aviv in Palestine, and they spent 10 days sightseeing around Jerusalem, Bethlehem and the Dead Sea.

The Battalion returned to Helwan for extensive training in Desert warfare.

In September, the Battalion transferred by road to a fortified position at Baggush Box in Libya.

In November the 6th Brigade moved to its starting position in Libya to be held as reserves.

After the Battalion crossed through the border wire into Libya and advanced towards Tobruk they bivouacked overnight and in the early morning a short sharp battle with a convoy of Germans and Italians ensued. 150 were taken prisoner and Pte Burnett’s platoon escorted the POW’s back to Egypt.

When 8th Platoon left to return to the 24th Battalion, incompetence of the Platoon Commander caused them to be lost in the desert for 3 days, and finally rejoined the 24th Battalion on the 27th November.

On the 27th November the platoon occupied the left flank of the depleted 24th Battalion and attempted to dig in but only managed small personal depressions (foxholes).

On the left flank of the escarpment with two sections facing down the escarpment and Lance Corporal Burnett’s section facing the left flank.

During the morning of the 28th the platoon was the subject of a surprise mortar creeping barrage and then was subject to attack.

Three times an officer ran across from the Battalion HQ screaming out to our Platoon Commander to order a cease fire as we were firing on our own Polish allies who had broken out from Tobruk.

On the 1st two occasions the two front sections facing the attackers ceased firing but the attackers did not and the two sections recommenced firing.

At no stage did the officer from HQ, or the Platoon Commander who was 50 metres back from the edge of the escarpment move forward to identify the attackers.

On the 3rd occasion they were ordered to cease fire, the corporal in charge of one section decided that the two sections should stand up and raise their arms to encourage the attackers to cease fire as well.

When the two sections who had stood up and raised their arms realised that the attackers were in fact Afrika Corp soldiers, it was too late to regather arms and they were subsequently taken prisoner.

Lance Corporal Burnett’s section were still in their firing positions but facing the left bank and the Germans were attacking across the right flank and the section only managed a few shots before the Germans were in behind them and they also had to surrender.

Lance Corporal Burnett was posted missing in action, believed POW.

The officer commanding the Germans apologised and told the prisoners that Hitler and Mussolini had signed a pact that all troops taken prisoner in North Africa by the Germans would be handed over to the Italians.

On the 30th November the prisoners arrived in Baggush Box and on the 6th December were loaded into the cargo holds of the modern cargo boat “Jason” for transportation to Italy. The boat showed no identification that it was carrying POW’s.

During the night there was a submarine scare and the Italian skipper diverted to sail up the west coast of Greece.

When boarding the boat the Italians decided that the forward cargo holds were full, and Lance Corporal Burnett and his section were sent to the rear hold.

2.26pm on the 9th December the boat was approximately 3km off Methoni Point when two torpedoes were fired by the MHS Porpoise, one striking the forward hold of the Jason.

The Italian skipper and entire crew except for 5 who were in the engine room, and all of the Army guards abandoned the ship either in life rafts or by jumping overboard. A lone German Naval Officer remained on board and told the prisoners that he would take charge of the ship and try and beach it.

He managed to do this during a violent storm but unfortunately by the time he did so over 50 of the 2,000 POW’s had been killed. The following day the POW’s were unloaded from the ship and help in temporary compounds overnight, then progressed a northward move towards Patros being kept in temporary open air compounds finally being housed in two large buildings in a sawmilling complex.

ON the 6th February 1942 a telegram was sent to LC Burnett’s father from Apostoli Delegation advising that Vatican had notified them that LC Burnett was a POW of Italy.

The POW’s were loaded on to the Italian liner “Rex” and transported to Bari in Italy, then marched to Tutaran0 and held at the transit camp PG 85, and were later transported by rail to Camp PG65 at Altamura in Southern Italy.

The Italians were unprepared for such a large number of POW’s, and immediately cut rations in half, so that the main past time of the POW’s who at that stage were a disorganised rabble was discussions about food.

After several months they were loaded onto box cars and taken north to Campo PG57 at Gravina, a well established POW camp. The journey took 2 to 3 days and they were loaded in the box cars the entire trip.

Life changed dramatically at Campo 57 as the Warrant Officers who were with us encouraged by the conduct of the POW’s already there, enforced a stricter military discipline and a parade every morning. There was also scope for organised sporting activities, a concert party and a library. But in typical Italian fashion a rather large jail.

On the 23rd September, the Italian Army, on the Orders of the King (not Mussolini) capitulated and to all intents and purposes we were once again free. However, due orders by the only British Officer in the Camp (Padre Bennet) the WO’s were told not to allow the ex POW’s to leave the camp until further orders were received.

The next morning they awoke to find that the German army had taken over the camp and they were once again POW’s, albeit this time of Germany.

The Germans wasted no time in bringing up a trail of box cars, loading the POW’s aboard and taking them up through and over the Swiss Alps into Austria, where they were unloaded at a POW camp at Markt Pongau.

After about a week they were again loaded into box cars and transported across Austria and Germany to Stalag VIIIa southeast of Berlin near the town of Gorlitz. The trip took 3 days, and unlike with the Italians, the POW’s were off loaded for a hot meal and then reloaded onto the box cars.

After one or two weeks, LC Burnett and some of his friends were selected as members of a working party and sent by rail via Breslow to Strelin to work in a sugar refinery.

After the sugar beet season finished and the refinery closed, the Colonel in charge of Gorlitz visited and told the POW’s that because they had committed minor acts of sabotage and other misdemeanours including stealing large quantities of sugar, they would be sent to a punishment camp for 28 days.

The punishment camp turned out to be outside a munitions factory and they were taken to the factory and told that they were expected to work assembling munitions for the German army.

Following a hasty get together with the NZ Sergent who was the liason officer, he informed us that under no circumstances were we to work in the munitions factory as it was against the Geneva Convention.

The Germans tried for 2 days to get them to work without success, so they marched them off to another jail site where half of the compound was occupied by political prisoners and the other half by POW’s.

After 28 days of unloading logs from railway wagons by day and locked in the jail at nights, they were marched to Herchburg and billeted in the remains of a pulp factory that had been converted into a small prison camp.

During the day they were marched to an area that was being used to construct a radio factory, half of which was built and the POW’s worked as labourers constructing the other half.

Early in 1945, the Russian army had commenced an advance towards Germany through Poland and the Germans were determined to keep the Allied POW’s away from the Russian army and one morning the POW’s awoke and were told they had a couple of hours to get their things together and be issued with some rations as they were to be marched back to Stalag VIIIa at Gorlitz. It was a 3 day march through the snow.

On arrival at Stalag VIIIA they were told that all of the Allied POW’s in the camp were to be marched west across Germany away from the advancing Russian army and that they would be the advance guard leaving next morning.

On the 13th or 14th February they commenced a westward march, being deliberately kept away from towns along the way, accommodated overnight in sheds and barns because of the extreme cold weather. After six weeks, on the 20th March they reached the outskirts of Duderstadt.

After 3 days at Duderstadt, they were marched north towards Hamburg, but after about 50 kilometres the German guards who were suffering almost as much as their prisoners decided to head east to Luckenwalde which is southeast of Berlin. Here the prisoners were placed in Stalag Luft IIIa which was an established camp that had not been liberated.

On the 7th May, Germany surrendered, however it was not until the 24th May that LC Burnett and his fellow POW’s were finally handed over to the US Army at Leipzig. Between these dates had been liberated from Stalag IIIa by the Russian army but were detained whilst the Allies negotiated the terms of the occupation of Europe and the establishment of the United Nations.

On the 29th May LC Burnett and others were flown by US Air Force to Brussels, and on the 30th May transferred to RAAF Flying Wing and flown to Oxford UK

On the 31st May they were transported via rail for the NZ Repatriation Centre at Folkestone, after being passed as medically and dentally fit LC Burnett was given a one month rail warrant and 28 days leave.

In July 1945 LC Burnett departed from Liverpool England aboard RMS Troopship (the Passenger Liner) Orion via Panama Canal for NZ, arriving in Wellington on the 3rd September. The Japanese surrendered on the August whilst LC Burnett was en route to NZ between Panama and N.)

Attended discharge medical board, diagnosed with a stomach complaint and attended a medical board and sent to the military annexe of the Auckland Hospital for treatment.

On 1st December 1945 LC Burnett married Nancy Ellen Clarke, and in June 1946 he was discharged from the Army.