

## Lizzie's Monday Blog April 22

ANZAC Day approaches, a day when I retreat to the back of our building preferring not to hear the sounds of a jolly street parade in Main Street or see children wearing medals without an understanding of what they represent. Medals like The Africa Star and The Italy Star, representing a time when young men stepped out of normality, endured not just traumatic fighting, but in between, as my father said, a lot of time that was boring. The times between intense danger and action: waiting, troop movement, training, all in unnatural, uncomfortable surrounds far from home, with close relationships, education, career plans put on hold, not just for months, but for years.

That was my Dad's experience. He was doing post graduate Geology research in the Lake Monowai area when Mickey Savage led us into war behind Britain. He rushed to Dunedin to enlist and, as an Engineer he spent the next five and a half years with 2NZ Division, NZ's contribution to the British 8<sup>th</sup> Army, in North Africa and Italy. A man of understatement, like many veterans he refused to talk about the experience. Talking risked opening up the deep well of loss. No grief counsellors to deal to that. "Stiff upper lip. You just got on." However, I've a fair idea of what his life was like, because after his death I tracked down some of the fifty Sappers in No 3 Section, 6<sup>th</sup> Field Company, the unit my father, a twenty two year old, commanded in the November '41 Crusader campaign. They were listed on a Xmas card that year. 2NZ Div. had a bruising time in Crusader. Many died, many were taken prisoner at Sidi Rezegh and Belhamed. One of his closest friends through school and university, bled to death in the back of a Div. truck on the return to Cairo, one of four brothers killed in WW2. Below, some of No 3 Section, just before Crusader, my father back end left.



Xmas 1941 was far removed from the card's tourist projection of pyramids and men in tropical gear. My oral history project, recording twelve 2NZ Division Sappers and Officers, several from that original list, is held in The National Library. Most had never talked about the war, but at life's end, they wanted to be recorded: war is no Gung ho adventure.

2NZ Division was an Infantry Division, the fighting arm of 2NZEF. It was commanded by Bernard Freyberg and the Engineers played a pivotal role enabling it to move forward. They laid and lifted mines across North Africa and when the Div. moved with the Eighth Army into Italy late 1943, the Engineers were faced with a different and difficult, often mountainous, terrain. Still laying and lifting mines, there was now the deep mud of winter, narrow roads needing clearing, rebuilding, constructing Bailey bridges for river crossings, and an enemy that fought dangerously all the way north to the river crossings in the Po Valley in the vicious Spring campaign of 1945.

The point of telling you all this? Well, it's close to ANZAC Day and not untimely to give a reminder that as we sit comfortably playing bridge, mentally whinging when things go belly up, for many in war, a pack of cards in a battle dress pocket, provided release and relief. Of course, not all played bridge, but many did, including Hamish McK's Dad and mine.

No matter what's going on in your life, whatever hell you may be facing, a game of cards can be totally absorbing, give you respite, companionship. Below two visuals of 2NZ Div. soldiers playing cards in downtime in North Africa. – Lizzie



A delicate pencil sketch of card play in a tent in North Africa  
sometime 1942. Bridge? Possibly.

