

IMAGES OF NEW ZEALANDERS
IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

THE FRONT LINE

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with Susan Lemish



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ABOVE | A medic offers water while checking on a wounded soldier in North Africa.

OZ TURLEY, 6TH FIELD REGIMENT,
FROM TONY GOODWIN

New Zealand and the Second World War

The war of 1939–45 remains the bloodiest conflict in human history. Even 80 years later, historians cannot be sure of the extent of loss of life,¹ though it is usually estimated as somewhere between 50 and 60 million people. In his impressive and appropriately titled history *All Hell Let Loose* Max Hastings suggests that ‘at least’ 60 million were killed, which was an average of 27,000 people for each day of the war between September 1939 and August 1945.² One thing is certain, though. This was truly a global struggle: hundreds of millions of the world’s inhabitants had their ordinary, peaceful lives shattered and were plunged into the ordeals and terrors of the most comprehensive war in history. New Zealand, despite its distance from the centre of events, was caught up in the whirlwind from the beginning. As James Belich has acknowledged, ‘New Zealand’s role in World War Two was less lethal than in World War One, but just as traumatic.’³

In 1939 New Zealand had a population of just over 1,600,000 and the country was still feeling the effects of the great economic depression that had haunted much of the preceding decade. When war broke out there were still 9000 people unemployed, with a further 22,000 on subsidised government work schemes.⁴ Despite these problems, New Zealand was an early entrant into the Second World War and, of the democratic nations that participated, fought for the longest period, along with Australia and Britain. The conflict is now generally accepted to have lasted 2179 days, from the German invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939 to the surrender of Japan on 15 August 1945. New Zealand was at war for all but three of those days.⁵

Despite its small population, New Zealand’s war effort was massive. More than 65 per cent of all men of military age were mobilised, and some 205,000 men and women, almost one in eight New Zealanders, served in the armed forces.⁶ In addition, though, more than 250,000 New Zealanders served in the Home Guard or various other reserve and emergency forces. As well as the 10,000 New Zealand women who joined the armed forces, a further 75,000 served with the Women’s War Service Auxiliary and 2700 with the Women’s Land Service. This level of

PAGE 2 | Members of the Women’s Royal New Zealand Naval Service (Wrens) parade down an Auckland street in February 1945.

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE ROYAL NEW ZEALAND NAVY, APD0108

PAGES 4–5 | New Zealand troops on a route march near Maadi Camp, Egypt.

NATIONAL ARMY MUSEUM, 1990-1010

human mobilisation was matched by the effect on the New Zealand economy: war-related expenditure consumed more than half of the national income between 1942 and 1944.⁷

Of those New Zealanders who joined the armed services during the war, most served in frontline combat units. The Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force (2 NZEF) was concentrated around a 10-battalion infantry division. This, later named 2 New Zealand Division, experienced much hard fighting and was part of military disasters in Greece, Crete, North Africa and Italy. A two-brigade infantry division, the 3rd New Zealand Division, took part in several amphibious landings in the Pacific in 1943 before manpower shortages forced its dissolution in late 1944. In the air, New Zealand fully supported the Empire Air Training Scheme (EATS), which trained aircrew in Canada for the Royal Air Force (RAF). As a result, New Zealanders flew in every theatre of war. At sea, much of New Zealand's contribution was made by providing personnel for the Royal Navy, which had a worldwide reach.

Wherever New Zealand soldiers fought in the war, nurses of the New Zealand Army Nursing Service (NZANS) were there to care for them. By May 1940, more than 1200 nurses had volunteered for overseas service. Between 1939 and 1945, 602 members of the NZANS worked abroad; many New Zealand nurses served with other medical organisations.⁸

The cost of such a heavy commitment was bound to be high. Of those who served, some 40,000 were killed, wounded or taken prisoner.⁹ The 11,671 members of the New Zealand armed forces and Merchant Navy who died during the war is a proportionately higher loss (per capita) than that suffered by Britain, and twice that of Australia — and neither of those two countries had an easy war.¹⁰



As THE LATE Richard Holmes observed, the Second World War was 'a photographer's war. Although there is abundant film . . . somehow it is the photograph that freezes the moment for posterity'.¹¹ Conflicts had been recorded on camera since the Mexican–American War of 1846 and reached a state of maturity during the First World War, but photography came of age during the Second World War. Some images are justly famous, capturing a moment in time for posterity: St Paul's Cathedral standing amid the smoke of the London Blitz, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill with a Tommy gun giving his V for victory sign, Australian infantry attacking through the smoke and dust of El Alamein, laden infantrymen wading ashore on the beaches of Normandy, the raising of the US flag at Iwo Jima. Unfortunately, as we now know, some of these — the Iwo Jima photograph, the Australians at El Alamein, and Douglas MacArthur wading ashore through the Philippines surf — were staged shots or re-enactments of earlier events. The fact that they were made at all, however, points to the power of the photograph in conveying an experience that we want to believe is true. That said, this book has tried to avoid using images that are not obviously candid and which are immediate.



ABOVE | In May 1940, the Second Echelon departed from New Zealand. This troopship, the *Andes*, is departing from the South Island. Unlike the First Echelon, which sailed to Egypt to be formed into the 4th Infantry Brigade and Divisional Headquarters, the

Second Echelon would disembark in the United Kingdom, which was then facing the threat of invasion. While in the United Kingdom it would be formed into the 5th Infantry Brigade.

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE ROYAL
NEW ZEALAND NAVY, OC 628

Most of the photographs used are from the magnificent collections of New Zealand's three service museums: the National Army Museum in Waiouru; the National Museum of the Royal New Zealand Navy at Torpedo Bay, Auckland; and the Air Force Museum of New Zealand at Wigram in Christchurch. A February 2019 appeal to the public to share their Second World War photographs produced an outstanding response; some of those images are included. The majority of the photographs in this book are published here for the first time.

In compiling the book, consideration has been given to include every battle and theatre in which New Zealanders fought. Also represented is the home front, which was a vital part of New Zealand's contribution to the Allied war effort. Live action shots are the gold standard of war photography but, as with the First World War, they remain incredibly rare — and those that do exist are frequently published. Such images have been used wherever possible and only when their veracity had been firmly established.

There were some surprises. One revelation was just how many German photographs appeared in soldiers' albums. These must have been developed from cameras 'ratted' from German prisoners of war or taken from the dead. Many German soldiers carried and used cameras, which were of the highest quality. Why New Zealand soldiers took the effort to develop the film and put the images in their albums is a puzzle, and a topic worthy of further investigation. Another discovery was the number of photographs taken by New Zealand prisoners of war. This was surprising as cameras were generally banned in prison camps.

All the captions have been written using the original annotations for guidance. In far too many cases, no information about an image was available and guesswork would have been required. Where there was no information about a photograph, it was not used.

Rather than organising the images chronologically, which could have been a little plodding, they have been grouped around campaigns and themes. It is hoped that this will sustain interest, avoid artificial breaks when campaigns crossed yearly boundaries, and help readers to home in on the sections that are of most interest to them and their families. There is a brief outline of each campaign or theme, to place the photographs in the context of both the war's progress and New Zealand's contribution.



IN EARLY SEPTEMBER 1939 a future New Zealand major-general named Howard Kippenberger listened to British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain announce, on the radio, that a state of war now existed between Britain and Germany. He turned to his young son and wife, whose face had gone white, and said, 'That's the end of the old pleasant days.'¹² While raising and training his battalion in Tai Tapu, outside Christchurch, Kippenberger, along with his infantry soldiers, heard 'Now Is the Hour' for the first time at a campfire concert. This haunting song of



ABOVE | Air-to-air view of a No. 98 Squadron Mitchell bomber heading off on a mission in 1944.

AIR FORCE MUSEUM OF NEW ZEALAND,
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farewell, also known as 'Po Atarau', was often played at the wharf as troopships left New Zealand. Kippenberger and his men felt 'for a moment the cold hand of fate and the shadow of the long years ahead'.¹³

Like any war, this one was strewn with moral complexities. The strategic bombing of Germany and the use of atomic weapons against Japan continue to cause concern and are hotly debated topics. Many people, however, still regard the 1939–45 conflict as a just war. In the words of Richard Holmes, 'Yet ultimately this was a war in which good was pitted against evil; and if the world which emerged from it brought tensions and tragedies of its own, surely we have only to consider the implications of an Axis victory to recognise the magnitude of the Allied triumph.'¹⁴ New Zealand contributed as much as it possibly could towards an Allied victory and took considerable risks in doing so. It was, as Michael King put it, the 'last great common denominator, the last intense experience that tens of thousands of people would share, and one whose rationale was accepted by the country as a whole'.¹⁵

This photographic record reveals much about a critical period in New Zealand's history when most of the country was united in a common cause while, for six long years, all hell really was let loose.



ABOVE | Hitler causes a war.
German troops advance into
Poland in September 1939.
This photograph and the three
that follow are from a German
propaganda album held at
the National Army Museum in
Waiouru.

NATIONAL ARMY MUSEUM, 2000-973

At War Again

On 1 September 1939, after fabricating an attack by Polish soldiers on a German radio station, German military forces invaded Poland. This deliberate move, designated 'Case White' by Germany, was the culmination of the diplomatic and international crisis that had gripped Europe since the Nazis and Adolf Hitler came to power in January 1933. Determined to reverse the outcome of the First World War and to dominate Europe, Nazi Germany had set out on a path that was certain to lead to war. After allowing Germany generous concessions under their policy of appeasement, which aimed to prevent war by redressing some of the grievances Germany felt about the Treaty of Versailles that ended the First World War — including the remilitarisation of the Rhineland, the right to rearm, the forced union with Austria and the occupation of Czechoslovakia — Britain and France had finally decided enough was enough. Poland would be their line in the sand. On 31 March 1939, both nations announced a unilateral guarantee of support to Poland should it be attacked. Similar guarantees were also later offered to Greece and Romania.

Hitler, however, was determined to have his war and to take the Lebensraum, the territory in Eastern Europe to which he felt the Germans were entitled. On 22 August he announced that Germany and the Soviet Union had signed a non-aggression pact. This pact between two obvious enemies was 'a diplomatic coup . . . that shocked the world'.¹ A secret protocol of the pact divided Eastern Europe, including Poland, between the two countries. Hitler now felt that the way was clear for Germany's invasion of Poland. He did not expect Britain and France to honour their commitment; it was a critical miscalculation.

The British government, determined to stand firm on this latest violation of international law, immediately issued an ultimatum for Germany to begin withdrawing its forces. When this expired at 11 a.m. on 3 September 1939 a disillusioned and gloomy Neville Chamberlain announced to the world that Britain was at war with Germany.

Britain's decision left the New Zealand government with a grave choice. Chamberlain's declaration of war made it clear that he was speaking for the British government alone. He announced in the House of Commons that 'this

country' and, not the Commonwealth, was at war with Germany.² The dominions, which included New Zealand, were regarded as autonomous communities responsible for their own domestic and external affairs. In September 1939 they faced a stark choice: either join Britain at war or declare their neutrality.

Neither New Zealand nor Australia hesitated. Australia alone of the dominions, under its Anglophile Prime Minister Robert Menzies, adhered to the principle that Britain's declaration of war applied to all the king's loyal subjects. This meant that Australia was automatically at war. It was surprising that Menzies, trained in the law, made such a constitutional error. New Zealand's response, though it followed parliamentary procedure, was equally speedy. The Cabinet met as soon as the formal notification from Britain was received, just before midnight on 3 September. The next day the governor-general dispatched a cable to London, stating that New Zealand was also at war with Germany and had been from the time the ultimatum expired. New Zealand was one of the first democratic nations to enter the war, alongside Britain, France and Australia. South Africa joined the war effort three days later and Canada did so after seven days. Éire was the sole British dominion that remained neutral throughout the war.



IT WOULD BE A MISTAKE to conclude that New Zealand's rapid declaration implied little thought was given to such a grave matter or, even worse, that it was a case of blind obedience. New Zealand was very much part of the British world and it was in New Zealand's interests to protect it. Historian Ian McGibbon has identified three key influences behind the government's decision and why it was almost universally supported: a desire to stand with British kith and kin; a need to protect New Zealand's economic and physical security, which was heavily dependent on Britain; and the recognition that aggression by lawless states had to be resisted. It was a combination of self-interest and ideology. 'Each on its own might have impelled New Zealand into the war; together they amounted to a powerful basis for action, and ensured almost universal acceptance of the government's decision for war.'³ These reasons, and New Zealand's independent stance, were stressed in one of the most impressive and important speeches ever made by a New Zealand prime minister. On 5 September 1939, an ailing Michael Joseph Savage said:

Not in anger but in sorrow, not in light heartedness, but with heavy hearts, not in hatred but with a grave sense of great responsibility to mankind and to the future of humanity, not in malice and revenge,



ABOVE | German soldiers goose-step in a victory parade, 1939.

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RIGHT | German Mark II light tanks on parade in Warsaw, Poland, in 1939; Hitler takes the salute in the centre background.

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ABOVE | The cavalry rides out of shot as Hitler takes the salute. Despite the propaganda, the German Army in 1939 was primarily an infantry force and still depended on horses for its mobility.

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