

Evan "Snow" Williams

Service No: 639543

## THEY CALL ME SNOW

---

### *Biography by Kim Newth*

Too young to enlist for overseas service when war was declared, Evan Williams instead chose to join the Home Guard in 1941. Guided by seasoned World War One veterans, the 16-year-old learned fast and was soon to discover an innate talent for command. By 1945 he was training other men to fight and the following year left for Japan to serve with 'J Force', the Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force (2 NZEF) as part of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force in Japan. This is his story.

\*\*\*\*\*

As if to leave no doubt as to their new born son's geographical place in the world, George and Flora Williams named their infant 'Evan' after the Timaru street where George's parents lived and chose 'Hugh' as his middle name, referencing the street where Flora's parents lived in Waimate.

This son of South Canterbury, Evan Hugh Williams, was born in Waimate on 6 February 1925 and raised in Timaru. The family had moved to Timaru in 1930 after George accepted an accountancy job there with Pyne Gould Guinness.

Evan, who grew up the middle child of three, recalls a family life that was somewhat "dysfunctional". His older brother Stewart had been born with Down Syndrome, while his younger sister, Eve Ann, was born with Hydrocephalus, (also called 'Water on the Brain'). Evan's mother, who had previously worked as a nurse, must have had time for little else beyond taking care of her children; Evan doesn't remember there being much help from the local school. Evan always accepted his siblings for who they were, but loathed the insensitivity of other children. At Waimataitai Primary School, he was constantly in fights with other kids who liked to tease his brother. "That was permanent. I was always fighting and going home with torn socks and torn clothes." Evan helped out at home and taught his brother to read. These were also the Depression years: Evan's family rode them out but there was never a lot of money for extras. In spite of the adversity, Evan feels these experiences were of benefit to him in later life, leaving him better able to relate to other people's troubles and difficulties.

By the time he was a teenager at Timaru Boys High School though, Evan was somewhat "lost" and finding school increasingly irrelevant. As often as he could manage it, he'd skip school to go fishing down at the local wharf. There seemed no reason or purpose to what he was supposed to be studying in class. "I didn't know where I was going."

When New Zealand declared war on Germany in 3 September 1939, Evan's mother reacted with unhappiness to the news. She had lost her brother, Lochiel Stewart, in World War One, just before the Armistice in 1918. "Also, my grandmother never forgot losing a son in the First World War." <sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Evan's own father did not fight in WW1: he had enlisted in the Army but was subsequently rejected because of "hammer toes" which meant he was unable to march.

Evan spent little time himself dwelling on the outbreak of hostilities but remembers enjoying 'School Cadets' in 1940, which were run under the supervision of a Regimental Sergeant Major (RSM). There were rifle drills and exercises, in one of which he and his schoolmates played 'the enemy' near Cave.

Not long afterwards he dropped out of school to go and work at a wool store in Timaru. A recruitment officer turned up one day looking for volunteers for the Home Guard. At 16, he joined. The year was 1941. "For the first time in my life there was a purpose. I was able to be independent of my family, make my own decisions and be more a part of society."

### **In the Home Guard – "Snow" comes of age**

Men who were either too young or too old for the armed forces joined the Home Guard to contribute to the defence of New Zealand, which was seen as particularly important after Japan entered the war. The War Cabinet had approved its establishment in August 1940<sup>2</sup>. Membership was voluntary and service unpaid with training generally taking place at evenings and weekends.

It was easy for young men such as Evan to get involved. "I signed a bit of paper. We were attested by Captain Pennyfather and we were in."

Not long after he joined, his family moved to Christchurch but not before finding a place for Evan to live: Beverley House, a local boarding house, in Wai-iti Road. Evan says this boarding house was originally owned by the Le Cren family<sup>3</sup>. "It was a clay walled building – the walls were two feet thick. It was very old and very substantial and it had been added to over the years. It was run by Mr and Mrs Hogg who knew my folks. They were able to keep an eye on me, not that I did anything too risky in my early years."

Looking back, Evan thinks his parents probably understood they were powerless to persuade him out of joining the Home Guard and staying on in Timaru on his own. "I was going to live my own life and, not unkindly, we grew apart and I did become independent although in many ways it was great to have their background support in my life."

Meals and laundry were provided at Beverley House, but he had to work to pay for his board and found a position as an assistant county clerk at the Levels County Council.<sup>4</sup> It required a sudden gear shift to go from having been an indifferent student to an employee expected to know all the ins and outs of local body law. Fortunately, the

---

<sup>2</sup> The War Cabinet was a two-party group of ministers composed of Peter Fraser, Walter Nash, Fred Jones, Dan Sullivan and Opposition leaders Adam Hamilton and Gordon Coates. The Home Guard was established under the direction of the National Service Department to back up the Home Defence Army. There was a Dominion Commander, three district commanders and 16 area officers. From *Last Line of Defence – New Zealanders Remember the War at Home*, Edited by Megan Hutching, Harper Collins Publishers (New Zealand), 2007, p 27

<sup>3</sup> According to Te Ara, The Encyclopedia of NZ, (see <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/115/le-cren-frederic>) Henry Le Cren built a homestead, Beverley, in 1858 in Timaru on 'bare, rising ground overlooking the ships'. Henry Le Cren played an early lead role in improving landing services for cargo at Timaru and was involved with the wool trade through the firm of H. J. Le Cren and Company. It seems the house became a war veterans' home by the 1970s, but was demolished in the 1970s to make way for the RSA's new Wai-iti Road premises, (see <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nzlscant/beverley.htm>).

<sup>4</sup> "The jurisdiction of the council extends over an area bounded on the north by the Opihi river, on the west by the Tengawai river, and Pareora and Cave roads, on the east by the sea, and on the south by the Pareora river...The council meets on the first Wednesday in each month at its offices, Church Street, Timaru." From The Cyclopedia of New Zealand [Canterbury Provincial District], Published by The Cyclopedia Company Ltd, 1903, Christchurch. More at: <http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-Cyc03Cycl-t1-body1-d7-d1-d6.html>

county clerk - George Basil Bird – was in the same Home Guard unit as Evan and he also hailed from Waimate. “We got along pretty well.”

They were both assigned to the local signals unit where they learned semaphore and morse code from veterans of World War One many of whom were also Post Office staff (who knew morse code through their work sending telegrams). At the time Evan joined, few other young men were doing so; he was trained by much older men.

“They were hard cases. I had to learn pretty quickly. I had to listen and listen and listen and keep working to keep up with them ... It was a big learning curve. I grew up very, very quickly.”

After parades, the men would often head to the local pub and took Evan with them. He recalls sitting very quietly at the back of the group, not saying a word and trying not to draw attention to himself. “Licensing was a different thing in those days.”

These men also bestowed Evan with a new nickname – “Snow” – inspired by the young man’s head of fair hair. This new moniker was to prove enduring. Many of his friends and acquaintances *only* know him by the name Snow Williams, (and this biography will hereafter refer to ‘Snow Williams’).

By late 1941, the prospect of an invasion by the Japanese suddenly began to seem very real. The attack on Pearl Harbour by the Imperial Japanese Navy on 7 December 1941 was an act of aggression that took everyone by surprise and it brought the threat of war closer to New Zealand shores.<sup>5</sup> This sense of threat intensified into 1942.

“We were dead serious that in the event of an invasion we were going to kill Japanese. We learnt bayonet drills and we fired rifles. There were not going to be any shortcuts...

“I think if there had been an invasion we would have done very well. There was a group near Geraldine that called themselves the ‘such and such’ guerrillas. They had horses, they were armed. They would have sniped at the Japanese. They would have been a real problem.”

For Snow and his platoon, there were weekend camps and exercises in the countryside to get the men “battle fit”.

Semaphore with flags failed to impress as a useful tool of battle though. Snow still shudders to think what might have happened had they ever been required to stand up and signal with flags in the face of enemy fire.

Communicating at night using Aldis lamps was a more effective business. Snow remembers his unit being required to look out for messages being delivered from a hill above Geraldine. These would then be passed to the next platoon south of Timaru. Generally this system seems to have worked well. Snow remembers how on one occasion, when the lamp they were meant to be using had stopped working, signalling was instead done using a powerful torch. It was an improvised solution that fortunately worked well in that night’s exercise.

For field communications during exercises, the men used cut-down wall phones fitted in wooden boxes – “they were very heavy” - and connected by wire. There was no radio. Sometimes these phones were connected via fence wire, instead of running wire out, to enable communications from one paddock to another.

“On one exercise we were in at Victoria Park in Timaru, ‘the enemy’ were approaching and somebody had the bright idea of using all our phones, goodness knows who, [so] that all the phones in the link would wind the handles and generate electricity. When

---

<sup>5</sup> ‘Japanese spotter planes flew over Auckland and Wellington in 1942. The war did not seem far away.’ From *New Zealanders At War* by Michael King, p 246. Published by Heinemann Reed, 1981.

the people were getting through the fences they were getting electric shocks. That really put them off!"

They travelled in Army trucks, wore scratchy old Territorials' uniforms from WW1 and were issued with .22 rifles (which Snow says had been surrendered by civilians).

Training at the barracks in Timaru always started with a drill. Discipline was "something new" but Snow says all the men respected their officers and NCOs during drills and exercises. "Afterwards it was quite different: it was first names. These blokes knew each other pretty well."

Being one of the young men in his unit, Snow was often called upon to do the more physically demanding tasks, such as lugging rolls of wire. It was tiring, yet rewarding, work.

In his time with the Home Guard, Snow says he learned about a lot about discipline and the importance of obeying commands. There were no shortcuts. Things had to be done properly. Snow still remembers being somewhat afraid of some of the more severe officers, particularly one strict sergeant – Jack Branthwaite – who seemed to wield all the power.

"I learnt that this wasn't a party. We were mutually supporting each other and we would fail if any of us didn't carry out our part of a task. It was a big learning curve. I really respected those guys. They had 'been there and done that'."

### **Picking Spuds in the Harvest Pool, mid-1944**

Providing food for Britain was a top priority for New Zealand during the war years.<sup>6</sup> Snow says once he was deemed old enough for farm labouring work, he was transferred to the Harvest Pool for a three month stint, based at a camp in Waimate.

"We had to go and pick spuds on farms. It was a job that none of us had done before. There were big buckets, big bags to fill ... Mechanical diggers brought the potatoes to the top and we would have to go down the rows, pick them up and put them in the bags."

Grateful farmers made sure the men were paid the same rate as they would have paid civilians, even though this was outside of Army rules.

They slept six to a tent and Snow remembers the nights as being pretty cold. There were occasional outings to the pub or local dances but their pay was not enough for many nights out. Showers were once-weekly. "We cleaned up as much as we could."

Throughout his time in Home Guard and Harvest Pool, Snow managed a few trips to visit his family in Christchurch. It was difficult since men were not supposed to travel more than 50 miles from where they were based and Christchurch was farther away than that. He remembers travelling by train to Ashburton with his bike, then having to get off and purchase another ticket and re-join the train to Christchurch, before getting off at Islington and then biking to his family's home in St Albans.

War in Europe remained a distant reality. Snow knew families who had lost sons in fighting but "at my age we thought we were twenty foot tall and bullet proof."

In January 1945, Snow was ready for the call up to go to Burnham Military Camp. Home Guard service meant he was well-prepared for life in the Army. "By the time I got to Burnham, I was an old soldier."

---

<sup>6</sup> 'Farming was never declared an essential industry, but it held a special place when it came to directing labour. At peak harvest times, the government sent the army in to help on farms.' From *Home – Civilian New Zealanders Remember the Second World War* by Alison Parr, p. 122. Published by Penguin Books, 2010.

### **At Burnham Military Camp, 1945/46**

After being met at the railway station and being marched into Burnham for the first time with a group of other new recruits, they were issued with blankets, fed – and then forgotten, at least for the first few days.

“The next day, nobody seemed to want to know anything about us. So, with my experience, I lined up the [20] guys in the hut and marched them out to the training area and we sat and we smoked and yarned and had a lovely time. Then we went back to the church army hut and had morning tea. We did that for a couple of days before they seemed to realise we were supposed to be there but we weren’t and where the hell were we. Nothing bad came of it.”

After a few months of “doing fatigues” and undergoing instruction, Snow was made a Corporal (21 June 1945). It was a rapid promotion and Snow credits his background experience for this, as well as being blessed with some “natural ability”.

He joined the camp’s staff as an infantry instructor, covering weaponry training, physical training and parade ground work. “Once they’d finished their basic training they would be allocated to battalions or specialised units. The 15<sup>th</sup> reinforcements went to Italy.<sup>7</sup> We trained the 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> reinforcements but I’m not quite sure where they all went.”

When on duty, he was responsible for getting his men up for reveille at 5.30am. He had to make sure they got up, shaved, cleaned up, and ready.

Even with his Home Guard experience, Snow remembers it wasn’t always an easy role for a young man. He adapted to leadership by using different tactics for different people, learning by trial and error and employing a certain charm where necessary. “They had to learn a bit about me too. They learned ‘the disciplinarian’ was a different person at different times.”

He recalls marching one particular team from the railway station to the barracks and getting them settled in, only to find the next morning “not a soul moving” in one of the huts. To get them going, he decided to pick on the likely leader first, the one who seemed most likely to cause trouble.

“I picked on this big bloke, a bit like a mountain. I tossed his bed over and out he fell in his jockeys. He was *big*. I thought he was going to kill me. The rest of the hut got up and I told them to get moving. I didn’t see him again for a couple of days but he turned up, quite strangely, I was marching into the orderly room and there was a pair of brown boots on the top step; I looked up and it was this guy I’d tossed out of bed and he was an officer. God, I thought I was in trouble ... I worked for him for ten years later in life - he was President of the Canterbury Hotel Association.”

A variety of men marched into camp for training, ranging from individuals who were keen to learn to others who simply did not want to be there. Some had come straight from prison having been told that Army service would count against their sentence. Snow found it hardest to put up with men who would not shower, shave or get their hair cut. “[But] we overcame that – many ended up in the water race, so they got a shower all right!”

Snow says he never really thought about his work at Burnham in 1945 until later meeting his second wife, who was a nurse. It made him reflect on how very different

---

<sup>7</sup> The 11<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> Reinforcements of 2NZEF were the last drafts sent from New Zealand before the armistice on the Italian front on 2 May 1945. *From Jayforce, New Zealand and the Military Occupation of Japan, 1945-48* by Laurie Brocklebank, p. 16, Oxford University Press New Zealand, 1997.

their wartime roles had been: while he had been training men to kill, her focus had been on caring for and looking after the sick, injured and dying.

When VE Day came, it was just another day at camp for Snow. On VJ Day, everyone in camp marched out and into central Christchurch. "It wasn't all that exciting when we got into town. There were thousands of people partying. I still had to go home to my folks ... but it was nice."<sup>8</sup>

The war may have been over yet this did not mean Snow could leave the Army. Being a member of Burnham's instruction staff, Snow knew he would have to serve for two more years from the time peace was signed. "All they had was ceasefire at that time with Japan."

Life in the camp gradually became a little quieter. "It was pretty relaxed without a lot of troops in camp. Our major job was having school cadets in camp and training them, which was a nice change from training mature men. Christ's College came in, as did St Andrew's. We had to keep our own training up to date too."

With the cessation of hostilities between Japan and the Allied powers, the British Commonwealth nations began to organise an occupation force for Japan. This was to be New Zealand's first participation in a multinational occupation force in peacetime. It was 'significant for the country as both a political-military event and a social-cultural experience'<sup>9</sup>.

Men who volunteered to join this British Commonwealth Occupation Force (BCOF) to Japan were told their time would be considered 'up' at the end of that service.<sup>10</sup> "Most of us decided that's what we wanted to do." By this time, Snow was starting to think about his future civilian life after the Army and was keen to resume his local body career.

So in 1946 - and now a Second Lieutenant<sup>11</sup> - Snow volunteered to join the New Zealand forces allocated to the BCOF. This deployment, officially the Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force (2NZEF), was known informally as J Force or Jayforce.

### **Serving with J Force in Japan, 1946/47**

The last 2NZEF troops sent to Italy were the first to be deployed in Japan. Among the conscripts, the reaction to this deployment was a mix of resigned acceptance to outright unhappiness. While these men had only been away from New Zealand for a comparatively short time, most would have already been in the army for several years prior to Italy.<sup>12</sup> With the war over, many would have just wanted to get home.

Back in New Zealand, the chance to join the occupation was met with greater enthusiasm. Snow saw it as a way of fast-tracking his return to civilian life. No doubt others shared that perspective. Those who had been too young to serve overseas during the war would perhaps also have seen this as an opportunity to finally put their training

---

<sup>8</sup> 'In a sense, the war ended twice for New Zealanders. There was VE Day in May 1945 and VJ Day in August. Both brought tumultuous scenes of jubilation.' From *New Zealanders at War* by Michael King, p 264, 1981.

<sup>9</sup> From *Jayforce*, Laurie Brocklebank, 1997 p.1

<sup>10</sup> New Zealand had swiftly made a decision in principle to participate in the British Commonwealth Occupation Force in Japan but it took until January 1946 for a full agreement to be reached. From *Jayforce*, Laurie Brocklebank, 1997, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> Snow was promoted to this rank on 26 June 1946.

<sup>12</sup> 'New Zealand soldiers were not normally sent overseas before they turned 21, but under wartime regulations many were called into the army at 18.' From *Jayforce*, Laurie Brocklebank, 1997, p. 33. (This page also describes the mixed attitudes of conscripts).

to the test. 'Between May 1946 and August 1947, four relief drafts of servicemen and women left New Zealand for the occupation'<sup>13</sup>.

Snow, who was appointed to 27 Machine Gun Battalion<sup>14</sup>, recalls there being very little preparation in terms of what to expect in Japan. "We were told we were going to Japan. Our information was zero. We were not allowed to have any friendly relationships with Japanese people.<sup>15</sup> There was a problem with STDs, [sexually transmitted diseases].<sup>16</sup> We would not be very welcome - we thought we knew that - and we were there literally as an occupation force, and that was the end of it."

Having served with the Home Guard in preparation for a possible Japanese invasion, Snow would have felt a degree of apprehension as he boarded the troop ship *Chitral* in Lyttelton in late July 1946<sup>17</sup>, bound for Japan. One wonders what kind of reception he thought awaited him and the other men. "We were prepared to be disliked," he says.

With some 2500 personnel on board<sup>18</sup>, *Chitral* was a crowded ship. Snow doesn't have fond memories of shipboard life. "[Conditions were] bloody awful. [It was] very, very unfamiliar. We managed fine. We were able to sunbathe on deck and sit around and chat. We were interested in what was going on but we were jammed in. It certainly wasn't a tourist ship."

Arriving two weeks later, having also endured a typhoon<sup>19</sup>, no-one felt very well. They sailed into Kure Harbour, still visibly damaged by war.<sup>20</sup> Snow doesn't remember that so much as the jabs they were greeted with to prevent Hydrocephalus. "We were up standing in queues filing past people with needles. People were passing out. We were pretty tired by the time we had finished getting off the ship."

One of the first things he noticed beyond the ship was the hardworking female labourers working on a neighbouring vessel. "They were working harder than our guys at home worked on ships. They were absolute slaves, which was a bit of a shock."<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> From *The Occupiers, New Zealand Veterans Remember Post-War Japan* by Alison Parr, Penguin Books, 2012, p.12.

<sup>14</sup> '27 Battalion has a very proud military past which saw the unit fight throughout the Mediterranean, North African, and Italian campaigns and as a part of J Force in Japan over the course of World War II'. From *Army News*, Issue 404, 17 November 2009, p. 4, *27 Machine Gun and Infantry Battalion Handover Parade with 2/1 RNZIR* by 2LT Jamie Blackmoore.

<sup>15</sup> Outside the work situation, relations were limited to specified cultural occasions and entertainment venues. [Brigadier] Potter made it clear that 'irregular association with Japanese women either in public or private' would 'be punished with the utmost severity.' From *Jayforce*, Laurie Brocklebank, 1997, p. 115.

<sup>16</sup> See footnote above. Brigadier Potter's instructions were not enough! 'The STD rate among Kiwi men serving in Japan reached record levels and worried military authorities. This was in spite of the army's best efforts to scare men away from unprotected sexual activity.' From *The Occupiers*, Alison Parr, 2012, p.146.

<sup>17</sup> 'The reinforcement drafts were sent to Japan on four vessels, the *Empire Pride*, *Chitral*, *Dunera* and *Kanimbla*.' *Chitral* departed Lyttelton on 30 July 1946 and arrived in Kure on 28 August 1946. From *Jayforce*, Laurie Brocklebank, 1997, pages 88, 218.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. 218

<sup>19</sup> 'The *Chitral*'s journey was lengthened by three days because of a typhoon south of Japan.' From *Jayforce*, Laurie Brocklebank, 1997, p. 91

<sup>20</sup> 'The place had been badly bomb[ed]. Saw about 15 Jap destroyers, all disarmed. Saw one still sunk in a dry dock. Also saw a couple of Jap cruisers which had risen out of the harbour. They looked in bad shape...' From *Records of the Canterbury Museum*, Volume 21, 2007: *Condon—Frederick Coy: Jayforce experience*, p 47. (Frederick Coy also travelled to Japan on the *Chitral* in 1946).

<sup>21</sup> This is something that struck many New Zealanders. 'They were surprised by the subjugated status of Japanese women, who appeared to do most of the physical labour.' From *The Occupiers*, Alison Parr, 2012, p.16.

From Kure, they travelled south by train to rural Yamaguchi.<sup>22</sup> It was a miserable journey. They had left New Zealand in winter and so the Kiwi soldiers were wearing their thick battledress winter uniforms. They arrived to the heat of a Japanese summer. So they had to sweat it out to Yamaguchi on a train “with smelly toilets ... dear oh dear!”

The changing view from the train window was a reminder they were far from home. They saw paddy fields and a foreign coastline. Their train also passed through Hiroshima, which had been utterly destroyed by a nuclear bomb on 6 August 1945. They were among the first New Zealanders to see Hiroshima and were shocked by its desolation.<sup>23</sup>

“I was staggered at the sight of that. More like Christchurch after the earthquake. There was very little there. There were beggars in the railway station. That was the eye-opener really. We were here ... It was even worse when later on we managed to get to Tokyo and saw the devastation there.”

Snow believes seeing Hiroshima shaped not only his own thinking on nuclear weapons but that of many other New Zealanders, ultimately paving the way to this country’s anti-nuclear stance.

Getting to Yamaguchi, Battalion headquarters, was a new beginning for Snow, with a new mortar platoon to command. Training started all over again with marching drills and weapons training. This went on for three intensive months. His CO was Lieutenant Colonel William Titchener, who had served with 27 MG Battalion during the war in Greece (Crete), Egypt and Italy. Snow remembers him as a seasoned soldier, a man whom others respected. “He was a very tough character”.<sup>24</sup>

Accommodated in the junior officers’ quarters not far from the officers’ mess, Snow soon grew used to this new life. Familiar touches from home included regular rugby matches. The Battalion had its own rugby team, which Snow remembers winning ‘the Freyberg Shield’.<sup>25</sup>

Officers at HQ came with a variety of experience, spanning Army, Airforce and Navy and men who had served with the 2NZE in Egypt and Italy. Snow remembers no particular difficulties arising from this diversity of service; everyone knew their job.

As he began getting to know the people of Yamaguchi, Snow found them “uncomplicated” and ready to fall into line with the occupation. He feels this is likely to do with it being a country area, far removed from city politics. “The people we were really afraid of were the ex-military Japanese who had lost a war and were home. [They had] lost a lot of pride. We couldn’t really foretell what their actions were going to be.”

General living conditions were fairly poor. “Their lifestyle was even more primitive than our back country places would have been back in the 1800s – very, very primitive.”

---

<sup>22</sup> ‘Jayforce was initially deployed in Yamaguchi prefecture on the southern tip of the main island of Honshu, and on nearby Eta Jima Island. This was a relatively poor rural area with a population of 1.4 million – not much less than New Zealand’s total population at the time.’ From <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/jayforce-arrives-in-japan>

<sup>23</sup> ‘At Hiroshima station in 1947, another New Zealand serviceman Basil Jamieson tried to absorb what he saw. ‘We stopped there for quite a while and looked over the city towards the sea ... The thing I remember is the unbelievable destruction.’ From *The Occupiers*, Alison Parr, 2012, p. 48

<sup>24</sup> Lt Col Titchener had married an Italian woman, a coastal runabout dubbed *Brunetta*, which was used by 27 MG Battalion in Japan for anti-smuggling operations, was named after her. From *Army People*, Issue 454, July 2014, *Sharing Stories, Experiences and Comradeship – 27 MGB and the 2/1 Battalion* by Lt Col Stef Michie, p. 13

<sup>25</sup> Alison Parr refers to it as the Freyberg Cup and notes that a finals match was held in Yamaguchi. See *The Occupiers*, Alison Parr, 2012, p. 167. One of Snow’s mates, George Morrow, was in charge of the sports teams there at one stage.



Snow relates how he had learned to ask 'where is the toilet?' in Japanese but never had to ask because "you could smell them."<sup>26</sup>

From Yamaguchi, Snow and his platoon was sent to Bofu, near the coast, where there was an air force base. Their task was to search "a map square" each day looking for hidden weapons and military equipment. Mostly, this meant checking old buildings and caves in the area.

"Intelligent anticipation" is a skill Snow learned through his time in Japan. In broad terms, it means knowing people inside out and being able to anticipate their behaviour. "It was highly necessary we should know what to do in an emergency and who would be backing us up."<sup>27</sup>

Snow was in charge of six sections, each comprised of four or five men. They travelled in convoy over dusty roads by mortar carriers equipped to handle "all sorts of terrain". These generally worked well unless they "threw a track" and needed repairs. "When that happened, it took all our ingenuity to get back on the road."

Once they got to the search site, sections spread out from a central point. One of the problems was how to communicate with other carriers within a 1000 yard block during searches. There was no radio, no RT communications. The answer was a whistle, hung around the neck on a lanyard.

"If we tried to call people and they were within hearing distance, the whistle was the easiest one, saved us having to drive the carrier cross-country to find somebody."

Snow became very attached to this simple, yet practical, solution and wore it at all times.

Some months later, Snow was serving as a defence officer in the Provost Courts at Chofu<sup>28</sup> and remembers a Captain coming up to him in the brigade mess and telling him he was improperly dressed as 'officers don't wear lanyards'. As far as Snow was concerned, the lanyard and whistle were a necessary part of his uniform, being essential work equipment. A major then came up, jumped in on the conversation and told Snow he was wrong.

"We had quite a heated argument. By this time, I was getting sick of these smart-arsed senior officers being so lacking in knowledge about what a platoon commander had to do in the field.

So we ended that argument on rude terms. This major was pretty upset at the end of it."

After Snow had finished at the Provost Courts he took some days off and was entertained by the man he had been defending. When he went back to Yamaguchi and reported in he was introduced to the new CO, who turned out to be none other than the major he'd argued with in the mess a week before in Chofu.

"That was the end of a beautiful friendship!"

Snow believes the men of his platoon were not overbearing during their searches and to an extent won the trust of the local people. There was mutual respect. Nothing was ever actually found in these searches. In his view, their role was primarily a show of strength. "It was extremely bloody difficult but it worked."

---

<sup>26</sup> New Zealanders in Japan also became inured to the smell from the ubiquitous 'honey carts' used for sewage disposal. *Ibid*, p. 16

<sup>27</sup> This skill of being able 'to read people' and anticipate behaviour is something Snow also employed to good effect in his civilian life as a professional secretary.

<sup>28</sup> '11 Provost Company had the dual task of preventing and policing crime committed by New Zealand servicemen and women...Its other duties included checking dress standards and the unauthorised use of vehicles and maintaining vehicles; denoting and monitoring out-of-bound areas and curfew times; and raiding brothels.' From *Jayforce*, Laurie Brocklebank, 1997, p. 152.

Another task Snow recalls was supervising post-war elections in Tokuyama.<sup>29</sup> He was surprised at rules that allowed candidates to treat their visitors and supporters with liquor. He remembers election-day crowds being rather rowdy. “We were alert. We didn’t have to show a presence. We had to be ready for whatever went wrong because the police would not have coped anyway.”

An unexpected dimension to life in Japan was the employment of local women, known as housegirls, to do the domestic chores for the officers.<sup>30</sup> Snow soon cottoned on that their nickname for him was ‘Yuki-san’ (with ‘yuki’ being the Japanese word for ‘snow’). “I was actually good enough to listen to their conversations and understand a lot of it.”<sup>31</sup>

J Force also provided a guard battalion in Tokyo, which took part in ceremonial guard duties in Tokyo; it was based at Ebisu Barracks.<sup>32</sup> Snow served with this battalion for a month undertaking guard duties at the Imperial Palace.<sup>33</sup> “It was brilliant ... the drills were very smart, excellent.”

Tokyo itself had sustained heavy damage in the war and it was something which made a big impression on Snow. “It was shades of Hiroshima because it had been bombed flat. It was an awful mess in parts, certainly worse than Christchurch [after the February 2011 earthquake] ... They were lovely people really you know and they had a hell of a lot to put up with.”

Even though this was a bombed-out city under occupation, Snow says it felt like a safe place to venture out into at night. He remembers visiting an area of the city known for its sushi cafes.

Snow was very aware of the high rates of sexually transmitted diseases among 2NZEF and BCOF soldiers. Brothels were officially out of bounds to them yet the use of prostitutes continued. Sometimes Snow was sent to “no go areas” to chase men out. It was one of his least pleasant duties. He disliked the idea that New Zealand soldiers were among those mistreating local women. He also found it hard to understand why anyone would risk infection for the sake of “five minutes’ pleasure”.<sup>34</sup> “I didn’t want to be a part of that.”

Being part of J Force would have changed the attitudes of some men towards the Japanese while others, says Snow, retained their preconceived ideas of ‘the enemy’. The

---

<sup>29</sup> ‘In April 1946 and 1947 respectively it [Jayforce] supervised local and national elections in its area. Small groups of soldiers were posted to polling booths to guard against any intimidation of voters.’ From *Jayforce*, Laurie Brocklebank, 1997, p. 147

<sup>30</sup> ‘Housegirls ... took care of all housework, washing and ironing.’ From *The Occupiers*, Alison Parr, 2012, p. 86

<sup>31</sup> Snow says his housegirls’ names were Takada and Michiko. One of the things he noted about housegirls was their apparent lack of embarrassment if they ever saw officers naked. At Japanese bath-houses, everyone bathed together. Snow says their attitude was “it was only a body”. He liked this lack of squeamishness towards nudity. (Their clothing was also very different compared to what New Zealand women wore, being traditional kimono and ‘geta’ or wooden clogs).

<sup>32</sup> ‘Initially there were twenty-two ceremonial guard posts, all but one of which had to be maintained around the clock. These were located at: the Imperial Palace, Empire House, the British Embassy, the Canadian Legation, Commonwealth House, AACS Atagoyama, and the Commander-in-Chief’s residence. The Imperial Palace had the greatest number of posts, eleven.’ From *Jayforce*, Laurie Brocklebank, 1997, p. 144.

<sup>33</sup> American soldiers, who were also carrying out guard duties there at the time, had a somewhat trigger happy reputation, according to Snow. “They were different in their approach. They were quite happy to shoot people who inadvertently walked across their territory...I didn’t see it but it did happen.”

<sup>34</sup> ‘The total number of cases of VD recorded in J Force was more than 1300, with some men being infected several times. In spite of education, and disciplinary action against infected men, sexually transmitted diseases remained the most common sickness among New Zealanders who served in the occupation.’ From *The Occupiers*, Alison Parr, 2012, p. 148

Japanese were the aggressors in the Pacific War yet Snow understood it did not make all Japanese 'bad', neither did it imply that New Zealanders were all saints.

"I thought they were a great nation. I didn't like what they had done but then I have understood since the Second World War that the New Zealand troops were not without fault ... The reality is no-one is above blame."

Overall, he sees his Battalion's contribution as a positive one.<sup>35</sup>

"We were there purely to have a presence. Any sort of uprising was beyond us because with our very small numbers and their millions we would not stand much of a show of impressing them. So we were there to show our strength but not to press it. To cut a long story short, I think we changed things quite a lot and were able to be friendly with our Japanese neighbours. We were able to speak to them [and] be kind to them. ... We had a relationship which was far greater than that of just an occupying force and the people actually respected us."

### **After J Force, civilian life in New Zealand**

Snow served in Japan for a year. By the end of that time, he was looking forward to coming home and feeling a mixed sense of relief and pride about his J Force service.

"I was emotional about getting back to New Zealand. I had been trained to kill. I hadn't fired a rifle in anger. I hadn't had to kill anyone. I had done a duty for the Army and I was reasonably proud of the way I had carried out my instructions."

Snow's return trip to New Zealand on the *Dunera* was uneventful.

Once back home, Snow resumed his local body career as he had planned. He went back to Timaru and was employed at South Canterbury Catchment Board as Rates Clerk. From there, he took up a position as Assistant County Clerk in Geraldine and was, for a time, Acting County Clerk.

In 1948, he married an ex-WAAC<sup>36</sup>. Her name was Helen Knox de Castro and they had met at Trentham Military Camp. In the early 1950s, they started a family and had three children together. (Their names are Margo Christine Lawton, Morgan Evan Williams and Owen Lloyd Williams).

Around 1953 Snow returned to Christchurch, where he had found work with the city's gas company. One day, at the Prince of Wales Hotel, he bumped into the man he'd once thrown out of bed at Burnham, Major Arthur McGregor. Now the President of the Canterbury Hotel Association, Arthur told Snow he was looking for an executive officer and suggested he apply, (so clearly there were no hard feelings from earlier times). "I got the job ... It meant learning a new lot of law, liquor licensing. I did it well [and] I enjoyed it."

Also at this time, Snow, still army-minded, decided to join the Territorials, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Canterbury Regiment, in 1951 and he was to remain with this regiment through to 1962. Once again, he was based at Burnham. This was a part-time, after-hours commitment and involved assisting with Compulsory Military Training (CMT). "They were brilliant years ... The oldest [of the men I trained] are now eighty. I was only ten years older than those guys!"

By 1962, younger officers were ready to fill the more senior posts and so this was when Snow decided to step down and "pass the baton".

In the late 1950s, Snow and Helen had divorced. Snow remarried again in 1958. His second wife, Esmay Doreen Smith, had trained and worked as a nurse. "Her nickname

<sup>35</sup> Snow has a photographic history of 27 MG Battalion which captures in images some of the highlights of its contribution in Japan.

<sup>36</sup> WAAC - Women's Army Auxiliary Corps

was 'Smithie' because nurses were known by their surname." The couple raised two children, (now in their 50s at the time of writing): Hugh Trezise Williams and Rosemary Ann Charles. This was to be a happy marriage, one that has lasted more than 50 years.

### **Bringing the Commonwealth Games to Christchurch**

At the same time that Snow was with the Hotel Association, he also worked in a professional capacity as a secretary for several sports organisations, including the New Zealand Amateur Swimming Association.<sup>37</sup> He went to a meeting to discuss how New Zealand might be able to successfully bid for the Commonwealth Games and ended up becoming Secretary for Commonwealth Games Promotion. "So I literally had a new career, which was supported by the Hotel Association."

It took 12 years for that bid to succeed. Snow remembers the process as "a long hard battle" and the work as being totally different to anything he had done before. "We had to fight other people who wanted to run the games, specifically Auckland. It wasn't until we got the approval of the New Zealand Commonwealth Games Association that we could make our actual application for the games."

Snow had "a lot to contribute" to the process, alongside other members of the promotion committee including Sir Ron Scott. They travelled to the Commonwealth Games in Jamaica in 1966 and Edinburgh in 1970 to put New Zealand's case. Having worked in the hospitality industry, Snow was adept at organising parties and functions, and 'getting to know people'.

"There was a fantastic party in Jamaica even by my standards. I'd had an introduction to the company that made Jamaican rum ...we used every opportunity. The Jamaican Hotel Association were quite supportive."

There were memorable meetings along with the way with sports celebrities of the day, such as former Olympic swimmer Johnny Weissmuller who starred as Tarzan in the popular film series of the 1930s and 1940s; and American track-and-field star Jesse Owens, who had won four gold medals at the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games.

At the Edinburgh Commonwealth Games, a New Zealand military band played at the promotional party, (at which there was no shortage of McCallums whisky, thanks to some smooth behind the scenes talking by Snow). "It went down like a charm." The application had succeeded and the games duly came to Christchurch in 1974.

After it was all over, Snow came home through Tokyo. Much had changed compared to his days with J Force. "[But] I felt very much at home."

### **1970s and beyond**

Soon after returning to Christchurch, Snow left the Canterbury Hotel Association and became Executive Director of the Christchurch Road Transport Association, which again required having to absorb a whole new set of rules, this time covering transport licensing law.

"One week every month I had to go to Transport Licensing sittings and have an overview from the point of view of the trucking industry on new applicants for applicants. I already had legal type training so appearing in front of a tribunal was no great difficulty. I had a fair amount of success arguing with solicitors appearing for the applicant."<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Also the Canterbury Football Association.

<sup>38</sup> He gained letters behind his name as a result of this service, MCIT - Member for the Chartered Institute of Transport.

He remained with the Christchurch Road Transport Association through to his retirement.

On his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday he remembers getting “very drunk”. All of a sudden, it seemed like life had little left to offer. He felt the years weighing upon him and remembers feeling as though “it was the end of the bloody world”. To blot out these feelings, he had taken to drinking heavily. Eventually though, realising he was “making a mess of it”, he decided to stop drinking and, with some help, managed to do so successfully. He is proud not to have touched a drop for 40 years.

“There is life after booze,” he says.

## **2/1 Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment takes custodianship of 27 Machine Gun Battalion, 2009**

Snow has continued to play an active role in the post-war life of 27 Machine Gun Battalion. He first became Secretary of the 27 Battalion Association in 1958. There were five national reunions all told, the final such reunion taking place in Christchurch in 2009. Over the years, Snow has been a dedicated facilitator for the battalion and advocated on members’ welfare and other issues.

In order to ensure the unit’s traditions and distinctions were maintained in the NZ Army into the future, custodianship of these matters was handed over to 2<sup>nd</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment (2/1 RNZIR) in 2009.<sup>39</sup> Snow wrote the chartered document that formalised the arrangement. “We had been anxious about what would happen to 27 Battalion when we shut up shop.” There was a handover parade at Burnham with around 60 members of 27 Battalion attending with their partners.

“The 2<sup>nd</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> guys who qualify with their machine gun drills are allowed to wear our unit flash on their uniforms and they really treasure them ...They think they are almost the ultimate. It’s almost like having everlasting life. We will be carried on in the minds of some people for a long time.”

In 2013 a commemorative platoon coin was struck featuring the 27 MG and Infantry Badge on one side and the 2/1 RNZIR Fire Support Group (FSG) adopted mascot (Murray Ball’s Horse from *Footrot Flats*) on the other.<sup>40</sup>

Joint luncheons continue to be held in Christchurch every three months. “We’re down to about a dozen now [from 27 MGB]. The Burnham boys turn up too with ten or so from the Machine Gun Unit and the CO, Peter Hall, and the RSM.”

## **Taking Stock**

Almost 90 at the time of this interview<sup>41</sup>, Snow has clippings of 27 Battalion events up on the wall of his small room at the Anthony Wilding Retirement Village in Christchurch. He has kept all his medals – “my grandchildren are proud of them” - and has treasured photos of his J Force days in Japan.

It is not so much ‘the rank’ that he values but the association he has had with “guys I have come to know and love and respect.”

He doesn’t like to think now what sort of person he would have become without that early experience of being in the Home Guard.

<sup>39</sup> See *Army News*, Issue 404, 17 November 2009, p. 4, *27 Machine Gun and Infantry Battalion Handover Parade with 2/1 RNZIR* by 2LT Jamie Blackmoore.

<sup>40</sup> From *Army People*, Issue 454, July 2014, p. 13, *Sharing Stories, Experiences and Comradeship – 27 MGB and the 2/1 Battalion* by Lt Col Stef Michie.

<sup>41</sup> 11 October 2014, recorded at 5 Corbett Crescent, Anthony Wilding Retirement Village, Christchurch.

“I do feel fulfilled. I have done lots of things as an ignorant ill-educated youth and I’m now fulfilled in many ways as an adult.”

He has little doubt that he will leave this world with a military-type funeral when his time comes.

“I have an idea that 2<sup>nd</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion wouldn’t want it any other way.”

*The author wishes to acknowledge the support of the Canterbury History Foundation through the 2014 Canterbury Community History Award and the RSA/NZ Institute of Professional Photographers’ WWII Veteran Portraits Project for providing the original inspiration to interview veterans in the Canterbury region.*

## PHOTOS – NEW ZEALAND J FORCE

These photos are drawn from Bill Henderson's photographic record. Bill was a mate of Snow's in the 27<sup>th</sup> Battalion. Bill's son Andrew plans to present his late father's collection to 2nd/1<sup>st</sup> Battalion's records of its association with 27 Battalion, along with the records it already has in safe-keeping. Snow also has a copy of this collection. The following images are from that source:



*HIROSHIMA, 1946*



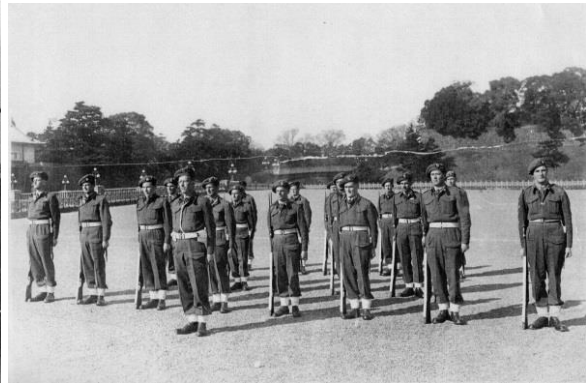
*EVAN "SNOW" WILLIAMS, 27 MACHINE GUN BATTALION,  
MORTAR PLATOON COMMANDER*



*BILL HENDERSON WITH JAPANESE CHILDREN*



*BACK STREET YAMAGUCHI*



*GUARD DUTY - IMPERIAL PALACE TOKYO (SNOW STANDING AT FRONT)*



*STREET VIEW, BOFU, 1947*



*PARADE OF STRENGTH, YAMAGUCHI, SNOW STANDING IN LEAD CARRIER*



*27 BATTALION RUGBY TEAM*



*27 BATTALION'S COASTAL PATROL BOAT 'BRUNETTA'*





HOUSEGIRL - TAKADA



CHRISTMAS GREETINGS 1946