

**Kenneth Raymond Wright**

**Service No: 445257**

## A SONG AND DANCE MAN

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### *Biography by Kim Newth*

In 1939, Ken Wright was a young Christchurch tap dance teacher with 100 pupils. In 1943 his tap shoes went with him to war. In August that year he danced on mess tables aboard a troop ship bound for the Middle East. Once there, he entertained American officers in Cairo and later dressed in drag to lift the spirits of wounded soldiers in Italy. He served his country by driving trucks carrying petrol and ammunition to supply frontline forces. This is his story.

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Ken's early childhood was spent in Little River, a place of importance in his family history. His grandfather, Frank William Wright, was the proprietor of the Little River Hotel (from 1914 to 1923) and its resident pound master (charged with taking care of stray animals). Frank was a man of local stature also for having married into the Libeau family which was one of the early French settler families in Akaroa.<sup>1</sup> Ken's older brother Francis<sup>2</sup> and his sisters – Thelma, Vivienne, Leonore and Annora - were all born in Akaroa. So when Ken came into the world in Christchurch on 30 January 1923, he was joining a local family of repute with a strong sense of identity. Ken grew up valuing his French ancestry.

Unlike his older sisters and brother, Ken never attended Little River School because he was still a toddler when the family uprooted and moved into Christchurch in 1926. Ken's parents – Henry and Kate Wright<sup>3</sup> - bought a house in Linwood (Stanmore Road), where they were to reside for the rest of their lives. Ken attended Phillipstown School.<sup>4</sup> In those days, the school taught children through to Standard 6. "I was a bright boy – I jumped every second class," recalls Ken.

Henry Wright had worked as a sharemilker before moving into the city to join the Groynes' project, a major works scheme at the time<sup>5</sup>. These were the Depression years, jobs were scarce. No doubt Ken's parents would have been reluctant to leave Little

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Libeau emigrated to New Zealand aboard the *Comte de Paris*, arriving in Akaroa in 1840. He married twice. One of his sons by his first marriage, Joseph Lucien Libeau, in turn married and one of his daughters, Leonore Virginia Libeau, married Frank William Wright, Ken's grandfather. This info is from Ken and also from this link: <http://www.geni.com/people/Joseph-Libeau/600000001413249091> Ken adds that Joseph Libeau was a successful businessman in his day, having owned a local brickworks and produce farm.

<sup>2</sup> Francis (Frank) Henry Wright.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Frank Wright and Kate Wright (née Moir)

<sup>4</sup> The school closed at the end of 2014 and merged with Woolston School. Prior to its closure, Ken says he was Phillipstown School's oldest living former pupil. Leonore and Annora also attended the school.

<sup>5</sup> 'The Groynes derives its name from large concrete blocks, made from concrete filled woollucks, jutting into the Otukaikino Creek. The Otukaikino, once the south branch of the Waimakariri River, was separated from the main branch during the course of major works in the 1930s.' From Christchurch City Council website: <http://www.ccc.govt.nz/cityleisure/parkswalkways/popularparks/thegroynes.aspx>

River but had to be prepared to move in order for Henry to find work. Henry, a practical and resourceful man, also worked for a time as a green keeper at Hagley Park.

“Father was what I would call a little Frenchman: he was short and tough. He was also a very gentle man – he had to be because Mother was a very gentle woman. She bought up her family through the Depression years and nobody went wanting.”

Ken’s older brother Frank inherited his father’s resourceful traits and in adulthood started work for the Perfection Ice Cream Company Ltd<sup>6</sup>, quickly progressing up the ranks into senior management. Henry also found employment as a driver with the same company and Ken has fond childhood memories of accompanying his father on weekend delivery runs to local shops and dairies. He remembers carrying a salt bucket that was emptied into a cabinet with ice to make a brine to freeze the ice cream.

“Father’s round was down to Sumner, up Ferry Road and into Sydenham and back to the factory.”

Ken’s parents ended up buying a weekend business of their own, a shop and tearooms at Pines Beach. It was a busy life. On some delivery days, Ken’s exhausted father would hand over the wheel to his son. It was how Ken learned to drive trucks. “In those days there were no cops on the road and so I’d drive the truck and service the shops we had to do on the way to our own shop at Pines Beach.”

Life wasn’t all about work though. There was still room to dream. In 1933, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers had shot to fame, paired in the RKO Radio Pictures production *Flying Down to Rio*.<sup>7</sup> They were a movie sensation starring in a number of other popular features during the 1930s. Like other boys of his era, Ken was impressed by Fred Astaire and soon wanted to learn to dance like him. At the age of 10, he started taking tap dance lessons with Eddie Hegan, the first male dance teacher in Christchurch.<sup>8</sup> Eddie, who was born in Belfast and had come out to New Zealand with his family in 1919, had been a professional performer from the age of 16. He had a lot of experience with touring variety shows. Eddie would take beginners and train them until they were ready to perform in one of his shows. His Christchurch dance school was immensely popular through to 1941 when it ended as a result of Eddie going overseas on military service.

“I can remember the day I asked my mother if I could go and learn tap dancing. We were down at the beach and her reply was ‘I spent a lot of shillings trying to teach you the piano. If you want to learn tap dancing you pay for it yourself.’ So I took odd jobs, helped Father on the van and Father chipped in. It was three and six<sup>9</sup> a lesson...”

At the school, Ken was taught English style tap, including a fast buck routine for beginners. Eddie was a self-taught professional. Soon after he started the school he put together a two chorus routine of steps covering all the basic movements that most of his pupils were soon able to master.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> “The Perfection Ice Cream Company Ltd had premises at 300 Manchester St and the factory included a 50 person capacity air raid trench which was put in during WWII by Christchurch architecture firm Trengrove and Blunt.’ From Kete Christchurch website, ‘The History of 300 Manchester St’. Link: [http://ketechristchurch.peoplesnetworknz.info/places\\_and\\_streets/topics/show/248-the-history-of-300-manchester-street#.VJYel8Dm4A](http://ketechristchurch.peoplesnetworknz.info/places_and_streets/topics/show/248-the-history-of-300-manchester-street#.VJYel8Dm4A).

<sup>7</sup> Information about this movie can be found online at the ‘Reel Classics’ website. Link: <http://www.reelclassics.com/Teams/Fred&Ginger/fred&ginger1.htm>

<sup>8</sup> Source: *No Choice – My Life in Vaudeville and Variety Around New Zealand* by Eddie Hegan, 1980, Hodder and Stoughton Ltd.

<sup>9</sup> Three shillings and six pence.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p 107. Eddie notes in his book that this routine was practically identical to one Gene Kelly had once taught to his students.

As well as discovering a passion and talent for tap, Ken loved to sing and did so from the very first time he ever went on stage. “My first number was called ‘Berry Picking Time’. Mother made the costume, complete with a straw hat, and I won. I was ten years old. I was always a song and dance man.”

Ken continued his lessons through to the age of 15. “I was a very slow learner but a very diligent practiser. I learned one step at a time and would practise it for six hours a day for a week until I perfected it. I became a perfectionist.”

After leaving Eddie’s dance school, Ken started one of his own. His brother-in-law – Thelma’s husband – was a forester who had gone to England with a forestry unit prior to England entering the war and had left his ‘Baby Austin’ car in Ken’s care. “So I established a dancing school in the country. I had a school at Templeton, two schools at Lincoln, a school at Greenpark, a school at Tau Tapu and a school at Heathcote.” The schools operated out of local halls and Ken ran them on a round robin basis every Saturday, teaching around 100 pupils.

From time to time Eddie would get in touch to ask Ken to perform in a show with him. He remembers being part of a show put on for prisoners at Paparua Prison one year and dancing at Eddie’s annual end of year variety concerts at the Civic Theatre.

“In those days variety shows were very popular. We didn’t know the word ‘television’.”

After three years of technical college education, Ken left school at 14 and went to work with a tool distribution firm called George Henry.<sup>11</sup> His weekly pay was five shillings and he worked five days a week and Saturday mornings. He then took a position with a company called Nivens as a draughting trainee, followed by employment at Ballantynes Department Store. “My ambition was to be a window dresser but it never eventuated.”<sup>12</sup>

Finally he got a job as a trainee cutter with a dressmaking firm before getting the letter conveying the news he had been drafted into the army. It was a sad day for Ken because it meant having to close down his weekend dance school; there was no-one else to take over his teaching role there.<sup>13</sup> It also meant having to leave home for the first time and begin a new life in the barracks, though Ken found he was still able to put his dance skills to use.

“I used to entertain the trainees at the YMCA and I also put on a show at the Winter Gardens. My commanding officer said ‘as you’re a dancer you should be able to organise it so I organised the ball because we were leaving Addington to go to Burnham.’<sup>14</sup> It was a great success. The next morning it was ‘full kit and march to Burnham’, with a hangover...”

At the Burnham barracks, he recalls how recruits were accommodated at both ends and non-commissioned officers in the middle. “The NCOs had better beds than us!” Everyone was up at 6am to begin long days of training.

### **From Burnham to Rotorua**

As the weeks of training went by at Burnham, Ken continued to dance and entertain regularly when opportunities arose but lacked both time and resources to practise

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<sup>11</sup> This company, which dates back to 1923, is still going strong – see website: <http://www.georgehenry.co.nz/shop.html>

<sup>12</sup> Ken had earlier put together a window display for George Henry while with that firm and had been generously rewarded an additional five shillings for his efforts!

<sup>13</sup> Sixty years later, when Ken was doing an exhibition dance at the Civic Theatre, a woman came up to Ken and said ‘do you remember me? You taught me at Lincoln!’

<sup>14</sup> Ken’s History Sheet from the war shows he was at Addington from 15 December 1941 to 2 April 1942, before going to Burnham Camp.

properly<sup>15</sup>. As well as tap, he would often do ‘acrobatic eccentric’, a routine of funny steps performed with a blank face.<sup>16</sup> It must have been highly diverting for his fellow recruits, but the entertainment ultimately proved personally costly for Ken. One day while doing knee splits without having warmed up he “blew the cartilage”. Refusing surgery for fear of its possible consequences, Ken rejected that option and was instead put in plaster for several months and sent off to Hanmer Remedial Camp, subsequently Rotorua Remedial Camp.

When he got to Rotorua, he found men at the camp were training for a show; those who were fit enough or talented enough were eligible to participate. Ken ended up teaching a team of six men to do a ballet and tap dance. They put on a show called the Blue Baths Ballet. “They were in tutus. They did it straight, not funny, and they were very well trained. It was a hit as a show. It was so successful they decided to take it on tour. So we toured the upper North Island as Splitzkreig Two and we finished up at the Civic in Auckland. I danced with the team doing the tap and I danced a tap solo and an acrobatic eccentric.” According to Ken, this tour raised £70,000 for the Auckland Patriotic Fund.<sup>17</sup>

By the end of the tour, Ken’s cartilage trouble was cured. “When I went back to Rotorua, the doctor examined me and said ‘well, there’s nothing wrong with your legs. Are you swinging the lead?’ I was so wild that I went straight back down to Burnham and joined the tenth reinforcements.”

### Off on the boat to Cairo

Ken still has his copy of *The Queue Ship*<sup>18</sup>, published in August 1943 by the 10th Reinforcements aboard the *Nieuw Amsterdam*, a Dutch ocean liner that had been pressed into service as a troop ship.

As this publication notes, no other feature of shipboard life was quite so constant as the queue: ‘From early morn to the last regretful clatter of the wet canteen’s closing, it has been with us...’ Ken recalls that the ship’s other nickname was ‘the custard ship’ because of the seemingly endless amounts of it dished out on the journey from Lyttelton until docking in Egypt.

To help relieve the boredom of shipboard life, Ken once again bought out his dancing shoes. “There wasn’t any organised concert party, but I got up on the mess tables and I tried to do a dance for them but the ship kept swaying. I did a few slides along the mess tables but I finished the dance. It was the most difficult dance I think I’ve ever done!”

He had no idea what to expect on disembarkation. “When we arrived it was totally foreign. There were flies, blowflies and sandhills...” Home was now at Maadi Camp, by the village of Maadi on the outskirts of Cairo.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> He was allowed to have a tap mat, which he describes as having been a little like a venetian blind of flat pine slats joined together with a backing mat. This could be rolled out and used for practice. Eddie Hegan had made the mat for Ken some six years’ earlier.

<sup>16</sup> “I won every time for five years with that dance from when I was ten to when I was fifteen,” says Ken.

<sup>17</sup> **What a Monster!** When you see the ballet’s pretty girls/Your head will spin around in whirls/Our ballerina Kenneth Wright/Is really an amazing sight.’ From *Splitkreig II* souvenir programme, Regent Theatre, Rotorua, March 1940. The programme describes it as an entirely Army Show, from first to last the work of personnel of the Remedial Training Camp.

<sup>18</sup> This troopship magazine is also held by Hocken Collections/Te Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago Library.

<sup>19</sup> The 1<sup>st</sup> Echelon had first set up camp here in February 1940. ‘The camp covers a huge piece of land and is widely laid out to escape bombing...You have to go a long way for showers etc here. Fine sand everywhere and just wait till the wind blows.’ From *Struan’s War*, p. 13, Edited by John MacGibbon, Ngaio Press, first published in 2001.

By the time the Queue Ship had arrived in Egypt, the Axis forces had surrendered after the battles of Alamein<sup>20</sup> and subsequent campaign in North Africa. Yet, as Ken found, training in the desert could still be an unnerving experience.

“When we were out on one of our little training trips into the desert we bivouacked for the night. There were guns going off and we were sitting in the tent. I was doing a few shivers and one of the old hands turned to me and said ‘what you need is a cigarette’. Being a dancer I had never smoked. He gave me a Victory ‘V’ cigarette which was full of weevils and it went ‘pop, crackle’ as you smoked it but it helped the nerves.”<sup>21</sup>

As well as training in the desert, Ken was assigned to the Workshops Section doing repair and maintenance, such as valve grinds, on army vehicles.

Putting on his tap shoes eased the transition to life at Maadi Camp, where he danced in the canteen. Before too long, he had also run across his former teacher, Eddie Hegan, who suggested he audition for the Kiwi Concert Party<sup>22</sup>. However, the tap dancing slot had already been filled by then, so Ken was turned away.

Not long afterwards though, Ken overheard some soldiers in camp talking about how lucky the Americans were because they had their own cabaret club, but that no-one else could get in because there were military police on every level of the six storey building. Ken decided to approach the Americans’ entertainment unit and ask if they were short of a tap dancer for the cabaret. This led to him getting a pass to go up to the club.

“It was a great experience walking up the stairs past all these big MPs with guns and flashing my pass. When I got up to the top, there was this beautiful rooftop cabaret with palm trees and a beautiful orchestra. There were American officers there with their dancing partners and I entertained them and they thought I was just marvellous. I could walk around afterwards, free drinks from every little cubbyhole in the place where they were sitting. So I did that every Saturday night much to the envy of my colleagues.”

## **Onto Italy**

Ken’s experience of Egypt was fairly fleeting. He cannot remember exactly when he was transferred to Italy, but he does recall being assigned to Petrol Company and reaching camp just outside Taranto. This would probably have been sometime in late October to early November 1943<sup>23</sup>. Two months earlier the Italian government had agreed to an armistice with the Allies, leaving Germany to defend the Italian Peninsula against the Allies (the American 5<sup>th</sup> Army and the 8<sup>th</sup> Army, led by the British). They did so by setting up defensive lines across Italy<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> ‘The second battle of Alamein, which started on 23 October 1942, was the beginning of the long Axis retreat that ended in Tunisia. ‘The great artillery barrage at El Alamein produced a spectacle that few people would have had the chance of witnessing ... The avalanche of shells landing in enemy territory would give most people the impression that no living thing could remain alive when the barrage, which would last many hours, ceased ... Later, the Germans started to retreat and General Montgomery’s drive started. It would finish in North Africa, 1000 miles distant.’ From *The Soldier Tourist – A Personal Account of World War II* by Gunner N.H. (Joe) Brewer, Published by Reed Books, 1999, p. 156

<sup>21</sup> He was hooked on cigarettes from then on for the next 40 years; he finally gave up when he was 60.

<sup>22</sup> ‘The Kiwi Concert Party was very popular with the troops. The shows were excellent.’ From *The Soldier Tourist* by Gunner N.H. (Joe) Brewer, 1999, p. 168

<sup>23</sup> ‘Petrol Company moved ‘piecemeal’ to Italy in various flights and parties, their departures spaced over a period of several weeks. Our Advance Party, numbering 4 officers and 92 other ranks, moved out on 3 October, setting up camp five miles from Taranto less than a week later.’ From *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War, Petrol Company* by A. L. Kidson, War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington, NZ, 1961, Printed by Whitcombe and Tombs Ltd, p. 287.

<sup>24</sup> From *The Italian Campaign - Prelude*, <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/war/Italian-campaign/overview>, (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 16 August 2014.

“I remember the first night in Taranto, we slept in a vineyard. I slept underneath big bunches of grapes and I ate them through the night...”

From Taranto, the division soon moved north to Bari.

Having obtained both civilian heavy duty and motorcycle licences before the war, Ken was initially put to work as a courier messenger on a large Harley Davidson. He recalls riding “hell for leather” up and down a convoy of military vehicles on a muddy clay road, taking reports hither and thither. For the small, slightly built dancer, it soon became too arduous and so he was then switched to driving trucks.

The main job of Petrol Company at that time was to establish petrol dumps to support the planned 8th Army attack across the Sangro River.<sup>25</sup> This was part of the Allied push to breach the Germans’ Gustav Line which was a series of well-defended fortifications across Italy.<sup>26</sup>

“When they put the pressure on the Germans they needed a lot of petrol in a hurry and we had to get it up there ... we made trips back and forwards to where we were camped and the Sangro. Over twenty four hours we delivered thousands of gallons of petrol.”

By early December, the Sangro River had been crossed and the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Division had captured the village of Castelfrentano and had entered nearby Orsogna. Here the advance was stalled. The German defence was resolute and winter roads grew ever muddier as the offensive ground to a halt. Petrol Company’s headquarters were at Atessa, south-east of Orsogna, at this time, with the company’s drivers working hard to build a new ‘Sangro Dump’, north of the river.<sup>27</sup>

The New Year blizzards that followed a wintry Christmas in camp marked the end of the attempt to capture Orsogna. To help make Christmas a little more pleasant, the neighbouring country had been scoured for weeks beforehand in search of extras – including live hens, ducks, geese and turkeys - to supplement army rations. Dinner was served around 1pm and afterwards some of men joined in folk dances ‘with the local belles, regardless of army boots thick with mud’<sup>28</sup>.

For his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, Ken got a parcel from home containing a box of cream wafers. “At home Mum always used to buy those for me because that was my favourite biscuit. So that was my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday – in the snow, eating a box of cream wafers!”

## Cassino

By mid-January, the New Zealand Division had moved across to reinforce the 5th Army which was planning an advance on Rome via the Liri Valley but was blocked by the strong German defences at Monte Cassino.<sup>29</sup> Petrol Company’s new camp was not far from Naples in the Volturno Valley, near the town of Piedimonte d’Alife.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> ‘Our Division, it was hoped, would advance quickly to Avezzano, and thence to Rome. Its move to the front line took place from 18 to 22 November; and what that meant in terms of discomfort, difficulties and frustrations will be well remembered by those who took part.’ From *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War, Petrol Company* by A. L. Kidson, 1961, p 290. From Larino, petrol dumps were established first at Gissi, then Atessa. Once the Sangro had been crossed, a new ‘Sangro Dump’ was built up north of the river.

<sup>26</sup> From *The Italian Campaign – Into Action at the Sangro River*, <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/war/Italian-campaign/sangro-river>, (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 16 August 2014.

<sup>27</sup> From *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War, Petrol Company* by A. L. Kidson, 1961, pp 292-295.

<sup>28</sup> From *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War, Petrol Company* by A. L. Kidson, 1961, pp 296-297.

<sup>29</sup> From *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War, Petrol Company* by A. L. Kidson, 1961, pp. 298-299.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p 300.

What happened at Cassino is well-known. It is remembered by New Zealanders as one of the most costly battles of the war. The 5<sup>th</sup> Army had earlier failed in their attempt to bypass it via a seaborne attack at Anzio, south of Rome. An American assault on Cassino in January 1944 had also been defeated by the Germans. Lieutenant-General Sir Bernard Freyberg, heading a New Zealand Corps, requested an aerial bombardment of Monte Cassino including its Benedictine monastery. It was to be a controversial decision and ultimately did little to weaken German defences. On 17 February, the Indian Division attacked from the north, the New Zealanders from the south. Only the 28<sup>th</sup> (Maori) Battalion got through to the town's well-defended railway station to the south of the town, but without support were ultimately forced to withdraw. In spite of another bombardment and additional assaults on the town, the Germans' defence held and Freyberg was ultimately forced to order his troops to stop the attack. In early April, the New Zealand Division withdrew, having suffered heavy losses.<sup>31</sup>

Ken recalls that on reaching the Volturno Valley, before Cassino, there was a temporary lull allowing time for football, sightseeing to Pompeii and trips into Naples, a war-scarred but bustling maritime city.<sup>32</sup>

In Naples, Ken was able to acquire a new outfit. "I bought myself a beautiful black wig, a red top, black dress, a pair of red ballet shoes, black net stockings and some long black net gloves."

There was frequent contact with American servicemen during this time, as they were camped in the same area.<sup>33</sup> So Ken put his new wig and dress to use by performing in drag at American barracks and in front of injured men in American hospitals; it proved an effective, popular morale booster. "I dressed up in drag and for music I had a gentleman who could play the banjo like no-one else on earth. He had a repertoire of about twenty four tunes that the Americans all knew. He would go flat out on the banjo and I would come out and do my little number to lots of hoots and whistles until I started to sing! My signature song was 'Glad Rag Doll'<sup>34</sup>. I used to sing the American numbers and the soldiers would join in. They thoroughly enjoyed it."

Of course, all this had to stop once the New Zealanders began to prepare for the assault on Cassino in early February, the New Zealand Corps<sup>35</sup> having been tasked with capturing the town of Cassino along with its craggy well-defended heights that included the Benedictine monastery.

Petrol Company moved forward to a new site near Mignano and on 18 February was busy collecting shells from an ammunition dump some 70 miles away to provide cover for 28 Battalion. In mid-March, they watched as American bombers dropped their deadly cargo on Cassino and its surroundings.

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<sup>31</sup> From *The Italian Campaign – Cassino*, <http://nzhistory.net.nz/war/the-italian-campaign/cassino>, (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 29 May 2014. Cassino cost the Division 343 deaths and over 600 wounded. Cassino finally fell to British and Polish troops with support from NZ artillery in May 1944.

<sup>32</sup> From *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War, Petrol Company* by A. L. Kidson, 1961, pp. 300-301.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p 301.

<sup>34</sup> A 1928 song composed by Milton Ager with lyrics by Jack Yellen and Dan Dougherty, which was written for the motion picture of the same name (released in 1929). Lyrics begin thus: All dolled up in your glad rags/But tomorrow may turn to sad rags/And they call you Glad Rag Doll! ... From International Lyrics Playground website, <http://lyricsplayground.com/alpha/songs/g/gladragdoll.shtml>

<sup>35</sup> The New Zealand Corps, with Freyberg as its commander, was formed in early February 1944 and was made up of the New Zealand Division, 4 Indian Division, an American armoured force and British, Indian and American artillery units. From *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War, Petrol Company* by A. L. Kidson, 1961, p 302.

In spite of all the action up front though, it was a relatively inactive time for the company.

At some point in proceedings, Ken was put to work in a new role as a second lieutenant's batman in 1<sup>st</sup> Ammunition Company<sup>36</sup>; the 1 NZ Ammunition Point was just across the road from Petrol Company's area. Ken had become friendly with a captain's batman, who one quiet night suggested they duck away to visit a nice Italian family he knew some distance away.<sup>37</sup> Ken says they took some food with them, hitched a ride on an American supply truck, met the family, shared a meal with them, and enjoyed the company of a couple of pretty Italian girls. After "a lovely night", Ken and his friend hitched a ride back to camp only to find it was "no longer there". According to Ken, the ammunition dump had been bombed in their absence, though Petrol Company's official history describes it as 'a fire'. Whatever the cause, the fire had raged for five hours and destroyed a vast amount of ammunition along with trucks, tents, bivvies and personal gear.<sup>38</sup>

The two men, dumbfounded by the destruction, went in search of their unit where it had been assumed they had died in the fire. There was nothing left of their trucks that had been parked between two piles of ammunition, one of cartridges and one of shells. "Luckily for us being a captain's batman and a lieutenant's batman all we got was a hard smack on the wrist."<sup>39</sup>

Cassino is remembered by Ken for its rain, mud, bomb holes - and a few close shaves.

"I remember we were sitting in the jeep one time on a high rise watching trucks unload down in the valley when the German 88s<sup>40</sup> cottoned on to us and started to destroy the stacks. We dived down behind the jeep with a tin hat on of course and there was a bit of a rattle. I looked up and one inch above my head was a shrapnel hole about the size of a dinner plate so I scuttled like the best of lizards down into a hole with some other troops."

On another occasion, Ken remembers sitting in his truck, some distance from the fighting, after having transported some troops. He was sitting in the cab having a smoke when the truck gave a lurch. He got out and found the canopy askew, then discovered what looked like an 88mm shell stuck in the bank. Fortunately, it was a dud.

Looking back decades later, Ken sometimes finds it hard to remember precisely what he was doing and when during the course of the Italian campaign and how his small part fitted into 'the big picture'. "You weren't personally told 'where' or 'why' or 'what' was going on. You just went where you were told and did what you were told to do. It's only after the war that ... you realise how big a war you were really in. I never had a vision, while I was there, of the whole thing."

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<sup>36</sup> In fact his army history records list him as having been posted to '1/Amm Coy' from the time of his arrival in Egypt in early September 1943 but, as he recollects it, he actually started off with Petrol Company in Italy.

<sup>37</sup> Ken cannot say for sure but thinks this family was in Naples.

<sup>38</sup> Over a quarter of a million rounds of machine-gun ammunition and about 6500 heavy calibre rounds went up in the fire. Two American soldiers died and another was badly wounded. From *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War, Petrol Company* by A. L. Kidson, 1961, p. 309.

<sup>39</sup> Ken also relates how one day, before the loss of the ammunition dump, he was with a line of men sitting on a pole over a latrine ditch with their trousers down when a low-flying Stuka came round the side of the hill. "Six bodies went backwards into the ditch ...!"

<sup>40</sup> 'The 88 mm gun was used by the Germans as an anti-tank, anti-aircraft, and artillery gun during World War II.' From <http://worldwar2headquarters.com/HTML/weapons/german/88gun.html>



## Onward Italy

What he does remember was the relief of reaching Rome after Cassino (which finally fell into Allied hands in mid-May). Rome had fallen to the Allies on 4 June, (two days before the D-Day landings in Normandy<sup>41</sup>). Many New Zealand servicemen were now able to enjoy a period of leave in Rome.

“I was still a batman so I drove my lieutenant to Rome. We parked there and he said to me ‘you have a week, so report back here in a week’s time.’ Ken toured ‘the sights’ – “I saw the lot”<sup>42</sup>. New Zealand had its own luxury hotel in Rome for the use of its troops<sup>43</sup> and so this is where Ken stayed and had his meals during the week’s leave. “There was a band playing all the time, it was very nice.”

In late June Ken had a brief stay in hospital<sup>44</sup> as a result of suspected food poisoning and afterwards returned to driving a truck with the 1<sup>st</sup> NZ Ammunition Company. Over the next few weeks they moved north-east via Terni, Spoleto, Foligno and Perugia, finally halting near Lake Trasimene.<sup>45</sup>

That summer, Ken remembers “a fairly easy run” through to Lake Trasimene and beyond. In many ways, his experience begins to sound more like that of a tourist than that of an army serviceman as the journey continues north.

“I’ve got a personal photo of the Leaning Tower of Pisa and we went to Siena<sup>46</sup> where they have the yearly horse races around the square. We went through Florence, which was a nice Italian town. It was a medieval sort of town with big solid buildings. Whenever we went through these places I’d go to the churches because there were always beautiful churches.”

Of course, this was no holiday with his company working hard to keep both ammunition and petrol moving to where it was needed. Unsurprisingly demand for both spiked as fighting intensified ahead of major engagements.<sup>47</sup>

After Florence had been taken, the company was tasked with assisting the 8<sup>th</sup> Army to move ammunition from a depot east of Siena to Iesi, located near the Adriatic Coast, travelling through Perugia and Foligno.<sup>48</sup> On the back of a postcard in Iesi, Ken drafted this message to his sweetheart back home: “The flat at the top of the stairs is where we

<sup>41</sup> ‘Assuredly, now, we were moving towards the end ... morale was on the ‘up and up’ From *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War, Petrol Company* by A. L. Kidson, 1961, p. 318

<sup>42</sup> The sights included Vatican City, Spanish Steps, the Colosseum and the Roman Forum.

<sup>43</sup> ‘It was a swell hotel previously and the furnishings remain here. The lounge contains the most comfortable armchairs and sofas it would be possible to get. The dining room is spotless, the table cloths are clean and altogether the place has a luxurious atmosphere.’ From *The Soldier Tourist* by Gunner N.H. (Joe) Brewer, 1999, pp 186-187.

<sup>44</sup> His army history sheet puts the date of admission as 25 June 1944 and date of discharge as 2 July.

<sup>45</sup> From *Journey Towards Christmas: Official History of the 1st Ammunition Company, Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force, 1939-45*, by S.P. Llewellyn, Historical Publications Branch, 1949, Wellington. This info is drawn from Chapter 20 – Through the Vineyards, p. 359

<sup>46</sup> ‘The official communique announcing that Florence was firmly in our hands was not issued until 22 August ... but the collapse of the Paula Line had decided the city’s fate, and in mid-August the Division started to assemble in a rest area near Castellina, ten miles north by west of Siena. We moved back on the 14th, occupying a sheltered, dust-free area by a small stream that was very pleasant to lie in during hot afternoons. From the 17th onwards there was generous day-leave to Siena.’ From *Journey Towards Christmas: Official History of the 1st Ammunition Company, Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force, 1939-45*, by S.P. Llewellyn, p. 367.

<sup>47</sup> ‘Between dawn and dusk we handled 34,000 rounds of 25-pounder. By the evening of the 30<sup>th</sup> [July, 1944]—we issued 47,000 rounds of 25-pounder that day—we had enough of everything at the ammunition point to meet any predictable demands, but there was no question of easing up. The guns kept firing: 27,500 rounds, 45,000, 28,000....’ Ibid, p. 362.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p. 367.

held the afternoon dance that I mention in one of my letters. The only dance I have had in Italy. Looking forward to and longing to dance again with you darling.'

The hard advance up the coast that followed saw Pesaro<sup>49</sup>, then Rimini<sup>50</sup> fall to the Allies. The men of 1<sup>st</sup> Ammunition Company were frequently required as 'first-line transport', taking ammunition to the firing line. Often the drivers had narrow escapes<sup>51</sup>.

At their camp at Cattolica, though, there was time for a little fun. A recreation centre was established, allowing for occasional light entertainment by men of the NZ Army Service Corps (ASC) Swing Band.<sup>52</sup>

By this time, Ken was also fully at ease with the familiar routines of life as a driver: "We were quite cosy. Your main job is to cart ammunition but there are lots of times when the truck is empty. You're not carrying it every day. There are long periods of rest and so forth. We always had two canvas bunks that we could fold up against the wall. At night, when the truck was empty, we would drop them down and we always had a primus<sup>53</sup>...We'd pump them up and hey ho, a truck was as warm as any house. We'd cook our meals on there. We always had a fry pan and a pot."

A well-stocked pantry box ensured there was always enough to eat.<sup>54</sup>

As well as carrying ammunition, he recalls sometimes carrying troops and Italian refugees<sup>55</sup>.

After Rimini, the company slogged its way ever northwards through mud and rain, enduring the ever-present threat of attack, (for the mountains to the east were still held by the Germans).<sup>56</sup> On 11 October, the New Zealand infantry crossed the River Fiumicino.

Not long after this, there was a major reorganisation of the NZASC which entailed 1st Petrol Company and 1st Ammunition Company each losing a section. No. 4 Platoon, the junior platoon, drew the short straw for 1<sup>st</sup> Ammunition Company. While some drivers were redeployed to reinforce other platoons, the rest were ordered back 'to Base' near Iesi.<sup>57</sup>

Ken remembers being at Forli that Christmas. It had fallen on 9 November with Faenza the next objective. Those who were there recall it as the best Christmas they ever had in the Army. Each platoon had a sit-down dinner in rooms decorated with flags and coloured streamers, where tables were laid out with oranges, silver paper and bottles of beer before a perfect Christmas dinner was served.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p. 368. Pesaro was taken by Polish troops on 2 September.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p. 371. 'Greek and New Zealand troops entered Rimini on the morning of the 21st and the battle moved on across the Marecchia River.'

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p. 371. 'One night a shell burrowed into the road and exploded beneath a lorry, lifting it off the ground but doing little damage.'

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p 373. 'Here you could write letters or read, and in the evenings, with the tea-urn bubbling in the corner, there were card parties, lectures, quiz sessions, sing-songs, and an occasional concert by the NZASC Swing Band ... Inside the recreation room—the *Albergo* we called it—all was warmth and light.'

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p. 373. 'When darkness came it was time to pull down the cover at the back of the lorry and begin searching for the primus pricker...'

<sup>54</sup> It contained emergency supplies along with food received from parcels sent to the men. The usual inventory included chocolate, soup, tinned food and coffee.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p. 370 'At almost every turn-off Italian refugees, sitting in carts loaded with furniture and bedding, waited patiently for an opportunity to use the road.'

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p. 373. There was truth in the subsequent verdict of a British infantryman: 'It weren't rain or bloody mountains held up advance. It were bloody Jerry sitting down behind spandau going blurp-blurp.'

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p. 376. This was not popular with the men. 'This was an appalling prospect—Siberia and the salt mines—but there was nothing to be said or done.' Yet their sojourn in Iesi passed pleasantly enough.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p. 395.

Christmas for Ken that year was memorable for a different reason: the Americans had arrived just before the big day, once more in need of a tap dancer.

“An American wagon arrived at camp headquarters and the call went out over the speakers for me to report to headquarters. I thought ‘what have I done wrong?’ When I got there they said ‘get your shoes, get your gear, you’re going to entertain the American forces in an international concert and you’re going to represent New Zealand.”

So he went along with the Americans. On Christmas Eve they took him to what he describes as a converted church. “It had a big vaulted ceiling. There was an Italian thirty piece orchestra, a host of entertainers. It had a beautiful marble floor. So I danced on this tile floor – every beat sounded like a machine gun. This huge auditorium of people clapped every step. I was in my element there. It was a fantastic experience.”

The highlight for Ken was a performance of *Ave Maria* by an Italian singer<sup>59</sup>.

That night he was billeted with the Americans. On Christmas Day, he dined with them at the American Red Cross Mess. Christmas dinner was a fine spread of roast turkey with cranberry sauce and gravy, mashed potatoes and peas accompanied by white wine followed by Christmas mince pies and cookies, nuts, figs and fruit.<sup>60</sup>

Next day he was delivered back to camp. “What a Christmas!”

January passed pleasantly enough, with little work to do. The streets were full of snow and the men passed their time queueing for the Metro Cinema, sweeping snow, or ‘taking a glass of something’.<sup>61</sup>

In the course of their travels, Ken recalls how some of the men had acquired piano accordions from a factory in one of the towns<sup>62</sup>. The men with the piano accordions got together and formed a band.

He believes it may have been around this time that they ended up putting on a show in the local theatre which ran for about a week.<sup>63</sup> “They had a picture first and then a show after, in front of the screen. We got dressed in our gear and got ready for the show behind the screen. We saw the picture from the back of the screen for the whole week, matinees and night shows. And the picture was ‘Fanny by Gaslight’.”

The band backed Ken who performed some solo tap numbers.

In March, Ken travelled to an area near Fabriano, where Nos. 1 and 2 Platoons had moved the Divisional Cavalry<sup>64</sup>.

<sup>59</sup> From the programme – *The American Red Cross presents “Christmas Fantasy”*. This was the night’s finale. Ken was the seventh performer that night and is described as ‘Master of Taps’. The programme shows two concerts were held: one on December 24, 1944 at 9pm and one on December 25 at 7pm. There is some information about the American program director Samuel J. Corrallo at this link:

<http://www.1973bitburgbarons.com/FOOTBALL/1969/1969%20Football%2022%20Oct.pdf>

<sup>60</sup> Unfortunately, neither menu nor concert programme states where this took place. Ken thinks it was Bari which is conceivable since men were being released there on furlough not long after this, in early Feb 1945. From *Supply Company Official History*, by P.W. Bates, 1955, Wellington, p. 336.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p. 400.

<sup>62</sup> Ken cannot recall the name of the town; perhaps it was Castelfidardo, near Ancona, famed for its piano accordians. See this link: <http://www.accordions.com/museum/>

<sup>63</sup> The Official History of Supply Company records how the Kiwi Concert Party helped to liven things up at this time and that films were also popular. It is not too difficult to imagine Ken performing here at this time. From *Official History of Supply Company* by P.W. Bates, 1955, p. 335. There is also an earlier account of the NZASC swing band performing after Cassino, in late April 1944, at Boiana Cinema and the Garrison Cinema, Isernia. It was described as a popular hit, made up of humorous sketches, choruses, songs, and solo items; this does sound like Ken’s type of show. (From *4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Reserve Mechanical Transport Companies*, by Jim Henderson, *Official History of NZ in the Second World War*, 1954, p. 314). Unfortunately, Ken cannot remember clearly when or where these performances took place; it is also possible they were staged even earlier, in Naples, before Cassino, as he initially suggests in the recorded interview.

<sup>64</sup> The night was spent at Albacina, where the villagers held a dance. Ibid, p. 401.

By April 1945, it was clear the war would soon be over, with the Allies very much ascendant in Italy. From the air, waves of United States' Liberators had sent bombs raining down, while the artillery - 'flashing and roaring' - was bringing an end to resistance on the ground.<sup>65</sup> The New Zealand division, at the head of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army, were at the forefront of the speedy advance now unfolding.<sup>66</sup>

It was around this time that Ken remembers arriving at Mestre on the mainland opposite Venice.<sup>67</sup>

"We were camping there for about a week. The first thing we said once we got there was 'right, we're going into Venice'. So twenty blokes hopped into my truck and away we went down the isthmus. We got half-way down and there was this British road block. They said, 'you can't go in there chum, there's still fighting'."

However, Ken says the guards eventually relented and let them through. They had no trouble once in Venice. Ken bought some Italian crystal and lace and spent time exploring St Mark's Square and its environs. He recalls that "German prices" still prevailed.

"If you wanted a lady of the night it only cost five lire which was sixpence so all the boys were rushing around a bit there. The hotel was equivalent to about three and sixpence a night so we lived in luxury for a couple of days. We had a lot of fun with a little bit of money!"<sup>68</sup>

At the same time that VE Day was being celebrated, the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Division was deployed on peacekeeping duties in Trieste. This was still disputed territory, with Yugoslavia claiming the port city. It led to an uncomfortable stalemate that lasted through to early June. Eventually the Yugoslav forces withdrew and the New Zealand forces were finally able to celebrate the end of the war in Europe.<sup>69</sup>

### At Trieste

Ken says the New Zealand forces were already occupying Trieste by the time he reached the city. "I still remember a gate across the entrance to the roadway with hands reaching through asking for chocolate. We made arrangements for an Italian girl to come and be our housemaid and she did all the cooking and washing and kept the inside of the truck nice and clean just for the food she could get. They were very hungry in Trieste." He later remembers being part of a convoy given the job of ferrying trucks and ammunition into Yugoslavia. "It was a bit eerie. We didn't know whether they'd let us come out or not."<sup>70</sup>

In spite of the squabble over Trieste, the New Zealanders still managed to have 'a surprisingly good time.'<sup>71</sup> Ken recalls taking leave, venturing into the mountains on twisty roads and into a pretty valley where he and his fellow travellers stayed in Madonna di Campiglio, a ski resort in northeast Italy. "The air was the most beautiful I

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<sup>65</sup> From *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War, Petrol Company* by A. L. Kidson, 1961, p 336. 'After that the infantry went in, with the New Zealand battalions storming across the Senio at the centre of the Eighth Army's drive...'

<sup>66</sup> From *Mates and Mayhem - World War II: Frontline Kiwis Remember* by Lawrence Watt, published 1996 by Harper Collins Publishers (NZ) Ltd, p. 186.

<sup>67</sup> Mestre is where Petrol Company had its headquarters, along with 3 Platoon.

<sup>68</sup> Another incident like this is described in the *Official History of Petrol Company*, by AL Kidson. See p. 340.

<sup>69</sup> From *Mates and Mayhem*, by Lawrence Watt, 1996, p. 188.

<sup>70</sup> Ken may be remembering this: 'Drivers without vehicles were employed in ferrying transport from Foligno to Trieste for UNRRA, 4 Yugoslavia.' From *Journey Towards Christmas: Official History of the 1st Ammunition Company, Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force, 1939-45*, by S.P. Llewellyn, p. 453

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, p. 447.

had ever breathed. It was just amazing. The hillsides were a mass of coloured flowers. It was the most beautiful place you could ever go to.”<sup>72</sup>

In late June, the company delivered its ammunition to a depot at Udine.<sup>73</sup>

### **Aix-en-Provence**

Whereas most of the company now moved south, Ken was despatched to Aix-en-Provence in France via Monaco, Cannes and the French Riviera. He says Aix was used as a kind of staging post where servicemen would go before taking leave to England and then boarding the ship home. A workshops’ base at a former German prison camp, still with its towers and barbed wire,<sup>74</sup> is where Ken left his truck and started a new job overseeing “petrol, oil and tyres” requirements for troop transport trucks coming from Italy to Aix-en-Provence, (and which would then go back again to collect more soldiers).

“I was at Aix for six months. It was a beautiful little town thirty miles from Marseille ... I also used to ferry men into Marseille for leave. It was a mad city. Everyone was travelling so fast, it was very busy.”

At the end of his service there, Ken was given the option of having leave to England or taking a ship directly back to New Zealand. “I never got to England.”

He headed back to Italy with some other servicemen. In Italy, they delivered their trucks to a large park full of military vehicles.<sup>75</sup> “But of course when our trucks got back there was not any equipment left in them. Somehow or other it got jolted out on the trip ... All the trucks were going to be given to the Ities so we thought we might as well make a little bit of hay, a little bit of money before we hopped on the ship. I had enough to buy some beautiful cameras and watches to bring home and that satisfied me.”<sup>76</sup>

### **Homeward Bound**

Ken remembers going to the nearest port to rendezvous with the ship that would take him home, M.V. Dominion Monarch. According to a souvenir magazine of the homeward voyage called *Monarch Memories*, the ship had left Southampton on 17 December 1945, before stopping at Naples (23 December) and then Taranto (Christmas Day), where 2000 Kiwis and South Africans boarded. The Monarch sailed the following afternoon, travelling home via Port Said (where the South Africans disembarked), through the Suez Canal to Port Tewfik where more New Zealanders came aboard, then onto Freemantle before reaching Wellington on 23 January 1946. (Dominion Monarch, originally built for Shaw, Savill and Albion to carry cargo and passengers, had made her maiden voyage to New Zealand in February 1939 but was used as a troop carrier during the war).

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid, p. 448. ‘A party of three travelled a thousand miles in search of a district suitable for mountaineering and ski-ing, finding one near Madonna di Campiglio, a village in the southern Dolomites.’ More parties of New Zealander servicemen visited this village over the following few months. Ken also recalls crossing the border into Switzerland.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, p. 451. ‘We were glad to be rid of the damned stuff.’

<sup>74</sup> Ken must be referring here to Les Milles internment camp near Aix-en-Provence. See *Aix-en-Provence: the dark side of France’s most beautiful town* Link:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/europe/france/10887179/Aix-en-Provence-the-dark-side-of-Frances-most-beautiful-town.html>

<sup>75</sup> Ken believes this may have been the British depot at Assisi.

<sup>76</sup> ‘...with agents of the black market prowling everywhere it would have been foolish to draw pay— foolish and rather priggish; for public opinion had removed the stigma of criminality from the sale of petrol and jeep tires and had even glamorised transactions of this kind, making them seem daring and clever.’ From *Journey Towards Christmas: Official History of the 1st Ammunition Company, Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force, 1939-45*, by S.P. Llewellyn, p. 450

Ken recalls there being a number of Italian brides amongst the Kiwi contingent on board the ship. It was a happy atmosphere for those now homeward bound and a concert party was soon formed. Ken jointly produced and performed in *Spray Play*, held in the Troop Recreation Room. The variety show, which opened on 9 January 1946, included an orchestra of piano accordions, guitars and drums.<sup>77</sup> “I was in the thick of it doing comedy sketches with one of the other artists and a song and dance with one of the female artists to entertain the troops on the way home<sup>78</sup>.”

It was a wonderful feeling to finally disembark on home soil.

“I remember running down a long boardwalk with a kit bag on my shoulder and a big box under my arm.”

According to his war history sheet, Ken was finally discharged on 7 April 1946, having been ‘home on leave’ up until that date.

### Post-war years

Ken well-remembers the sense of euphoria that came upon him during his first few days back in New Zealand. On his first night at home, he recalls walking from his mother’s lounge to a bedroom feeling as though he was floating six inches off the ground.

He and his fiancée Ngaire<sup>79</sup>, whom Ken had met before the war, were soon making plans to get married. After their wedding, the couple took over the family tearooms business at Pines Beach. They demolished the old premises and built a new modern grocery and milk bar, along with “a home to raise a family in”. Their first child was born soon afterwards. “But we found it wasn’t a seven day a week business – it wasn’t enough to keep us going – so we sold the shop to my brother and we moved back to town.”

Ken then found a job with a company called Mercers, working in the drawing office. In Christchurch, he and Ngaire had two more children.<sup>80</sup>

While it was “very hard” settling back into civilian life after the war, Ken feels he was fortunate to have had the tearooms business to start with.

Looking back though he realises he returned from the war “more cynical” and with a loss of faith in churches. “I saw how well they were looked after in Italy while the people starved. I wasn’t very happy with that.” What replaced it was a kind of faith in the environment itself - “the trees, the birds, the mountains, the land” – and an appreciation for peace. “I always say to everybody ‘you don’t know how lucky you are’. This is God’s country.”

For a time, Ken went back to sales work, selling fruit and vegetables to men working on hydroelectricity schemes in the Mackenzie Country.<sup>81</sup> In the early 1960s, he found work with Nestle, (staying there through to his retirement at the age of 60).

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<sup>77</sup> A shipboard newsletter published 10 January 1946 describes *Spray Play* as well-received ‘entertainment of good variety’ and ‘dancing by Ken Wright’ is listed as one of the notable performances.

<sup>78</sup> The other performer in the comedy sketches was ‘Major Seymour’, while the female performer was ‘Dorothy Church’. From Ken’s *Spray Play* souvenir programme.

<sup>79</sup> Ngaire Agnes Martin.

<sup>80</sup> Their children’s names are Linda Gaye-Libeau, now living in Auckland; Rayleen Ryan, who now lives in Bluff and is married with three children and five grandchildren; and Steven Kenneth Wright, a paramedic, who lives in Christchurch.

<sup>81</sup> ‘Lake Tekapo, the highest of the Mackenzie Country lakes (its maximum height is 712 metres above sea level), was first tapped for hydroelectric power in a project completed in 1951.’ From *The Encyclopedia of New Zealand, Story: South Canterbury places, Page 2 – Mackenzie Country*, link: <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/south-canterbury-places/page-2>

Sadly, Ngaire died of leukaemia while still a young mother and so the years afterwards must have been very busy for Ken with work having to be juggled around the needs of his family.

In the mid-1950s Ken was asked to judge tap dance classes for the Christchurch Competitions Association and then started to get requests to teach. This is how he ended up meeting his second wife, Vonnie<sup>82</sup>; she lived in Greymouth and began regularly bringing her niece all the way to Christchurch for Saturday lessons with Ken; Vonnie's niece was his first pupil. "She won every championship in the country at the age of twelve."

Eventually he ended up with 60 pupils; Ken says many of them went on to win competitions in the South Island, lower North Island and Auckland. He was still with Nestle at this stage as a travelling sales representative and found time to teach in the places where he stopped. "Instead of spending the nights in a bar, I taught two girls in Blenheim (who grew up to have their own school), a girl in Nelson (who finished up with the biggest Nelson school), and I taught on the West Coast."

On one of his trips, Ken bought a poodle for Vonnie; they ended up breeding and showing poodles for the next 20 years. He is currently Patron of the South Island Poodle Club.<sup>83</sup>

He and Vonnie - also a dancer (ballet and highland) - lived together for 10 years, and then were married. They built a house in Avonhead, as well as a large dance studio from which they ran their own dance school called Rite Rhythm.

When Ken turned 65, they decided to sell the dance school and retire to the West Coast "to fish and play golf". Unfortunately, Vonnie had a stroke. "So for the next twenty years I looked after her."

Ken did his last song and dance performance on his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2013. He also danced at his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. At the ages of 78 and 80, he won two Australasian championships in the veteran classes.

"I've always enjoyed dancing because it's so creative and of course I was successful and that's what made it even better."

He is a life member of the Christchurch Competitions Society<sup>84</sup>. The Ken Wright Challenge Cup is one of those competed for annually in the Tap Dancing Section of the competitions. Ken says he has also donated other cups and trophies over the years, (including one for top place-getters, known as 'Golden Taps').

Ken sometimes finds himself wondering what would have happened had he followed up "introductions from the Americans" to go over and perform in Las Vegas and Hollywood, rather than stay in New Zealand and settle down. "I might have been another Fred Astaire, but [I think] I would not have had as happy a life as what I've had. I had two beautiful wives and I have three marvellous children and lots beautiful, clever, intelligent grandchildren. I've even got great-grandchildren."

He has also changed more than a few lives along the way, whether by teaching tap or being the song and dance man who lifted spirits during the war and in the decades that followed.

Ken enjoys looking through his memorabilia that includes a laminated sheet from ANZAC Day, 2008. Pupils of Christchurch dance teacher Jan Ruardy - one of Ken's former pupils - attended that year and wrote of why Ken was special to them:

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<sup>82</sup> Veronica Gilmore (nee Goodall).

<sup>83</sup> See link: <http://dogsshowcase.weebly.com/sipc.html>

<sup>84</sup> See page 2, link: [http://www.chchcomps.org.nz/uploads/6/5/4/5/6545578/tap\\_dancing\\_2014.pdf](http://www.chchcomps.org.nz/uploads/6/5/4/5/6545578/tap_dancing_2014.pdf)

'During the war he drove military trucks but he is very special to us because of some other things he did. Mr Wright choreographed dance shows and entertained the soldiers to keep their spirits up during the war. Ken Wright came with us to the parade and he walked with the war veterans. Stage Door Dance Studio walked near the end of the parade. We were there in remembrance of the soldiers but also in remembrance of all the entertainers who gave their spare time between war duties to dance in shows like Mr Wright.'

*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.*

*This biography was compiled from an interview with Kenneth Raymond Wright on Tuesday, 9<sup>th</sup> December 2014, conducted at his home in Spreydon, Christchurch. The chronology of events in this account differs at times from that in the interview. This reflects adjustments made as a result of subsequent post-interview conversations with Kenneth, research of the official war histories and a review of his photos and memorabilia. The biography is therefore as accurate as time, memory and research allows.*



## PHOTOS FROM KEN'S COLLECTION



KEN'S TAP TEACHER, EDDIE HEGAN



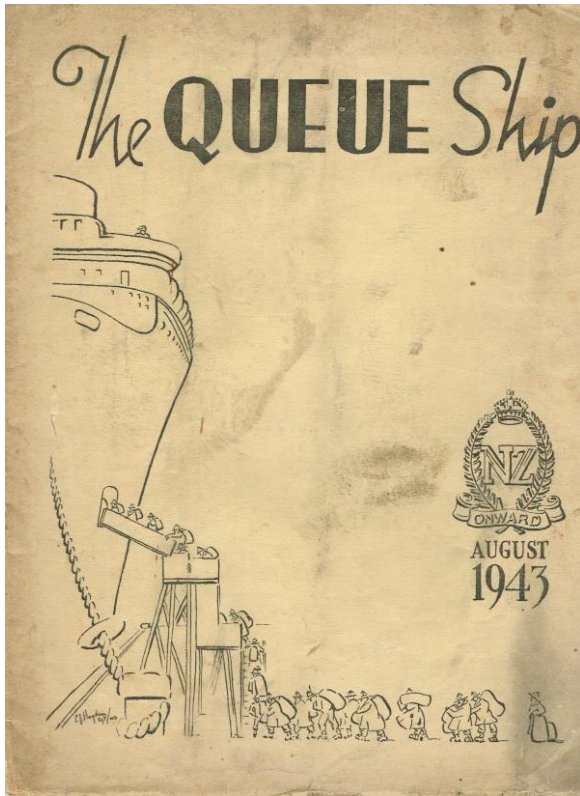
SPLITZKREIG II SOUVENIR PROGRAMME



TARANTO, PIAZZA DELLA VITTORIA. ON THE BACK, KEN HAS WRITTEN: 'VICTORY MEMORIAL, LAST WAR, SITUATED IN ONE OF THE MAIN SQUARES IN THE CENTRE OF THE TOWN'.



SOUVENIR POSTCARD OF BARI



THE QUEUE SHIP MAGAZINE, AUGUST 1943



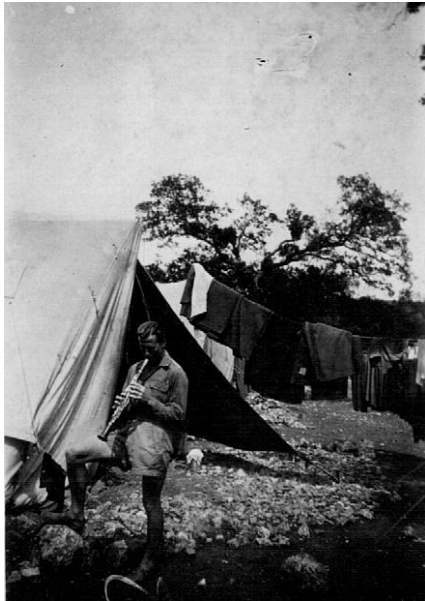
ST PETER'S, ON LEAVE IN ROME, JUNE 1944 (KEN IS 5<sup>TH</sup> FROM LEFT)



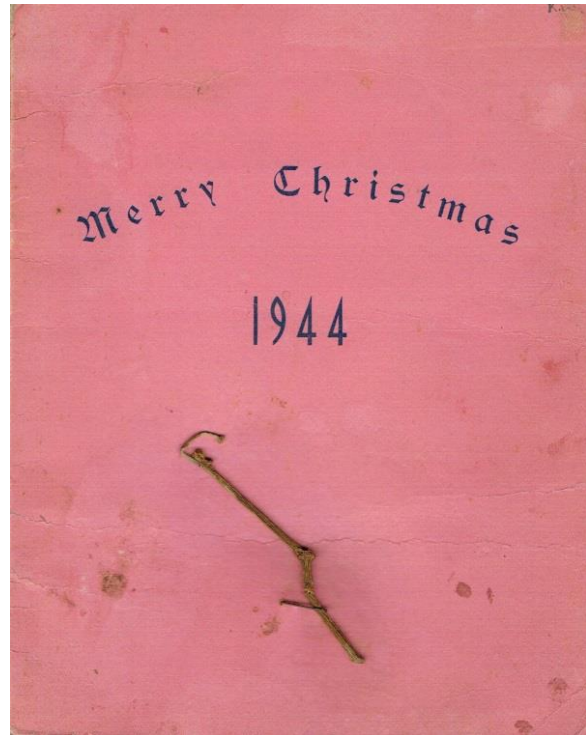
SOUVENIR BOXES OF PHOTOS, SIENA AND FLORENCE



IESI POSTCARD (WITH ROMANTIC MESSAGE ON THE BACK)



MUSICAL INTERLUDE, SOMEWHERE ON THE ROAD ... KEN'S NOTE ON THE BACK READS: 'AND THIS IS WHY WE CALL HIM BOOP.'



CHRISTMAS MENU 1944, STILL WITH HOLLY TWIG ON THE FRONT, AMERICAN RED CROSS MESS



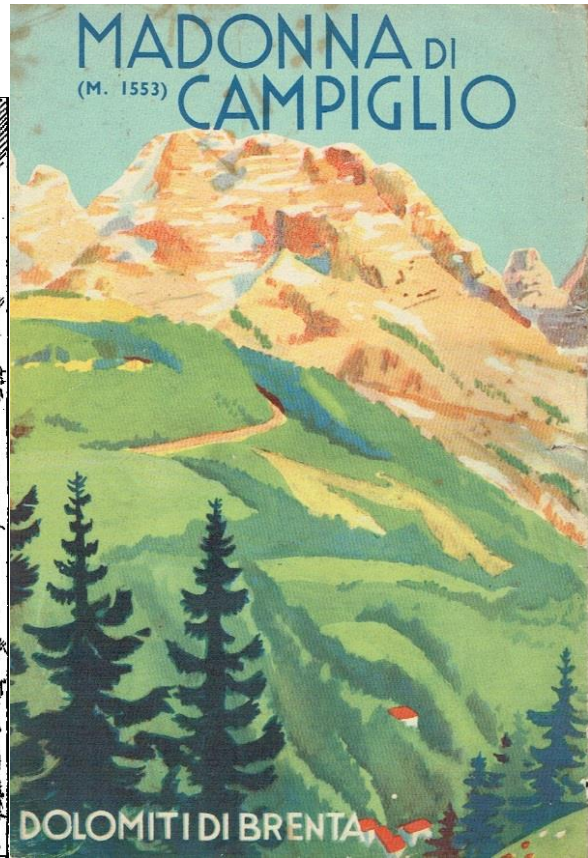
AMERICAN RED CROSS "CHRISTMAS FANTASY" PROGRAMME, 1944



'FABRIANO, 12-3-45'



CHRISTMAS CARD, 1<sup>ST</sup> AMMUNITION COMPANY, 2<sup>ND</sup> NZEF, 'ONWARD ITALY'



SOUVENIR FROM KEN'S TRIP INTO THE SOUTHERN DOLOMITES



CAMP AT AIX



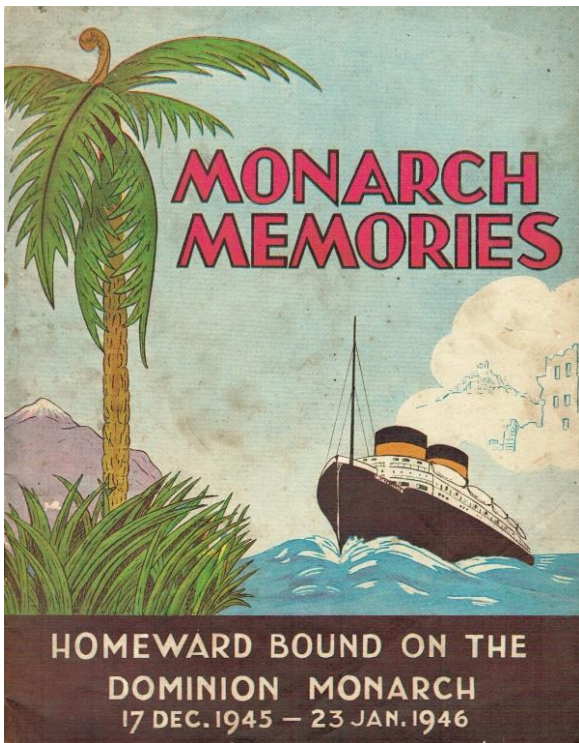
SERVICEMEN DEPARTING AIX-EN-PROVENCE FOR LEAVE IN ENGLAND



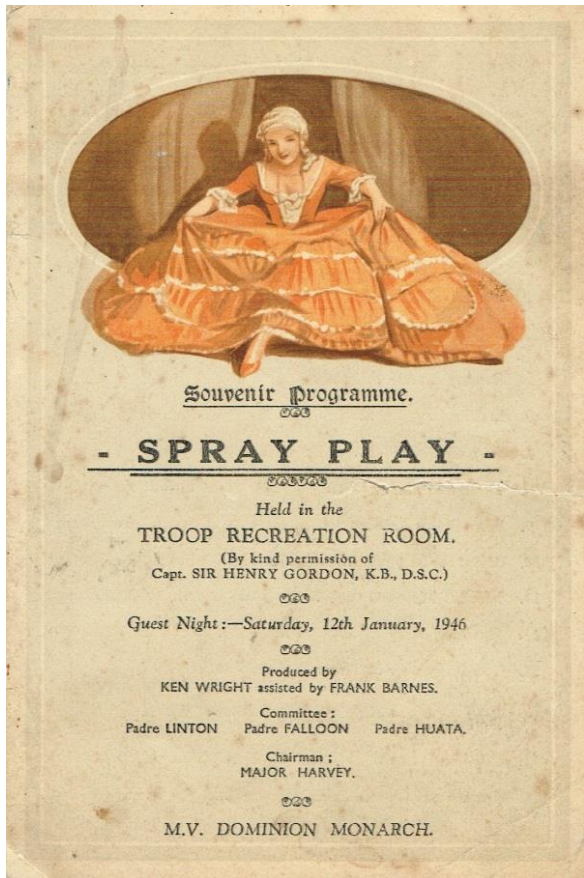
SOUVENIR BOX OF PHOTOS, AIX-EN-PROVENCE



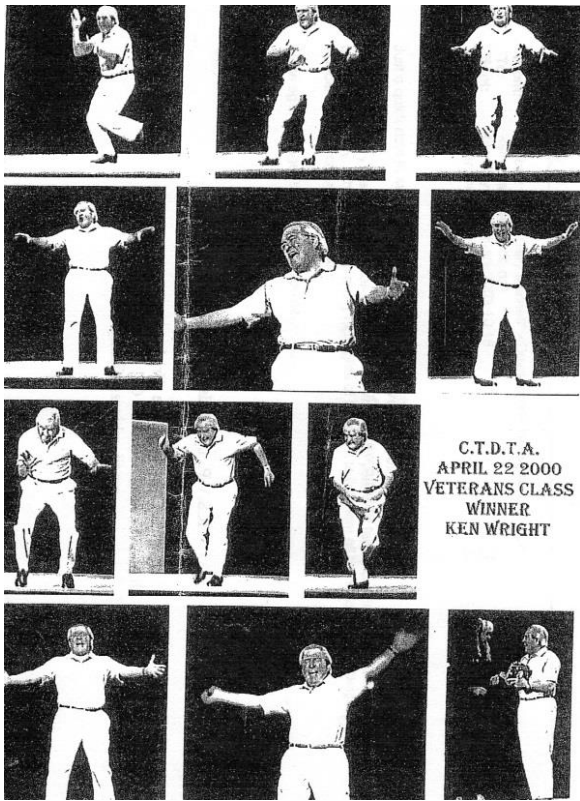
TRUCK PARK IN ITALY



SOUVENIR MAGAZINE, M.V. DOMINION MONARCH



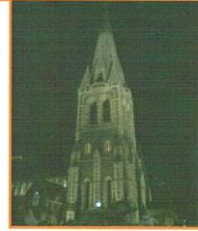
'SPRAY PLAY' SOUVENIR PROGRAMME



C.T.D.T.A.  
APRIL 22 2000  
VETERANS CLASS  
WINNER  
KEN WRIGHT

VETERANS CLASS WINNER, 2000

## Christchurch Dawn Parade ANZAC DAY 25th April 2008



Mr Ken Wright 1939



We met at 6.00am on Anzac Day morning to walk in the Parade in remembrance of all the brave soldiers who fought in the war.

**Mr Ken Wright**

was one of those Soldiers.

During the war he drove Military trucks but he is very special to us because of some of the other things he did .

**Mr Wright choreographed Dance Shows and entertained the Soldiers to help keep their spirits up during the war.**

Ken Wright came with us to the parade and he walked with the War Veterans.

Stage Door Dance Studio walked near the end of the parade. We were there in remembrance of the soldiers but also in remembrance of all the Entertainers who gave their spare time between war duties to dance in shows like Mr Wright.

Ken Wright taught our teacher Jan Ruardy to entertain and now Jan is teaching us. We dance in shows to entertain the elderly and sometimes Mr Wright comes too.

He is 85 years old now and he still performs Song and dance routines and entertains an audience well.

It was a very special morning for us because it was the first time our dance studio has walked in the parade. Having Mr Wright with us made our day even more meaningful and special.

Back: **Ken Wright and Jan Ruardy**  
Front: **Grace Taurima, Sophie Witteman and Charlotte Taurima.**

ANZAC DAY TRIBUTE, 2008