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New Zealand's politico-military leadership and the war in the Mediterranean theatre, 1938 to May 1943

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New Zealand's Politico-Military Leadership
and the War in the Mediterranean Theatre,
1938 to May 1943

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Abstract

This thesis essentially concerns the years from 1938, as the government in Wellington was deciding on its responses to the burgeoning crisis in Europe, until May 1943 when the New Zealand House of Representatives made the decision to retain its main (Second) Division in the Mediterranean theatre of war. It is concerned with the politico/military leadership of New Zealand during this time. At the outbreak of the Second World War, New Zealand was in the throes of a crisis. It had just secured a loan from Britain on quite onerous terms and its prime minister, Michael Joseph Savage was ailing with severe health issues. Yet by 1945, and with a population of just 1.7 million, it had made an impact out of all proportion to its size during the conflict, was much lauded as a founder member and supporter of the United Nations and treated with esteem in the post-war corridors of global power. Arguably, in 1945, New Zealand stood at the most influential moment in its history, having attained what historian F.L.W. Wood characterised as 'small power rampant' status.

It is argued that this transformation in status came about as a result of its commitment to the Allied cause, notably during the onerous years of 1941 and 1942, as exemplified by the fighting ardour of its men at these crucial times and its political and military leadership. From the outbreak of war this leadership, despite severe misgivings at times, maintained its decision to align itself alongside the imperial strategic doctrine of concentrating its forces in the essential theatre of war. This thesis is essentially a thematic chronology of how Wellington negotiated the vicissitudes of this period, all the while acting, within the constraints of coalition warfare, as an independent nation with its own interests. A number of significant additions to the historiography are identified.

It reveals the patent inadequacy of Michael Savage as prime minister in a time of developing global crisis, and the fortuitousness that during the whole duration of the Second World War

its *de facto* and official leader, Peter Fraser, was like his British counterpart, of a quality commensurate to the dire times.

The problematic relationship with its nearest neighbour and fellow dominion, Australia, whose condescension towards New Zealand throughout 1938 and 1939 is chronicled, and how this was rudely transformed by the Dominion's decision to despatch its expeditionary force without consulting Canberra. It also identifies an overlooked aspect behind Prime Minister Menzies last-minute, forlorn appeal for this decision to be delayed.

Domestically during his first year in leadership, firstly as Acting and then actual Prime Minister, Fraser displayed his craft, subtlety and ruthlessness in establishing New Zealand on the path he wanted his country to follow. By July 1940 he had established conscription and some form of a coalition government. Simultaneously to these intense negotiations, he was having equivalent ones with London and Canberra over the sailings of the US2 and US3 troop convoys.

From 1941, with an increased confidence and not prepared to uncritically defer to British command, Fraser visited the Middle East and London and gained a comprehensive insight into imperial command. He questioned the whole premise of the Aegean campaigns and furthermore, his reservations about relative aircraft numbers in the weeks before Crusader caused the most profound anxiety in Whitehall and Cairo, lest the New Zealand Division be withdrawn.

Bernard Freyberg, brought up in New Zealand, but then following the First World War became a British general officer, was appointed to command the New Zealand Expeditionary

Force (NZEF). He is revealed to have misled his government over the Greece expedition and it is contended that there was a distinct Anzac dimension to this deception. Following a severe admonishment by Fraser, and a reiteration of his responsibilities in keeping Wellington informed. He firstly regained his military reputation by his standout leadership in the Crusader campaign, and in the following months, by his actions in his dealings with a completely unsuitable Commander-in-Chief (General Auchinleck), and thus regained the trust of his government.

Finally, following the Japanese entry into the war there was deep anxiety within New Zealand, with voices calling for the Second Division to be returned to the Pacific. Throughout 1942, on three main occasions Churchill contrived to avoid this scenario and was successful in the sense that the New Zealand House of Representatives, in the December, decided to keep its troops in the Mediterranean theatre at least until victory was achieved in North Africa. Following this until April 1943, Churchill was unrelenting in his efforts to evince a retain decision, but these had effectively gone as far as they could. With a month to go before Wellington's parliamentary decision, Fraser, who it is argued almost certainly wanted a retention outcome for some months before, took the lead on this issue and skilfully guided the way to achieve this outcome.

Acknowledgements

This thesis is the product of my own layman interest in the exploits of the Second New Zealand Division, extending now for thirty years, and the particular generosity of three historians. First is Andrew Stewart, formerly Professor of Modern Conflict History at the Defence Studies Department (DSD) of King's College, London, now the Principal of the Military and Defence Studies Program, at the Australian National University, Canberra. In 2014 he generously 'took a punt' on a novice historian to supervise me, provide support and encouragement and prevented me from descending down too many 'rabbit-holes'. His constant good cheer for five years, until January 2020, is something of which I am forever grateful.

Ashley Jackson, Professor of Imperial and Military History, also at the Defence Studies Department of King's College, has by quirk of fate bookended this project. He supervised the dissertation element whilst I was undertaking a Post-Graduate Certificate in Historical Studies at Oxford University in 2013, and generously invited me to a workshop on the role of the dominions in the Second World War. This it must be said changed everything and afforded the germ of an idea that I could undertake a PhD. He has since January 2020 taken over the supervisory responsibilities from Andrew Stewart providing the most valuable guidance and suggestions in improving the final product.

Whilst I was undertaking my archival research in Wellington, John Crawford, the New Zealand Defence Force Historian, afforded valued acumen into possible avenues of research, as well as enlightening me as to the existence of the transcripts of the 1969 John Henderson interviews with about a dozen of the prominent New Zealand leaders of the Second World War. He additionally kindly invited me to give a paper at the 2020 conference he organised

in Wellington, 'Heavy and Continuous Sacrifice, New Zealand, Its Allies and the Second World War'.

Much gratitude is also due to Jonathan Fennell, Reader in Modern History at the Defence Studies Department of King's College, and additionally my second supervisor. He has provided an invaluable insight into the factors behind the motivation of the men of the NZEF as well as a perceptive critique of this thesis. Glyn Harper, Professor of War Studies at Massey University, enhanced my understanding of the actions of the New Zealand Division by twice delving into his archives and notes relating to points I identified in two of his books.

I used a number of archives in both New Zealand and Britain and am forever in wonderment at the work of the librarians and archivists in their cataloguing and organisation of the collections I accessed. I am profoundly grateful for all they provided and help in accessing particular files for me. I am most appreciative for the facilities and help received in accessing books at the four main libraries I used. The Maughan Library of King's College, London, Senate House Library of the University of London, notably its Commonwealth Studies section, the University Library of Cambridge and the Hobson Library at the JSCSC, Shrivenham. The latter two also provided access to theses by Iain Johnston-White and Christopher Pugsley respectively.

In New Zealand the staff were unfailingly helpful and considerate at Archives New Zealand and the Alexander Turnbull Library of the National Library of New Zealand, both in Wellington, plus the Kippenberger Military Archive and Research Library, of the National Army Museum, Waiouru. I am also most appreciative of the help I received by archivists in retrieving the broadcasts of Prime Minister, Michael Joseph Savage at Ngā Taonga Sound &

Vision, Wellington and a 1938 copy of the *Auckland Weekly News* by Auckland Central Library.

The British collections accessed were the National Archives, Kew where I perused relevant files from the Dominions Office, Cabinet Office, Premier Papers, Foreign Office, War Office and Admiralty. At the Churchill Archives, Cambridge were the Chartwell Papers of Sir Winston Churchill, the Bodleian Library Special Collections, Oxford housed the papers of Sir Harry Batterbee and the John Rylands Library, University of Manchester those of Field Marshal Sir Claude Auchinleck. Additionally, at the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College London, were the papers of General Sir Richard O'Connor, Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke and Captain Sir Basil Liddell Hart.

Acknowledgement is also due to my two Headteachers at Davenant Foundation School, Loughton, Chris Seward and Adam Thorne, who allowed me timetable flexibility for visits to New Zealand, my supervisor and conferences.

In a previous academic life I undertook a PhD in Quaternary geology at the then University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, supervised by the late David Q Bowen, formerly Professor Emeritus at the School of Earth and Ocean Sciences, Cardiff University. The enthusiasm and scholarship he exemplified is something I greatly treasured, and whilst undertaking this thesis I realised that whatever rubbed off on to a young geology PhD student then, has in later life never left me. In many ways the interrogation of geological exposures in the field and laboratory is not very different from performing the same of historical documents and I have been constantly thankful for that life-changing experience.

Looking back at what seems an age at times in the undertaking of this odyssey, I have been constantly fortified by the encouragement of my family. My three children, Eleanor, Rosalie and Patrick, and partners Tom and Sam provided constant cheeriness and encouragement. As for my wife Jean, who must at times have wondered what had got into her husband as he delved and travelled, both metaphorically and in reality to New Zealand for six years, her unconditional love and tolerance made the finishing line possible, and with much love this thesis is dedicated to her.

Abbreviations

AFV	Armoured Fighting Vehicles
AIF	Australian Imperial Force
AOC-in-C	Air Officer Commander-in-Chief
BEF	British Expeditionary Force
BGS	Brigadier General Staff
BTE	British Troops in Egypt
C-in-C	Commander-in Chief
CGS	Chief of General Staff
CID	Committee of Imperial Defence
CIGS	Chief of Imperial General Staff
COC	Council of Cabinet
COD	Council of Defence
CoS	Chief of Staff
COS	Chiefs of Staff
CCOS	Combined Chiefs of Staff
CRA	Commander Royal Artillery
DCGS	Deputy Chief of General Staff
DLP	Democratic Labour Party
DMO	Director of Military Operations
EATS	Empire Air Training Scheme
FOL	Federation of Labour
GHQ	General Headquarters
GMT	Greenwich Mean Time
GOC	General Officer Commanding
GSO1	General Staff Officer (Grade 1)
HMS	His Majesty's Ship
HMAS	His Majesty's Australian Ship
LRDG	Long Range Desert Group
MEC	Middle East Command
NZEF	New Zealand Expeditionary Force
ONS	Organisation for National Security

PACC	Peace and Anti-Conscription Council
PDC	Pacific Defence Conference
PEFRA (PEter FRAser)	Fraser's telegrams to Churchill
RAF	Royal Air Force
RMS	Royal Mail Ship
UAP	United Australia Party
US (convoys)	Australia to Suez Canal convoys
WDF	Western Desert Force
WINCH (WINston CHurchill)	Churchill's telegrams to Fraser

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Introduction

By 1945 and with a population of just 1.7 million, New Zealand had made an impact out of all proportion to its size during the Second World War. It was much lauded as a founder member and supporter of the United Nations, and its Prime Minister, Peter Fraser, and other politicians and officials were treated with esteem in the post-war corridors of global power. Arguably, it stood at the most influential moment in its history, having attained ‘small power rampant’ status.¹

This change in New Zealand’s prestige and the regard that it engendered was achieved by its commitment in the Mediterranean theatre, notably in 1941 and 1942; those inauspicious years for the Allied coalition in North Africa and the Aegean. This was when the presence of dominion troops during times of imperial overstretch, in both men and *matériel*, was crucial in the theatre principally to defend the strategically pivotal Suez Canal. The elevated status of New Zealand was a result of the well-recognised martial ardour of its manhood, and their significant contribution to eventual victory in North Africa. Secondly, and arguably less appreciated, was the sagacity of its politico/military leadership, who fully appreciative of the imperial-dominion strategic framework that New Zealand operated in, directed its over-sized contribution to victory.

Thesis Focus

It is this leadership that is the subject of the thesis and it is almost exclusively focused on the Mediterranean theatre of war, from the Munich crisis of September 1938 to eventual Allied victory in North Africa in May 1943. It comprehensively analyses how the New Zealand Government acted upon its roles within the Imperial framework as set out, and most

¹ F.L.W. Wood, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45. Political and External Affairs* (Wellington, 1958), 370.

importantly, the adjustments made reflecting its changing interpretation of that task. It shows that tentatively from 1940, and definitively in 1941, under the stress of events emerged a distinctive New Zealand independent policy-making strand. Though willing to repose to Imperial and later Imperial/American strategic power and make a full-hearted contribution to victory, with the concomitant sacrifices that would entail, Fraser ensured that a New Zealand voice was heard.

The thesis core revolves around the multi-axes of Wellington-London, Wellington-Canberra, Wellington-Cairo and London-Cairo diplomacy and politicking. It thus exposes the complex blow-by-blow, trans-hemispheric and trans-Tasman interplay of the Dominion's communications with its coalition partners. Significantly its originality is aided by the thematic structure, providing an essential focus on certain themes. Thus, supplementary material augments the appreciation of existing known events, enhanced by the discovery of previous unknown ones. Therefore a greater insight into the profound decisions made by the leadership is afforded, hence enriching the historiography.

This leadership was dominated by Fraser who was particularly vocal in ensuring that the safety of his nation's troops would not be compromised during their oceanic transits, nor be materially disadvantaged in battle. Despite extreme anxieties over the advance of Japan in early 1942, the leadership stuck to Allied grand strategy, and with conspicuous political skill, Fraser garnered the support of the New Zealand House of Representatives in May 1943 to retain the Second New Zealand Division in the Mediterranean theatre of war. All this was greatly appreciated by both Churchill and Roosevelt.

Much of the thesis's content mirrors the two outstanding historical works on the politico-military relationship of New Zealand during this time, F.L.W. Wood's 1958 *Political and*

External Affairs in the Official Histories series, and Gerald Hensley's *Beyond the Battlefield*.² The former had 'unrestricted access' to New Zealand sources and produced an extremely detailed account of internal politics and foreign policy, especially valuable in chronicling the intricacies of domestic debates in 1940 in Chapter Three. However, though authoritative in that latter aspect, it is limited by its lack of British sources being subsequently described by Hensley, as 'like listening to [just] one end of a telephone conversation'.³ Wood was also reticent in identifying any shortcomings in the leadership of Savage. Hensley's opus, published in 2009, corrected many of these limitations, and as befits a former Head of the Prime Minister's Department he had access to an increased range of documents and some fascinating anecdotes.

Both the above works covered the whole war, incorporating both hemispheric theatres in which the Dominion played a part. This thesis, however, confines itself to the period from the pre-war years to May 1943, encompassing just the British theatre of war in the Mediterranean/Middle East. It is additionally aided by two other excellent works. W.D. McIntyre's *New Zealand Prepares for War*, provides a detailed narrative of New Zealand's defence and strategy between the wars especially helpful in Chapter One.⁴ The biography of Peter Fraser by Michael Bassett and Michael King, *Tomorrow Comes the Song* is a work of considerable erudition supplying valuable insights into Fraser's life, and used in all chapters.⁵ Three of the Campaign series in the Official History, W.G. McClymont's *To Greece*, W.E. Murphy's *The Relief of Tobruk* and J.L. Scoullar's *Battle for Egypt*, provided much valuable material, notably their deliberations on the inherent tensions in the Middle

² Wood, *Political and External*; Gerald Hensley, *Beyond the Battlefield. New Zealand and its Allies 1939-45* (North Shore, 2009).

³ Hensley, 12.

⁴ W. David McIntyre, *New Zealand Prepares for War. Defence Policy 1919-39* (Christchurch, 1988).

⁵ Michael Bassett & Michael King, *Tomorrow Comes the Song. A life of Peter Fraser* (Auckland, 2000).

East Command (MEC) NZEF relationship.⁶ Paul Freyberg's biography of his father, *Bernard Freyberg, VC: Soldier of Two Nations*, though a work of filial piety, possesses much worthwhile and original material and it is used notably in Chapter Six.⁷

Thematic approach

The thematic perspective was considered most suitable, though a strong chronological thread is retained. In the context of the seminal periods and events, the politico-military leadership of New Zealand is examined through the prism of four themes: Theme I focuses on the political leadership required to garner support and prepare the Dominion for the oncoming crisis, from 1938 (with a brief diversion to 1936-37) until mid-1940. It explores the character and contrasting actions exhibited by New Zealand's first two Labour Party prime ministers. Theme II is virtually contemporaneous but focused predominantly on New Zealand's at times problematic relationship with its trans-Tasman neighbour, fellow dominion and oft-cited 'closest ally', Australia.⁸ Themes III and IV are effectively parts one and two of how the two prominent New Zealand military and political leaders, Prime Minister Fraser and General Freyberg, handled their interrelationships and responsibilities with British command, and each other, in two periods. The first concerns that up to autumn of 1941, during which a crucial change of overseeing approach occurred in Wellington, and the second from late 1941 until May 1943, when significant dominion equality was achieved.

Theme I on the political leadership consists of three chapters arranged chronologically from the election of Michael Joseph Savage in 1935, until the middle months of 1940 when his

⁶ W.G. McClymont, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War, 1939-45, To Greece*, (Wellington, 1959); W.E. Murphy, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War, 1939-45, The Relief of Tobruk* (Wellington, 1961); J.L. Scoullar, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War, 1939-45, Battle for Egypt* (Wellington, 1955).

⁷ Paul Freyberg, *Bernard Freyberg V.C. Soldier of Two Nations* (London 1991).

⁸ McIntyre, *Prepares*, 239.

successor, Fraser, established his new ministry at a moment of keenly felt imperial crisis. Chapter One deals exclusively with the well-meaning but profoundly unsuitable Savage from his assumption of office until August 1939, when he had to stand aside for health reasons in favour of his deputy. Chapter Two examines the latter months of 1939, with Fraser, a man cut from a different cloth, taking the reins as Acting Prime Minister and almost immediately providing grip and direction for his country as war broke out. His performance at the Dominion Ministers Meeting in London, much neglected by historians, provided the essential direction for his nation's path in the war. Chapter Three follows him during the first half of 1940, a period in which he asserted greater control in preparing his nation for war alongside an increasingly ailing Prime Minister. Once Fraser attained the premiership after Savage's death, he firmly established his own position, and then confronted his party's twin *bêtes noires*, conscription and coalition.

Theme II on trans-Tasman relations comprises two chapters. Chapter Four chronologically parallels the first two up to the end of 1939, focusing on New Zealand's efforts in seeking greater liaison amid Australian condescension, and the events leading up to the despatch of the First Echelon, New Zealand Expeditionary Force (NZEF). Chapter Five is essentially a continuation, contemporaneous to Chapter Three, in dealing with the first half of 1940. It addresses New Zealand's renovated relationship with its neighbour and the arduous negotiations that ensued, principally over the convoy sailings up to September 1940. Also involved in this intricate interplay was Britain, which sometimes had differences of view with both Pacific dominions, adding further complexity to the resultant decision-making.

Themes III and IV are scenes one and two of the dynamic and changing dominion-metropole relationship, from one of general acquiescence to London's wisdom and judgement, possibly

with overstated deference, to an emerging critical capability on the part of New Zealand. In Theme III, Chapter Six relates to General Freyberg, and his dealings with the secondary military capital of the Empire at the time, Cairo. As a dominion commander, he was subordinate both to his government and the British Middle East Command (MEC), and if any disputations arose, aided by a charter provided by the War Cabinet, the former had precedence. It begins in late 1939 with his appointment as GOC, and at first his dual role was uncontroversial and worked well. But during the latter months of 1940, fraught interactions occurred with MEC and he needed to stand by the terms of his charter. However, more controversially, his concurrence with the British proposal for New Zealand participation in the Greece expedition and his decision to effectively deceive his government meant the opposite pertained. In the summer of 1941, his stock had reached its nadir both militarily with the British, and politically in Wellington. After frank discussions with the Prime Minister and a reiteration of his command responsibilities, a new relationship was established that lasted for the remainder of the war.

Chapter Seven is concerned with Fraser in 1941, now established as New Zealand's leader, and especially highlights his transformation from February 1941, of almost uncritical acceptance of British decision-making, to a much more judicious and interventionist approach in his dealings with Whitehall by June. This was evident in his probing of the premise behind the Greece and Crete campaigns, and notably his dissatisfaction over the ratio between Allied and Axis aircraft figures preceding Crusader in October. Nevertheless, at the same time, the willingness he displayed as a junior partner cooperating as much as possible for the greater good in pursuit of victory over the Axis, established him as a standout dominion representative, enhancing his relationship with Churchill.

Theme IV, embracing the final two chapters, is a continuation of this narrative and relates to the developing relationship of these two New Zealand leaders with both Cairo and London, and significantly, with each other. In the light of grim experience, they became more critical of the metropole, and their decision-making displayed greater maturity and leadership in brokering their nation's contribution to the war. Chapter Eight chronologically follows that of Chapter Six in its focus on Freyberg up until the autumn of 1942. It is concerned with the decisions and challenges faced by the GOC after his instructional renewal in the wake of the Aegean campaigns, and how he resurrected both his military reputation and restored his esteem in the eyes of Wellington. The former occurred following his and the Division's exploits in Operation Crusader, yet in the following three months, from December 1941 until February 1942, his interactions with MEC and General Auchinleck were most onerous. The chapter is notably focused on the tribulations he faced during that time, when Freyberg revealed a most skilled hand in his exchanges with his military superiors. After a relatively short sojourn in Syria, the Division returned to hold the line in Egypt, making a significant contribution to saving a parlous situation. Yet at the same time, Freyberg's refusal to obey what he saw as detrimental constraints from Eighth Army arguably saved the Division. His actions further enhanced his status and renewed the trust of his government.

Chapter Nine deals with the long seventeen-month period from the Pearl Harbor attack and culminates in May 1943 with the decision by the New Zealand House of Representatives to retain the Second Division in the Mediterranean theatre. Much of the first year of this time revealed the anxieties of Fraser regarding Japanese advances in the Pacific and the concomitant vulnerability of his nation. It was alleviated at first by the manoeuvrings of Churchill in obtaining American divisions to help garrison the Dominion. There was a huge and constant British effort from the spring of 1941 to placate Wellington, embellished by

enhanced paroxysms of intra-Whitehall/Cairo activity during three periods in July 1942, November 1942 and April 1943. Whilst Churchill was successful in July and December 1942 in keeping the Division in North Africa, it was clear that his manoeuvres had run their course by April 1943. However, in the last month it was Fraser who, in his unassuming manner, picked up the baton and in a political masterclass, aided by cunning and political craft, obtained the decision he wanted for the retention of the Division.

Sources

A substantial amount of new material has been accessed, and the interrogation of these sources has enabled this study to go deeper behind events than in previous works, thus providing a commensurate insight and a significant contribution to the historiography. In New Zealand previously unused archival sources from the Alexander Turnbull Library include the interview transcripts with prominent Second World War New Zealand officials conducted by John Henderson in 1969, and notably those with Sir Alister McIntosh by Michael King in 1978. In Archives New Zealand are the transcripts of Savage's Sunday evening broadcasts in 1939/40, (aided by those of the New Zealand Sound Archives), the original draft copy of Peter Fraser's account, with redactions and additions, of his visit to the Dominion Ministers Meeting in 1939, the mass of telegraphic communications with Australia in 1939 and the War Cabinet Decisions records.

These were further supplemented by the digitised records of contemporary newspapers from *Papers Past* and the *New Zealand Parliamentary Debates*, especially valuable in the earlier chapters. What also needs to be mentioned are the unique *Official History of New Zealand in*

the Second World War Documents Volume I and II published in 1949 and 1951 respectively.⁹ Though in the everyday public domain, a close interrogation of these have provided several gems of original material, not previously mentioned in the literature. Similar material has also been afforded by *Volumes I to VI* in the *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy 1937-49* series, published from 1975 to 1983.¹⁰

In Britain extensive use has been made of material from The National Archives, Kew notably files from the Dominions Office, Cabinet Office and Premier papers, supplemented by those of the Foreign Office, War Office and Admiralty. These were significantly augmented by the Chartwell Papers of the Churchill Archives, Cambridge, the Auchinleck Papers at the John Rylands Library, Manchester, the papers of Sir Harry Batterbee at the Bodleian Library, Oxford and the O'Connor, Liddell Hart and Alanbrooke papers at the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College, London.

A Note on Nomenclature

At the beginning of the twentieth century, four nations of the British Empire, including New Zealand and Australia, attained dominion status, defined as self-governing entities within the British Empire. It has frequently become a vexed question as to whether 'dominion' should be rendered with an upper or lower case 'D', and is complicated by the fact that during the first half of the last century, New Zealand often referred to itself as 'the Dominion' (as Australia referred to itself as 'the Commonwealth'). For reasons of stylistic economy those self-governing entities will be referred to collectively as 'dominions', New Zealand as 'the Dominion', and Australia as 'the Commonwealth'. For the same reasons General Freyberg is additionally characterised as 'the General' or 'the GOC'.

Theme I

Enunciating a policy for the Dominion. New Zealand's two contrasting political leaders, 1938-40.

Chapter One

Michael Joseph Savage-Labour's First Prime Minister

The First Labour Government of New Zealand was in office from 1935 until 1949, and thus completely encompassed the years of the Second World War. Its first prime minister, Michael Joseph Savage, in office from 1935 until 1940, attained power in the wake of the depression years, that had such a scarring impact on much of the populace. It was a time when many people suffered 'the humiliation of farm or business failing, of being rejected by employers, (and) of seeing their families in want'.¹¹ For many people the Labour Government's implementation of policies such as increased pensions, free health care and social security, replaced despair with hope and optimism. Additionally, Savage, viewed as a 'benign political uncle', came to be held with such reverence that 'for many years after his death in 1940, a photo of (him) hung on the wall inside thousands of New Zealand homes'.¹² This chapter however, is concerned with the approach he took in reaction to the developing international crises of the late 1930s, which revealed, in direct contrast to his performance in domestic affairs, a manifest unsuitability as leader of his country during this time.

Parliamentary Introduction

Savage was unanimously elected as Labour Party leader in October 1933, with Peter Fraser as his deputy.¹³ Two years later, aided electorally by the severe economic stringency during the depression years of the previous government, they won a huge parliamentary majority, taking 53 out of the 80 seats.¹⁴ This one-sided contest was fought on purely domestic issues

¹¹ N.M. Taylor, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45. The Home Front, Volume I* (Wellington, 1986), 1-2.

¹² Wood, *Political*, 82; Barry Gustafson, *From the Cradle to the Grave. A Biography of Michael Joseph Savage* (Auckland, 1986), 1.

¹³ Bassett & King, *Tomorrow*, 129-30.

¹⁴ "Fifty-Two Seats Won," *Evening Post*, 28/11/35, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19351128.2.53.1>

with foreign affairs hardly a consideration.¹⁵ In 1938 Labour was re-elected with an increased majority, as well as nearly 56 per cent of the popular vote.¹⁶ Paradoxically the sheer size of both these election victories was to cause Savage's successor, Fraser, a significant ongoing political problem in 1940 in attempting to shift policy to adjust to a nation at war (Chapter Three). However, though this huge personal triumph for Savage meant his position as party as well as national leader was unassailable, he nevertheless faced rumblings of discontent within caucus (the parliamentary party) during the governing years. This became more intense after the election, with dissent tending to revolve around John Lee from Auckland, fueled by differences over treasury policy and accentuated by the fact that no ministerial changes had occurred for three years.

Lee was characterised as a 'brilliant orator and an artist in both the spoken and written word', but was also 'dogmatic and egotistical'.¹⁷ The fact that Fred Jones attained the defence portfolio he coveted, on the grounds that he was a member for Dunedin, and that a regional spread of ministerial posts was the convention, caused a simmering resentment.¹⁸ He had a significant following in the party, but his frequent criticisms of the government, alongside his own volatile character and uncollegiality, upset people in the party hierarchy.¹⁹ Lee's significance at this juncture is that he was seen as a possible successor to Savage and therefore a rival to Fraser to eventually become party leader. Yet his repeated attacks had so antagonised the Prime Minister, that it seemed that much of Savage's motivation during the last six months of his life was to ensure that his loyal deputy, not Lee, succeeded him.²⁰

¹⁵ Wood, *Political*, 43.

¹⁶ "Labour Return With Majority Vote," *Evening Post*, 17/10/38, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19381017.2.27>

¹⁷ Gustafson, *Cradle*, 285-86.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Eric Olssen, *John A. Lee* (Dunedin, 1977), 133.

²⁰ Gustafson, 256.

Labour's Foreign and Defence Policy

Traditionally New Zealand deferred to Britain when it came to foreign policy, but it soon became evident that the new government had a particular vision of world order and justice. They consistently adhered its support for the principles of collective security as contained in the Covenant of the League of Nations.²¹ This ideological approach involved the pursuance of a moral foreign policy as against a pragmatic one, anti-imperialist, anti-militarist and internationalist, 'expressly diverging from that of the United Kingdom'.²² These deviations became notably apparent in response to successive international crises such as Japanese outrages in China, and the Italian invasion of Abyssinia when New Zealand advocated a forceful stance against aggression.²³

The leading historian of the British Empire, Nicholas Mansergh, commented of this time that 'New Zealand apart, the dominions favoured appeasement'.²⁴ However, by the time of the 1937 Imperial Conference, despite Savage criticising such a policy as one of 'improvisation on the principle of peace at any price', the contradictions in Labour's policy were becoming increasingly apparent.²⁵ The *Round Table* commented on the absurdity of New Zealand raising its voice loudly in the councils of Europe, when it was unwilling to make any effective contribution to enforcing the principles which it advocated.²⁶ In a similar vein McIntyre described how

²¹ Malcolm McKinnon, *Independence and Foreign Policy. New Zealand in the World Since 1935* (Auckland, 1993), 14-15; Wood, *Political*, 43-45.

²² Bruce Bennett, *New Zealand's Moral Foreign Policy 1935-1939: The Promotion of Collective Security Through the League of Nations* (Wellington, 1988), 95; Keith Sinclair, *Walter Nash* (Dunedin, 1976), 181-82; Wood, 44.

²³ McKinnon, 14-15; Angus Ross, "Reluctant Dominion or dutiful daughter? New Zealand and the Commonwealth in the inter-war years" *Journal of Commonwealth Political Studies (JCPS)*10:1, (1972) 38.

²⁴ Nicholas Mansergh, *The Commonwealth Experience* (London, 1969), photo 60.

²⁵ Hensley, *Beyond*, 33.

²⁶ *The Round Table*, Vol.116, September 1939, 878.

Savage stood out in opposition to Britain's appeasement of aggressors and lack of direction in the League; (yet) on the other hand, he insisted that the British promise to send a fleet to the Far East in the event of Japanese aggression. It was almost as if she sought a firmer commitment from Britain than New Zealand was willing to make in return.²⁷

McKinnon added that the 'rise of Fascist powers raised awkward questions about the need for defence which anti-militarism was ill equipped to answer'.²⁸

Therefore, the contradictory position that became established was very much a product of the Labour Party at the time, internationalist and anti-fascist, but wedded to a deep-rooted anti-militarism with a significant attendant strand of pacifism. This markedly manifested itself in its suspicion of the army, associating it with conscription and for putting down organised labour. Additionally, Labour had an ideological preference for local as opposed to empire defence, and took up the idea of a strong air force as it was felt that this would be more cost-effective than the cruisers of the New Zealand Division (of the Royal Navy), being seen as more defensive and less imperialist. However, in the event they held onto the cruisers, but starved the army of funds until the eve of war.²⁹

The dichotomous mindset of Savage concerning defence started to become a significant issue, clearly evident, when defence planners in Wellington troubled at the escalating international situation, determined that there should be a body concerned with defence lodged in the Prime Minister's Office. This became the Organisation for National Security (ONS) and consisted of a number of committees, the architecture of which meant that defence coordination could

²⁷ McIntyre, *Prepares*, 158.

²⁸ McKinnon, *Independence and Foreign Policy*, 28.

²⁹ McIntyre, 18.

only develop with the Prime Minister in the chair.³⁰ Despite the fact that it was established in August 1936 nothing happened, because even with it being his committee, Savage was very reluctant to preside over it.³¹ Not until late March 1937, just before Savage departed for the Imperial Conference, was a secretary appointed to the body, William Stevens.³²

Things started subtly to change, however, when Fraser became Acting Prime Minister during the four months his colleague was away in London, during which he took a keen interest in the cable traffic with Whitehall.³³ Although earlier authorisation had been obtained for the preparation of a War Book, it went into dormancy and only at Fraser's instigation was it reinvigorated under the auspices of the ONS. Additionally, an overseeing Council of Defence (COD) was created, again with the Prime Minister in the chair.³⁴

As Carl Berendsen, the Head of the Prime Minister's Department, accompanied Savage to London, Alister McIntosh became Acting Head during his absence, and in recounting these days over forty years later, ascribed the successful completion of the War Book in 1939 to Fraser. It 'was definitely Fraser's work. He saw the point'.³⁵ However, once Savage returned from London, his instinctual reluctance to face up to the escalating global crisis meant that a press release announcing the creation of the ONS 'predictably died on (his) desk'.³⁶ Thus, the respective character traits of both these leaders with regard to defence and how they were to handle their nation's responsibilities started to come to the fore.

³⁰ McIntyre, *Prepares*, 178; Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington [henceforth ATL], 2000-094-5, John Henderson interviews W.G. Stevens 6 & 9/6/69, History of New Zealand Defence Policy.

³¹ *Ibid*, 178-79.

³² Wood, *Political*, 86; Hugh Templeton (ed) *Mr Ambassador. Memoirs of Sir Carl Berendsen*, (Wellington, 2009), 126.

³³ Bassett & King, *Tomorrow*, 168.

³⁴ *Ibid*; McIntyre, 179; Hensley, *Beyond*, 35.

³⁵ ATL, 2000-094-2, Michael King interviews Sir Alistair McIntosh, 6/4/78, Papers relating to the Biography of Peter Fraser.

³⁶ Hensley, *Beyond*, 35.

Berendsen, although a great believer himself in the principles of collective security under the auspices of the covenant of the League of Nations, was becoming disenchanted with the endless discussions there, and ‘the crude pretence that the passing of a resolution would provide a solution’.³⁷ Since 1927 he had been ‘responsible for overseeing and coordinating all international matters within the purview of the prime minister’.³⁸ But now, in 1938, the gathering clouds in Europe caused him to contend that the government should subordinate its previous approach to the League to one of an over-riding necessity of ensuring the survival of Britain and the Empire.³⁹

He wrote a long memorandum to Savage and stated that he was the only official with a background in both the ‘Foreign Affairs side and the Defence side of the Dominion’s activities’, and produced an analysis that was a reversion to the traditional New Zealand strategy.⁴⁰ He emphasised in the most profound terms, that

the main defence of this Dominion is not here but in Europe. Quite apart from sentiment, if Britain falls.....nothing that can be done in this country can be of any real effect against an attack by a first-class Power. We must therefore to the utmost extent of our means and power, assist in British defence as the first line of New Zealand defence.⁴¹

As events transpired, very gradually and reluctantly, Savage was being dragged by his officials to face up to the developing international situation. He had in fact acceded three weeks earlier to a request from the ONS and Berendsen and wrote to the Australian leader

³⁷ Templeton, *Mr Ambassador*, 123.

³⁸ Ian McGibbon, “Berendsen, Carl August”, *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, (1998). <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/4b25/berendsen-carl-august>

³⁹ Ian McGibbon, “New Zealand’s strategical approach” in *Kia Kaha. New Zealand in the Second World War* ed. John Crawford, (Wellington, 2000), 12.

⁴⁰ Archives New Zealand, Wellington [henceforth ANZ], EA1/553, Berendsen to Savage, 14/10/38.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Joseph Lyons to suggest greater defence liaison between the trans-Tasman dominions (see Chapter Four).⁴²

Domestic Concerns

Domestically there were also a number of other issues that concerned Savage at this time, notably the dramatic reduction in overseas New Zealand funds, which would almost certainly necessitate austerity in the near future.⁴³ Additionally there was also his own failing health, as he had experienced repeated episodes of severe abdominal pains. On 9 August he became ill again, was diagnosed with cancer of the colon and an immediate operation was recommended, which would have meant becoming *hors de combat* for three months.⁴⁴ However, with the culmination of his life's work about to reach fruition in September with Labour's Social Security Bill, and significantly the General Election a month later, Savage made the fateful decision not to undergo surgery at this time.⁴⁵

As mentioned above, Labour triumphed at the polls in October, but there was no afterglow of victory as agitation by Lee caused increased acrimony, which engendered a determination by Savage to block any advancement for him. Puzzlingly, he further postponed his operation so that he could attend both the 1939 Labour and the Pacific Defence Conferences.⁴⁶

Conscription was an issue of significant resonance for the New Zealand Labour Party. It took on a totemic status during and after the First World War, particularly as several future Labour MPs were jailed for sedition connected with their opposition to it in 1917, including Fraser.⁴⁷ Although the gradual impending crises from 1936 onwards generated a movement towards its

⁴² ANZ, EA1/520, Savage to Lyons 23/9/38.

⁴³ Sinclair, *Nash*, 181-82.

⁴⁴ Templeton *Mr Ambassador*, 129; ANZ, Nash Papers, 1177 0319-0430, The Radio Broadcasts of M.J. Savage.

⁴⁵ Gustafson, *Cradle*, 217

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 250.

⁴⁷ Bassett & King, *Tomorrow*, 73.

reintroduction, the Government resisted such claims, as exemplified by Savage in February 1937, reiterating his opposition 'to conscription in any shape or form'.⁴⁸ But positions became entrenched on the other side of the debate too, as opinion grew among conservatives that only compulsion could produce the necessary men to put the army in order.⁴⁹

The issue surfaced in more serious form within the Territorial Force, when in May 1938 four colonels of the force issued a public manifesto stating their disquiet over the lack of government action. This became known as the 'Four Colonels Revolt' and resulted in them being posted to the retired list.⁵⁰ The resultant publicity added to the pressure on the Government, but in facing this increasingly profound and personal dilemma on the issue, Savage's solution throughout was one of constant equivocation.⁵¹ For example, in meeting a deputation from the Wellington Defence League on 2 June 1938, he referred to the £80 million debt incurred from the previous war and how some people got rich whilst thousands died, and this would not happen under his government.⁵² He emphasised that if the global situation took a turn for the worse, then 'there is more to be done than conscripting men ... (and) when it comes to conscription we should not begin with human flesh and blood'.⁵³

This allusion to the conscription of wealth became the Party's favourite stalling adage on this issue, but with the increased tensions brought about by the Munich crisis this line became finely blurred. This was perhaps subtly demonstrated by Fraser on 20 September when he gave both aspects equal status in stating that 'there could be no conscription of human beings

⁴⁸ "Territorial Force", *Otago Daily Times*, 9/9/36, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/ODT19360909.2.141>; "No Support for Conscription", *Christchurch Press*, 22/2/37, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19370222.2.93>; McIntyre, *Prepares*, 182.

⁴⁹ Wood, *Political*, 70.

⁵⁰ McIntyre, 183-85; Laurie Barber, "The New Zealand Colonels' 'Revolt', 1938". *New Zealand Law Journal*. 6 Dec.1977: 496-502.

⁵¹ McIntyre, 232.

⁵² "Defence Needs", *New Zealand Herald*, 2/6/38, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NZH19380603.2.90>.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

without conscription of wealth'.⁵⁴ He repeated the refrain six months later at the 1939 Labour Conference, asserting that not only humans would be put into the line, 'but every atom of wealth as well'.⁵⁵

Savage the Unready

During the latter months of 1938, and in the spirit of Berendsen's strictures over defence, Savage invited Britain, Australia and the Governor of Fiji, Sir Harry Luke, to a Pacific Defence Conference (PDC) to be held in Wellington in early 1939 (See Chapter Four). This call was undoubtedly a forward looking step in the defence of his country and a contribution to the Empire alliance, viewed by *The Round Table* as encouraging evidence of the Government's attention to the defence problem.⁵⁶ However, what became increasingly characteristic on the part of Savage from late 1938 was his failure to issue any declaration of resolution, without countervailing it with overtones of either ambivalence on the subject of the oncoming crisis, or specifically his repeated appeals for a world peace conference.

He first petitioned for such a gathering at the 1937 Imperial Conference where he stated that international conflicts had an economic basis often founded on the unequal sharing of resources, proposing a review of the Treaty of Versailles so as to give 'Germany a new start', via such an assembly.⁵⁷ Two years later, at the turn of the 1939 new year, he repeated this request for a conference of the leading countries. In an interview with the Labour newspaper *The Standard*, he emphasised that 'the only way to solve the problems that led to wars was to

⁵⁴ "Government's Duty" *Evening Post*, 21/9/38, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19380921.2.72>;

⁵⁵ ANZ, WAI121/45, H. Witheford, *The Pre-War Attitude of the Labour Party to War, Part.1*, (1948), 100; McIntyre, *Prepares*, 187.

⁵⁶ *The Round Table*, Vol.115, June 1939, 663.

⁵⁷ Wood, *Political*, 91.

settle the economic differences existing in the world today'.⁵⁸ However, he then lapsed into an illusory world lamenting that those on the side of peace were comparatively weak in the methods of propaganda. His solution bordered on the farcical when he added that this could be countered as New Zealand would soon have a short-wave broadcasting service, which would allow it to express its views and 'reach a larger number of people'.⁵⁹

The following month William Barnard, a member of the COD, made a speech which in some respects squared the intractable circle for the Government. He presented a proposal of providing an adequate defence force, avoiding conscription by outlining a plan of voluntary recruitment to form a 20,000-strong citizen force for home defence.⁶⁰ This irritated Savage who responded in an interview the following day declaring that 'I can see nothing whatever in the present situation to get excited about'.⁶¹ He went on to mention the rapid increase in the defence estimate under his government, but then delved into what was to become a characteristic surrealness on these matters. Savage wanted for every soldier to feel

that he is being trained in the arts and crafts of citizenship. We are not simply asking men to go into camp to learn the art of war; we want them to learn the *arts of peace* (emphasis added) at the same time.⁶²

As anxiety over the international situation became increasingly tense, Savage's almost psychological inability to make any expression of determination without lacing it with appeasing tendencies, notably his desire for a world conference, came more into evidence.

For example, one week after the German annexation of Bohemia and Moravia breached the Munich agreement, he gave a speech in Auckland on 22 March, redolent with imperial

⁵⁸ ANZ, WAI21/45, Witheford, 92.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ "A Citizen Force," *Evening Post*, 8/2/39, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19390208.2.53>

⁶¹ "Mr Savage on Defence," *Christchurch Press*, 9/2/39, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19390209.2.84>

⁶² Ibid.

loyalty, stating that ‘when Britain is in trouble, we are in trouble’ and that New Zealand would be found wherever Britain was in need.⁶³ Yet published on the same day in the *The Standard* was an interview he had given earlier, in which he expressed the view that ‘the international situation had been allowed to drift and that it seemed nobody’s business to try to stop (it)’, and suggested that Britain call a world economic gathering.⁶⁴

A few weeks later at the Labour Party Conference, the British guarantee to Poland prompted a realisation that a 9,000-strong territorial force was insufficient and a motion was passed, supported by Savage, that every fit man should offer himself for voluntary training for home defence.⁶⁵ Yet on 17 April, the resoluteness of such a commitment was soon undone. In response to an appeal for restraint by President Roosevelt, Savage issued a ‘characteristic statement’ commending the American leader’s ‘outstanding’ declaration, and added that ‘people do not fight for the love of it’, before reverting to his favourite theme of nations meeting to address underlying differences.⁶⁶

This contradictory approach continued the following day as delegates arrived to attend the PDC in Wellington. In his welcoming speech Savage acknowledged that much had to be done for his nation to be prepared, and armed with the motion passed at his party’s conference, proposed that ‘every man up to 45 or even 50 years of age should avail himself of the opportunity to be ready to serve his country’.⁶⁷ Yet such a statement of military readiness, was again countervailed in the same speech when he repeated his appreciation of

⁶³ “Loyal Dominion”, *New Zealand Herald*, 23/3/39,
<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NZH19390323.2.94>

⁶⁴ ANZ, WAI21/45, Witheford, 93.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 99; The National Archives, Kew [henceforth TNA], CAB 21/502, Batterbee to Inskip, 11/5/39.

⁶⁶ Witheford, Part.II, 1; “Mr Roosevelt’s Plea,” *Evening Post*, 17/4/39,

<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19390417.2.69>

⁶⁷ CAB 21/502, Batterbee to Inskip, 11/5/39; “Call to Serve,” *Evening Post*, 18/4/39,

<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19390417.2.101>

Roosevelt's plea, and additionally hailed the proposal for an international conference put forward by the Irish leader, Eamon De Valera.⁶⁸

In a fascinating critique of the Prime Minister's psyche at the Imperial Conference of 1937, Hensley commented that the persistent lack of frankness from Savage about the direction of his own thinking was less conscious deceit, than a reluctance to acknowledge in public what had to be said in private.⁶⁹ He further stated that these two sides of his character worked happily and exclusively of each other until the pressure of events in 1939 forced them on a collision course.⁷⁰ The manifestation of such oppositional character facets in his statements though, illustrated his profound unsuitability to be leader of his nation at this time.

Such incongruity was exemplified in late April in a speech in Auckland where he stressed that 'we are not sleeping' and asked for volunteers for a home defence force of 50,000 men. This proposal was initially given a guarded welcome by the press as 'better late than never'.⁷¹ Yet on 4 May, the *Otago Daily News* laid bare his contradictory posture, when it criticised the delay in a Government order for 60,000 uniforms, that would have improved wool sales earlier in the season, enabling the mills to be better prepared.⁷² This £40,000 order for military clothing and boots had in fact been signed off by Fraser on 24 March with other military orders, and now Savage finding that the incompatibilities of his own actions had

⁶⁸ TNA, FO 372/3319, Batterbee to Dominions Office, 18/4/39 [henceforth DO].

⁶⁹ Hensley, *Beyond*, 33

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ "The Government's Aims," *Evening Post*, 26/4/39, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19390426.2.162.1>; "Mr Savage on Defence," *New Zealand Herald*, 26/4/39, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NZH19390426.2.59>

⁷² "Clothing For Forces," *Otago Daily Times*, 4/5/39, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/ODT19390504.2.91>

been so exposed, spoke about invoking the Official Secrets Act against the newspaper.⁷³ He made matters worse by stating that he was talking about

a citizen army, in which men would not be dressed up in uniform but could go about their business feeling that they were citizens and soldiers at the same time, not goose-stepping up and down the country in uniform.⁷⁴

This taking of umbrage at a newspaper for the exposition of his own government's policy, in an inappropriate allusion to his own nation's troops for wearing the uniforms his cabinet ordered in the immediate wake of the Nazi advance into the rump of Czechoslovakia, seems an unconscionable comment by the Prime Minister. The whole episode not only revealed the illogicality and paradox at the heart of Savage's stance and pronouncements, but also an antipathy towards the army. Nancy Taylor, the official historian, commented on his obvious limitations as leader of his country at this time, observing the 'political absurdities (that) attended New Zealand's approach to war', and 'the lingering resistance even at this stage to traditional forms of defence'.⁷⁵

In private, Savage's self-contradictions were also evident during a meeting with new High Commissioner Sir Harry Batterbee on 26 April. The latter asked for a statement of support for Britain, to help counteract negative comments from German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop about internal discontent within the Empire over foreign policy.⁷⁶ Savage replied that 'he was in entire agreement with the course pursued by the United Kingdom Government, but it was a different thing to express approval of the method'. Nevertheless, he

⁷³ ANZ, AAFD 809, Box 1.1, War Cabinet Decisions; TNA, CAB 21/502, Batterbee to Inskip, 11/5/39.

⁷⁴ "Citizen Soldiers," *Evening Post*, 4/5/39, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19390504.2.109.6>

⁷⁵ Taylor, *Home Front*, Vol.I, 30.

⁷⁶ TNA, FO 372/3318, Batterbee to DO, 27/4/39.

promised to think about repeating his positive message of a month earlier, that if Britain is in a scrape, then New Zealand is too.⁷⁷ However, before an additional meeting of the two, Britain introduced conscription, which Savage assessed would cause him political embarrassment by the opposition National Party who supported such a policy. In the subsequent meeting, he mentioned that it would now be ‘impossible for him to make any public statement expressing approval of the policy’ of the British Government.⁷⁸

Writing of this time, Wood very charitably commented that the Prime Minister ‘was doubtless feeling his way, and reaching that personal conviction which was a major factor in preparing New Zealand for the crisis’.⁷⁹ In reality such personal conviction on Savage’s part was never attained, clearly evident when the contents of his repeated statements in those early months of 1939 are analysed. It seems patently apparent that this ambiguity was in fact his default position, an entrenched refusal to see the world as it was, and not as he envisioned it. This accentuated his evident failings, thus reinforcing the contention that he was demonstrably out of place as prime minister during this time of global conflict.

Concerns in London and a Possible Alternative Leader

Throughout this time, the oscillating statements and policy of Savage was causing a concerned reaction by British officials. In London on 24 December 1938, General Hastings Ismay, the Secretary to the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID), expressed consternation with the situation in New Zealand on both the financial and defence fronts and its

⁷⁷ TNA, FO 372/3318, Batterbee to DO, 27/4/39.

⁷⁸ Winston Churchill, *The Second World War. Volume I, The Gathering Storm*, (London, 1948) 318; CAB 21/494, Batterbee to DO, 29/4/39.

⁷⁹ Wood, *Political*, 81.

questionable ability to contribute to imperial security.⁸⁰ Such disquiet was underlined two months later, when Savage cabled London, mentioned that ‘provision for defence [was] limited at present by the low level of the Dominion sterling resources’ and requested a loan of £5 million for guns and ammunition.⁸¹ The Chiefs of Staff in London at first suggested that it be denied, stating that the money would be better spent at home, but such a response caused dismay not only at the Dominions Office, but with Ismay and Admiral Sir Roger Backhouse, the First Sea Lord.⁸² The former further mentioned the contacts he had had with Stevens, the Secretary to the ONS in Wellington, who stated how Munich had woken his nation up, and stimulated an acceleration in the work on the New Zealand War Book.⁸³ It seems that at this time the loan request went to the Treasury for consideration.

In Wellington on 15 February Godfrey Boyd-Shannon, the Official Secretary of the British High Commission cabled the Dominions Office and commented on the malaise at the heart of government where defence was concerned.⁸⁴ In a further long report on 1 March, he mentioned how ministers find it ‘very difficult, if not impossible to go back in public on their previous pacifist declarations’ lamenting that the issue had become a favourite political stick of the Opposition to beat the Government.⁸⁵ He appended a further derisive critique of Savage, writing that ‘in Cabinet, it is said that...if difficulties arise, he is usually prepared to look them squarely in the face and then move on to the next item’. An additional source of unease was the depth of political feeling and mutual antipathy between Government and Opposition, that even permeated into private life to an extent unknown in Britain.⁸⁶

⁸⁰ TNA, CAB 21/496, Ismay to CID sub-committee, New Zealand Cooperation (COS 815), 24/12/38.

⁸¹ Ibid, Governor-General to DO, 21/2/39.

⁸² Ibid, CID sub-committee, New Zealand Cooperation (COS 849), 27/2/39.

⁸³ TNA, CAB 21/502, Ismay to Harding, 16/3/39; Ibid, Ismay to Devonshire, 16/3/39; CAB 21/496, Backhouse to Ismay, 6/3/39.

⁸⁴ TNA, FO 372/3318, Boyd-Shannon to Stephenson 15/2/39.

⁸⁵ TNA, DO 35/587/4, Boyd-Shannon to Harding, 1/3/39.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

It was during these inauspicious days of early 1939, and conscious of the ‘recurrent rumours’ of the declining health of the Prime Minister, that Boyd-Shannon first mentioned the name of Fraser. He was, he stated, ‘one of the ablest members, and perhaps the best speaker in the Government’.⁸⁷ At the PDC six weeks later, perhaps conscious of his own limitations, Savage passed on the overseeing of most sessions to his deputy, confining his own role to that of a host and giving the closing address. Apart from the first day’s sessions which Savage chaired after greeting the delegates, Fraser presided over the other eight days, as well as his own committee on Trans-Pacific Air Routes.⁸⁸

He performed this with ‘a practiced firmness’ which caused McIntosh, who was to become New Zealand's first secretary of foreign affairs, to believe that this experience was formative in his later actions and thinking. It provided him not only with an introduction to the defence problem, but greatly enhanced his knowledge, causing *realpolitik* to seize his mind.⁸⁹ This eye-witness commentator concluded that the experience became a significant turning point in the development of Fraser’s attitude during the war, stating that ‘you’ve really got to go back to this point’.⁹⁰ Significantly this observation was confirmed contemporaneously by Batterbee in a report back to the Dominions Office, who described Fraser as standing ‘head and shoulders above other ministers’.⁹¹ At the Conference itself, Luke, Governor of Fiji, characterised New Zealand Ministers as an interesting lot, but ‘thought Fraser quite the outstanding man among them’.⁹²

⁸⁷ TNA, DO 35/587/4, Boyd-Shannon to Harding, 1/3/39.

⁸⁸ School of Advanced Study, University of London [henceforth SAS], “Stevens, William George”, https://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/view/creators/Stevens=3AWilliam_George=3A=3A.html

⁸⁹ Hensley, *Beyond*, 40; Bassett & King, *Tomorrow*, 169.

⁹⁰ Alistair McIntosh, “Working with Peter Fraser in Wartime”, *New Zealand Journal of History (NZJH)*, 10:1, (1976), 3-20; ATL, 2000-094-2, King Interviews McIntosh, 18/4/78.

⁹¹ TNA, DO 121/94, Batterbee to Harding 27/3/39.

⁹² SAS, “Report of the Air Committee, 24/4/39”, <https://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/8599/128/A00001805.pdf> ; TNA, DO 121/94, Luke to MacDonald, 29/4/39.

It is perhaps likely at this stage that Batterbee, having only recently arrived in Wellington on 11 March, and observing that Savage had had little to do with the Defence Conference, started to discern that power and defence policy decision-making was not the exclusive preserve of the Prime Minister.⁹³ This was displayed on 21 April, when following the conclusion of the Supply Committee, that the purchase of essential war commodities was dependent on ‘sterling funds being available’ from Britain, Batterbee had discussions with Fraser, Nash and Sullivan.⁹⁴ Additionally, six weeks later on 30 April as Nash was about to depart for Britain to seek these funds, the High Commissioner met him at Wellington railway station and enquired as to what defence proposals he would put forward in London. Nash referred him to Fraser, who shortly afterwards stated that they were awaiting the Macksey Report (see below) and the degree of financial assistance that would be forthcoming from Britain.⁹⁵ On both these occasions, it seems clear that Batterbee did not have any meaningful conversations with Savage, and thus could perhaps see that significant and perhaps future power lay with the Deputy Prime Minister.

However, as attested to by both McIntosh and Batterbee, not only did Fraser realise by early 1939 that a robust response to Hitler was needed, but he was a politician of the first order. He understood the New Zealand Labour Party and its distinct antipathy to conscription and increased military expenditure, especially to the army, as well as its deep reverence for its leader. It is conjectural, but if Fraser did have ambitions at this stage to soon replace the ailing Prime Minister it would have been imperative that he stick as closely as possible to Savage’s outlook in order to attain eventual power. This would have meant having to

⁹³ “Sir Harry Batterbee,” *Evening Post*, 11/3/39, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19390311.2.73.1>; [Three of his ministers actually chaired separate committees, Fraser-Pacific Air Routes, Walter Nash-Strategic Problems of the South-West Pacific and Daniel Sullivan-Supply Problems. SAS, <https://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/view/creators/Stevens=3AWilliam+George=3A=3A.html>]

⁹⁴ SAS, “Batterbee to DO, 21/4/39”, <https://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/8591/20/A00001687.pdf>

⁹⁵ SAS, “Batterbee to Inskip, 11/5/39”, <https://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/8621/29/A00001814.pdf>

suppress, at least in public, his own increasingly realistic assessment of what needed to be done by his nation, contrary to the inherent pacifism of his leader. In undertaking this, he thus avoided the *bête noir* of his party, the issue of compulsory military service.

On such an issue Fraser had the perfect credentials, as ironically, he had himself been jailed during the First World War for sedition relating to anti-conscription. But as he told the Labour Conference in April 1939, it was obsolete ‘talking about compulsory military service’, as everyone would be involved if a raider attacked.⁹⁶ He then delivered to cheers the Labour Party’s favourite adage, when forced to face this issue, that not only humans would be put into the line, ‘but every atom of wealth as well’.⁹⁷ He therefore ensured that he would not be outflanked politically, on this most sensitive of issues.

Savage and the last three months

Following the furore surrounding his appeal for volunteers for a home defence force, on 11 May, Savage announced in *The Standard* ‘that in the near future he hoped to broadcast to the people of New Zealand his own impressions of world affairs’.⁹⁸ This would draw not only on the escalating tensions in Europe, but a report to be presented on 22 May by the British Major-General Pierce Macksey, who was authorised by the War Office to advise on the army’s deficiencies in New Zealand. This commentary concluded with a warning that

unless the Army is encouraged to be proud of itself ...I fear, the Army can neither acquire nor maintain that spirit which, in the day of trial, may prove VITAL to the future of New Zealand.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Bassett & King, *Tomorrow*, 73; ANZ, WAI121/45, Witheford, Part I, 100.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, Part I, 100; Wood, *Political*, 83.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, Part II, 15.

⁹⁹ ANZ, EA1/595, Report on the Military Forces of New Zealand, 22/5/39, paragraph 113.

This ‘swingeing indictment of the effects which ten years of economy and ideology had had on the army’ seemed to finally convince Savage that the immediate strengthening of land forces was needed.¹⁰⁰ This was proclaimed in a radio speech where he appeared to have at last broken with his fantasy world and transitioned into one grounded in the reality of imminent war and danger to his country. He spoke ‘of his bitter disillusionment’, further expressing his ‘regret and reluctance that I cannot express in words, I say that we must recognise that the world as we hoped it would be....does not exist’.¹⁰¹

He appealed for volunteers to fill gaps in the Regular Forces, to increase the strength of the Territorial Force to 16,000 and for every able-bodied man to register on the National Military Reserve. However, he took pains to emphasise that such a force would not be the forerunner of an expeditionary one, but for ‘home defence; the defence of New Zealand in New Zealand’.¹⁰² Wood viewed that in this speech Savage spoke from a position ‘of unique personal strength, (as) the very cloudiness of his past thoughts on the subject cleared him from any suspicion of militarism’, further adding that ‘it would be hard to imagine a better equipped recruiting agent for the New Zealand of 1939’.¹⁰³ This positive view was in addition to his conclusion that Savage’s public appeal of 24 April for volunteers was a ‘major factor in preparing New Zealand for the crisis’.¹⁰⁴

The speech also received guarded support from Adam Hamilton, Leader of the Opposition, and a no doubt relieved Batterbee, who felt ‘sure that its terms would be appreciated’ in London.¹⁰⁵ Such a sentiment was confirmed the following day on 24 May by both Secretary

¹⁰⁰ McIntyre, *Prepares*, 234.

¹⁰¹ “No New Crisis,” *Evening Post*, 23/5/39, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19390523.2.141.1>

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Wood, *Political*, 82.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁰⁵ ANZ, WAI21/45, Witheford, Part.II, 22; TNA, FO 372/3319, Batterbee to DO, 23/5/18.

of State Thomas Inskip and British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, with the latter mentioning the ‘great pleasure the account of his broadcast’ gave, particularly the ‘assurances of New Zealand support’.¹⁰⁶ What is fascinating about the reporting of the broadcast in the press is that the three leading regional newspapers, *Christchurch Press*, *Evening Post* in Wellington and *New Zealand Herald* in Auckland, along with Wood with his laudatory comments in his official history, all omitted a small portion at the beginning of the speech.¹⁰⁷

This was included in the full text published in *The Standard* of 25 May, which was much more in the characteristic Savage vein. Within it was the oft-repeated suggestions that ‘if the peoples of the various nations had the settlement of the question of war in their own hands there would be no war’, and added his now obligatory call for a peace conference that should ‘be held before, and not after another great war’.¹⁰⁸ In fact, these omitted phrases were published in the *Auckland Star* of 23 May, along with the bulk of the speech.¹⁰⁹

Having now read *The Standard* himself, Batterbee backtracked on 26 May when in his next telegram to London he stated that the text of the speech he had sent three days previously ‘was not reported in the press as delivered’, and enclosed a copy of the introduction which reiterated Savage’s entrenched pacific disposition.¹¹⁰ He revealed his own inattentiveness to the broadcast and possible guilt by meekly stating that ‘as I heard it delivered...it sounded

¹⁰⁶ TNA, CAB 21/494, Inskip to Batterbee, 24/5/39.

¹⁰⁷ “No New Crisis,” *Evening Post*, 23/5/39, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19390523.2.141.1>
“Home Defence,” *New Zealand Herald*, 23/5/39, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NZH19390523.2.98.1>
“Defence of New Zealand,” *The Press*, 23/5/39, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19390523.2.64>

¹⁰⁸ Witheford, Part II, 22,

¹⁰⁹ “Peace Conference Before Next War,” *Auckland Star*, 23/5/39, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/AS19390523.2.116>

¹¹⁰ TNA, FO 372/3319, Batterbee to Inskip, 26/5/39.

more impressive than it reads in print'.¹¹¹ It must therefore be assumed that a transcript of this speech was given to the press agency for the newspapers to publish beforehand, which did not have the complete text, and unlike the *Auckland Star*, did not listen to the actual broadcast. Such an explanation, however, does not excuse Wood for the omission some two decades later, as he frequently utilised *The Standard* throughout his classic work. It does, however, further emphasise the assertion made above, that the repeated natural default position of Savage was not only contradictory and confused, but broadly still a pacific one.

As the international situation worsened, Batterbee in a cable to Inskip on 24 July gave expression to the ambivalent position he perceived in Wellington. He hoped that his past despatches made it clear that New Zealand would stand by Britain in a war, but was uncertain as to the level of forthcoming assistance.¹¹² Such perceived diffidence was exemplified in a conversation of earlier that month when Savage expressed to him his regret if war was to break out over Danzig, as that issue would not greatly appeal to the people of New Zealand.¹¹³

It must also be further stressed that during 1939 the Prime Minister's health was declining, which likely exacerbated any touchiness he exhibited, as on 22 July he repeated the reaction with regard to the *Otago Daily Times* of 4 May. A clothing manufacturer allegedly commented that he had reportedly been told that the Government was preparing for war within two months, and khaki uniforms and boots had been ordered in much greater amounts than the 'public had been led to believe'.¹¹⁴ In a prickly response two days later, Savage condemned these comments, and again invoked secrecy when he stated that 'I don't know if

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² TNA, CAB 21/873, Batterbee to Inskip, 24/7/39.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ "Talk of War", *Evening Post*, 24/7/39, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP/19390724.2.96.2>

the law covers it, but if not, it certainly should'.¹¹⁵ It seems that as the international tensions were increasing, his characteristic disclaiming mentality, was becoming untenable even to himself. He was now a very sick man and on 26 July returned to his bed and agreed to have his much-delayed operation just after presenting the budget, six days hence.¹¹⁶

Wood was to write that New Zealand 'entered the war better prepared psychologically, technically and administratively than might have been anticipated'.¹¹⁷ Although in many respects it could be said that this was in spite of Savage and not because of him, this would perhaps be too simplistic. The enduring conundrum, especially of his second term, is that war preparation did take place, at first very gradually with a 'fudging of lines', especially behind the scenes.¹¹⁸ For example in September 1938 there was an appeal for ex NZEF men to enrol in a National Military Reserve for home defence only, but the volunteers were asked discreetly if they would serve their duty overseas.¹¹⁹ Also that month a garrison for Fanning Island (now Tabuaeran, in the Line Islands), a vital telegraph station on the trans-Pacific cable, was planned at the COD.¹²⁰

Finally, the Munich crisis generated a much-needed impetus for work on the War Book which would guide every government department through the transition to a state of war and an Alert Stage was added to it.¹²¹ Importantly, although there seemed to be no official

¹¹⁵ "Dangerous", *Evening Post*, 24/7/39, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP/19390724.2.96.1>

¹¹⁶ Gustafson, *Cradle*, 247

¹¹⁷ Wood, *Political*, 89

¹¹⁸ McIntyre, *Prepares*, 187.

¹¹⁹ Auckland Central City Library, *Auckland Weekly News*, "Join the Territorials", 21/9/38, 42; McIntyre, 187.

¹²⁰ ANZ, EA1/436, 5th COD Meeting, 3/9/38.

¹²¹ Wood, *Political*, 87; McIntyre, *Prepares*, 222.

preparations for an expeditionary force, there was an expectation for one with unobtrusive preparations by the Chief of General Staff (CGS), General John Duigan.¹²²

The Savage enigma does cause some perplexity. His broadcast to the nation on 22 May, newspaper adverts and a poster campaign triggered a significant increase in the number of men volunteering for the Territorials, and by August the target of 17,000 was achieved.¹²³ He did chair all fifteen of the Council of Defence meetings between 30 October 1937 and 22 June 1939, which especially advocated liaison with Australia (see Chapter Four).¹²⁴

Although the two actual government orders for military clothing, which caused him so much angst in the press, were actually signed off by Fraser, Savage himself on 2 and 4 May authorised £515,000 to be spent on accumulating reserves of essential commodities such as rock phosphate, sulphur, rubber and asbestos.¹²⁵

Furthermore a memorandum from Berendsen to department heads on 12 June 1939, with Savage's authority, insisted that preparations on the War Book be completed by the end of July, which it was, approved and endorsed at the 17th Meeting of the COD on 5 August, just in time for the war.¹²⁶ Clearly then, the machinery, both military and administrative, was there in the days just before and after the war declaration, ready to cope with training the volunteers.

¹²² Hensley, *Beyond*, 50; McIntyre, 221, 236; ATL, 2000-094-5 Henderson interviews Conway, 10 & 11/11/69; John Crawford & James Watson, "The Most Appeasing Line": New Zealand and Nazi Germany, 1935-40," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History (JICH)* 38:1, (2010) 83.

¹²³ McIntyre, 235-36; Wood, 83.

¹²⁴ EA1/436, COD Meetings.

¹²⁵ ANZ, AAFD 809, Box 1.1, War Cabinet Decisions.

¹²⁶ McIntyre, 222; ANZ, EA1/436, 17th COD Meeting, 5/8/39.

McIntosh, at the heart of the decision making during this time, conceivably provides some answers to this paradox. In a series of extensive interviews nearly forty years after the events, he stated that ‘Savage wasn’t really interested. War didn’t come into his range of thought at all. He disliked the military and really preferred to sweep the whole thing under the carpet’, further claiming that most of the decision makings of the Defence Council were left to Fraser and Berendsen.¹²⁷ This could have been another manifestation of Savage’s complex approach to defence issues, and as has been well documented he was much more comfortable dealing with domestic issues, notably the social security reforms his government brought in.

It can perhaps be conceivably argued that the deteriorating international situation and the consequent impingement of that on his time and energy caused an inner resentment, as exemplified by the repeated reminders to him from members of the Defence Council to get things done.¹²⁸ This allied with his denial mindset and declining health meant that much of the decision making was delegated, mostly to Fraser and Berendsen. It is a conjectural yet plausible contention that a compromise was reached whereby decisions concerning defence preparations and assessments had to be made, but someone else would make them; Savage in effect complicit in being by-passed. This was particularly evident when he seemed content for his deputy to not only be the Chairman at the PDC, but also to largely sign off the expenditure for essential resources and raw materials. Further support for such a view is arguably the seamless way Fraser took over in early August and changed the direction of policy almost immediately (see Chapter Two).

¹²⁷ ATL, 2000-094-2 King interviews McIntosh, 12/9/78.

¹²⁸ McIntyre, *Prepares*, 178.

As mentioned above, when the press exposed that large sums authorised by Fraser for military clothing in April and July, revealing that advance preparations for war was being undertaken, Savage's irritated and testy reaction in wanting to invoke the Official Secrets Act exposed the absurdities of his position. It showed how uncomfortable he was when events and his colleague's preparations in reaction to them had forced his more realistic and private self into the public realm. There is also no doubt that 'unauthorised' decision-making by officials did take place, notably when Jones the Defence Minister was not told that stores were amassed and sent in August 1939 for the prospective garrison of Fanning Island.¹²⁹ It is virtually inconceivable that Fraser and Berendsen would have been bypassed such.

Finally in his critique of Savage's psyche mentioned previously, Hensley stated that the two sides worked happily and exclusive of each other until pressure of events in 1939 brought them gradually together.¹³⁰ However, such a consideration is challenged in this thesis, as although European concerns did force the 'two Savages' closer together, the older anti-military one was always dominant despite the accelerating tensions across the world. This was clearly reflected in that repeatedly, whenever there were opportunities to make clear unambiguous statements of New Zealand preparedness and resolution in 1939, he always couched it in equivocal terms. In fact, it is valid to state that Savage's repeated inability to convey any sense of a firmness of purpose regarding the international threat, allied with a total reluctance to confront his rigid pacifistic tendencies within the new global paradigm of the late 1930s, was the fundamental Savage.

¹²⁹ ATL, 2000-094-5, Henderson interviews Conway, 10 & 11/11/69.

¹³⁰ Hensley, *Beyond*, 33.

This further reinforces the assertion that, though undoubtedly much loved and revered because of his humane character and domestic policies, he was out of his depth in the milieu of global events. His incapability and rigidity in adapting his previous idealistic tones to the reality around him, has been virtually ignored in the historiography, notably by his biographer and underplayed by the official historian, Wood.¹³¹ Even considering his illness, he was patently unfit to be the New Zealand leader at this critical time, but fortunately for his nation, there was a potential replacement whose skills and resolution would appropriately match up to the demands of this age.

¹³¹ Gustafson, *Cradle*; Wood, *Political*, 81-83.

Chapter Two

Peter Fraser-Acting Prime Minister

The accession of Peter Fraser from *Deputy* (emphasis added) to *Acting* Prime Minister on 2 August 1939 was to become an event of the greatest significance for New Zealand, as it brought into sharp contrast the months of vagueness and aimless drift under Savage, to one of decisiveness and resolution by his replacement. This chapter deals with those early transformative months of Fraser as a war leader, as he positioned his nation to follow the path he sought, of firmly standing by British and imperial war strategy. At the same time, he had to tread a delicate path in assuaging his party's sensibilities, notably that of conscription, and coping with minor internal opposition. The chapter especially reveals the critical importance of the Dominions Ministers Meeting in London in November 1939, and Fraser's conduct there, in establishing the foundations of his country's role in the Second World War.

The change in policy from early August was so dramatic that it seems almost certainly that Fraser harboured increasingly different notions from his colleague for perhaps several years. Additionally, Savage's biographer alleges that Fraser probably knew his colleague had cancer from August 1938 and would have witnessed his declining health, thus affording the conjectural but realistic scenario that Fraser positioned himself as successor.¹³² He was additionally advantaged by Savage's tendency to hand his deputy 'the awkward and dirty jobs in handling internal party crises', which provided a multifaceted knowledge of the party from union leaders to the caucus, which he was to use to great advantage in attaining the leadership.¹³³ As mentioned in the previous chapter, Fraser displayed great political acumen in concealing his divergent views and exhibited distinct skills during the final weeks of Savage's tenure.

¹³² Gustafson, *Cradle*, 217.

¹³³ McIntosh, "Working with Peter Fraser", *NZJH*, 10:1, (1976), 8.

Such political dexterities were needed both before and after his elevation, being especially seen one month before he took the helm. On 3 July, whilst visiting Britain negotiating the government loan, Finance Minister Nash made a statement in Dublin in which he mentioned that it was unlikely that New Zealand would send an expeditionary force overseas in the event of Britain being involved in war.¹³⁴ This caused a furore back in Wellington, with former Prime Minister George Forbes demanding a reiteration of government policy. On 6 July Savage replied by just reading out a clarification, viewed as unsatisfactory by the Opposition, and he left the chamber.¹³⁵ It was left to Fraser to clear things up and he outlined New Zealand's defence aims 'in proper sequence', of firstly home defence, secondly Britain's interests in the Southern Pacific and thirdly 'everything possible to help the British Commonwealth of Nations'.¹³⁶ This was thought at the time to have extricated the government from a potentially difficult and embarrassing situation. In retrospect this perpetuation of ambiguity on the defence issue was clearly focused on his own party colleagues. Whatever his own thoughts on Nash's comments and Savage's clarification, Fraser's willingness to robustly defend the Government's position would have gone down well with caucus, demonstrating his political skills and leadership.

Just weeks later, a more cunning exposition was shown, as in Nash's absence Savage was to present the budget in July and was warned by Bernard Ashwin, Secretary to the Treasury, of the problems associated with accumulating yet more debt. The Prime Minister heeded this in his planned speech, however, according to Ashwin's diary account, Fraser, on reading a draft finessed these aspects and watered them down, allegedly in order not to alienate his more

¹³⁴ "The Empire Idea.", *Evening Post*, 4/7/39, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19390704.2.100>

¹³⁵ New Zealand Parliamentary Debates [henceforth NZPD], 6/7/39, www.parliament.nz/en/pb/hansard-debates/historical-hansard, Vol.254, 170

¹³⁶ *Ibid*, Vol.254, 182.

left-wing colleagues, being possibly mindful that soon he might need their support in a bid for the premiership.¹³⁷

Fraser's First Steps as Acting Prime Minister

The new stance and transformation of outlook was clearly displayed one week after assuming responsibility, on 9 August in the House of Representatives. Former Prime Minister Gordon Coates questioned Fraser about possible government confusion with respect to British defence policy, to which Fraser replied, that 'to prevent any misrepresentation I can state definitely that the Government is wholeheartedly in favour of the defence efforts of the British Government'.¹³⁸ This was undoubtedly an about-turn of emphasis of a month earlier and a clear reversion to its traditional role. This according to John Crawford was based on a clear-sighted appreciation of New Zealand's place in the world, its interests and principles, the manifestation of which was to make available an expeditionary force to concentrate where their presence would be most effective and 'help ensure that Britain was not defeated'.¹³⁹

A clear signal as to change of leadership and policy occurred just two months after Nash's Dublin speech and Fraser's subsequent reiteration of priority on home defence. On 2 September a complete *volte-face* ensued, as Batterbee reported to London that ministers were anxious to help as much as possible and had already offered a brigade as a forerunner of a division.¹⁴⁰ Additionally, scarcely four hours after their actual war declaration, a further message was received in London that

¹³⁷ Brian Easton, "Fraser and the Development of the Nation Building State" in *Peter Fraser, Master Politician*, ed. Margaret Clark (Palmerston North, 1998), 124.

¹³⁸ NZPD, 9/8/39, Vol.255, 115.

¹³⁹ John Crawford, "Introduction", in *Kia Kaha*, (ed) Crawford, 1; McGibbon, "Strategical Approach", in *Kia Kaha*, 14; ANZ, EA1/553, Berendsen to Savage, 14/10/38.

¹⁴⁰ TNA, CAB 21/873, Batterbee to DO, 2/9/39.

this Dominion (will) give the fullest consideration to any suggestion of the British Government as to the method...by which this Dominion can best assist in the common cause.¹⁴¹

The ‘method’ was confirmed on 9 September when the Governor-General, sent a telegram to London stating that ‘a *special* (emphasis added) military force for service within or beyond New Zealand’ would be raised.¹⁴²

New Zealand, therefore, had clearly rejected its past equivocation on where it would serve in the event of war, and hence within this short period, Fraser had unmistakably reversed the aims he expounded two months earlier, in effect just Savage era platitudes. Now, grip and leadership became the personification of New Zealand foreign policy and additionally a moral tone became established, of ‘freeing the peoples of the Earth from bondage and slavery’.¹⁴³ The historian Ian Wards commented that this two month transformation provided an interesting study in Fraser’s political development, whilst Wood wrote that ‘as far as New Zealand’s domestic arrangements were concerned, a complete reversal of military policy was quickly and easily achieved’.¹⁴⁴ He then added an interesting rider by referring to Savage, that ‘the Prime Minister’s private thoughts on the matter will never be known’,¹⁴⁵ although his later actions were to provide some tentative clues. However, the immediate challenge Fraser faced was to convince his fellow party members to follow this path, a task that would take almost a year to fully accomplish.

¹⁴¹ *Documents Relating to New Zealand’s Participation in the Second World War*, Volume I (Wellington, 1949), [henceforth *DRNZ*, Vol.I], Doc.9 6-7, Galway to Eden, 4/9/39.

¹⁴² *Ibid*, Doc.41, 34-35, Galway to Eden, 9/9/39.

¹⁴³ “All Preparations Made,” *Evening Post*, 4/9/39, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19390904.2.51.2>;

¹⁴⁴ Ian Wards, “Peter Fraser-Warrior Prime Minister” in *Peter Fraser*, ed Clark, 145; Wood, *Political*, 99.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 99.

Additionally, the poor relations across the political spectrum alluded to earlier in the year by both Boyd-Shannon and Batterbee, were rectified in late August, when in response to the looming emergency Fraser took the three leaders of the opposition into his confidence and showed them the cables from London.¹⁴⁶ Batterbee moreover commended the very warm handshake that took place with Hamilton, which emphasised the desire of Fraser that his nation entered a war politically united.¹⁴⁷ Therefore, both immediately and explicitly, an unequivocal early marker of intent was laid down that exhibited a unity of purpose, thus rectifying any previous confusion over the government's commitment.

Placating the Labour Party

Having established a steadfastness and consensus in the disposition of his country since 4 August, Fraser further demonstrated political skill in handling members of his own party. He had to placate a discontented Labour caucus which was still very unhappy at the lack of any cabinet promotions during the four years of the Government. Ironically three of the leading dissidents, notably the most prominent John Lee, had all served in the First World War and they tended to take a dim view of the present Cabinet where none had served, referring to them as 'ex-COs' (conscientious objectors).¹⁴⁸ At a parliamentary party meeting held from 8 to 10 September, Fraser at first had to defeat a no-confidence motion which he easily achieved, by 39 votes to 3.¹⁴⁹ Such a vote at this time was a blessing in disguise, as it provided the necessary authority to continue making important wartime decisions.¹⁵⁰ He did, however, have to tread very carefully, as there was a distinct strand within the party who were unable to shake off the vestiges of their anti-militarist ideology, significantly reflected

¹⁴⁶ TNA, DO 35/587/4, Boyd-Shannon to Harding, 1/3/39; Bodleian Library, Oxford [henceforth BLO], (MSS.NZ.s 13) Batterbee Papers, Box.6, File.1, Batterbee to Inskip, 16/5/39, [Opposition Leader Adam Hamilton, and former premiers George Forbes and Gordon Coates]; TNA, CAB 21/494, Batterbee to DO, 25/8/39.

¹⁴⁷ TNA, CAB 21/873, Batterbee to DO, 2/9/39; Batterbee Papers, Box.9, File.5, Diary of a Crisis.

¹⁴⁸ John Lee, *I Fight for New Zealand* (pamphlet Auckland, 1940) 28.

¹⁴⁹ Sinclair, *Nash*, 191.

¹⁵⁰ Bassett and King, *Tomorrow*, 172

in two key domestic issues the government faced.¹⁵¹ Conscription and coalition were both viewed with abhorrence by much of Labour, with the former notably attaining totemic status since the First World War, becoming a prominent issue as the European crises developed.

Fraser's caution was evident in the judicious wording of the Governor-General's offer, whereby it was characterised as a "Special" rather than an "Expeditionary" Force, further stressing that 'enlistment will be entirely voluntary'.¹⁵² This semantic sensitivity was exemplified in an exchange of cables with London at the end of the month, which followed a message on the Empire Broadcast Service from Daventry, that 'a little country of 1½ million inhabitants, [has provided] the offer of a fully equipped Division for service in any part of the world'.¹⁵³ Although Fraser intended the 'Special' force to in effect be an 'Expeditionary' one, and eventually a New Zealand Division, he was outraged by the announcement as he had deliberately couched it so as not to antagonise those on the more pacifistic wing of his party.¹⁵⁴ He complained to Batterbee that the plans had been broadcast prematurely, who immediately sent two rapid cables to Whitehall on 25 September. These stressed the touchiness of the issue for the government, hence the careful phrasing used, emphasising that it was proposed only the First Echelon was to be despatched.¹⁵⁵ An apology was provided by return from the Dominions Office, and Batterbee was asked to reassure Fraser of London's concern, and he in turn acknowledged the apology and sent his thanks.¹⁵⁶

This all plainly illustrates the underlining tension within the government, with Fraser treading a problematic line between his own inclination to resolute action and maximum

¹⁵¹ Hensley, *Beyond*, 24; ATL, 2000-094-5, Henderson interviews Pharazyn, March 1969

¹⁵² *DRNZ* Vol.I, Doc.41, 34, Galway to Eden, 9/9/39; Henderson interviews Pharazyn.

¹⁵³ TNA, DO 35/1003/5, 'New Zealand's Lead'.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, Batterbee to DO, 25/9/39, tele. 330 & 331.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid*, DO to Batterbee, 25/9/39; Batterbee to DO, 26/9/39.

support for Britain, and the need to avoid antagonising the anti-militaristic appeasement wing within his party. Moreover, although by now he possibly supported the introduction of compulsory military service, he was limited by his party's hostility to the matter. Publicly advocating such a measure at this stage would be a political step too far, especially with a possible premiership contest on the horizon in the next few months.

The other prominent issue viewed with trepidation by Labour, particularly following the war declaration, was that of coalition. This was anathema to members, not only because of the close association of such an arrangement with the depression government of the early 1930s, but with a large parliamentary majority it saw no reason to share power.¹⁵⁷ Fraser was certainly conscious of this, but at the same time was grateful for any cooperation from the Opposition, and was particularly aided by Coates who viewed narrow politicking 'as being beneath him, notably when his country's vital interests were affected'.¹⁵⁸

On 5 September, Fraser undertook a balancing act by stressing the importance of maximum cross-party accord and his desire 'to agree on those matters where agreement can be reached, and...to postpone matters on which there are obvious political disagreements'.¹⁵⁹ This was followed eight days later, by the Opposition's acquiescence in passing the Emergency Regulations Bill in acknowledgement of the special circumstances.¹⁶⁰ Evidently, in these fast-moving days with the nation now at war, a significant spirit of cooperation reigned between both government and opposition parties. Whether Savage, who had a more problematic relationship with the Opposition would have reached out to them as his deputy

¹⁵⁷ Wood, *Political*, 137; Mary Logan, *Nordy. Arnold Nordmeyer: A Political Biography* (Wellington, 2008), 159.

¹⁵⁸ Michael Bassett, *Coates of Kaipara* (Auckland, 1995), 248.

¹⁵⁹ NZPD, 5/9/39, Vol.256, 21

¹⁶⁰ NZPD, 13/9/39, Vol.256, 92-94; Wood, 120.

did is questionable. However, regardless of the great mutual respect between the leaders on all sides, ‘the forces within both parties operating against a coalition government proved overwhelmingly strong’.¹⁶¹ Despite Fraser reiterating that there was ‘no length to which I personally will not go to get cooperation’, he was unable to trim the more contentious issues of Labour’s legislative programme such as the greater control taken under the Reserve Bank Act.¹⁶² Thus, by late September as the parliamentary recess approached, relations between the two main parties had unfortunately regressed to the usual peacetime acrimony.

In mid-October, Fraser departed New Zealand for the Dominions Ministers Meeting in London, and temporarily gave up his position as Acting Prime Minister to Nash. It is clear that during his two months at the helm he displayed the full range of characteristics required to lead his nation. He ensured that New Zealand’s voice was unambiguous in supporting Britain, was politically adroit in seeking cooperation with the Opposition, initially reducing tensions with them, and crucially within his own party placated the malcontents by supporting voluntary rather than compulsory military service.

His performance since August meant that he acquired a significant degree of authority, not only amongst his own colleagues, but also in the mind of Batterbee. The High Commissioner was actually with Fraser in the immediate days before and after the war declaration and cabled London on 9 September commending him not only for the efficient functioning of government, but crucially for the keen desire for close cooperation with Australia, and ‘for the interchange of information..... regarding all defence measures’ (see Chapter Four).¹⁶³ A month later, just before Fraser departed New Zealand shores for London, Batterbee posted an

¹⁶¹ Wood, *Political*, 118.

¹⁶² NZPD, 28/9/39, Vol.256, 447; Sinclair, *Nash*, 192.

¹⁶³ TNA, FO 371/23965, Batterbee to DO, 9/9/39.

‘unofficial’ hand-written letter to the Permanent Under-Secretary Eric Machtig back at the Dominions Office. This emphasised that despite being jailed in the last war for inciting sedition over anti-conscription, ‘there is no doubt whatever now about his loyalty... and his determination to assist the Mother Country to the limit of his power’.¹⁶⁴

Savage’s last hurrah

Following his bowel operation on 4 August, Savage remained in hospital for three weeks and then returned home to convalesce. His biographer characterised him as exhibiting no desire to be a leader of a nation at war, but two days after the declaration he delivered from his bed a broadcast to the nation. He pronounced that

both with gratitude for the past, and with confidence in the future, we
range ourselves without fear beside Britain. Where she goes, we go,
where she stands, we stand.¹⁶⁵

It is of huge irony that this speech became the most famous exposition of New Zealand sentiment of the war, with its most quoted part an expression of loyalty so redolent of the Book of Ruth.¹⁶⁶ The great paradox is that the sentiments exemplified in his broadcast not only differed distinctly from those he expressed in the months before the war declaration, but also in those that followed, when he partially and temporarily recovered. Furthermore, those memorable cadences were not his words, but those of Solicitor General Henry Cornish, who was asked by Berendsen and McIntosh to write them for the stricken Prime Minister.¹⁶⁷ It is a reasonable supposition that these two civil servants would not have issued such a request without some intimation from Fraser.

¹⁶⁴ TNA, DO 121/116, Batterbee to Machtig, 11/10/39.

¹⁶⁵ Gustafson, *Cradle*, 251; Wood, *Political*, 11.

¹⁶⁶ “For whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge” (Ruth 1:16).

¹⁶⁷ ATL, 2000-094-2, King interviews McIntosh, 16/3/78.

On 21 September, Chamberlain cabled a circular to his dominion counterparts asking them to select a minister to visit Britain in November to attend a series of meetings.¹⁶⁸ The logical New Zealand representative was Fraser, whose attendance was confirmed on 6 October and that same day, the night before Parliament adjourned, Savage returned to his seat in the House to resume as head of the Government, at least nominally.¹⁶⁹ Although still ill and only able to work for one or two hours a day, this re-emergence created a quasi-interregnum period, previously unidentified in the literature, causing a minor power struggle in the war leadership of New Zealand, with a half-hearted reversion in the Dominion's approach to the war.¹⁷⁰

This was first seen in reaction to Hitler's 6 October Reichstag speech, in which, following the capitulation of Poland, he made an offer of a general settlement asking the West for a free hand in Eastern Europe.¹⁷¹ The initial draft of the British response, an unequivocal rejection of the German terms, was sent to the dominions. But their reaction, as summarised by Dominions Secretary Anthony Eden to the War Cabinet, was that the reply 'went too far in the direction of "slamming the door" on further discussion'.¹⁷² In a cable to Chamberlain on 11 October, Savage requested that Britain should avoid intransigence, and returned to his pet theme by stressing that no door

should even at the present juncture be closed that might lead to a peaceful solution whether by international conference or any other feasible means.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁸ TNA, CAB 21/874, Chamberlain to Dominion Prime Ministers, 21/9/39.

¹⁶⁹ TNA, FO 371/23967, Fraser to Chamberlain, 6/10/39; ANZ, Nash Papers, 1177 0319-0430, The Radio Broadcasts of M.J. Savage; Gustafson, *Cradle*, 254.

¹⁷⁰ 2000-094-2, King interviews McIntosh, 16/3/78.

¹⁷¹ Christopher Hill, *Cabinet Decisions on Foreign Policy. The British Experience October 1938-June 1941* (Cambridge, 1991) 104.

¹⁷² TNA, CAB 65/1/43, War Cabinet 43(39)13, 10/10/39; *Ibid*, 123.

¹⁷³ TNA, FO 371/23965, Savage to Chamberlain, 11/10/39.

It is unclear as to why it was Savage and not Fraser who replied to Whitehall, as the latter had another two days before he was due to leave for Britain, but though ill, it seems that the Prime Minister perhaps wanted to make his presence felt by adjusting his nation's stance to one bordering on appeasement. Fraser departed for Britain on 13 October, accompanied by Secretary of the War Cabinet, Berendsen. This leading civil servant, who virtually ran New Zealand's external affairs for a decade or more, was appalled at the appeasing line emanating from the dominions, particularly from Wellington.¹⁷⁴ In one stopover on 20 October he wrote a 'typically forthright memorandum' to Fraser, stating that

I do not believe that anything that is morally wrong can ever be politically right....To accept a peace at this juncture would be to 'sell the Poles down the river'.¹⁷⁵

He referred a further coruscating comment to advocates of an international conference, such as his own prime minister, stating that this would lead to 'a weakening of resolution'.¹⁷⁶

It is a reasonable contention that these views provide an insight into those of Fraser too, as Berendsen would hardly have written such a personal exposition if he thought his travelling companion was not of like mind. Both men had worked very closely together over the last year on the Council of Defence, and even more so since early August. Over thirty years later Berendsen confirmed that he and Fraser 'did think alike...[and] in foreign affairs our ideas were the same'.¹⁷⁷ Perhaps Fraser recognised at this juncture, that he did not quite have the reserves of authority and popularity within his party that Savage had, and unable to challenge him on this, was willing to bide his time and get on with the negotiations in London.

¹⁷⁴ Crawford & Watson, "Most Appeasing Line" *JICH* 38:1, (2010) 85.

¹⁷⁵ Frank Corner, "Carl Berendsen", in *An Eye, An Ear and A Voice. 50 Years in New Zealand's External Relations, 1943-1993* ed. Malcolm Templeton (Wellington, 1993) 13-14.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ ATL, 2000-094-5, Henderson interviews Berendsen, 25.

Savage returned to his office following Fraser's departure, and was visited by Batterbee on the 19 October, who described him as looking well in the face with a hearty handshake. He did though observe that 'he became weak and listless, and there was a noticeable lack of papers on his desk, so evidently [he] was doing very little work'.¹⁷⁸ The clear implication of this despatch was that the Prime Minister's appearance at the helm of government was chimeric, a fact confirmed by McIntosh. He recalled that though Savage was able to attend to some matters, he became tired in the afternoon, with most business conducted by Nash. He also did not attend any War Cabinet or COD meetings, and it is likely that virtually all the cables appended to and by him were handled by Nash and McIntosh.¹⁷⁹

However, though he was not particularly interested in day-to-day government business, Savage was still able to influence cabinet decisions on issues he thought important. He became reinvigorated again on 28 October when he received a copy, sent to all dominion leaders, of a cable by Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies to Chamberlain. (An exception with respect to New Zealand as will be seen in Chapter Four).¹⁸⁰ In it, Menzies stressed his view about the desirability for the Allies to define their war aims and not to impose a Carthaginian peace upon Germany following victory. This mollifying standpoint from Canberra galvanised Savage to reply to his counterpart a week later in supportive terms, which highlighted again his underlying fundamental mindset of appeasement. He stated that 'your sentiments in favour of a generous peace were shared equally by us', and then copied in the Australian to the instructions he had conveyed privately to Fraser at the Dominion Ministers Meeting in London.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁸ TNA, DO 121/116, Batterbee to Machtig, 19/10/39.

¹⁷⁹ ATL, 2000-094-2, King interviews McIntosh, 16/3/78.

¹⁸⁰ TNA, FO 371/23967, Menzies to Chamberlain, 28/10/39

¹⁸¹ R.G. Neale (ed) *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy 1937-49*, Volume II:1939, (Canberra, 1976), [henceforth *DAFP* Vol.II], Doc.326, 369-71, Savage to Menzies, 5/11/39.

Upon hearing of this possible alternative line emanating from Wellington, Batterbee took alarm and on 5 November contacted the Dominions Office, mentioned the message being cabled from Savage to Fraser, and that a copy had been sent across the Tasman. He stated that 'at present I only know general line of telegram and will defer telegraphing these in hope of obtaining copy'.¹⁸² The importance he attached to the matter was demonstrated by his frantic efforts not only to acquire a copy, but his subsequent actions. He obtained 'the consent of Mr Nash' to procure a copy of the message, and sent five separate telegrams in the space of two hours to Whitehall.¹⁸³ The second of these, in three parts, was the actual text conveyed to Fraser which stipulated that Allied war aims must be stated, and that Germany should be induced to discuss them.¹⁸⁴

At the Ministerial Meeting in London, Fraser attended six sessions between 1 and 7 November, but it was only at the seventh on 16 November, at which Chamberlain, Foreign Minister Lord Halifax and Eden were to be present, that he was scheduled to follow his government's instructions. In the meantime, Batterbee, having obtained further intelligence, probably from Nash, indicated to the Dominions Office that the terms of the telegram had come largely from Savage himself and added that he was still

hankering after an International Conference...[and] I understand that
Mr Fraser was fully aware of the views of his colleagues before he left
New Zealand.¹⁸⁵

In fact Fraser had divulged the contents of his instructions to the Dominions Office, but nevertheless at the seventh session he referred to his instructions and articulated his prime

¹⁸² TNA, FO 371/23967, Batterbee to DO, 5/11/39, no.423.

¹⁸³ Ibid, no.424.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, no.425.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, no.427.

minister's views, mentioning the 'desire for a conference before enormous casualties have taken place on both sides'.¹⁸⁶ Whilst Eden was allegedly too embarrassed to speak, both Chamberlain and Halifax put forward compelling counter-arguments.¹⁸⁷

That Fraser was under instruction from Wellington was further confirmed four months later on 14 March 1940, when Robert Semple the Minister of Public Works, mentioned in *The Standard* that Fraser had acted under explicit directives to pressure Britain in advocating 'an armistice and a conference'.¹⁸⁸ He evidently complied to the extent required by loyalty, but as the minutes of the meeting show, he then reverted to what must have been a more personally comfortable mode. He confirmed that the New Zealand Division's First Echelon would be ready to leave for the Middle East on 20 January, and that official confirmation would follow shortly.¹⁸⁹

Therefore, this dichotomous situation of contrasting policy decisions of the previous six weeks undoubtedly reflected the outlook of Savage, as he clearly defaulted to the position he had held from the latter months of 1938 until July 1939. He was not attending to much government business at the time, nor present at any of the five COD Meetings held whilst his deputy was away, notably the crucial 26th one of 9 November, when Fraser recommended that the First Echelon should be despatched.¹⁹⁰ This ambiguity was patently symptomatic of Savage's actions throughout 1939. He was absent for a most vital meeting and decision, which displayed New Zealand's intent in sending its soldiers abroad to fight, yet was able to

¹⁸⁶ TNA, FO 371/23967, DO to Batterbee, 8/11/39; TNA, CAB 99/1, Visit of Ministers, Seventh Joint Meeting, 6-8.

¹⁸⁷ D.R. Thorpe, *Eden. The Life and Times of Anthony Eden, First Earl of Avon, 1897-1977* (London, 2003), 241; Hensley, *Beyond*, 60.

¹⁸⁸ Wood, *Political*, 109.

¹⁸⁹ Hensley, 60; CAB 99/1, Seventh Joint Meeting, 11.

¹⁹⁰ ATL, 2000-094-2, King interviews McIntosh, 6/4/78; ANZ, EA1/436, 26th COD Meeting, 9/11/39.

rouse himself to support a mildly appeasing statement by Menzies and repeat the same old phrases about the need for a world peace conference.

Although Belich wrote that following the outbreak of war, Savage's policy 'was to wholeheartedly support Britain', Crawford and Watson, in their well-argued critique of their nation's historiography of this period took a different view.¹⁹¹ They asserted that Savage's frequent interjections of late 1939, which illustrated his willingness to find some accommodation with Germany, confirm that New Zealand portrayed a 'most appeasing line'.¹⁹² This was certainly nowhere near the spirit represented in the famous radio speech on 5 September, but a relapse to his previous inability to fully comprehend the international situation and give a resolute lead to his nation. In fact, it is valid to state that his repeated failure to convey any sense of firmness of purpose over the international threat, allied with a total reluctance to confront his rigid pacifistic tendencies, was the quintessential Savage.

One fascinating aspect of the foregoing was the collusion with the Dominions Office by Fraser in London, and Nash in Wellington on the contents of the Savage instructions to his deputy. It can be discerned that the two leading lieutenants took an alternative and more realistic view of the international situation, and quietly reverted to what pertained two months previous by aligning themselves with British policy. It seems clear, that fully aware of the Prime Minister's declining condition, they did not wish to overtly antagonise the more pacific wing of the Labour Party. Evidently in this 'power struggle', the views of Savage were tolerated but ignored, and below the surface was a determination to get on with preparations for war and the raising of a full division. This was certainly the message

¹⁹¹ James Belich, *Paradise Reforged. A History of the New Zealanders. From the 1880s to the Year 2000* (Auckland, 2001), 266; Crawford & Watson, "Appeasing Line": *JICH* 38:1, (2010) 84.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

Batterbee conveyed in a personal letter to Machtig on 13 November, when he mentioned that Savage ‘lives in the clouds, is not moved by political arguments.... [being] determined to remain at the head of things until Mr Fraser returns, but after that I expect that we shall see changes’.¹⁹³

Thus, it is clearly apparent that throughout 1939, a clear dissonance had emerged in the responses that emanated from Wellington by their two leaders. It was only when Savage was at the helm up to August, and then again in partial mode in October and November, that New Zealand’s actions could be characterised as supporting the Crawford and Watson view of ‘appeasing’. The validity of such a claim clearly cannot apply to the resolution and firmness shown when Fraser was in this position. It is perhaps pertinent to end this point with Berendsen, who worked closely with both prime ministers, and in fact personally liked Savage much more than Fraser. He was later to describe Savage as ‘the most Christ like man I have ever known and an absolute ninny’.¹⁹⁴

This was the last time the increasingly ailing Savage attempted to influence policy, clearly demonstrating that he had failed to adjust his idealism to the realities of the international situation. Domestic politics and intra-party strife in Wellington had not gone away during this time, and the earlier mentioned enmity with his most vociferous critic, the mercurial John Lee, continued unabated. On 4 November, their long-standing antagonism came to a head at a Labour caucus meeting, when a very sick and highly medicated Savage got into a serious argument with his arch-critic over ministerial vacancies, and allegedly wanted to physically fight those that disagreed with him.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ TNA, DO 121/94, Batterbee to Machtig, 13/11/39.

¹⁹⁴ Corner, “Carl Berendsen” in *An Eye, an Ear*, ed Templeton, 67.

¹⁹⁵ Lee, *I Fight*, 30.

Fraser certainly saw Lee as rival for the premiership and was concerned that if Savage died while he was out of the country, then the Aucklanders who did have support in caucus might gain the leadership.¹⁹⁶ He allegedly proposed that Lee should accompany him in the party to London to avoid this scenario, but this was vetoed by Savage.¹⁹⁷ The context of Lee at this time was twofold, his rivalry with Fraser and the enmity he engendered with Savage. It is contended that a significant reason for Savage to continue remaining in post for another three months, despite his manifest incapability, was to serve a very useful purpose. The *de facto* leadership ruthlessly manipulated and exploited his circumstances and genuine popularity in order to galvanise the nation for war, and significantly with Labour Party members, to lay the ground to expel Lee, Fraser's main rival (see Chapter Three).

Fraser negotiating in London, 1939

It is maintained that Fraser's performance during his London sojourn was crucial in setting the scene for his nation's performance in the Allied coalition, and that much of the enhanced reputation gained by New Zealand was due to his groundwork and actions in this period. For this mission he had to undertake several tasks, which included the selection of a GOC for the burgeoning NZEF, the recommendation as to whether the First Echelon of this force should be despatched and the procurement of sterling loans from the Treasury to finance the Dominion's initial war contribution. The first of these was satisfied quite early with the appointment of Bernard Freyberg as GOC, 2NZEF (see Chapter Six).

The second significant task was also quickly fulfilled, as on 2 November, Fraser bestowed substance to the Governor-General's offer of 9 September of raising 'a special military force

¹⁹⁶ Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, 268; Gustafson, *Cradle*, 256; Bassett & King, *Tomorrow*, 173.

¹⁹⁷ ATL, 2000-094-2, King interviews McIntosh, 6/4/78.

for service within or beyond New Zealand'.¹⁹⁸ This decision was pending as to the attitude of Japan, and 'on the assumption that the New Zealand Government is satisfied on this point'.¹⁹⁹ Fraser received the assurance he sought at the first two Joint Meetings with Halifax and the Minister for Defence Coordination, Lord Chatfield.²⁰⁰ Their favourable analysis of the strategical situation, to which Fraser concurred, meant that at a further meeting chaired by Secretary of State for War, Leslie Hore-Belisha, Fraser was able to say that 'there seemed to be no impediment to the early despatch of New Zealand troops overseas'.²⁰¹

Superficially, it is legitimate to conclude that at this stage it seemed that whatever Britain asked for or suggested, Fraser was acquiescent. Such alleged lack of independent thought behind their actions have been characterised within the New Zealand historiography in pejorative terms, portraying the Dominion as possessing a 'Mother Complex' or suffering from the 'Dutiful Daughter' syndrome. Its own leading historians have depicted their nation as being 'psychologically a colony', a 'quasi-colony' or having undergone 'recolonisation'.²⁰² Yet at the meeting with Hore-Belisha, in addition to the Japan factor, Fraser's consent to the despatch of New Zealand's First Echelon was conditional on two key points. The first was the financing of the expeditionary force and the second the adequate protection of the troop convoys whilst sailing across the ocean.²⁰³ In his negotiations over these issues, Fraser demonstrated that such disparaging epithets were clearly misplaced, as he showed great skill in making his negotiating hand stronger during two quite contentious discussions with the British Government.

¹⁹⁸ *DRNZ* Vol.I, Doc.41, 34, Galway to Eden, 9/9/39.

¹⁹⁹ TNA, CAB 99/1, Visit of Ministers, First and Second Meetings.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁰¹ ANZ, EA1/586, Visit of Ministers from Dominions, New Zealand Forces, 6/11/39.

²⁰² J.B. Condliffe, *New Zealand in the Making: a Survey of Economic and Social Development* (London, 1930), 431; J.C. Beaglehole, "New Zealand in the Commonwealth" in *Contemporary New Zealand. A Survey of Domestic and Foreign Policy* (Wellington, 1938), 3; Sinclair, *Nash*, 186; Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, 29.

²⁰³ ANZ, EA1/586, New Zealand Forces, 6/11/39.

The first of these involved war finance, as Fraser, conscious of economic issues concerning the Dominion, requested a meeting of just the New Zealand delegation with the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir John Simon.²⁰⁴ The specific context was the parlous state of its finances, especially the sterling reserves. Nash had visited London in the months before war was declared in order to obtain a loan on relatively favourable terms, and he initially had a torrid time in the negotiations.²⁰⁵ Had it not been for the imminence of war and Britain's desire for the Dominion to stand with it, 'New Zealand would most probably have been left to pay the price for its financial innovations without support from London'.²⁰⁶ Yet a few weeks later, on 5 and 6 September, the country's finances were in effect saved by the war as Britain was prepared to buy New Zealand's 'entire exportable surplus for twelve months of frozen beef, mutton, lamb and edible offals', plus that of butter and cheese.²⁰⁷

It would though, take some time for the Dominion's sterling balances to attain a semblance of health, and there were still reservations within Whitehall, as reflected by an internal memorandum on 22 October which stated that 'NZ does not start the war very well placed financially: this fact is quite clear'.²⁰⁸ The meeting at the Treasury with Simon was scheduled for 17 November, and concerned an immediate sterling loan to cover the New Zealand's costs of their expeditionary force and share of the Empire Air Training Scheme (EATS). The Dominions Office viewed this encounter inauspiciously, and its internal correspondence revealed it might become prickly, being particularly apprehensive about Fraser's abrupt manner. During his ten days attendance so far, he had reputedly engendered some bad

²⁰⁴ TNA, CAB 99/1, Visit of Ministers, Fourth Meeting; ANZ, EA1/1020, Dominion Ministers Meeting.

²⁰⁵ Sinclair, *Nash*, 177-87

²⁰⁶ Hensley, *Beyond*, 48; P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism, 1688-2000* (Harlow, 2002), 514.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, 48; J.V.T. Baker, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War, 1939-45, War Economy*, (Wellington, 1965), 42-43.

²⁰⁸ TNA, DO 35/1027/5, Internal Memo 22/10/39.

feeling with his ‘not very pointed harangues, which ministers here(find) rather boring’.²⁰⁹

Percivale Liesching, the Assistant Under-Secretary, aware of a potentially disputatious atmosphere with the Treasury, suggested in a memorandum that Eden might appear as a representative of the Dominions Office there, though his deputy the Duke of Devonshire attended instead.²¹⁰

Simon went part way to satisfying New Zealand’s request for a sterling loan, and the minutes revealed that the main differences seemingly revolved around the Dominion’s decision to relax petrol rationing at home, thus increasing oil imports at the cost of valuable foreign exchange.²¹¹ However, the likely sanitisation and banality of the exchanges, detailed in the official account of the meeting, was in sharp contrast to that recounted by R.M. Campbell, the Economic Adviser to the New Zealand High Commissioner in London at the time. He stated that Simon told Fraser that the Treasury did not intend to finance New Zealand out of its monetary difficulties under cover of a war. Fraser, no doubt aware of the torrid time Nash had received at the hands of Simon the previous summer, ‘snapped back that they were not there as supplicants but as partners’, clearly conveying the message that New Zealand’s loyalty was contingent, not unqualified.²¹² The meeting closed with the issue being unresolved and a further one was scheduled.

It is important to stress that the day before this finance meeting on 16 November, Fraser attended the seventh meeting mentioned above, where he gave verbal authorisation of his nation’s willingness to despatch its Expeditionary Force. This was confirmed in writing to

²⁰⁹ BLO, (MSS.NZ.s 13) Batterbee Papers, Box.7, File.4, Stephenson to Batterbee, 10/11/39.

²¹⁰ TNA, DO 35/1027/5, Finance for the New Zealand Expeditionary Force, 13/11/39.

²¹¹ ANZ, EA1/1020, Financial Aspects of the Employment of NZ Forces, 17/11/39; ANZ, WAI/23/e, Peter Fraser, Draft Report, of Dominion Ministers Meeting, 13.

²¹² Sinclair, *Nash*, 178-183, 202-03, 394; Malcolm McKinnon, “‘Equality of sacrifice’: Anglo-New Zealand relations and the war economy, 1939-45”, *JICH*, 12:3 (1984), 55.

Eden the following day in a very amicable tone, ‘My dear Secretary of State. I have much pleasure in informing you...’ and given premier to premier status by Savage to Chamberlain on 20 November.²¹³ Whether Simon knew of this the following day at his meeting is perhaps questionable, as he certainly portrayed an uncompromising demeanour. This was in direct contrast to other senior cabinet colleagues, including Chamberlain, who had approbatory views about the psychological importance of the necessity for dominion troops to be in the line as soon as possible.²¹⁴ The British, no doubt delighted that New Zealand was sending its troops overseas, now faced a possible dilemma of balancing a generous loan facility versus the despatch of the First Echelon. This was articulated by Machtig, two days after the Savage cable, in an internal note to Devonshire stating that ‘it cannot be denied that New Zealand finances are such that they are likely to hamper her war effort and incur an additional financial burden on the UK’.²¹⁵

In retrospect there was never any real doubt which way the decision would fall, but this would not necessarily have been felt by the expectant New Zealand delegation. However, an insightful act of cooperation on their part, almost certainly orchestrated by Fraser, probably made any decision a certainty in the Dominion’s favour. The Admiralty had already requisitioned passenger liners in mid-November, to travel to the South Pacific to prepare for the transportation of a brigade group from each of the Tasman dominions before any official acquiescence, yet undoubtedly conditional on a positive response from them.²¹⁶ Savage in his telegram of 20 November intimated that the troops would be ready to leave New Zealand on 20 January 1940. However, due to the exigencies of coordinating troopships with their navy escorts, it was necessary to synchronise the departure of New Zealand troops to join the

²¹³ TNA, CAB 21/882, Fraser to Eden, 17/11/39, and Savage to Chamberlain. 20/11/39.

²¹⁴ TNA, CAB 65/2/2, War Cabinet 68(39)6, 2/11/39.

²¹⁵ TNA, DO 35/1027/5, Machtig to Devonshire, 22/11/39.

²¹⁶ Peter Plowman, *Across the Sea to War: Australia and New Zealand Troop Convoys from 1865 through Two World Wars to Korea and Vietnam* (Kenthurst, 2003) 87.

Australian convoy three weeks earlier.²¹⁷ This hastening forward in the date by the Admiralty energised the New Zealand delegation in London into a swift-acting reaction.

Brigadier Park, the New Zealand Military Liaison Officer in London, and Fraser, on the 28 and 29 November respectively, each sent urgent requests to Wellington pressing for an early decision to satisfy the earlier sailing date.²¹⁸ The COD complied at its 27th meeting on 1 December, and the following day Fraser received confirmation that the Cabinet had decided to expedite a departure for early January, thus optimising coordination and cooperation with both London and Canberra.²¹⁹ A creditable explanation for the haste expressed by Fraser for this rapid facilitation, soon became evident in subsequent meetings he had with Simon on 2 December at the Treasury, and Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty, three days later at the Admiralty.

In the follow up meeting with Simon, both the official minutes and Fraser's own account revealed a correspondingly emollient atmosphere. An agreement was reached, advantageous to New Zealand, whereby a dollar loan would be provided to cover the EATS and partly fund the expeditionary force. The Chancellor added that he could say on behalf of

the United Kingdom Government, that they would be ready to give every reasonable assistance, [and that they] would have it upon themselves to see that the necessary sterling or dollars were made available.²²⁰

He then left this meeting early, so as to attend an 11.30 am War Cabinet in Downing Street, at which he mentioned that Fraser, 'was fairly well satisfied with the discussions on financial matters which had taken place'.²²¹ Thus, in terms of his first objective with respect to the

²¹⁷ TNA, CAB 21/882, Savage to Chamberlain, 20/11/39; *DAFP* Vol.II, Doc.395, 439, Casey to Menzies, 29/11/39.

²¹⁸ *DRNZ* Vol.I, Doc.57, 47, Park to CGS, 28/11/39; Doc.60, 49, Fraser to Savage, 29/11/39,

²¹⁹ ANZ, EA1/436, 27th COD Meeting, 1/12/39; *DRNZ* Vol.I, Doc.62, 51, Savage to Fraser, 2/12/39.

²²⁰ ANZ, EA1/1020, Financial Aspects, 2/12/39; ANZ, WAI/23/e, Draft Report, 16.

²²¹ TNA, CAB 65/2/2, War Cabinet 101(39)13, 2/12/39.

finance of the New Zealand expeditionary force, Fraser, despite the earlier fractious meeting, extracted the financial concessions he required, clearly in his nation's interest.

The second and equally important variance with Whitehall was over the perceived safety of troops of the First Echelon during their long transit of the Tasman Straits and the Indian Ocean, echoing the concerns of Massey and Allen in 1914.²²² It is clear that this was an extremely sensitive point for Fraser, and was to become an essential condition throughout the war. At his meeting with Hore-Belisha on 6 November, he emphasised that New Zealand assent was conditional on the proviso 'that adequate arrangements could be made for the protection of the convoy on its passage', and cabled his recommendation that the situation was 'sufficiently clear to warrant the despatch ...of the First Echelon'.²²³ Wellington's affirmative reply stated that 'it is presumed you will discuss with the Admiralty the nature and adequacy of the escort to be used for the safe conduct of the force', to which Fraser responded his understanding 'that adequate escort is an essential contingency'.²²⁴

He was, however, to be disappointed as in late November or early December the second disputatious meeting occurred. An officer from the Admiralty visited him, indicating that the request for at least a cruiser to escort the convoy across the Tasman Sea leg was unviable, and that the light cruiser, HMS *Leander*, was sufficient. Fraser's response was to inform the Admiralty that the First Echelon would not now sail. This prompted a meeting with the First Sea Lord, on 5 December, who upon shaking hands with the New Zealander, and fully aware of the situation, immediately offered the heavy cruiser HMAS *Canberra* as an additional

²²² R. Pfeiffer, "Exercises in Loyalty and Troublemaking: Anglo-New Zealand Friction at the time of the Great War, 1914-1919", *AJPH*, 38:2, 1992, 178.

²²³ ANZ, EA1/586, Visit of Ministers, 6/11/39; *DRNZ* Vol.I, Doc.46, 38, Fraser to Savage, 7/11/39.

²²⁴ *DRNZ* Vol.I, Doc.47, 39, Savage to Fraser, 11/11/39; Doc.48, 40, Fraser to Savage, 17/11/39.

escort across the Straits.²²⁵ Playing upon Churchill's well-known affinity for the military ardour of dominions troops, Fraser then mentioned that a battleship had never visited New Zealand before, and such a visit would enhance New Zealand morale. Grasping at once the political criticality, Churchill agreed that it was a 'splendid suggestion', the result of which was that HMS *Ramillies* was despatched to accompany *Leander* and *Canberra* across the Tasman.²²⁶

This meeting with the future British leader was one of great significance for New Zealand and became the first of several occasions to come during the war years that Fraser was successful in a request with Churchill. They were entirely different in outlook and background yet shared a similar purpose in the conduct of the war. Following Fraser's return to Wellington and a consultation with Batterbee, the latter reported to London that 'oddly enough, Fraser seems to have got on very well with Winston, for whose efficiency and drive he has apparently a boundless admiration'.²²⁷ Their great affability set the standard for what became a most successful and enduring intra-Empire relationship during the war, second only in intimacy to that which Churchill enjoyed with his old friend from the First World War, Field Marshal Smuts.

Compared to other post-war reminiscences, the veracity of this account is given extra credibility by the fact that it was drafted just two weeks after the event, on approximately 21 December, when Fraser was in Australia on his return home. Therefore, anything dictated would have been relatively fresh in his mind, buttressing the reliability of his

²²⁵ *DRNZ* Vol.I, Doc.66, 55-56, Report by Fraser on his visit to England in 1939.

²²⁶ ANZ, WAI/23e, Draft Report, 19.

²²⁷ <https://www.winstonchurchill.org/publications/finest-hour/finest-hour-161/fraser-and-churchill-a-working-partnership-between-two-prime-ministers/>; BLO, (MSS.NZ.s 13) Batterbee Papers, Box.6, File.4, Batterbee to Harding, 3/1/40.

recollections.²²⁸ The especial importance, is the identical appreciations of both men with the decision taken by the Wellington Cabinet to facilitate this earlier departure. Churchill expressed his immense appreciation of the steps

taken by the New Zealand Government, not only to play an early part in general operations, but *also to meet the admittedly difficult situation that had developed in regard to the time of departure* (emphasis added).²²⁹

This is paralleled by Fraser's turn of phrase in the report, of his

genuine gratitude.... of the attitude of cooperation which the New Zealand Government had so generously adopted.²³⁰

This provides significant insight to the contention presented, that Fraser viewed that his hand had been strengthened in the financial negotiations by Wellington's rapid Cabinet pronouncement. Revealingly, he further mentioned how this decision 'was greatly appreciated in London by the British authorities *and indeed by myself*' (emphasis added).²³¹

Clearly it seems that an important factor concerning Fraser's anxiety in wanting an early reply from Wellington, was his desire to strengthen still further his bargaining position with respect to his finance negotiations. By displaying the willingness to cooperate with the British request for an earlier sailing so that two brigades of dominion troops would be in the Middle East by February, he perhaps added more weight to the New Zealand side of the negotiations by engendering a feeling of obligation within Whitehall to the Dominion.

²²⁸ ANZ, WAI/23e, Draft report, 19, [He cited in this report the sinking of the Graf Spee, which had occurred three days before (18 December), and that he had yet to leave Australia, which he did at 5.00 p.m. on 23 December; Bassett and King, *Tomorrow*, 178.]

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Ibid.

The actual affirmative answer acceding to the British request for an earlier convoy departure date came from Wellington on 2 December, 12 hours ahead of GMT. The meeting Fraser held that same day with Simon at the Treasury was 10.00am, accordingly 10.00pm in New Zealand.²³² Hence, it can be tentatively offered, that the time difference between the two capitals was sufficient for the positive response from Wellington to have been conveyed to London in the early hours, and then to Simon before the actual Treasury meeting took place. Hence, the tone of Fraser's appreciation to the positive reply he received from Wellington supports the supposition that it advantaged his negotiating position, in that Britain felt beholden to help New Zealand financially, which they undertook with a generous sterling loan.

It is therefore argued that the subtle conflation of these two issues by Fraser, the financing of the expeditionary force and adequate troop convoy protection by the navy, enabled him to extract concessions significantly to New Zealand's advantage. He achieved this by an awareness of the great desire in London for the dominions to join the line as soon as possible, being extremely cooperative in bringing forward the departure date of New Zealand's troops, and finally applying an act of intransigence in refusing any departure, unless it was in his view adequately protected.

Fraser and his Report

A fascinating coda as to his relationship with Savage, and more importantly with Labour opinion, is revealed in the report Fraser wrote for the New Zealand Cabinet of his ten weeks away. He left London in early December with Berendsen and Richard Casey, the Australian representative, and journeyed to Alexandria, whereon the 11 December Freyberg joined them

²³² *DRNZ*, Vol.I, Doc.62, 51, Savage to Fraser, 2/12/39; ANZ, EA1/1020, Financial Aspects, 2/12/39.

for the ten-day flight to Sydney. Conceivably, Fraser jotted down his recollections of his time in London during the journey for his draft, as the introduction stated that

it was quite impossible to carry with us any secret papers on our return by air, and that consequently this report is compiled from memory and without recourse to documents.²³³

Freyberg, who was also compiling his GOC recommendations for the New Zealand Cabinet during the same flight, got his memorandum typed at Australian Army Headquarters during their two day stopover there.²³⁴ For that reason it is suggested that a first draft of Fraser's report was also dictated and typed around 20-21 December during this stopover, and then edited by Fraser with pen annotations perhaps as he sailed across the Tasman.²³⁵ The compelling nature of this archival copy are the highlighted alterations and edits by Fraser, especially notable in 'War Aims and Wider Aspects of Policy' on pages 5 to 6.²³⁶

These redactions and additions perhaps ought to be seen within the context of two important factors. The first of which was Fraser's increased realisation that New Zealand needed to do more to contribute to the Allied war effort. Secondly, and most crucially, they must also be seen from the viewpoint of his awareness that his position was perhaps a minority one amongst his more appeasing cabinet colleagues. These possibly shared Savage's half-committed outlook, notably with respect to a declaration of Allied war aims as was demanded in November.²³⁷ Furthermore, an additional important consideration is that whilst in London, Fraser seemed to have thought that his leader's condition might be improving,

²³³ ANZ, WAI/23/e, Draft Report 1.

²³⁴ ATL, 9030-36, Bernard Freyberg, "The World War", 20.

²³⁵ ATL, 2000-094-2 King interviews McIntosh, 6/4/78; Draft Report.

²³⁶ Draft Report, 5-6.

²³⁷ TNA, FO 371/23967, Batterbee to DO, 6/11/39, no.427; TNA, DO 121/94, Batterbee to Machtig, 13/11/39.

and conceivably a little caution on his recommendations at this stage was thought prudent, thus an edited report.²³⁸

This was particularly illustrated with reference to the British Government deprecation of any attempt to frame too specifically any definition of the British and Allied war aims; the position of Savage. Fraser ensured that his initial comment at being impressed ‘by the validity of the arguments that were advanced in favour of this point of view’ was deleted.²³⁹ He provided instead an alternative reason, that the situation was still uncertain in terms of potential allies and enemies, and that a definition of war aims could prove unwise. This was especially pertinent when considering the position of occupied eastern Poland and the undesirability of declaring ‘war against Russia with the object of reconstituting the Polish State’.²⁴⁰ It therefore seems evident that upon reading his first draft Fraser, re-considered the wording, thinking it wise to remove an opinion that was supportive of the British assessment about war aims, which disparaged any attempt to be too specific about them, in effect the Savage position. He thus eradicated any contrary view to that of the Prime Minister.

Additionally, in the archives accompanying the draft report, are rough notes written by Fraser with an indication of where he wanted them inserted in his second version. They included positive impressions of the British worker, and of being inspired by a speech given by British Labour leader Clement Attlee.²⁴¹ Fraser noticeably extolled the commitment of the British Labour movement from factory workers to miners in panegyric terms, adding that

²³⁸ Bassett & King, *Tomorrow*, 181.

²³⁹ ANZ, WAI/23/e, Draft Report, 5.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ ANZ, WAI/23/e Eight hand-written notelets; Clement R. Atlee, *Labour's Peace Aims*, 8/11/39, (London, 1939).

the manhood of England and Scotland have responded in their hundreds of thousands to the country's call. *National Service* (emphasis added) is accepted as an every-day fact.²⁴²

Evidently, this report and accompanying notes provide a clear insight into the thinking of Fraser on his return. There is the clear implication that by now he had concluded that conscription needed to be introduced in New Zealand, and he cleverly advocated such a view by using his party's policy position as the foil to that of the conscripted British worker. Such an assessment of what his nation needed to do on this issue had perhaps permeated various leaders in New Zealand, given added credence by the CGS Duigan, in one of his first letters to General Freyberg on 11 December, that

I feel quite sure that the Hon P Fraser will insist on NZ fulfilling her obligations, and that will mean adopting compulsory service, sooner or later.²⁴³

Hence the shrewd political game Fraser played can be disentangled. He was careful not to cause offence, and so redacted his probable view on New Zealand's war aims proposal, giving succour to Savage's repeated support for a world peace conference. Then by hiding behind the Attlee speech and his impressions of the British worker, gave implied support for conscription by referring to it as National Service. This clearly exemplified not only Fraser's resolve for his country to follow the resolute line of Britain, but as in the weeks leading up to when he became Acting Prime Minister, also the wily political skills to avoid any hostility by his more radical parliamentary colleagues. This was to ensure that he would be the next leader of his nation when Savage retired or died.

²⁴² ANZ, WAII/23/e Eight notelets.

²⁴³ ANZ, WAII8/130, Duigan to Freyberg, 11/12/39.

Such a view is further illustrated by Freyberg, who on 8 January wrote a private letter to the Director of Military Operations (DMO), General Richard Dewing, in London. He mentioned that the Deputy Prime Minister ‘considers the military point of view rather than the political’, and that ‘left to himself he could always be depended upon’.²⁴⁴ Thus, the sentiments of Fraser, given by Batterbee to Machtig nearly three months earlier of his ‘determination to assist the Mother Country to the limit of his power’ seem most apposite.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁴ ANZ, WAI18/13V, Freyberg to Dewing, 8/1/40.

²⁴⁵ TNA, DO 121/116, Batterbee to Machtig, 11/10/39.

Chapter Three

Fraser- the Domestic Leader, 1940

This chapter is concerned solely with the internal politics and war policy in New Zealand during the first half of 1940. Fraser arrived back in Wellington on Christmas Day 1939 with the resolve for his nation to increase its contribution to the Empire's war effort and established the Dominion on this path during the most taxing domestic circumstances.²⁴⁶ Upon his return Fraser took control of the leadership and wielded his power astutely and in a hardnosed manner. This chapter conveniently divides into two, the first of which deals with Fraser as Deputy Prime Minister up until late March alongside a dying Savage and his ascent to the premiership. The historiography is quite sparse on this period. The second concerns the early months of his tenure as Prime Minister as he established his position and importantly his management of two crucial internal issues, conscription and coalition amidst the most onerous international situation. In contrast to the first period, this one has been excellently documented in the historiography, principally by Wood in his *Political and External Affairs* volume in the official history series.

'Deputy' Prime Minister and Organ Grinder

Fraser upon his return soon became aware that the rumours he heard in London of Savage's improved health were chimeric and took control of the leadership both incisively and ruthlessly, in mid-January 1940. This became the pivotal period, when New Zealand's approach to war policy eliminated any equivocating posturing and leant explicitly and decisively to that of resolution. Fraser seemed to have achieved this by exploiting the popularity of the Prime Minister in two main ways. The first involved a deception and conspiracy of silence by the leadership about Savage's true condition, which crucially manipulated the natural sympathy within the Labour Party for the beloved but ailing leader,

²⁴⁶ Bassett and King, *Tomorrow*, 178.

and thus helped secure the succession for Fraser ahead of John Lee. The second was to instigate a distinct change in the temper and substance of the weekly Sunday broadcasts Savage had commenced in late November, to line the Dominion up to its wartime responsibilities as Fraser saw them.

This former submission of image manipulation is revealed upon analysis of the *War Cabinet Decisions* volumes. From the War Cabinet's inception the previous September until the end of 1939, 720 decisions were approved there, yet not one was by Savage as Fraser and Nash did the honours.²⁴⁷ However, remarkably on the 12 and 15 January the Prime Minister attended the War Cabinet and signed off the approval for Decisions No. 740 and 753-758.²⁴⁸ This appearance of Savage seemed to provide substance to the illusion being promulgated that he was fit and well, further demonstrated on 17 January when Fraser gave a speech in Auckland wanting to 'remove a slight misapprehension' that he was in effect the *éminence grise* behind Savage. He stressed that 'I left New Zealand as Acting Prime Minister, but I am pleased to say that I returned to find the Prime Minister in good health', mentioning the Prime Minister's attendance at Cabinet on the above dates.²⁴⁹ He further added that 'I think the country ought to know that Mr Savage is again taking up the work of his high and responsible office'.²⁵⁰ Fraser, fully appreciative of the Prime Minister's popularity with both the public and the party, conspired to give his fellow citizens the impression that his colleague was at the helm.

As Savage became weaker and housebound from the 18 January, his deputy found himself in the unique position of possessing direct power and influence, but crucially not the nominal

²⁴⁷ ANZ, AAFD 809, Box 1.2, War Cabinet Decisions.

²⁴⁸ Ibid, Box 2.3.

²⁴⁹ TNA, DO 121/94, "Full Cabinet Work", *The Dominion*, 18/1/40 [enclosed by Batterbee].

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

responsibility. Fraser was able to hide behind the authority and persona of his leader, shrewdly using him as a cipher to endorse and publicise the more resolute line he wanted propagated. He notably did this with Savage's Sunday night radio broadcasts. On 26 November 1939, whilst his deputy was in London, Savage commenced this series of eleven airings on the theme of 'New Zealand problems as I see them'.²⁵¹ It is contended that the importance of these transmissions lay in the dramatic change of tone and substance over the weeks, providing a litmus test of the changing power dynamics within the Government, and an intriguing insight into Savage's progressive physical and mental decline.

The first seven broadcasts, up to 21 January, were mostly partisan and arguably less about the war, being more concerned with a defence of government policy. The opening one did mention the prospect of a long war and the need for national unity, but Savage then struck a partisan and discordant note by refuting any unifying sentiment, stating that 'National unity is not to be bought by a people's Government by the abandonment of its domestic policy'.²⁵² However, by the eighth broadcast a dramatic change in content had occurred whereby the only similarity with the preceding seven was the personage of the broadcaster himself, as the actual text content had a new author, probably Cornish again.²⁵³

These transmissions were of a completely different tone and substance to his previous ones. Gone was the lauding of the achievements of his government and social security, replaced by an outright focus on what had to be done in the war. The primary concern at this stage was the rate of voluntary enlistment, an issue raised by Freyberg in a private letter to Churchill.²⁵⁴

²⁵¹ ANZ, Nash Papers, 1177 0319-0430, The Radio Broadcasts of M.J. Savage; New Zealand Sound Archives, [Henceforth NZSA] D3631-D3642, "New Zealand problems as I see them", www.ngataonga.org.nz; Wood, *Political*, 121.

²⁵² What Hinders Unity," *Evening Post*, 27/11/39, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19391127.2.50>

²⁵³ ATL, 2000-094-2, King interviews McIntosh, 16/3/78.

²⁵⁴ ANZ, WAI18/13v, Freyberg to Churchill, 8/1/40.

In his 28 January broadcast, Savage made a blunt call for more recruits. He stated that ‘we are in jeopardy as never before...this is the day and the hour for the fighting man’, concluding with the most spirited and, for Savage, astonishing appeal to New Zealand pride.²⁵⁵ In the most acclamatory terms he stated that

throughout the Empire, yesterday’s sportsmen are today’s warriors.

Men who have worn the jersey of the All Blacks...men who have led them - captains courageous - are now wearing khaki.²⁵⁶

Using that most iconic representation of his nation’s masculinity to encourage his fellow countrymen to go to war represented the most astonishing U-turn of any speech of the Prime Minister. When the substance of all his previous broadcasts in the series is considered, along with those throughout the early months of 1939, it seems quite incongruous. Yet he went even further in his concluding talk on 3 March, titled ‘Public friend No.1-the fighting man’. This time Savage delved into Anzac mythology, competing with C.E.W. Bean, the Australian official historian from the First World War, in purple prose.²⁵⁷ He asked his audience to ‘remember what the New Zealanders did in the last war...What New Zealanders did once they can do again’.²⁵⁸ He then exhorted them further by quoting a General von Roon, who maintained

that he found repeatedly that it took the heart out of our best troops if they found the trenches they had to attack were manned by Anzacs.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁵ ANZ, Nash Papers 1177 0319-0430, The Radio Broadcasts of M.J. Savage, 28/1/40; NZSA, Digital Audio 39940 1.06-1.20, www.ngataonga.org.nz

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ C.E.W. Bean, *The Official History of Australia in the War 1914-1918, Vol.V, The AIF in France during the main German Offensive, 1918*, (Sydney, 1941).

²⁵⁸ Radio Broadcast 3/3/40.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

Clearly, these words were not those of someone with an appeasing bent and a long-held antipathy to the army, who until well into 1939 had kept it short of funds.²⁶⁰ In fact, according to his biographer, Savage had severe reservations about the excessively jingoistic tone of these later broadcasts, and that on at least one occasion he had to be persuaded by Fraser to deliver it.²⁶¹ The only concession in these broadcasts to his former views was the 28 January expression of antipathy to compulsory service wishing it to be said that:

every New Zealand soldier is a volunteer on whom no compulsion was brought to bear, and who willingly takes up arms freely.²⁶²

This latter aspect encapsulated the great Labour Party dilemma of early 1940, in that although Fraser was almost certainly in favour of it, galvanised by his visit to Britain, any advocacy of conscription at this time would be a political step too far.

Thus, it is evident that throughout the last two years of his life, the only occasions when Savage gave speeches that were unambiguously staunch and unwavering, such as the famous 5 September address, or his latter broadcasts from 28 January until 3 March, were not written by him, but for him. All other speeches and broadcasts, notably during the first seven months of 1939 and when he had partially recovered in October and November, displayed distinct strands of appeasement and equivocation. It seems clear that the new tone and sentiment from the middle of January was a consequence of his deputy wielding more influence and power. Wood, with masterly understatement, commented that Savage

was so little at home in the new war situation that his broadcasts may be read as [particularly] reflecting..... the views of ...his deputy and successor, Peter Fraser.²⁶³

²⁶⁰ McIntyre, *Prepares*, 113.

²⁶¹ Gustafson, *Cradle* 252.

²⁶² ANZ, Nash Papers 1177 0319-0430, Radio Broadcasts, 28/1/40; NZSA, Digital Audio 39940 1.06-1.20, www.ngataonga.org.nz

²⁶³ ATL, 2000-094-2, King interviews McIntosh, 16/3/78; Wood, *Political*, 121.

Fraser was, additionally, both irritated and concerned by the actions of left wing and conscientious objector groups at this time, notably on volunteer levels, and responded with his own Sunday broadcast on 25 February. With great astuteness, he added weight to his remarks by stating that the address was under the auspices of the ailing leader, commencing with

the Prime Minister has requested me (emphasis added) to explain briefly certain matters relating to the Public Safety Emergency Regulations’.

He continued with

*Mr Savage considers that I, as Minister in Charge of the Police should say a few words to the people on the subject’.*²⁶⁴

He then outlined his view that freedom to incite or damage New Zealand’s war effort was not freedom of speech, nor was ‘endeavouring to prevent men enlisting....political freedom’.²⁶⁵ As a result he stifled any anti-war and communist inclined dissent under the legislation, which gained the support of a complimentary Batterbee, who mentioned to London that left-wing pacifists were unable to obtain any publicity in the press or meeting places.²⁶⁶ New Zealand in effect became, as characterised by historian Keith Sinclair, a ‘constitutional autocracy’.²⁶⁷

The more authoritarian milieu which pertained was also seen in a decision of some significance as Fraser abolished the COD. This body, which last met with its 28th meeting on 7 December with Nash in the chair, was replaced on 27 February 1940 with one virtually

²⁶⁴ NZSA, Digital Audio 39940 1.26-1.33, www.ngataonga.org.nz; “Right Of Free Speech,” Evening Post, 26/2/40, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19400226.2.43>

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ TNA, FO 371/25222, Batterbee to Parkinson, 20/2/40.

²⁶⁷ Sinclair, *Nash*, 208.

identical in personnel, but re-named as a Committee of Cabinet (COC).²⁶⁸ Fraser fully ensured that there were to be no non *ex-officio* members, and accordingly Lee and Barnard, two dissenters, who in fact challenged whether the First Echelon should be dispatched the previous November, were excluded.²⁶⁹ The establishment of this new committee, just two days after Fraser's Sunday radio broadcast with its authoritarian intimation, provides a clear exposition of Fraser's determination of purpose in establishing the path he deemed necessary, and a political ruthlessness in downgrading Lee at the same time.

He had thus, skilfully used his political wiles to garner support for a less tolerant attitude towards dissent, which a significant number in his party would probably have opposed if it did not come with the imprimatur of the revered Prime Minister. Additionally, at this time, though constrained by his party's hostility to conscription, Fraser did everything he could to maximise enlistment. The War Cabinet of 15 February authorised £10,000 to be set aside for a recruitment drive, which included a large photo of Savage used as a front in a renewed newspaper campaign advocating volunteering, and Fraser even asked Batterbee to make recruiting speeches in the constituency of a pacifist Labour MP.²⁷⁰

The Demise of John Lee

Having achieved his aim of engendering a resolute approach to the war and, as reflected in the press, greater national unity, Fraser now needed to focus on his own political party to ensure that he secured the leadership to reemphasise the path he envisioned for his nation.²⁷¹ To ensure success, it seems that a blatant deception as to the true condition of Savage took place. In analysing this, a brief recourse to events at a Labour Party caucus the previous

²⁶⁸ ANZ, EA1/436, 28th COD Meeting, 7/12/39; Ibid, 1st Committee of Cabinet [henceforth COC] Meeting, 27/2/40.

²⁶⁹ Ibid, 26th COD Meeting, 9/11/39; ANZ, WAI/23/e, Meeting of Defence Council, 10/11/39.

²⁷⁰ ANZ, AAFD 809, Box 2.3, War Cabinet Decisions; TNA, DO 121/116, Batterbee to Machtig, 7/3/40; <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19400304.2.29.1>

²⁷¹ "To the Last Ounce," *Evening Post*, 29/1/40, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19400129.2.21>

November is needed, which involved a clash over ministerial vacancies between Savage and Lee. Lee's biographer states that in response to this quarrel, the Aucklander attempted to precipitate a crisis and a leadership election, because with the 'heir apparent [Fraser] twelve thousand miles away', such an election by caucus might well result in victory for him.²⁷² This was revealed on 8 December, when Lee published a controversial article called 'Psychopathology and Politics', which clearly implied that a psychologically unfit Savage would lead Labour to electoral disaster.²⁷³ It caused a huge amount of dismay within the party, and Nash as Acting Prime Minister whilst Fraser was away, sacked Lee from his minor ministerial position on 20 December.²⁷⁴ A notion became embedded in the minds of Labour leaders that Lee must go, and knowing that such a result could only occur at a party conference, the groundwork was laid for this outcome.²⁷⁵

The final episode in this tale of leadership rivalry involved a manifest deception of Labour Party members, to which it is thought unrealistic that Fraser would have been ignorant of. *The Standard* of 8 March displayed a whole page article titled 'Facts About Mr Savage's Health'. This described their correspondent enjoying 'a glass of sherry' with the Prime Minister, further stating that he was

not only very fit, and looking very fit, but is in daily consultation with his Ministers, [and was] still the directing head of Government policy.²⁷⁶

Being in effect the party's newspaper, this article was patently a canard and especially focused upon Labour members so as to convince them that their leader was well. Yet, in reality he was too ill to see Batterbee and was reportedly drifting in and out of a coma.²⁷⁷

²⁷² Olssen, *Lee*, 146.

²⁷³ Gustafson, *Cradle*, 260; Bassett and King, *Tomorrow*, 180.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 180.

²⁷⁵ G. Hunt, *Black Prince. The Biography of Fintan Patrick Walsh* (Auckland, 2004), 115.

²⁷⁶ TNA, DO 121/116, enclosed with Batterbee to Machtig, 7/3/40.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid*.

Shortly afterwards, during a period of relative vitality, Savage dictated a report denouncing Lee and the worsening impact the Aucklanders' actions had upon his condition. On 25 March, the now comatose Prime Minister's report was read out to conference which added to the shock of Savage's imminent death. Fraser raised the emotional temperature further by condemning Lee for causing the recovering Prime Minister to have a fatal relapse.²⁷⁸ Being adept in the dark arts of his profession, Fraser knew that he was assured of the bloc votes controlled by union leaders Fintan Patrick Walsh and James Roberts. 'Walsh got the wink to do the numbers', and ensured that 'Lee's expulsion was a foregone conclusion due to the card vote of affiliated unions'.²⁷⁹ Hence, the desired result was achieved and Savage's most vehement critic, the one potential rival to Fraser was expelled.²⁸⁰

This deception of Labour members was Fraser's second approach in his exploitation of the popularity of the Prime Minister, which he applied further by instructing officials to 'put considerable thought into planning the Prime Minister's funeral'. This took the form of a lying-in-state, a lengthy train journey to Auckland, his burial there, and 'at all points Fraser leading the mourners'.²⁸¹ Thus in addition to the authority he had already acquired as the *de facto* war leader, further was acquired by this association with the beloved and late Savage.

Fraser as Prime Minister

Seven days later, and just after Savage's funeral, Fraser attained the leadership of his party and the premiership of New Zealand. There was the perceived opinion amongst caucus that Fraser never forgave anyone who opposed him, and in exploiting this he cleverly conducted the leadership ballot by a show of hands. He was determined to find out where his support

²⁷⁸ Wood, *Political*, 117; Bassett and King, *Tomorrow*, 181-82.

²⁷⁹ Hunt, *Black Prince*, 115.

²⁸⁰ Bassett and King, 182; Gustafson, *Cradle*, 265.

²⁸¹ *Ibid*, 183; [A personal idiosyncrasy of Fraser was his love of attending funerals, and he would have savoured involvement in planning Savage's]

lay and whether he had the unanimous backing of Cabinet colleagues, which enabled a victory by 33-15.²⁸² He sensibly conceded that the spare cabinet place would be left to caucus to nominate. This reduced much of the discontent that had pervaded the previous two years and shrewdly avoided open discontent, thus creating a relatively quiescent atmosphere within the governing party.²⁸³

It is the clear contention that no incoming New Zealand Prime Minister, either before or after Fraser, had to face such a series of inauspicious events during the first few months of their ministry. Whilst the structure of this thesis is indeed thematic, it is imperative to appreciate that the most significant international issues were encompassing Fraser contemporaneously to these events, especially seen in Chapter Five.

The remainder of this chapter is concerned with the domestic scene that faced Fraser in the middle months of 1940 and involves his party's internal debates and dealings with the Opposition. Having achieved the aim of shoring up the party following the Labour Conference and the fallout over the expulsion of Lee, he faced the pressures emanating from the Opposition. This was their calls for both conscription and a coalition government, to enable the nation to present a united approach to the war.²⁸⁴ These two great domestic issues converged soon after Fraser took power, and his deft handling helped him fully establish his position. Up until then, the subject of both of these were anathema to the Labour Party.

Background to conscription

When war had been declared, Fraser possibly supported the introduction of compulsory military service, and as previously mentioned there is compelling evidence from the draft of

²⁸² Bassett and King, 185; Logan, *Nordy*, 155; TNA, DO 35/587/4, Comment on DO folder, TNA.

²⁸³ Sinclair, *Nash*, 194; Michael Bassett, "The Political Context of the Prime-Ministerial Years" in *Peter Fraser*, ed Clark, 48.

²⁸⁴ "A Dramatic Two Days," *Evening Post*, 15/5/40, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19400515.2.49>

his Cabinet Report that such an assessment was reinforced following his visit to London in late 1939. Though he returned to New Zealand convinced of the necessity for his nation's increased contribution to their war effort, he was limited by his party's hostility to conscription, and at this stage advocating such a measure was a political step too far. It is additionally important to note that Fraser, very mindful of Savage's declining health, appreciated that the prospect of a premiership contest in the next few months would neuter any such immediate plans, and wanted to avoid alienating potential support within caucus.

This conundrum was demonstrated on 21 February, one month before their annual conference, when the Labour Party and the Federation of Labour (FOL) issued a statement which was submitted for endorsement at the full conference. It included a re-affirmation of the determination to do everything possible to overthrow the Nazi regime, yet avowed that 'there will be no conscription while Labour is in power'.²⁸⁵ At the conference itself on 26 March, Fraser disingenuously declared that the conference had never considered 'the question of conscription and [any] agitation against it was therefore unnecessary and spurious'.²⁸⁶

However, displaying an increasingly characteristic authoritarian trait, as reflected by his 25 February broadcast, Fraser labelled anti-conscription activists as simply anti-government militants encouraged by communists.²⁸⁷ He then went on to warn that any Labour Party members attending a conference of the Peace and Anti-Conscription Council (PACC) would

²⁸⁵ TNA, DO 35/587/4, *The Dominion*, 22/2/40.

²⁸⁶ Ibid, Report on 1940 Labour Conference, Boyd-Shannon to Eden, 8/4/40,

²⁸⁷ "Right of Free Speech," *Evening Post*, 26/2/40,

<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19400226.2.43>

be expelled from the Party.²⁸⁸ The Government's position on the issue of volunteerism in the early months of 1940 was superficially neutral, although there were distinct concerns about the declining numbers recruited. Following a surge in enlistment as a result of the sailing of the First Echelon in early January, with numbers rising to 6282 in the first four weeks of 1940, just 534 enlisted in the week ending 9 March.²⁸⁹ This was despite the newspaper advertisements fronted by Savage's photo, and recruitment tours around the country by Duigan and Fraser.²⁹⁰ A mood of undoubted concern pervaded over military manpower and its consequential impact on the efficacy of a future Division.²⁹¹

Background to coalition

As mentioned in Chapter Two, on taking over as Acting Prime Minister in the days before the declaration of war, Fraser appreciated the need for his nation to be as politically united as practicable and to avoid contentious issues. Relations deteriorated, however, notably when he was away in London, and a more rancorous environment was evident enough in January for the *Round Table* to comment that despite a political truce being suggested, there was 'practically no political cooperation between the Government and the Opposition'.²⁹²

It was, however, well known that Fraser wished for greater all-party cooperation in war, and possibly with this in mind, a delegate at the Labour Party Conference in late March 1940 questioned him on the matter. His reply mentioned that he saw no need for a coalition, but if the need ever arose, then he (the questioner) could be satisfied that conference would be consulted.²⁹³ Although there is no evidence at this stage that Fraser desired a step beyond

²⁸⁸ David Grant, *Anti-Conscription, Conscription and the Referendum* in Clark (ed), *Peter Fraser*, 134.

²⁸⁹ Taylor, *Home Front, Volume I*, 88.

²⁹⁰ ANZ, WAI18/13v, Berendsen to Freyberg, 14/3/40.

²⁹¹ Taylor, 88-91.

²⁹² "Domestic Policy of NZ," *Christchurch Press*, 27/11/39,

<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19391127.2.42>; *The Round Table*, Vol.118, March 1940, 460.

²⁹³ TNA, DO 35/587/4, Boyd-Shannon to Eden, 8/4/40.

that of greater party collaboration, he was no doubt aware of the visceral opposition to any formal coalition from his own party. Nevertheless, on attaining the premiership, the relations with the National Party seemed better than at any time since the outbreak of war, a distinct change from the sentiments echoed in January.²⁹⁴

The issues start to merge

Circumstances arose in May whereby the ever-louder drumbeat of conscription merged with the much quieter call for coalition. Clearly the catalyst for this arose from the dramatic events in Europe in May 1940, which caused shocks of an ‘unprecedented character’ in New Zealand following the initial German success.²⁹⁵ The Chamberlain Government fell on May 10 to be replaced by a coalition with Winston Churchill as Prime Minister. This engendered demands for a similar arrangement by many editors in New Zealand, although such a proposal was dismissed by both Fraser and Nash.²⁹⁶ The populace of the Dominion, however, continued to watch with horror at the ‘unexampled dissolution of established securities’ seeing the precariousness not only of the ‘Mother Country’s’ situation, but also their own, as Britain was New Zealand’s first line of defence.²⁹⁷

On 22 May, 13,000 miles away from Wellington, Attlee, the Labour leader and now a member of the War Cabinet, introduced the British Emergency Powers (Defence) Act, giving the Government complete control over persons and property.²⁹⁸ This led to agitation for similar actions in New Zealand, and mass meetings were held throughout the country, angering Fraser at what he saw as an orchestrated campaign by opponents of the government

²⁹⁴ Wood, *Political*, 131.

²⁹⁵ Ibid, 135.

²⁹⁶ Ibid, 130; “Not Needed,” *Evening Post*, 14/5/40, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19400514.2.34>

²⁹⁷ Ibid, 135.

²⁹⁸ James Thorn, *Peter Fraser, New Zealand’s Wartime Prime Minister* (London, 1952), 173.

to destabilise their policies.²⁹⁹ Despite his resentment, at a meeting of the Labour Party caucus on Friday 24 May, Fraser responded positively announcing the intention of a similar act to be presented to Parliament the following week. This would entail that ‘all forms of property and institutions, as well as every person in the Dominion, would be at the disposal of the country for the prosecution of New Zealand’s war effort to a successful conclusion’.³⁰⁰ He was therefore, clearly preparing the ground for compulsory military service.

That day, the issue also moved to that of coalition as Hamilton and Coates personally called that afternoon, deeming it wise ‘to tell the Prime Minister that in the emergency he should form a national government’.³⁰¹ Fraser, despite acknowledging the friendly spirit in which this approach was made, proposed instead ‘to set up at once a representative War Council to take charge of war activities’, so ensuring that the nation’s effort was maximised.³⁰² This response clearly indicated him seeking some form of compromise, as he did not accept Hamilton’s offer of a war coalition but did not completely discard the sentiment behind it. The middle-ground solution of a combined war administration was his solution, as he could not agree to the abandonment of his party’s mandate to govern New Zealand.³⁰³ This limited proposal was however, rejected by the National Party caucus on 29 May.³⁰⁴

In between these negotiations about coalition, Fraser returned to the matter of conscription on 26 May during a Sunday evening radio broadcast to the nation. Here, he declared that the Government intended to enact an ‘All-in’ policy and take virtually unlimited powers to direct

²⁹⁹ Bassett & King, *Tomorrow*, 194; *Evening Post*, 25/5/40,

<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/evening-post/1940/05/25/13>

³⁰⁰ Ibid, 194-95; Wood, *Political*, 136-37; “Parliament to Meet” *Evening Post*, 24/5/40,

<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19400524.2.61.1>

³⁰¹ “Opposition Aims” *New Zealand Herald*, 27/5/40, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NZH19400527.2.46>

³⁰² “Council To Be Set Up,” *Evening Post*, 27/5/40, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19400527.2.106.1>

³⁰³ Thorn, *Fraser*, 173

³⁰⁴ “Opposition reject proposal” *Evening Post*, 29/5/40,

<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19400530.2.164.1>

both men and resources in the national interest.³⁰⁵ This manifested itself as the Emergency Regulations Amendment Bill four days later, which included conscription, and with the tacit support of the Opposition displaying a degree of cooperation, the Bill was rushed through in all its stages and allowed to pass without a division.³⁰⁶ During this debate, Fraser made it unequivocally clear that ‘provision will be made for the compulsory system right away’, and it became reality the following month when voluntary enlistment ceased on 22 July.³⁰⁷

Therefore, in these intense days at the end of May, Fraser was dealing virtually simultaneously with both the conscription and coalition issues, attempting to find some sort of compromise to attain national unity, but always conscious of how much of such an arrangement he could sell to his own party.

Attention then moved to the specially convened emergency conferences of the Labour Party and the FOL, and assured that he had the support of the bloc votes controlled by union leaders, a manifesto was issued.³⁰⁸ This commented on the gravity of the military situation, whereby Fraser in effect asked for a ‘completely free hand’ including the ‘conscription...of the whole of the wealth and manpower of New Zealand’.³⁰⁹ The delegates accordingly ‘placed [their] full trust in Fraser and his Cabinet to use their powers wisely’, and as his biographers emphasised, there was no doubt that the promise to conscript wealth had considerable appeal amongst Labour’s rank and file.³¹⁰ This distinctly helped ameliorate any anxieties, which was additionally bolstered by their leader’s reluctance to countenance any form of coalition that inhibited the Government’s mandate to govern.³¹¹

³⁰⁵ “National Effort”, *New Zealand Herald*, 27/5/40, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NZH19400527.2.47>

³⁰⁶ Wood, *Political*, 139; *The Round Table*, Vol.120, September 1940, 944.

³⁰⁷ NZPD, 30/5/40, Vol.257, 21; Bassett and King, *Tomorrow*, 195-96.

³⁰⁸ David Littlewood, “‘The Debates of the Past’: New Zealand’s First Labour Government and the Introduction of Conscription in 1940”, *War and Society (W&S)* 39:4, (2020) 287.

³⁰⁹ Wood, 199 & 196; Thorn, *Fraser*, 179.

³¹⁰ *Ibid*, 197.

³¹¹ *Ibid*.

This latter issue now became the obvious political danger for Fraser, especially as the unminuted *quid pro quo* for the delegates in accepting compulsory military service was keeping as much distance as possible from the National opposition.³¹² This policy also mitigated against the unease felt in the party at being outflanked on its left by John Lee's newly formed Democratic Labour Party (DLP), who were specifically targeting Labour seats.³¹³ Thus, by gauging the public mood to introduce compulsory military service, Fraser was able to counterbalance the last vestige of the old aversion to the issue and get the legislation passed. It was a 'highly successful piece of political manoeuvring and timing', though throughout, he was fully aware of the pressure that this put on his party, which completely exemplified his leadership in bringing them to this position.³¹⁴

A War Cabinet is Established

Although conscription ensued, the Prime Minister was conscious that with the dire situation in France and the increasing belligerency of Japan, some form of cross-party cooperation was needed in order to maximise the Dominion's effort and present a united front. He firstly tried to square this intractable circle of a politically united coalition government, against the abhorrence such a step would produce in his own party, by proposing a representative War Council to Hamilton. This would be confined solely to activities concerning the war, but was not far enough for the National Party, and a stalemate resulted. Within Labour circles there was a fear that the Opposition wanted to interfere with their social legislation and cull the benefits they had campaigned for over so many years. On its part, the Opposition feared that the necessary coordination of state policies for the war effort was a back-door way of increasing the socialisation of the economy and impeding free enterprise.

³¹² Wood, *Political*, 197; Thorn, *Peter Fraser*, 173.

³¹³ Bassett and King, *Tomorrow*, 191.

³¹⁴ Littlewood, 'Debates of the Past', (*W&S*) 39:4, (2020) 288.

In order to seek some guidance, on 12 June Fraser cabled the High Commissioner, William Jordan in London requesting a prompt reply, wanting to know the ‘precise function of the British War Cabinet’ and whether it just confines itself to war questions and asked of the remit of the ordinary Cabinet.³¹⁵ Jordan responded that the War Cabinet is the only one in government, with domestic affairs considered by committees chaired by a cabinet member.³¹⁶ Whether this reply much informed Fraser is not clear, but it did indicate the direction of his thinking to solve the dilemma by having two parallel cabinets.

On that same day he raised his offer with Hamilton, inviting him to ‘appoint two members of the Opposition party to act in a War Cabinet alongside three members representing the Government’.³¹⁷ This revised proposal was rejected by the National Party caucus, as the offer was viewed as over cautious. Its remit to just deal with the armed forces at home and abroad and not the ‘all important questions of production, finance and manpower’ was a fundamental area of disputation. Hamilton said that ‘nothing less than an “all in” quick acting, non-party Cabinet will satisfy the people ... and ensure a full national effort’.³¹⁸ Nevertheless, the leadership in both main parties remained on amicable terms, and negotiations continued for several weeks ‘among those who wished so far as possible to eliminate party politics from matters concerning the war’.³¹⁹

Fraser relented and agreed that everything relating to the war would be dealt with by the War Cabinet and set out the agreement.³²⁰ Coates was the lynchpin, as he realised that the Prime Minister had gone as far as he could in reaching a compromise acceptable to the Labour

³¹⁵ ANZ, AEFZ, W5727 22619 Box 1713, Fraser to Jordan 12/6/40.

³¹⁶ Ibid, Jordan to Fraser, 12/6/40.

³¹⁷ NZPD, 13/6/40, Vol.257, 168.

³¹⁸ Ibid; *The Round Table*, Vol.120, September 1940, 945.

³¹⁹ Wood, *Political*, 141.

³²⁰ AEFZ, W5727 22619 Box 1713, War Cabinet.

Party.³²¹ Characteristically, the former who at this stage in his career had retreated from partisan politics, just told the National caucus, rather than asked for its agreement when the invitation finally came to join.³²² On 16 July the official announcement was made in a Ministerial Statement in Parliament by Fraser, stating that a five member War Cabinet consisting of Nash, Jones, Coates, Hamilton and himself would be formed, to control New Zealand's war effort, and it duly sat for the first time on 23 July.³²³ The ordinary Cabinet would continue to manage domestic affairs, with Fraser as its head too.³²⁴

The *Round Table* commented that this arrangement 'appeased rather than satisfied public demand for a national all-in government', and mentioned the unprecedented situation of having its affairs administered by two cabinets, both presided over by the same chairman.³²⁵ Hence, by quietly waiting and working behind the scenes, and having 'weaved his way through a dense thicket', Fraser emerged with a workable if clumsy structure for handling the war, achieving a coalition of sorts, mutually disliked by both major parties but not enough to obviate some kind of partnership.³²⁶

A postscript to this arrangement was that although Labour had misgivings, party discipline generally held firm. But in the National Party there was a new less accommodating strand, which attained a majority and evicted the old guard with a more oppositional leader, Sidney Holland.³²⁷ Hamilton retained his post in the War Cabinet, to which the new leader refused an invitation, as he preferred to resort to adversarial politics. Wood commented on the inevitable result as a 'somewhat unedifying if superficial conflict'.³²⁸

³²¹ NZPD, 13/6/40, Vol.257, 168. 141; Bruce Farland, *Coates' Tale: J. G. Coates, War Hero, Politician, Statesman. Joseph Gordon Coates, Prime Minister of New Zealand 1925-1928* (Wellington, 1995) 146.

³²² Bassett, *Coates of Kaipara*, 251.

³²³ ANZ, AAFD 809, Box 3.5, War Cabinet Decisions.

³²⁴ NZPD, 16/7/40, Vol.257, 512.

³²⁵ *The Round Table*, Vol.121, December 1940, 179.

³²⁶ Bassett and King, *Tomorrow*, 198

³²⁷ Wood, *Political*, 143 & 165-67.

³²⁸ *Ibid*, 167.

Fraser's First Months

By the very nature of the job, any prime minister first coming into office has an array of issues to deal with. In wartime the scope of those matters is not only greater, but of a different scale and intensity. Like his soon to be counterpart in London, Winston Churchill, it is of the profoundest importance to appreciate the sheer scale and magnitude of the problems Fraser faced in the first four months of his ministry. When the inauspiciousness of those days and weeks are considered, arguably the singularly least important, but significant nonetheless as it gave him his political base and security, was to stabilise his party in the wake of the Lee affair. Fraser's achievement in reducing the latent discontent that had infected his party over the previous year and thus be able to establish a solid unity for the two much more serious and potentially divisive party issues, was a testament to his political adeptness and craft.

The two different domestic concerns of conscription and coalition, both shibboleths in their status to the Labour Party, became intrinsically linked in these middle months of 1940, and whilst appreciating his political constraints, Fraser carefully nudged his party step by step towards his goal. He was invariably mindful to keep the membership informed and enfranchised, being crucially cognisant that he was assured of the bloc votes controlled by union leaders to get through what he thought was required.³²⁹

Whilst this thesis has a thematic structure with this chapter concerned with domestic issues in early 1940, it is imperative to appreciate the wider context of the pressures that Fraser faced. Within a month of taking office, whilst all the foregoing matters were simmering, he had to deal with that most intensive three-day period involving negotiations with Canberra and London over the departure of the US3 convoy (see Chapter Five). Additionally, weeks

³²⁹ Bassett and King, *Tomorrow*, 195-96.

later, just after the conscription issue had been settled and the National Party had turned down the initial offer of a war administration, there was the subsequent anxiety concerning his fellow countrymen in the US3 convoy having to be diverted mid-ocean to Britain.

Notwithstanding all this, France had by now collapsed, and Italy's entrance into the war provided profound implications about the possible future risks of interdiction of New Zealand's convoy sailing routes. Although the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) had escaped from Dunkirk, an anxious Fraser on 13 June received the most perturbing and ominous telegram, Z106, from London.³³⁰ In it Churchill asserted defiantly that 'we continue to fight with or without United States assistance', but then proceeded with a strategic appreciation that Wellington 'had been half-dreading and half-expecting for almost a year'.³³¹ He declared that there

would not be sufficient forces to meet the combined German and Italian invasion in European Waters and the Japanese fleet in the Far East.³³²

This latter analysis, which in effect annulled the Singapore strategy- the sending of a British fleet there to deter the Japanese- engendered a dignified but terse response from Fraser. He stated that the message was a departure from the

understanding, reinforced by repeated and explicit assurances that a strong British fleet would...proceed to Singapore should circumstances require.³³³

The recitation of this telegram is to emphasise and reiterate further the sheer number of issues, mostly of the most profound nature, that passed across Fraser's desk in the first

³³⁰ TNA, DO 114/113, Churchill to Fraser, 13/6/40, (Z106).

³³¹ Ibid; Hensley, *Beyond*, 80.

³³² Ibid.

³³³ Hensley, 80; TNA, DO 35/1003/15, Fraser to Churchill, 15/6/40, (230).

months of his premiership. Although the specific contents of the above is beyond the scope of this chapter, the ramifications concerning the negotiations over the transits of 2 and 3 New Zealand Echelons of the NZEF are discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.

In conclusion, Fraser returned to New Zealand in late 1939 with a profound determination to do all he could to enable the Dominion to maximise its contribution to the war. He undertook this with a political mastery of both ruthlessness and subtlety by exploiting the ailing and often comatose Savage in three ways. This ensured that an enhanced vigorous tone and message was conveyed, which at the same time obscured his augmented authoritarianism. Firstly, he utilised his colleague's popularity by acting as the organ grinder to the infirm Prime Minister by manipulating his Sunday evening broadcasts. Furthermore, he hid behind the authority of the Prime Minister in suppressing dissent, making it very difficult for pacifists and anti-war activists to gain any sort of platform. This was followed by the deception of Labour Party members as to Savage's true condition, notably *The Standard* article of 3 March, accordingly creating an atmosphere of shock at the beloved leader's condition when known three weeks later at Conference. The subsequent apportioning of blame for it to John Lee helped facilitate a momentum for the latter's expulsion.

Fraser further exemplified his ruthlessness, a week after Savage's death, by taking the chair and insisting that the election of a new Labour Party leader and Prime Minister be undertaken by a show of hands, thus creating a daunting atmosphere for any cabinet and caucus member thinking of voting for other candidates.

Finally, as mentioned in Chapter Two, the tone and redactions of the first draft of Fraser's Report of the Dominions Ministers Meeting revealed a suppressed support for the policy of

conscription to be enacted in New Zealand. The fact that these views were not openly expressed in the first months of 1940, alongside an advocacy of volunteerism, demonstrated his willingness in biding his time until he viewed the party was ready. This arrived with the grim news from Europe, and, aided by the Labour mantra of equality of sacrifice, he legislated conscription legislation followed by the imperfect yet workable coalition War Cabinet.

In order to have achieved all he did, Fraser in 1940 had placed in his hands more power than any 'New Zealand leader before or since'. Yet as his most authoritative biography stated, 'the way he used that power ultimately became the measure of his greatness'.³³⁴

³³⁴ Bassett and King, *Tomorrow*, 197.

Theme II

Problematic relations with their 'closest ally'.

Chapter Four

'Scruffy younger brother' earns recognition: New Zealand and Australian relations, 1938-1939

Although the sense of comradeship was strong following the First World War, and their shared Anzac identity engendered a huge amount of pride, defence communication between New Zealand and Australia in the 1930s was negligible and restricted to the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) in London acting as their go-between. As mentioned in Chapter One, increasing concerns at the international situation led to the formation of the Organisation for National Security (ONS) in 1936 followed by an overseeing Council of Defence (COD) the next year. Such disquiets additionally prompted the imperative that greater cooperation and liaison with Australia should ensue, and initial cables focused on the significance of some of the Pacific islands to the defence of New Zealand.³³⁵ In the following months Wellington's anxiety extended to various aspects of imperial strategy and they repeatedly initiated communications across the Tasman, hoping that greater liaison with their neighbour would entail. This chapter is about the Dominion's struggle to achieve that aim, as well as a mutual respecting status incumbent on such a partnership.

New Zealand requesting, Australia ignoring

In February 1938 the newly appointed New Zealand Chief of Air Staff, Ralph Cochrane, aware of the 'especial importance' of Fiji and Tonga, from which modern bombers could reach New Zealand, encouraged Savage to make a formal proposal for a Pacific Conference involving New Zealand, Australia and Britain.³³⁶ This he did in a letter sent to Australian Prime Minister, Joseph Lyons on 19 May, to which an apparent reply eventuated, although nothing tangible transpired at this time.³³⁷

³³⁵ McIntyre, *Prepares*, 200-02.

³³⁶ *Ibid*, 202.

³³⁷ Referred to in ANZ, EA1/520, Savage to Lyons, 22/12/38, [In the above cable by Savage, he referred to secret letter Z.15/1/1 from Lyons].

Whilst these concerns were to the fore, the Secretary to the ONS and COD, W.G. Stevens, wrote a memorandum on 17 May to the three services chiefs in New Zealand. He noted the close defence contacts with Britain, but the absurdity of there being virtually none with Australia. He stressed the importance of greater liaison with Melbourne, and as New Zealand had more to gain from this suggested that Wellington should initiate a possible visit to Australia by the Defence Minister.³³⁸ This proposal was passed to the Defence Minister, Fred Jones, but possibly reflecting his Prime Minister's disinterest in defence matters, he noted in a hand-written annotation that 'it is not my intention to visit Australia this year'.³³⁹

Persisting, Stevens sent another memorandum to the chiefs in early July, in which he repeated his view of the desirability of liaison on a whole range of issues, and suggested that in his role, he should himself visit Defence Headquarters in Melbourne for two weeks.³⁴⁰ The upshot was an agreement from the Chiefs of Staff Committee that the

closest possible liaison should now be established [with Australia, and that] it should be at least as close as with Great Britain - in fact, in view of the similarity of our problems both in peace and war, it is very easy to make out a case for it to be even closer.³⁴¹

Five points were laid out where liaison was thought imperative, and a recommendation was made that this be communicated at premiership level to Australia.³⁴²

The Munich crisis of September 1938 created a profound sense of urgency in Wellington, and using much of the phrasing from the Chiefs of Staff Report, and pushed by Berendsen,

³³⁸ ANZ, EA1/520, Stevens to CoS, 13/5/38.

³³⁹ ANZ, AD/11/6, Handwritten annotation on CoS memorandum to Jones 17/5/38.

³⁴⁰ EA1/520, Stevens to CoS, 11/7/38.

³⁴¹ Ibid, CoS Committee Paper, 27/7/38.

³⁴² Ibid.

Savage wrote a letter dated 23 September 1938 to Lyons.³⁴³ In it he stated that defence liaison with Australia is ‘not as good as is desirable,’ and proposed that more direct consultation should take place, suggesting five ‘possible methods to adopt’.³⁴⁴ These called for an exchange of brief summaries of decisions on defence policy, furnishing each other with copies of any communication to Britain of mutual interest, exchange of War Book Papers and definitive War Books, and an understanding that in time of war the fullest possible information both of enemy and own activities should be exchanged.³⁴⁵

Just at that time, Lyons was intimately focused on the ongoing Munich crisis and in daily contact with his High Commissioner in London, the former Prime Minister Stanley Bruce. On 28 September, when tensions were at their height, he suggested to Chamberlain that Bruce fly to Rome with a personal message from Lyons, ‘[as I] am on good personal terms with Signor Mussolini’.³⁴⁶ Considering the distractions of Europe’s worsening security, and the fact that any Pacific concerns would be communicated to London, it is hard to see Lyons being much concerned with any proposals from New Zealand, yet Australia did respond. Their answer arrived a week later from Deputy Prime Minister (Country Party leader and coalition partner) Earle Page, and replying ‘*for the Prime Minister of Australia*’ (added emphasis), acknowledged receipt of the letter.³⁴⁷ He stated that ‘I heartily agree that the closest liaison between our countries in this regard is essential’, and further mentioned that a full response would follow as ‘early as possible’.³⁴⁸ However, this was not forthcoming, causing some exasperation in Wellington.

³⁴³ Hensley, *Beyond*, 37; ATL, 2000-094-5, Henderson interviews Stevens, 6&9/6/69.

³⁴⁴ ANZ, EA1/520, Savage to Lyons 23/9/38.

³⁴⁵ Ibid.

³⁴⁶ R.G. Neale (ed) *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy 1937-49, Vol.I: 1937-38*, Doc 288, (Canberra, 1975) 469, [henceforth, *DAFP Vol.I*].

³⁴⁷ EA1/520, Page to Savage 4/10/1938.

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

Thus, it is evident that amongst the leading military officers and civil servants in New Zealand, the growing alarm emanating from Europe generated an increased anxiety causing them to take the logical step of seeking greater defence liaison with their near neighbour. Although both nations had similar strategic perspectives, at this moment in time Australia was not looking south-eastwards for any more meaningful cooperation across the Tasman. It can be argued that Canberra had aspirations for a role on the global stage, demonstrated in the preceding years when Lyons himself held two meetings with Mussolini in 1935 and 1937, and the Attorney General, Robert Menzies, visited Germany just two months prior to Munich.³⁴⁹ Lyons's communications with Chamberlain were another demonstration of Australia's ambition and view of itself in the world, and in this strategic calculation New Zealand was hardly considered. Although Canberra had initially responded quickly to Savage's liaison proposal via the Deputy Prime Minister, its failure subsequently to deliver on Page's pledge became the first of several such instances emanating from the Commonwealth Government. This was to become symptomatic of what could be characterised as Australian condescension towards New Zealand.

Pacific Defence Conference and new hope for liaison

Following the fickle and haphazard Australian response to his initial overtures, Savage cabled a reminder to his opposite number in late December, where he additionally proposed a conference with an enlarged scope beyond that of just trans-Tasman liaison, embracing the whole strategic situation in the Western Pacific.³⁵⁰ He suggested it be held in New Zealand, stating that he had just received confirmation that delegates from Britain would attend as well.³⁵¹ The recommendation for such a gathering surprised both potential partners, and had

³⁴⁹ Anne Henderson, *Joseph Lyons: The People's Prime Minister*, (Sydney, 2011) 405; Cameron Hazlehurst, *Menzies Observed* (Sydney, 1979) 133-34.

³⁵⁰ ANZ, EA1/520, Savage to Lyons 21/12/38.

³⁵¹ Ibid; TNA, CAB 21/496, Governor-General to DO, 24/12/38.

in fact evoked in the Dominions Office a feeling that New Zealand perhaps had ‘exaggerated notions’, but nevertheless, Secretary of State Malcom MacDonald gave his blessing.³⁵² The Australian response, however, was more problematic as their attitude changed from that of just disregarding Wellington’s requests to that of blatant obfuscation and, arguably, an attempt to derail entirely the significance and authority of the conference.

In an exchange of cables in early January 1939, Lyons firstly questioned the ‘enlarged scope’ of the conference, to which Savage responded about the potential importance for both dominions especially in the context of ‘considerations that would arise in a simultaneous war in Europe and the Far East’.³⁵³ A further Australian rejoinder of 15 February continued to reflect Canberra’s lack of interest, and in a derisive tone asserted that it ‘would be inconvenient to lose the services of [senior] officers’ preparing for and travelling to New Zealand.³⁵⁴ This created disquiet in Wellington, reflected by a Boyd-Shannon cable to London two days later, commenting on how perturbed Wellington was by Lyons’s reply, and asked for British support in any of their representations to Canberra.³⁵⁵

Savage replied to his counterpart again, emphasising ‘the desirability of collaboration in Pacific defence measures to the utmost extent possible’.³⁵⁶ Lyons concurred with this sentiment two weeks later, but devalued the proposed conference still further by stating that only Australian officers would be present, as it ‘is impracticable for a Commonwealth Minister to attend’.³⁵⁷ The view amongst New Zealand officers during this period was becoming increasingly critical. Stevens in conversation with Boyd-Shannon mentioned the

³⁵² Hensley, *Beyond*, 39.

³⁵³ *DAFP* Vol.II, Doc.4, 7, Lyons to Savage, 11/1/39; *Ibid*, Doc.9, 19-20, Savage to Lyons, 24/1/39.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid*, Lyons to Savage, 15/2/39. Doc.24, 42.

³⁵⁵ SAS, Boyd-Shannon to Harding, 17/2/39, <https://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/8438/20/A00001641.pdf>

³⁵⁶ *DAFP* Vol.II, Doc.28, 48-49, Savage to Lyons, 17/2/39.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid*. Doc.31, 53, Lyons to Savage, 28/2/39.

lack of any significant contact with its neighbour, and in an acerbic note, Naval Secretary E.L. Tottenham, commented that there was little point ‘in straining ourselves to achieve the impossible’.³⁵⁸

At this stage, further significant progress in trans-Tasman cooperation seemed unlikely, but then, rather surprisingly on 3 March and after a delay of five months, Lyons replied to the original proposals outlined in Savage’s initial letter of the previous September. Perhaps a little chiding from British sources about the forthcoming conference elicited a change, as he now stated that mutual understanding would be beneficial. He outlined his response to each of the five ‘methods’ of the Savage letter in turn, but only on the fifth one, ‘an understanding that in time of war the fullest possible information both of enemy and own activities should be mutually exchanged’, did he fully agree. To this he stated that ‘this would appear to be desirable and could be arranged so far as my Government is concerned’.³⁵⁹ It is important to stress at this stage that Lyons’ accord with the final ‘method’ would become a significant source of contention the following November, when New Zealand made a unilateral decision to despatch their First Echelon of the NZEF.

The Australian’s overall line nonetheless remained distinctly superior, noticeably illustrated by the insertion of a rider that both nations ‘should [just] keep each other posted on broad questions of policy and plans’, and emphasised that it was only necessary to transmit ‘information regarding the conclusion reached, rather than the documentation relating to their evolution between the two Governments.’³⁶⁰

³⁵⁸ SAS, Boyd-Shannon to Stephenson, 16/2/39, <https://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/8433/38/A00001616.pdf>; Ian McGibbon, *Blue-water rationale: the naval defence of New Zealand 1914-1942* (Wellington, 1981) 311.

³⁵⁹ ANZ, EA1/520, Lyons to Savage, 3/3/39 and Savage to Lyons 23/9/38.

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

Denis McLean, a former New Zealand diplomat and historian, described this reply as ‘a masterpiece, not only of bureaucratic gobbledegook but of the disdainful brush off’.³⁶¹

The Australian delegation to the Pacific Defence Conference (PDC) consisted of just two relatively junior officers alongside one civil servant and a civil aviation expert, but fortunately, the attendance of senior British officials, led by the new High Commissioner Sir Harry Batterbee, gave it credibility and status. Whilst awaiting his voyage to the Dominion, he reiterated Whitehall’s view that with the ever-increasing likelihood of war, he did not want to pour cold water on New Zealand’s willingness to cooperate.³⁶² The host’s delegation consisted of a full ministerial team that was ‘led in practice’ by Deputy Prime Minister Fraser.³⁶³ However, the lack of seniority amongst the Australian delegation meant they were essentially muted throughout the talks, and little in the way of military cooperation was discussed, notably with respect to the Singapore strategy.³⁶⁴

In a post-Conference report Stevens wrote to Berendsen in gloomy tones that the meeting ‘carries us very little further’, describing some of the statements made by the Lyons reply of 3 March as ‘most unsatisfactory’.³⁶⁵ At the 12 June COD meeting, however, it was agreed that ‘an attempt should be made to arrange an exchange of officers with Australia’, reiterated at the subsequent one by Berendsen to an initially reluctant Savage.³⁶⁶ The latter did in fact cable his counterpart four days later, and asked if Stevens could visit Melbourne and be ‘furnished with a range of information’ on issues such as censorship, control of aliens and

³⁶¹ McLean, *Prickly Pair*, 111.

³⁶² McIntyre, *Prepares*, 203.

³⁶³ Hensley, *Beyond*, 40.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁵ ANZ, EA1/520, Stevens to Berendsen, 25/5/39.

³⁶⁶ ANZ, EA1/436, Record of 15th Meeting, COD, 12/6/39, & 16th Meeting, 22/6/39.

supply, and also requested discussions for a 'freer exchange of information' with New Zealand.³⁶⁷

Only this time Savage was not cabling Lyons, as the latter had died on 7 April, but his successor, Robert Menzies, who had won the subsequent leadership election of the United Australia Party (UAP). He brought a new energy and greater consideration of the mutual benefits of liaison with his dominion neighbour. Significantly, however, the circumstances in which he attained the premiership left a legacy of parliamentary instability, as Lyons had enjoyed a close personal relationship with his friend and coalition partner Earle Page. A qualified medical doctor, he had observed at close-hand the depression and illness of Lyons from late 1938 to early 1939, which was accentuated by the 'disloyalty and irritation of cabinet colleagues', particularly Menzies.³⁶⁸

The latter's election as premier caused Page to withdraw his Country Party from the governing coalition, thus leaving a minority UAP Government dependent on the whims of representatives offering support on a confidence and supply basis.³⁶⁹ The fact that this administration was left so vulnerable would play a noteworthy part in the events that would lead to the 'minor trans-Tasman crisis' of November 1939, when New Zealand unilaterally decided to despatch the First Echelon of their Expeditionary Force overseas.³⁷⁰

A new era?

In the light of the letter sent by Savage, and probably aided by gentle encouragement from Britain's High Commissioner in Canberra, Geoffrey Whiskard, Menzies may have looked at

³⁶⁷ ANZ, EA1/520, Savage to Menzies 26/6/39.

³⁶⁸ TNA, CAB 21/2527, Whiskard to DO, 28/11/38.

³⁶⁹ Paul Hasluck, *The Government and the People, 1939-41, Australia in the War of 1939-1945* (Canberra, 1952) 114.

³⁷⁰ McGibbon, *Australia-New Zealand Defence Relations*, 179-80.

the trans-Tasman correspondence of the past year and realised the inadequacies on the part of Australian communication.³⁷¹ In his reply sent two weeks later, a completely new tone was presented, which welcomed the prospect of a visit by Stevens, but due to various administrative details, asked that it not take place earlier than the latter half of September.³⁷² A further letter from him on 3 August commenced with ‘in continuation of my letter of 3rd March 1939’. The importance of this communication is that its use of the first person was not a reference to Menzies himself, but to the Office of the Prime Minister. The status and wording of the letter was structured in such a way that it was in effect a corrective addendum to that sent by Lyons shortly before his death. His successor wrote,

concerning the issue of interchange of information between the Governments of New Zealand and Australia, I forward, herewith, for your information copies of the following document,

which included the defence measures taken at Australian ports.³⁷³

Therefore, unilaterally and no doubt to the pleasant surprise of Wellington, Menzies was repairing the deleterious legacy left by Lyons with respect to the relationship with New Zealand. This act in effect rectified such negativity and satisfied the first ‘method’ of the Savage letter sent to Lyons the previous September, of exchanging ‘brief summaries of decisions on defence policy’.³⁷⁴

On 4 August Savage went into hospital for his long-delayed cancer operation, being replaced by Fraser as Acting Prime Minister. Following a request from Batterbee, Whiskard

³⁷¹ TNA, FO 371/23965, Batterbee to DO, 9/9/39.

³⁷² ANZ, EA1/520, Menzies to Savage, 12/7/39.

³⁷³ Ibid, Menzies to Savage, 3/8/39.

³⁷⁴ Ibid, Savage to Lyons, 23/9/38.

encouraged Menzies to contact Wellington again, and on 26 August informed them that in view of the present emergency, the Australian Government had promulgated national security regulations. Hence again, Menzies satisfied the first ‘method’ of the Savage letter giving an account of the measures the three services were undertaking.³⁷⁵ This information was received ‘with great pleasure’ by Fraser, and he responded in spirit and kind to this initiative the following day, stating that

I warmly welcome all possible reciprocity between Australia and New Zealand and have issued instructions that you are to be kept informed of all relevant actions and proposals in New Zealand.³⁷⁶

To emphasize this intent, a memorandum was sent to the three Chiefs of Staff by Stevens, in his role as Secretary to the ONS. This reiterated ‘the wish of the Acting Prime Minister (Fraser) to effect as close a liaison as possible with the Commonwealth authorities’ and required a weekly relevant statement from each of the services to be on his desk at 9.00am each Monday morning.³⁷⁷

Although it was not known at this time in Wellington, on 24 August Menzies had sent a ‘Most Secret’ letter, which did not actually reach New Zealand until 10 October, as it came by sea for security reasons, accompanying a copy of the Australian War Book.³⁷⁸ Addressed to ‘My Dear Prime Minister’, the letter had a pronounced amiable tone, distinctly in the spirit of the original premier to premier plea of the previous September. Now, in effect, Savage’s original third and fourth methods were clearly satisfied. Thus, by late August, aided and encouraged by Whiskard, Menzies had unmistakably endeavoured to correct the obfuscation,

³⁷⁵ ANZ, EA1/520, Menzies to Fraser, 26/8/39; BLO, (MSS.NZ.s 13) Batterbee Papers, Box.9, File.5, Diary of a Crisis.

³⁷⁶ Ibid, Fraser to Menzies, 27/8/39.

³⁷⁷ Ibid, Stevens to New Zealand CoS, 26/9/39.

³⁷⁸ Ibid, Menzies to Savage, 24/8/39.

condescension and lack of cooperation of Lyons, being successful in putting relations with Wellington on a new and positive footing.

What is curious, however, is that there is no record of the Menzies initiative evident in any of his biographies, autobiography, or even in *Volume Two of Documents on Australian Foreign Policy 1937-1949*.³⁷⁹ Indeed, these efforts by him were entirely absent in any literature of the time dealing with relations between the Pacific dominions. In an historiographic sense, this heightened cooperative period in the trans-Tasman relationship was to become obscured by Australia's and its prime minister's understandable attention and focus towards the outbreak of war in Europe. However, in terms of their endemic disregard of its smaller neighbour during the fourteen-month period between September 1938 and November 1939, this six-week period of considerateness, can in retrospect be seen to have been an anomaly. This was because unfortunately, from mid-September 1939 Australia reverted to its established diplomatic *modus operandi* with respect to New Zealand.

In a 9 September report sent to the Dominions Office, Batterbee complimented the performance of Fraser and Berendsen during the hours before and after the declaration of war. He emphasized how gratified he was by the keen desire of New Zealand for close cooperation with Australia, 'to set on foot a system for the interchange of information ...regarding all defence measures'.³⁸⁰ It thus seems evident that at the outbreak of war there was a very visible confirmation from both governments that they wished to undertake a full and frank interchange of information. It must have seemed to Wellington that their efforts over the preceding sixteen months for greater defence cooperation with Australia had at last

³⁷⁹ Notably absent in his most respected one. A.W. Martin, *Robert Menzies. A life: Volume 1, 1894-1943*, (Melbourne; 1993); The only published communication with Wellington was on 21 August concerning the British trans-Pacific air service, *DAFP* Vol.II, Doc.137, 176, Commonwealth Government to Savage, 21/8/39.

³⁸⁰TNA, FO 371/23965, Batterbee to Eden, 9/9/39.

succeeded, and that to some degree their anxieties were alleviated. Yet, despite there being an undoubted increase in the cable traffic between both governments, this tended to just take the form of informing the other capital of decisions made, without there being any real sense of policy consultation.³⁸¹

Liaison frustration for New Zealand

This lack of actual coordination can be explained, at least partially, by the sheer mass of information reaching both nations, not only from each other, but also from London. Additionally, the differing strategic perceptions of both countries was significant, as Canberra was more sceptical of British policy notably regarding the Singapore strategy and wanted a more independent but central role in policy making. Wellington, however, was generally content to follow Britain's lead if it was kept informed of developments. This reservation on Canberra's part was clearly illustrated by Menzies instructing Bruce to send a daily communication back, setting out the position of the war as known in London.³⁸² This would increasingly be for the eyes of the Prime Minister only, and it is contended that as a prioritising result, the focus of Menzies' attention would be on these cables.

Moreover, there were differences, no doubt suppressed, with New Zealand over the issue of an expeditionary force. Less than two days after the outbreak of war in a cable sent to Bruce, Menzies laid bare his domestic political vulnerability when he stated that 'any suggestion at present of sending troops out of Australia would be widely condemned'.³⁸³ In response his High Commissioner ensured that London appreciated the 'absolute necessity of avoiding any suggestion of an [Australian] expeditionary force'.³⁸⁴

³⁸¹ EA1/754, ANZ; EA1/520, ANZ.

³⁸² *DAFP* Vol.II, Doc.200, 235, Cabinet Minute 10, 5/9/39.

³⁸³ *Ibid*, Doc.195, 232, Menzies to Bruce, 5/9/39.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid*, footnote.2, 232, Bruce to Menzies, 7/9/39.

However, in Wellington, just hours after the war declaration a characteristically loyal tone was struck:

this Dominion [will] give the fullest consideration to any suggestion of the British Government as to the method....by which this Dominion can best assist in the common cause.³⁸⁵

The diplomatic manifestation of this occurred on 9 September from the Governor-General, Viscount Galway, that Wellington would raise ‘a special military force for service within or beyond New Zealand’, of which Menzies was informed the same day.³⁸⁶

The official promulgation of this commitment four days later, displaying the willingness of its neighbour to establish such a force, no doubt caused consternation in Canberra as they feared the invidious comparison.³⁸⁷ This occurred almost immediately from two of Australia’s leading newspapers. *The Argus* in Melbourne invoking memories of Anzac when both dominions landed and fought together at Gallipoli, stated that ‘New Zealand has already acted’ and emphasized that ‘this is no time to temporize’.³⁸⁸ Whilst *The Sydney Morning Herald* accused Menzies of ‘complacency’ exhorting him to ‘throw open the recruiting offices for a really trained volunteer army, as New Zealand has done’.³⁸⁹ Adding to the media condemnation, two old friends of Menzies warned of a whispering campaign with concerns at his perceived inaction.³⁹⁰ Not for the last time, Menzies was hurried into a decision by the actions of New Zealand. On 15 September he announced in a radio address

³⁸⁵ DRNZ, Vol.I, Doc.9, 6-7, Galway to Eden, 4/9/39.

³⁸⁶ Ibid, Doc.41, 34, Galway to Eden, 9/9/39; ANZ, EA1/520, Fraser to Menzies, 9/9/39.

³⁸⁷ Ibid, Doc.25, 22, Galway to Eden, 13/9/39.

³⁸⁸ “The Spirit of Anzac,” *The Argus*, 14/9/39, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/11246699/602539>

³⁸⁹ “Canberra and the War”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 14/9/39,

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/17630686/1131563>

³⁹⁰ Martin, *Robert Menzies*, 288.

that Australia proposed to form an infantry division of 20,000 men, 'specially enlisted for service at home or abroad', sending a copy of the text to his counterpart in Wellington.³⁹¹

As mentioned above, it is a vital consideration to appreciate just how much attention Menzies could give to any arising trans-Tasman issues once war commenced, with its concomitant demands, allied with his pretensions for a larger stage role. Although he had undoubtedly attempted to prompt greater coordination and cooperation with Wellington, the sheer demands on his time now meant decisions concerning New Zealand would most likely be initially left to other ministers and government officials. These would in turn decide whether it was worth the consideration of the Prime Minister, an approach that in many respects did little more than mirror that adopted previously by Lyons. Unfortunately, as it did with the late Prime Minister, the relationship drifted into neglect, the consequences of which became painfully evident for the Australian in early December.³⁹²

Such disregard was to be seen on several occasions in the latter months of 1939. For example, on 5 September Menzies had conversations with Whiskard about closer cooperation with Wellington, and the latter cabled London mentioning that Australia 'is particularly anxious to work in the closest possible touch with New Zealand'.³⁹³ Following this was a proposal in the Australian Cabinet for negotiations to commence with New Zealand and South Africa about the exchange of high commissioners. Minute 181 was recommended to be enacted, but this failed to occur and it drifted into abeyance.³⁹⁴

³⁹¹ John Robertson & John McCarthy (eds), *Australian War Strategy 1939-1945, A Documentary History* (Queensland, 1985), Doc.20 29-30; EA1/520, National Broadcast by the Prime Minister, 15/9/39.

³⁹² TNA, CAB 21/882, Whiskard to DO and Batterbee, 5/12/39.

³⁹³ TNA, FO 371/23966, Whiskard to DO and Batterbee, 6/9/39.

³⁹⁴ *DAFP* Vol.II, Doc.198, 233, Cabinet Minute 181, 5/9/39; *Ibid.* Footnote 3, 233.

Wellington would have been unaware of this, but more significantly on the 13 September a repeat occurrence of the previous year transpired. Fraser cabled Menzies to state that New Zealand would like to authorise a recommendation from the PDC to have a liaison officer emplaced in Melbourne to improve the levels of communication between the two nations, significantly to provide a valuable link 'for the coordination of defence policy'.³⁹⁵ A week later Menzies, like Page the year before replied, stating that this proposal was receiving consideration and that he hoped to communicate Australia's view 'in [the] next few days'.³⁹⁶

After waiting for two weeks and shortly before he was to travel to London for the Dominions Ministers Meeting, Fraser expressed Wellington's anxiety at the lack of a reply and issued a reminder stating that he 'would be grateful for an early expression of your views on this proposal'.³⁹⁷ Another brief response followed from Canberra seven days later, which promised that 'expected advice will be available next week', but again nothing resulted. A final forlorn cable from Nash (as Acting Prime Minister) on 1 November, stated that New Zealand 'would appreciate if early advice could be forwarded'.³⁹⁸

History was indeed repeating itself, and it became even more apparent that a disdainful view of New Zealand was endemic amongst Australian officials. Such a contention gained further credence following the surrender of the Polish military on 6 October, when Hitler proposed to France and Britain a general settlement in which he asked for a free hand in Eastern Europe. The dominions had an input in the British reply,(see Chapter Two) and via Eden, Menzies urged there to be a 'simple presentation of our war aim... [and] no punishment or

³⁹⁵ ANZ, EA1/520, Fraser to Menzies, 13/9/39.

³⁹⁶ Ibid, Menzies to Fraser, 20/9/39.

³⁹⁷ Ibid, Fraser to Menzies, 4/10/39.

³⁹⁸ Ibid, Menzies to Wellington, 12/10/39; Nash to Menzies, 1/11/39.

humiliation for the ordinary German people'.³⁹⁹ Commenting on this cable, Bruce artfully fuelled the *amour propre* of Menzies by stating that 'your telegram which arrived in time for consideration by War Cabinet (in London) this morning created deep impression', going on to suggest it 'would be desirable to circulate it to other Empire Governments or in any event to Canada' for comment. Subsequently a copy was additionally sent to Smuts in South Africa, but markedly not to New Zealand.⁴⁰⁰

Thus, it is evident that although there were exchanges of information regarding their respective military dispositions, budgetary policies and commercial activities, New Zealand was still ignored by Australia when it came to any communication regarding shared strategic interests and closer liaison. Menzies it must be stressed, engulfed by the torrent of events, was not necessarily consciously ignoring his neighbour, but it is evident that his attempt to improve relations with Wellington in the weeks before the war's outbreak was little more than an incongruity in terms of the wider Australian view of New Zealand.⁴⁰¹

The repeated examples of Australian government failures to enact the opportunities they had for greater cooperation with New Zealand reveals a pattern of behaviour hitherto absent from the historiography. Whether that was the abortive directive of Cabinet Minute 181 of 5 September, the request of 13 September for the exchange of liaison officers, and the two following reminders of this, or finally, the failure to include New Zealand in Menzies's recommendation to Chamberlain and other dominion governments in early October. All taken together, this suggests a reversion to the attitude that pertained during the Lyons

³⁹⁹ TNA, DO 114/113, Menzies to Chamberlain, 11/10/39.

⁴⁰⁰ *DAFP* Vol.II, Doc.285, 330, Bruce to Menzies, 11/10/39; *Ibid*, Footnote.3, 330.

⁴⁰¹ Hazlehurst, *Menzies Observed*, 176.

administration. This in effect was the default *modus operandi* of the Australian Government, best characterized as the institutionalized condescension of New Zealand by them.

Trans-Tasman Differences at the Dominion Ministers Meeting

The United Kingdom Government was aware of the general desire of the dominions for greater involvement in imperial strategic decision-making in the war, and on 21 September a circular was sent by Chamberlain to all dominion prime ministers asking them to select a minister to visit Britain in November, and attend a series of meetings.⁴⁰² The logical New Zealand representative was Fraser, whose experience gained at the helm during the previous two months was invaluable, and as argued in Chapter Two, the London meeting was a pivotal experience for him. Australia nominated the Minister for Supply and Development, Richard Casey.⁴⁰³

From the outset of the subsequent Dominion Ministers' visit, it was plainly apparent that Britain wanted dominion troops despatched as soon as possible, so that they would be available for active service in Europe the following spring. At the War Cabinet of 2 November, Chamberlain stated that the 'effect of their presence...on the French, on neutrals and on the Germans would be out of all proportion to the number of troops engaged'.⁴⁰⁴ Eden in his memoirs, citing his own military experience, expressed similar admiring sentiments when he recalled

the month of April 1918, a dark period in the First World War when we had been in the line alongside the Australians at Villers-Brettonneux, and

⁴⁰² TNA, CAB 21/874, Chamberlain to Dominion Prime Ministers, 21/9/39.

⁴⁰³ TNA, FO 371/23967, Fraser to Chamberlain, 6/10/39; *DAFP* Vol.II, Doc.291, 337, Menzies to Eden, 13/10/39.

⁴⁰⁴ TNA, CAB 65/2/2, War Cabinet 68(39)6, 2/11/39.

to September and the capture of Flers,...when the New Zealanders had been on our left. No tougher fighting neighbours could be dreamed of.⁴⁰⁵

Both Australia and New Zealand had concerns about the potential Japanese threats in the Pacific, as well as issues of shipping across the oceans both of troops and the primary products on which their economies depended. Following meetings of the dominion representatives and the War Office, notably one Fraser held specifically on 6 November and mentioned in Chapter Two, he was mostly satisfied at the strategic outlook. He declared that ‘there seemed to be no impediment to the early despatch of New Zealand troops overseas’, pending the adequate protection of the convoy and a loan to cover the financing of the force.⁴⁰⁶ He felt able to cable his government on 7 November, stating that the general opinion with respect to Japan ‘is sufficiently clear to warrant the despatch at any rate of the First Echelon’ to Egypt.⁴⁰⁷ Following confirmation of this advice at the COD meeting on 9 November, and bolstered by the Wellington Cabinet two days later, assent was given to the recommendation.⁴⁰⁸

Although the government in Canberra received the same positive War Office signals concerning Japan via Casey, it was still hesitant about the despatch of an expeditionary force due to its anxieties over the latter’s possible aggressive attitude.⁴⁰⁹ Menzies required another and more detailed assessment of the international situation before giving his agreement. The result of which on 16 November gained the approval of Casey, who stated that ‘at first sight

⁴⁰⁵ Anthony Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden, Earl of Avon: The Reckoning* (London, 1965) 86.

⁴⁰⁶ TNA, CAB 99/1, of Ministers, First Joint Meeting, 1/11/39, 4-18; ANZ, EA1/586, Visit of Ministers from Dominions, New Zealand Forces, 6/11/39.

⁴⁰⁷ DRNZ Vol.I, Doc.46, 38, Fraser to Savage, 7/11/39.

⁴⁰⁸ ANZ, EA1/436, 26th Meeting, COD, 9/11/39; ANZ, AAFD, 809, Box 1.2, War Cabinet Meeting, 10/11/39; DRNZ Vol.I, Doc.47, 39, Savage to Fraser, 11/11/39.

⁴⁰⁹ DAFP Vol.II, Doc.327, 372-374, Casey to Menzies 5/11/39.

it reads very satisfactorily from the point of our security in the Far East'.⁴¹⁰ Significantly for the events that were to follow a week later, the cable also mentioned that he had been informed by Fraser that the 'New Zealand Government has sanctioned the despatch of the first echelon of the New Zealand Division to Egypt during the last week of January'.⁴¹¹ This was also further confirmed to Menzies the following day by Bruce.⁴¹²

Therefore, at this stage there were clearly significant differences in the responses of New Zealand and Australia to the despatch of forces. Wellington, satisfied with the British assessment of Japanese quiescence in early November, reached its decision in a straightforward way, whilst Australia, in distinct contrast, still had concerns which they needed assuaging before giving their concurrence. This divergence between the Pacific dominions was also evident with regard to the Singapore strategy, and mentioned in the War Cabinet by Churchill, the First Lord of the Admiralty. He cited the disagreements he had with the Australian delegation, with Bruce arguing for a specific number of capital ships to be despatched and stationed in Singapore. Churchill in response, emphasised the need to maintain naval flexibility and stated that the New Zealand delegation had taken a 'much more realistic view of the situation'.⁴¹³

These divergences reflected their differing perceptions of the Japanese threat. Although, like New Zealand, Australia viewed itself as precariously placed at the limit of British sea power, it was significantly closer to potential Japanese resource interests, such as tin and rubber in Malaya and oil in the Dutch East Indies. Therefore, it undoubtedly considered itself to be on

⁴¹⁰ *DAFP* Vol.II, Menzies to Casey, Doc.361, 405-06, 14/11/39; Doc.368, 413, Casey to Menzies, 16/11/39.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid*, Casey to Menzies.

⁴¹² *Ibid*, Doc.373, 419-20, Bruce to Menzies, 17/11/39.

⁴¹³ TNA, CAB 65/2/2, War Cabinet 92(39)5, 23/11/39.

the frontline, facing Japanese expansionism, and felt it needed additional guarantees because of its seeming vulnerability.⁴¹⁴

Thus, on two of the major issues to be decided upon at the Dominion Ministers Meeting, the authorisation of sending an expeditionary force and flexibility regarding the Singapore strategy, New Zealand supported the strategic perceptions of Britain, almost certainly suppressing any doubts. Whether any coordinated policy position between the Pacific dominions in harmonising their different strategic perceptions was realistic is conjectural. This especially resulted from the contrast in the Dominion's distinctive pro-British sentiment which seemed to override any misgivings, to the greater scepticism emanating from the Commonwealth. However, as was to become apparent the following week, Australia's neglect over their lack of consideration for any significant trans-Tasman liaison during the preceding three months meant that the question was asked only when it was too late.

Menzies's Country Party woes and calculations

In order to fully appreciate the events that led to New Zealand independently announcing the sending of the First Echelon of its expeditionary force, without first consulting Australia, and the first dispute of the war between the two nations, an immersion in the political milieu then existing in Canberra is needed.⁴¹⁵ It had its genesis in the April decision by Earle Page to refuse to serve alongside the UAP with Menzies as leader, which meant the latter was leading a minority government dependent on its former coalition partner, and its 15 seats, to remain in power.⁴¹⁶ Following the outbreak of war he found himself assailed on all sides. On

⁴¹⁴ David Day, *The Great Betrayal. Britain, Australia & the Onset of the Pacific war 1939-42* (North Ryde, 1988) 18 & 28; T.B. Millar, *Australia in Peace and War. External Relations 1788-1977* (London, 1978) 136.

⁴¹⁵ Glyn Harper, "Threat Perception and Politics: The Deployment of Australian and New Zealand Ground Forces in the Second World War" *Journal of Australian War Memorial (JAWM)*, 20, (1992),36; McGibbon, "Australia-New Zealand Defence Relations", 179-80.

⁴¹⁶ <http://elections.uwa.edu.au/listelections>

one was the opposition Labor Party, hostile to sending an expeditionary force, whilst the other, his own party, consisted of the loyal imperial lobby, was anxious that Australia should aid Britain and despatch this force as soon as possible. The activities of the Country Party throughout this period was generally supportive of the pro-British line, but particularly exasperated Menzies and he complained about a ‘specially poisonous campaign’ by them.⁴¹⁷

He found himself in an anomalous situation. On one hand, aided by Bruce in London, he had developed aspirations of grandeur to become a prospective member of an Imperial War Cabinet making decisions on a global scale.⁴¹⁸ Yet on the other, he needed to get his hands dirty dealing with grubby domestic politics in placating the Country Party, towards whom he had a ‘deep-seated distaste’ as a ‘predatory sectional group’.⁴¹⁹ Nevertheless their support was essential to his political survival, and it is not hard to visualise where any communications involved in the exchange of liaison officers with New Zealand came in Menzies’s order of priorities.

In 1985, the leading Australian historian Carl Bridge recognized that in the four decades following the Second World War, a traditional Australian historiographical interpretation had become established.⁴²⁰ This was that Menzies delayed his decision affirming the despatch of 2AIF because he was awaiting further strategic reassurance concerning Japan’s intentions, and British clarification pertaining to any prospective response.⁴²¹ However, citing research by Ian Hamill, Bridge sought to ‘supplement’ this historiography and re-interpreted the

⁴¹⁷ TNA, CAB 21/2529, Whiskard to DO, 24/10/39; *DAFP* Vol.II, Doc.309, 355-56, Menzies to Bruce, 27/10/39.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid*, Doc.300, 347, Bruce to Menzies 18/10/39.

⁴¹⁹ A.W. Martin and Patsy Hardy (eds), *Dark and Hurrying Days. Menzies’ 1941 Diary* (Canberra, 1993), 139.

⁴²⁰ Carl Bridge, “Casey, Menzies, and the Politics of Australia’s Participation in the European War, October 1939 to January 1940”, *Flinders Journal of History and Politics (FJHP)*, 11, 1985, 79-90

⁴²¹ Gavin Long, *Australia in the War of 1939-1945: To Benghazi* (Canberra, 1952), 63-6; Hasluck, *Government and People*, 167-69; David Horner, *High Command, Australia and Allied Strategy 1939-1945* (Sydney, 1982), 28-31

events as the by-product of a ‘complex political game’.⁴²² He construed that Menzies’ equivocation was not solely due to the greater Australian concerns regarding Japan, but obscured much baser issues governed by domestic politics.⁴²³

Such matters concerned the appeasing of the Country Party, which became an integral challenge for the UAP administration, highlighting the political difficulties of Menzies and his struggle to stay in power. Apart from the war itself, arguably the most contentious question within Australia was wheat sales, as this key commodity provided 23 per cent of all Australian rural production.⁴²⁴ It was a particularly potent issue as the Country Party’s main supporters were the very farmers whose products were exported, as were seven of their sixteen MPs.⁴²⁵ John McEwen, one of the latter, and a future Minister for External Affairs under Menzies, commented on the current great tension between the Country Party and the UAP, especially over ‘what was to be done about the wheat industry’.⁴²⁶ He further added that ‘it was quite clear that the fate of the government depended on its attitude to wheat’.⁴²⁷

On the 21 November, in order to enhance his position, Menzies attempted a ploy to begot Country Party support by endeavouring to obtain sales for the bumper wheat harvest in the British market. He cabled Casey and complained that shipping was ‘miraculously’ found to transport troops, but not the essential goods that kept the war economies of the Pacific dominions going.⁴²⁸ ‘In a blatant act of political horse-trading’, he emphasised that ‘we must determine the relative priority of such things as wool and wheat and the special Division’,

⁴²² Ian Hamill, “An Expeditionary Force Mentality? The Despatch of the Australian Troops to the Middle East, 1939-1940”, *Australian Outlook*, 31, 1977, 319-29; Bridge, “Casey, Menzies”, *FJHP*, 11, 1985, 79&85.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁴ *The Round Table*, Vol.117, December 1939, 199; John G. Crawford, *et al.*, *Wartime Agriculture in Australia and New Zealand, 1939-50, Issue 5*, (Stanford, 1954) 170.

⁴²⁵ David Horner, *Inside the War Cabinet, Directing Australia’s War Effort 1939-45* (St Leonards, 1996), 9.

⁴²⁶ John McEwen, *John McEwen: His Story* (Barton, ACT, 1982) 19.

⁴²⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁸ TNA, CAB 21/2529, Menzies to Casey, 21/11/39.

urging Casey to pressure the British, by adding ‘can you throw any light on this?’⁴²⁹ The Australian literature has interpreted this as a bluff, hoping to squeeze concessions from Britain regarding wheat and wool, thus getting the Country Party inside.⁴³⁰

It is though imperative to appreciate, that Menzies was conscious of the cables previously mentioned from both Casey and Bruce, that the ‘New Zealand Government had sanctioned the despatch of the first echelon of the New Zealand Division to Egypt’.⁴³¹ He knew that this would create irresistible pressure for him, as it did the previous September when they announced their willingness to send a Special Force overseas, and Australia subsequently followed suit. Menzies desperately needed to buy time so that he could use prospective wheat sales to Britain to convince the Country Party into supporting the UAP, thus making any decision to send an expeditionary force successful in a parliamentary vote.⁴³² Therefore, it is contended in this thesis that the aforementioned Australian political backdrop provided the context behind the only significant communication Menzies had with Wellington since mid-September. Suddenly in Canberra’s eyes, New Zealand for once apparently counted.

In his message to Savage on 21 November, Menzies used the pretext of the need to ‘watch developments’ in Europe and appealed for ‘the closest co-ordination between our policies’.⁴³³ In order to avoid the situation where Australia could again be ‘out of step’ with New Zealand, he advocated a delay in the decision to transport the expeditionary forces of both countries to the Middle East for three or four weeks.⁴³⁴ McGibbon commenting on the

⁴²⁹ TNA, CAB 21/2529, Menzies to Casey, 21/11/39; David Day, *The Politics of War*, (Sydney, 2003), 31; Martin, *Robert Menzies*, 292.

⁴³⁰ Hamill, “An Expeditionary Force Mentality?”, *Australian Outlook*, 31, 1977, 324; Bridge, “Casey, Menzies”, *FJHP*, 11, 1985, 85-86; Day, *Betrayal*, 29

⁴³¹ *DAFP* Vol.II, Doc.368, 413, Casey to Menzies, 16/11/39; Doc.373, 419-20, Bruce to Menzies, 17/11/39.

⁴³² Day, *Betrayal* 29.

⁴³³ *DRNZ* Vol.I, Doc.52, 52-53, Menzies to Savage, 21/11/39.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*

irony of this in light of their previous non-actions, stated ‘that the Australians were now virtually demanding better coordination of Australian and New Zealand policy’.⁴³⁵

As previously mentioned, Bridge supplemented the research of Hamill on Australia’s wheat exports by integrating it with Menzies’ reluctance, in order to explain the decision to dispatch the AIF to the Middle East.⁴³⁶ The assertion presented above provides an additional New Zealand dimension to the complex backdrop prevailing in Canberra at this time. The clear temporal connection between Menzies’ awareness of Fraser informing London of New Zealand’s willingness to send an expeditionary force, his endeavour to obtain wheat sales from Britain, and then finally cabling Savage in Wellington has not been previously identified in the historiography.

Two days later Menzies learnt the consequences of his failure to maintain communications with Wellington in the spirit of the previous August, and notably the Australian neglect to reply to the request reminders for the exchange of liaison officers. His message, born out of desperation came too late. Savage replied that acting on advice from Fraser in London, New Zealand had already notified the British Government that the first echelon would be sent overseas as soon as shipping was available.⁴³⁷

A ‘minor trans-Tasman crisis’

Following this negative reply and realising that pro-British sentiment would add to the pressure, Menzies met Whiskard twice that very afternoon and evening, complaining furiously that ‘decisions of such importance ought....to be reached in consultation between

⁴³⁵ McGibbon, *Blue-Water Rationale*, footnote, 356.

⁴³⁶ Bridge, “Casey, Menzies”, *FJHP*, 11, 1985, 79&85.

⁴³⁷ *DRNZ* Vol.I, Doc.54, 44-45, Savage to Menzies, 22/11/39.

the two governments and announced simultaneously'.⁴³⁸ Disingenuously he stated that both capitals 'have hitherto kept closely in touch to their respective defence measures' and he had been 'placed in a position of very considerable embarrassment' and was 'highly incensed at the New Zealand Government'.⁴³⁹ He had no doubts that this would give rise to an irresistible demand that Australia had 'to send a force overseas', and worse, 'it would be incontestable that their hands had been forced, and that they were merely following New Zealand's lead'.⁴⁴⁰

Undoubtedly, Menzies was outraged by the New Zealand decision, what McGibbon depicted as a 'minor trans-Tasman crisis'.⁴⁴¹ He was possibly additionally personally slighted, especially when considering his attempts at developing greater amity with Wellington the previous August. In his reply to Savage on 28 November, the Australian leader stated, more diplomatically than he did to Whiskard, that he regretted 'earlier consultation was not possible' and hoped for better cooperation in the future.⁴⁴² He did however pointedly mention the first and fourth 'methods' of the letter sent to Lyons fifteen months before, and chided that they had been concurred to by his predecessor's subsequent reply on 3 March.⁴⁴³

According to Batterbee in a cable to London, Savage responded to Menzies on 30 November in a conciliatory tone, but then brought up Canberra's repeated dilatoriness in replying to New Zealand requests to attach a liaison officer to the Australian Defence Department.⁴⁴⁴ Fraser, in Britain, added his view on 30 November stating how surprised he was to receive

⁴³⁸ TNA, FO 371/23967, Whiskard to DO, 24/11/39.

⁴³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁴¹ McGibbon, "Australia-New Zealand Defence Relations", 179-80.

⁴⁴² *DRNZ* Vol.I, Doc.56, 46-47, Menzies to Savage, 28/11/39.

⁴⁴³ ANZ, EA1/520, Savage to Lyons 23/9/38 and Lyons to Savage 3/3/39.

⁴⁴⁴ TNA, CAB 21/882, Batterbee to DO and Whiskard, 30/11/39. [This telegram was mentioned by Hensley too (Hensley, *Beyond*, 66), but does not appear in either *DRNZ* Vol.I or *DAFP* Vol.II]

the news from Wellington about 'Australian difficulties'.⁴⁴⁵ But he then denigrated any feelings of victimhood on the part of Canberra as 'I do not feel that there can be any suggestion of want of frankness with Australia', as Casey was informed.⁴⁴⁶

A reflection of the mutual feeling of distrust and anger in both capitals was provided by both high commissioners, who, considering their efforts in the days before the outbreak of war were dismayed at the situation. On 29 November Batterbee asked Whiskard to do everything he could to expedite 'an early and favourable answer' with respect to a New Zealand liaison officer being stationed in Melbourne, further commenting the next day that 'I have done all I can to soothe feelings at this end'.⁴⁴⁷ Revealingly, on 4 December in a meeting with Menzies, the High Commissioner mentioned this request. A 'visibly annoyed' Australian leader, now perhaps fully appreciating the New Zealand stance and his possible culpability, stated that he 'thought this had been done long ago', no doubt by his officials, and Whiskard anticipated that early action would be taken on this.⁴⁴⁸

This view was confirmed three days later when Menzies telegraphed Savage stating that they 'are in accord' with the New Zealand request of a liaison officer, and would be 'glad to learn' of the officer's name and when he could take up his duties.⁴⁴⁹ However, closer analysis of this cable reveals aspects of the perennial misunderstanding between the Tasman neighbours. Contemporaneous to these communications on prospective liaison officers were similar ones on trade commissioners. Menzies added that, 'as the [liaison] officer's main function will relate to supply', the need for separate trade commissioners would be negated,

⁴⁴⁵ *DRNZ* Vol.I, Doc.61, 50, Fraser to Savage, 30/11/39.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁷ TNA, CAB 21/882, Batterbee to Whiskard, 29/11/39; BLO, (MSS.NZ.s 13) Batterbee Papers Box.7, File.5, Batterbee to Whiskard, 30/11/39.

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, Whiskard to Batterbee, 5/12/39.

⁴⁴⁹ ANZ, EA1/520, Menzies to Savage, 8/12/39.

and ‘suggested that this matter remain in abeyance at present’.⁴⁵⁰ Thus, even at this juncture, it can be tentatively suggested that New Zealand was seen in Canberra, less as a nation to liaise with over strategic policy, but more as a market for Australian manufactured exports. Arguably, this was a return to a slightly modified, but fundamentally still the default Australian position that previously ensued.

In terms of Tasman communication, the last exchanges of the year took place on 20/21 December when Fraser, on his journey back to New Zealand, had a brief meeting in Sydney with Menzies. Regarding the decision to send their force overseas, Fraser detailed that he had been under the impression that ‘Australia was moving step by step with us’.⁴⁵¹ He further added that had he ‘any indication that Australia would have preferred to defer a decision for a short period, I would most certainly have explained the position to Wellington’.⁴⁵² He was pleased however, to receive an assurance from Menzies about future cooperation, who then blamed Casey for being confused about the Government views.⁴⁵³

It is likely though, that Fraser was being a little disingenuous in implying that he would have been agreeable in deferring a decision for a short period, and thus side with Australia rather than Britain. When his supportive, though not uncritical, posture at the Dominion Ministers Meeting is considered (as seen in Chapter Two), along with his knowledge of the difficulties in obtaining replies from Canberra, it can be surmised that he was being tactful whilst there. Nevertheless, he must have been very content that not only had the marginal rupture in

⁴⁵⁰ ANZ, EA1/520, Menzies to Savage, 8/12/39.

⁴⁵¹ ANZ, WAI/23e, Draft Report 17.

⁴⁵² Ibid.

⁴⁵³ Ibid.

relations been repaired, but also that New Zealand had attained its objective of embedding a liaison officer in Australia. A policy he first advocated the previous early September.

In conclusion, both New Zealand and Australia decided that their expeditionary forces could be despatched to the Middle East in the first phase of the establishment of full divisions. Both countries took different routes to this outcome, as not only was the approach and attitude of the respective nations clearly different, but Australian aloofness forced New Zealand into making their decision independently. Although there is some sympathy with the plight of Menzies and his political precariousness, the fact that the final decision was in effect made for him and not by him, was due to the persisting Australian condescension of New Zealand as a meaningful consultative partner. Menzies was the victim partially of the disdainful legacy of Lyons, but also his own neglect with respect to New Zealand. The tone of the frequent requests from Wellington for greater liaison and cooperation over the preceding eighteen months clearly indicate the one-sided nature of the relationship.

An argument, however, can be made that in a *de jure* sense that New Zealand did fail to officially consult Australia, despite a 'pre-war agreement'.⁴⁵⁴ Lyons had agreed to the fifth point of Savage's letter of 23 September 1938, that there would be

an understanding that in time of war the fullest possible information

both of enemy and own activities should be mutually exchanged,

and although Fraser did notify Casey unofficially, legalistically Australia would seem to have some cause of limited grievance.⁴⁵⁵ This failure on New Zealand's part has tended to have become embedded within the Australian historiography, but Canberra's neglect in

⁴⁵⁴ Hasluck, *Government and People*, 170.

⁴⁵⁵ ANZ, EA1/520, Savage to Lyons 23/9/38, and Lyons to Savage 3/3/39.

hardly deeming Wellington worthy of consideration in virtually any decision making or liaison, meant that *in spiritu*, Australia failed New Zealand.⁴⁵⁶ This aspect though is not apparent in their literature.

In terms of his expression of anger to Whiskard, it is difficult to discern what vexed Menzies the most, the undoubtedly awkward decision he had to make against opposition in Parliament, or that ‘no Australian, in government or out would wish to be seen merely following passively behind New Zealand’.⁴⁵⁷ In the months to come, contrary to the intimation made above that the tone of Menzies’ 8 December reply to Savage suggested a reluctant partner, Australia ensured the latter would not be repeated. For a time at least, they were meticulous in ensuring that there were regular communications with their neighbour over defence and strategic policy.

Thirty years after these events, W.G. Stevens, the man who pushed hardest for trans-Tasman liaison in New Zealand, remembered his irritation at the Australian attitude, ‘which was that of a superior elder brother towards a scruffy younger brother who didn’t count for much’.⁴⁵⁸ However, the events of the latter months of 1939 jolted Australia into the realisation that this ‘younger brother’ did count a lot, and was to engender a much improved approach and a greater respect for him.

⁴⁵⁶ Millar, *Australia in Peace and War*, 136-37.

⁴⁵⁷ McLean, *Prickly Pair*, 113.

⁴⁵⁸ ATL, 2000-094-5, Henderson interviews Stevens, 6&9/6/69.

Chapter Five

1940. The convoys, a new relationship with Australia and Fraser's decisions

This chapter corresponds chronologically with Chapter Three encompassing the first eight months of 1940 dealing with the foremost international issues concerning New Zealand at this time. These were principally the negotiations concerning the sailings of the next three troop convoys across the Indian Ocean to Egypt, and how the Dominion Government handled these with both Australia and Britain. They followed the pattern revealed from the Dominion Ministers Meeting of a cooperative coalition colleague, yet one willing to strongly advocate or oppose a policy according to the best interests of New Zealand and its troops to do so. As mentioned in the Introduction, both New Zealand and Australian historians constructed document volumes of their diplomatic interactions, principally those with Britain, but also with each other. This chapter relies heavily on *Volume I* in the New Zealand and *Volume III* in the Australian series, published in 1949 and 1979 respectively. A thorough interrogation of these have greatly enhanced the appreciation of the forthcoming events.

Australia and New Zealand-an Improved Relationship

It could be said that the work of repairing the New Zealand/Australia relationship commenced in the immediate aftermath of the 'minor trans-Tasman crisis', in December of 1939 with the meeting between Fraser and Menzies. There was a clear attempt to avoid future disputes, and communications between the two became distinctly considerate and meticulous in their dealings with each other. This is illustrated when the wording of the letter sent by Savage to Lyons in September 1938 is assessed with its five 'methods', compared to the degree of their actual enactment. The 'methods' were an exchange of summaries of decisions on defence policy; furnishing of any mutually relevant communication to Britain; exchange of War Book Papers; exchange of the definitive War Books; and an understanding

that in time of war the fullest possible information should be shared. By December 1939, four of these 'methods' had been satisfied.⁴⁵⁹ The one exception which had hardly been exercised up to then was point two, the 'furnishing each other with copies of any communications to the United Kingdom which might be of interest to the other side'.⁴⁶⁰ This was to be fulfilled during the following months when the most intense three-way governmental communication occurred between Britain, Australia and New Zealand over several issues, and both Pacific nations were notably solicitous in copying each other into their communications with the Dominions Office.

It was imperative that this should occur, as both dominions had significant numbers of troops in the first convoy (US1) that was to sail to the Middle East, and arrangements for its journey had to satisfy both nations. For example, on 11 January within days of this convoy leaving New Zealand waters, the New Zealand Naval Board cabled the Admiralty and copied in Canberra. It wanted to know the views of their allies regarding any publicity about the convoy's departure, and proposed that any release of such news should be coordinated simultaneously between the three nations.⁴⁶¹ The Admiralty reply was that this would be appropriate only after disembarkation in Egypt was completed, which was agreed to by both dominions, and confirmed by Fraser in a personal cable to Menzies on 23 January.⁴⁶²

The amity continued in early February as Fraser slightly changed his mind with respect to censorship. He was ever anxious at this time about the level of voluntary enlistment, and messaged London stating that a continuation of the restrictive publicity policy 'would materially injure our war effort by discouraging recruiting'. He additionally emphasised that

⁴⁵⁹ ANZ, EA1/520, Savage to Lyons, 23 September 1938.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁶¹ TNA, ADM 116/4254, New Zealand Naval Board [henceforth NZNB] to Admiralty 11/1/40.

⁴⁶² Ibid, Admiralty to NZNB, 12/1/40; Ibid, Fraser to Menzies 23/1/40.

any news release should be from New Zealand and not from Daventry, the Empire radio news transmitter in Britain.⁴⁶³ On the following day in a cable to Eden, the copied-in Menzies affirmed his support, asserting that ‘I entirely agree with the views expressed by New Zealand’.⁴⁶⁴ Clearly, with their troops crossing potentially dangerous waters to fight, cooperation and cordiality was the most efficient way in getting down to business and pursuing their national interests.

This mutual considerateness was illustrated further in a slightly comical event when the convoy carrying both nations troops stopped in Fremantle on 18-19 January. The men clearly made the best use of their short time ashore and the 3 February edition of *Smith’s Weekly* reported drunkenness during this brief stopover.⁴⁶⁵ The Government in New Zealand on hearing this expressed its disquiet in a telegram on the grounds that censorship had been infringed with the arrival of their troops being made public.⁴⁶⁶ In his 10 February reply, Menzies apologised that the article was not censored, informed Wellington that the editor had been rebuked, and asked ‘whether you would be agreeable to discuss variations between your censorship and ours’.⁴⁶⁷ In the spirit of this new improved tone, Fraser responded, sending his thanks for the telegram and confirming that with reference to censorship of military movements he entirely agreed ‘that complete parallel lines should be adopted’.⁴⁶⁸

The parallel lines alluded to by Fraser had resonance as both nations became distinctly proprietorial in conforming to censorship regulations and were thus very touchy regarding

⁴⁶³ TNA, ADM 116/4254, New Zealand Government to London, 8/2/40.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid, Menzies to Eden, 9/2/40,

⁴⁶⁵ “In The West,” *Smith’s Weekly*, 3/2/40, 3, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/234578479/25348916>

⁴⁶⁶ H. Kenway, H.J.W. Stokes, P.G. Edwards (ed’s), *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy 1937-49*, Vol.III: *Jan to June 1940* (Canberra, 1979) [henceforth *DAFP* Vol.III], footnote.1, 72.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid, Doc.51, 72, Menzies to Savage, 10/2/40.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid, Doc.55, 75-76, Fraser to Menzies, 11/2/40.

any publicity concerning their perceived interests, notably the transportation of troops.⁴⁶⁹ On 16 February the Admiralty allocated two of the largest and fastest Cunard liners afloat, the *Queen Mary* and *Mauretania*, for use in the US2 second convoy, ideal for transporting large numbers of dominion troops swiftly.⁴⁷⁰ Both liners left New York on 20-21 March, and a BBC report mentioned the arrival of the *Mauretania* at Honolulu three weeks later. This generated a negative reaction from the Australian Government that the liner would clearly be sailing to the Pacific dominions, and was thus publicising forthcoming convoy movements.⁴⁷¹ In an exchange of cables both Menzies and Fraser expressed support for such censorship, further illustrating yet again the closest of cooperation between them.⁴⁷²

Such agreeableness was evident on another issue of profound concern to the Tasman allies. Britain sent cables to both dominions in mid-April expressing the desire to tighten the blockade against Germany by preventing high value commodities reaching it via the Trans-Siberian railway. This would have meant preventing transshipment from Japanese controlled ports, to which Canberra demurred, emphasising that such action would be provocative, and copied in Wellington.⁴⁷³ In this spirit of reciprocity, Fraser cabled London and reinforced the concerns of his Australian counterpart by stating that the ‘the gain to be achieved by interception...is not commensurate with the risks involved’.⁴⁷⁴ He then forwarded a revealing note to Menzies, attached to the copy of this cable, that he ‘greatly appreciated the opportunity of perusing your two telegrams [to Eden], with reference to the Pacific’.⁴⁷⁵

⁴⁶⁹ BLO, (MSS.NZ.s 13) Batterbee Papers, Box.6, File.1, Batterbee to Eden, 12/2/40.

⁴⁷⁰ Plowman, *Across the Sea*, 102-103.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid, 103 & 117-18; *DAFP* Vol.III, Doc.133, 184, Menzies to Bruce, 10/4/40; footnote.1, 184.

⁴⁷² Ibid, Doc.145, 198, Menzies to Fraser, 15/4/40; footnote.2, 198.

⁴⁷³ Ibid, Doc.141, 192, Eden to Menzies, 13/4/40; Doc 148, 201, Menzies to Eden, 16/4/40.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid, Doc.165, 215-16, Fraser to Eden, 20/4/40.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid.

Clearly the harmonious tone of their mutual interaction over the three months exemplified the desire of both governments to put any past differences behind them and cooperate wherever possible. The two issues illustrated above, that of censorship concerning the shipping movements of troops and the minimising of any antagonistic actions with respect to Japan were both clearly in the two nations national interests, and they saw eye-to-eye on them. However, the test of this renewed affability was to come when such interests were not parallel, but divergent.

The first of these occurred in early March with a proposal from Canberra to establish an Anzac Corps. Menzies had decided that 2AIF should be increased to two divisions, and thus become an army corps, and suggested that New Zealand forces could join under the command of the Australian Lieutenant General Thomas Blamey. He laced his despatch with resonant phrasing, writing that within such a force there would be ‘a close psychological affinity’ which would be ‘inspiring to the national morale of Australia and New Zealand’.⁴⁷⁶ This was possibly initiated by General Ernest Squires, Australian Chief of Staff, following the positive indications that he had received from General Freyberg in December 1939.⁴⁷⁷ It is difficult to gauge Menzies’ motivation with this initiative, which possibly was a case of striking whilst the iron was hot with the improved amicability with Wellington, and the perceived greater influence that Menzies would gain for his nation.

In the event, at this time in early 1940, the initiative drifted into abeyance principally due to the reluctance of Freyberg. A full account of his reasoning and a further attempt to form an Anzac Corps a year later appears in Chapter Six. The second test of this rejuvenated

⁴⁷⁶ *Documents Relating to New Zealand’s Participation in the Second World War*, Volume II, (Wellington, 1951) [henceforth, *DRNZ* Vol.II], Doc.1, Menzies to Savage, 4/3/40; *DAFP* Vol.III, Doc.88, 124.

⁴⁷⁷ ANZ, WAI8/13V, Freyberg to Squires, 8/1/40.

cordiality came over the next few months and concerned the convoys that were to transport the fighting men of both nations. On this issue the perceived national interest of New Zealand did not align exactly with that of Australia, and Wellington had to make choices in positioning with the views of London or Canberra.

The Second Echelon, US2 and US3, the disputatious convoys

The timeframe involved in the consultations and transportation of New Zealand's Second Echelon, the third convoy to leave the Pacific dominions, lasted nearly five months. It involved, notably in the few days of late April and early May 1940, some very complex and intense diplomatic communications. As mentioned above, the minutiae of these have been in public domain in *Volume I* of the New Zealand, and reiterated in *Volume III* of the Australian Documents series, but not fully analysed within the historiography. They reveal the most insightful and wily exchanges by Fraser with respect to both London and Canberra as he pursued New Zealand interests as he saw them, acting incisively and shrewdly. Whereas previously when considering censorship and avoiding possible acrimony with Japan, he saw these interests ranged with those of Australia, however, with regard to the convoys he distinctively bound himself more with Britain. Yet throughout, and most crucially, he acted so as to minimise any enmity with Menzies and Canberra.

Having been successful in securing HMS *Ramillies* for the Tasman crossing and beyond with the First Echelon, Fraser tried to repeat his previous approach. On the 25 January, while US1 was halfway across the Indian Ocean, he expressed to the Admiralty his hope that this iconic ship would return to New Zealand to escort the Second Echelon across the Tasman the

following April or May.⁴⁷⁸ Unfortunately though, whilst escorting the First Echelon to Egypt, the boilers on the ageing battleship came under strain and, as a consequence it needed a refit at Sydney. As a result the Admiralty decided that she would not be able to undertake escort duties on the Tasman Sea leg, but would be able to proceed with the convoy from Australia to Egypt.⁴⁷⁹ This caused disquiet in Wellington and a warning was issued that the government ‘cannot consent to these arrangements’, but would be willing to accept a delay if *Ramillies* could be present in Tasman waters.⁴⁸⁰ The Admiralty reconsidered, and on 15 February despite viewing that there was no military necessity for the battleship to escort troops from across the Tasman, yet with the overriding imperative of getting these dominion troops into an active theatre, the request was accepted ‘in deference to the representations’.⁴⁸¹

Whilst these communications between Wellington and London were proceeding, the voyage of US1 generated a significant degree of anxiety, mostly concerning the sluggish speed of its transit which was caused by the need to travel at 13 knots, the pace of the slowest ship.⁴⁸² It was decided by the Admiralty on 6 March to split the second convoy in two; one slow (US2) and the other fast (US3). The first of these, transporting primarily the Australian 17 Brigade, was viewed to be more vulnerable and thus required greater protection. Consequently, the Admiralty rescinded its plan for the now refitted HMS *Ramillies* to visit New Zealand as it was tasked to provide the main escort for US2, departing Melbourne on 15 April.⁴⁸³

Wellington had no choice but to accept this *fait accompli*, being partly assuaged by the knowledge that very few New Zealand troops were part of US2. However, they repeated

⁴⁷⁸ *DRNZ* Vol.I, footnote, 83.

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, Doc.101, 83, Fraser to Eden, 3/2/40.

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.*, Doc.102, 84, Eden to Fraser, 15/2/40.

⁴⁸² Plowman, *Across the Sea*, 102.

⁴⁸³ *Ibid.*,106-113; *DRNZ* Vol.I, footnote.1, 84.

their concerns following another Admiralty proposal of 15 March, adopting a more forceful tone in regard to the planned escort across the Tasman Sea for the US3 convoy and New Zealand's Second Echelon. This would consist of HMAS *Canberra* (8-inch guns), for the whole leg, accompanied by HMS *Leander*, (6-inch guns) to the mid-Tasman point, there to be replaced by HMAS *Australia* (8-inch guns), to Sydney.⁴⁸⁴

Therefore, in comparison to the US1 crossing there was a diminution in firepower, as just two ships at a time would provide the escort as against three previously, and additionally the weaponry was reduced by the loss of the battleship's 15-inch guns. It is certainly important to note that in terms of fighting efficacy, the gun calibre of a cruiser as against its armour and mobility seemed to take on a disproportionate weight in the considerations of Wellington. The logic of this seems understandable in that their priority was not necessarily the naval ship, but to ensure that any possible exchange of fire with a raider would be advantageous to the former, thus in effect increasing the security of the accompanying troop carriers.

This reduction in escort capability caused Wellington, for the third time in four months to articulate its anxieties over the perceived inadequacy of such protection, and on 20 March they questioned the naval appreciation.⁴⁸⁵ This was expressed in a carefully-worded message to Eden on 1 April which stated that, although they did not dispute the Admiralty's judgement in such matters,

they feel bound to point out that it is also their own responsibility to ensure that over 7000 New Zealand troops do not depart from this country

⁴⁸⁴ DRNZ Vol.I, Doc.104, 84-85, Commonwealth Naval Board to NZNB, 18/3/40.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid, Doc.106, 85, NZNB to Admiralty, 20/3/40.

unless and until they are fully satisfied that the voyage will be made in conditions providing a reasonable maximum of safety.⁴⁸⁶

They suggested that HMS *Leander* should proceed the whole way across the Tasman with the convoy, as ‘they will feel more reassured if the convoy is escorted by two 8-inch and one 6-inch cruiser’.⁴⁸⁷ The astuteness of this message is exemplified as it combined a polite recognition of the greater naval expertise of the Admiralty, whilst at the same time intimating a distinct concern, which if unsatisfied could clearly be trumped politically by Wellington at any time. It was a technique to be repeated by Fraser, becoming a hallmark over the next three years of his communications with London.

On 11 April, acknowledging the strength of feeling, Eden confirmed Admiralty agreement to this proposal, which underlined still further the Dominion’s keystone priority to reduce to the absolute minimum any risks that might occur in the passage of its troops across the oceans.⁴⁸⁸ This assertion of independence and the consequential minor diplomatic victory over the size of the trans-Tasman escort, however, did not stop with Britain. In a dramatic short period at the end of April and early May, Fraser was to also find himself at variance on several other occasions, but this time with Menzies and Australia.

Within Whitehall, there were increasing concerns about Italy and assessments about its imminent entry into the war on Germany’s side. The strategic context of such an eventuality was highlighted in a 1939 report from the War Office, which concluded that Italy’s overwhelming military advantage in the Red Sea area meant it could be closed, and would take time for imperial forces to re-establish control in order to maintain their position in

⁴⁸⁶ *DRNZ* Vol.I, Doc.109, 87-88, Fraser to Eden, 1/4/40.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid*; S D Waters, *The Royal New Zealand Navy, Official History, of New Zealand*, (Wellington, 1956), 81.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid*, Doc.110, 88, Eden to Fraser, 11/4/40.

Egypt.⁴⁸⁹ Menzies in the meantime had in fact received several cables from Bruce in London, who on 15 April warned that a ‘considerable body of opinion consider that Italy [was] likely to enter the war’ in the near future.⁴⁹⁰ This was obviously of great concern to both dominions and notably for Australia, as US2 consisted almost exclusively of its 17 Brigade, along with 50 members of an advance party of New Zealand railway and forestry companies.⁴⁹¹ The convoy left Melbourne for Colombo, accompanied on the Indian Ocean leg by *Ramillies* and HMAS *Sydney* (6-inch guns), joined later by the French cruiser *Suffren* (8-inch guns).⁴⁹²

After this passage, *Suffren* was scheduled to return to the Cocos Islands, midway along the Fremantle to Colombo leg about three weeks later, and then escort the US3 convoy with the New Zealand Second Echelon and Australian 18 Brigade. However, the escalating anxieties about Italy entering the war and the consequences for the naval situation in the Red Sea and Mediterranean prompted a decision by the Allies to present a naval show of force there. On 17 April the French Admiralty requested the early return of the *Suffren* to the region as part of this strategy, which meant that for the second half of the Fremantle to Colombo leg she would be replaced by HMAS *Sydney*, now heading for the Cocos Islands.⁴⁹³

The Admiralty then stated that as German naval forces ‘and both pocket battleships’ were fully occupied in the North Sea with the Norwegian campaign, the only danger would come from a merchant ship raider, which would be out-gunned by any cruiser, a view accepted by the Australian Naval Board.⁴⁹⁴ This assessment caused renewed uneasiness in Wellington, but realising the limited resolvability of the issue the government reluctantly accepted ‘the

⁴⁸⁹ F.H. Hinsley *et al*, *British Intelligence in the Second World War, Volume 1* (London, 1979), 201; Andrew Stewart, *The First Victory, The Second World War and the East Africa Campaign* (New Haven, 2016), 29-30.

⁴⁹⁰ *DAFP* Vol.III, Doc.146, 198-199, Bruce to Menzies, 15/4/40.

⁴⁹¹ McClymont, *To Greece*, 28.

⁴⁹² Plowman, *Across the Sea*, 107-12.

⁴⁹³ *DRNZ* Vol.I, Doc.112, 89-90, Naval Secretary to Berendsen, 19/4/40.

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid*; [However, on 19 November 1941 HMAS *Sydney* was lost with all hands after destroying the German raider *Kormoran*, *DRNZ* Vol.I, footnote.2, 89]

point of view of the Admiralty’, but stressed how much happier it would feel ‘were it possible to substitute an 8-inch for a 6-inch cruiser’.⁴⁹⁵

Fraser had been resolute in advocating the maximum protection for the Second Echelon convoys, but was willing on two occasions, when there were no realistic alternatives, to compromise and concede on fundamentally lesser points. These involved the replacement of an ageing and slow battleship of 15-inch guns by a more modern, faster cruiser with 8-inch guns, still easily able to outgun any German raider, or an Indian Ocean escort consisting of two 6-inch and one 8-inch armed cruisers, instead of two 8-inch and one 6-inch ones. It seemed that Fraser went as far as he could, but was prepared, albeit reluctantly, to accept the reasoning from the Admiralty so as not to show an intransigent posture. He thus preserved the cooperation he had fostered with Canberra and London and, arguably, this willingness to concede on relatively lesser points but win on bigger ones exemplified his astuteness.

30 April 1940, New Zealand time

It was in late April 1940, when the US2 convoy was approaching Colombo during the final stretch of its Indian Ocean leg, and a few days before US3 was due to leave New Zealand waters, that the most intense four days of trans-Tasman and trans-hemispheric telegram exchanges and diplomacy occurred. This was reflected in the meetings of the new Committee of Cabinet (COC), which over the first two months of its existence had five meetings, yet met a further three times on successive days from Tuesday 30 April.⁴⁹⁶ This would have necessitated the five politicians, two leading civil servants and the Chiefs of Staff being on permanent standby during these hours.

⁴⁹⁵ *DRNZ* Vol.I, Doc.113, 90, NZNB to Admiralty, 19/4/40.

⁴⁹⁶ ANZ, EA1/436, 6th, 7th & 8th COC Meetings.

On Monday 29 April at 11.30am, the War Cabinet met in London amid concerns following the latest intelligence about Italian intentions. It was decided that *Ramillies* should leave US2 and sail for Alexandria to augment the Mediterranean Fleet, and that both the US2 and US3 convoys should not attempt to enter the Red Sea, but be diverted with their 20,000 plus troops, possibly to Britain.⁴⁹⁷ Eden, obviously aware of the touchiness this would cause, mentioned that if

HMS *Ramillies* must now be removed from convoy duties, the Australian and New Zealand Governments should be informed, since they had attached great importance to this ship being employed on these duties.⁴⁹⁸

He duly notified both nations of the intention for the battleship ‘to cease acting as escort for the convoy and proceed ahead’, much as had occurred with *Suffren*.⁴⁹⁹ This message would have arrived in Wellington and Canberra in the early hours of Tuesday 30 April.

With the US3 convoy carrying nearly 7000 men due to depart New Zealand shores within the next 48 hours, an anxious Fraser replied within hours wanting to know the latest information with respect to possible Italian hostility. He emphasised that the Government ‘can by no means divest themselves of responsibility’, being especially insistent on knowing what forces the Italians might deploy against the Egyptian-bound convoy.⁵⁰⁰ Furthermore, he wanted to know the steps Britain would take ‘to protect the convoy from attack by air or sea while en route’, and if the convoy was to be diverted.⁵⁰¹

Menzies too was becoming increasingly concerned that Italy would soon enter the war on Germany’s side, with Bruce’s assessment being that this would most likely occur if the

⁴⁹⁷ TNA, CAB 65/6/52, War Cabinet 107(40)5 29/4/40.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁹ DRNZ Vol.I, Doc.116, 91, Eden to Fraser, 29/4/40.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid, Doc.119, 92-93, Fraser to Eden, 30/4/40.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid.

British Norwegian campaign continued to falter.⁵⁰² A few days previous on 27 April, the Admiralty actually decided to partially close the Mediterranean, which would have further heightened Canberra's anxiety concerning the US2 convoy.⁵⁰³ Thus on Tuesday 30 April, Menzies cabled both Eden and Fraser, sending the latter the text of his cable to London, proposing a postponement of convoy US3 until the situation with Italy was clarified. He further stressed the imperative of an immediate decision being taken because, if a delay occurred with the New Zealand troops already at sea, there would not be sufficient accommodation for them in Australia. Menzies therefore wanted the embarkation in New Zealand to be postponed and rescheduled.⁵⁰⁴

This provoked concern in both Whitehall and Wellington as both respective governments, for differing reasons, wanted US3 and the Second Echelon to sail on Thursday 2 May. The time pressure became intense and to help facilitate a decision, the embarkation of New Zealand troops in Wellington and Lyttelton was delayed a day.⁵⁰⁵ London wanted them to leave the Pacific region so as to be in the Middle East to bolster their forces there, and if not, then at least doing the same in Britain. Possibly due to its awareness of the more fractious background to the decision made in despatching the AIF the previous November, the British Government was arguably particularly anxious about whether the Australian troops would sail at all. From the New Zealand perspective, a negative decision causing a delay in the Second Echelon's departure would have the knock-on effect of obstructing the prospective Third Echelon entering camp and training, as well as inevitably delaying the concentration of

⁵⁰² *DAFP* Vol.III, Doc.146, 198-99, Bruce to Menzies, 15/4/40.

⁵⁰³ Hinsley, *British Intelligence*, 202.

⁵⁰⁴ *DAFP* Vol.III, Doc.188, 237-38, Menzies to Eden, 30/4/40; *DRNZ* Vol.I, Doc.117&118, 91-92. Menzies to Fraser, 30/4/40.

⁵⁰⁵ Plowman, *Across the Sea*, 123.

their troops into a complete division. Such a potential scenario was viewed with dismay in Wellington.

Following a meeting of the COC earlier on that day, a decision was taken to reply to Menzies, but before it was actually transmitted to Canberra Fraser first cabled the Dominions Office, letting it know that a subsequent telegram would contain the actual text of his reply to Menzies.⁵⁰⁶ In this message to London, Fraser added that he would be grateful for a reply to his cable to Eden earlier that day about Italian intentions. He wanted a response by 8.00 a.m. New Zealand time on 1 May, 'as the New Zealand troops embark on that date'.⁵⁰⁷ Fraser had clearly given Eden a strong hint as to his government's view and its reluctance to countenance a delay in embarkation. The Dominions Secretary replied that he could not conform to the immediate time frame of the New Zealand request about the latest assessment of Italian intentions. However, clearly cognisant of sensitivities in Wellington about convoy escorts, he expediently re-clarified the decision that *Ramillies* 'need not be detached' from the convoy escort duty after all, providing Fraser with continued reassurance as to the US2 convoy protection.⁵⁰⁸

It is not unreasonable to assume that having received a broad hint as to Fraser's views on the issue of convoy delay, the Dominions Office scabbled around at short notice for any concession they could find, even though there were only a very small number of New Zealand troops in the US2 convoy. Additionally, it must also be asked why Fraser cabled London at this time in the first place and whether it was ostensibly just to ask Eden to hasten his assessment of Italian intentions, informing him that a copy of his cable to Canberra

⁵⁰⁶ ANZ, EA1/436, 6th COC Meeting, 30/4/40.

⁵⁰⁷ DRNZ Vol.I, Doc.120, 93, Fraser to Eden, 30/4/40.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid, Doc.121, 93, Eden to Fraser, 30/4/40; Doc.122, 93, Eden to Fraser, 30/4/40.

would be with his next telegram. He appeared to be siding with Britain and preparing the ground to ensure that Menzies was in a minority on this issue.

1 May 1940, New Zealand time

It was whilst awaiting the reply from Eden in the early hours of Wednesday 1 May, that Fraser cabled Menzies with reference to the latter's request for delaying US3. He stated that New Zealand did not view a postponement as warranted, but would reconsider this in light of London's reply, and whilst awaiting this the Second Echelon would proceed with plans for their embarkation that day.⁵⁰⁹ At 7.18 p.m. 30 April London time, 7.18 a.m. 1 May in Wellington, Eden replied to both dominion premiers mentioning that even before he received their telegrams of the previous hours, 'the question of the safety of your convoys was already under consideration'.⁵¹⁰ However, he then released a bombshell, which became the catalyst for the most intense triangular diplomacy. He revealed to both governments that the Admiralty now considered that 'it would be undesirable to pass the convoys US2 and US3 through the Red Sea', further adding that both convoys could instead be diverted to Britain via the Cape of Good Hope.⁵¹¹

Having considered this telegram, and following another meeting of the COC that afternoon, Fraser cabled Menzies for the second time that day.⁵¹² In this message he outlined his government's position with respect to Eden's reply and the possibility of the convoys being diverted to Britain. He referred to Wellington's 'general agreement with the measures suggested' and a proposal to act accordingly, but before proceeding asked for the views of

⁵⁰⁹ *DRNZ* Vol.I, Doc.124, 94-95, Fraser to Menzies [copied into Fraser to Eden], 1/5/40.

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid*, Doc.123, 93-94, Eden to Fraser, 30/4/40; *DAFP* Vol.III, Doc.190, 239, Eden to Menzies, 30/4/40.

⁵¹¹ *Ibid*.

⁵¹² ANZ, EA1/436, 7th COC Meeting, 1/5/40.

the Australian Government.⁵¹³ These two cables sent to Canberra on 1 May further revealed Fraser's deft diplomacy, this time with Australia. In the first he stood his ground with respect to Menzies and presented him with a partial *fait accompli* with the confirmation that New Zealand troops were embarking. In the second, having isolated his counterpart with respect to not delaying US3, he then let Menzies know his decision in giving assent to the diversion of New Zealand troops. Thus, in the spirit of the original Savage letter he asked for Canberra's view, ahead of informing London of his nation's acquiescence. Hence Fraser made the decision knowing it was an identical one to Britain's and divergent to that of Menzies. Yet by enacting the fifth 'Method', he avoided a repeat of the Australian accusation concerning the despatch of the First Echelon by informing his convoy partner.

Later that day, Menzies copied Wellington into his reply to Eden's suggestion of the convoys being diverted to Britain. He expressed the perennial Australian fear, carried over from the First World War, of the AIF being dispersed, expressing grave concerns 'at the prospect of the 6th Division being split into parts located in Palestine and the United Kingdom'.⁵¹⁴ He additionally asked for a Chiefs of Staff appreciation regarding the strategic considerations involved in Italy's possible entry into the war, requesting that this be sent to both dominions, something that would take three days to produce.⁵¹⁵ Therefore, under the extreme duress of events over this short space of time, discussions became a stress-test for these Empire alliance members. From this short period, it is possible to discern the differing core priorities of each country and observe the deft hand that New Zealand played.

⁵¹³ *DRNZ* Vol.I, Doc.125, 95, Fraser to Menzies, 1/5/40.

⁵¹⁴ *DAFP* Vol.III, Doc.191, 240-41, Menzies to Eden, 1/5/40.

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid*; *DRNZ* Vol.I, Doc.127, 97, Eden to Fraser, 1/5/40.

2-3 May 1940, New Zealand time

At just past midnight on Thursday 2 May and following the eighth meeting of the COC, Fraser sent his full reply to London and copied in Menzies.⁵¹⁶ In this he stated that the New Zealand Government concurred with the diversion of the convoy to Britain, and was determined 'not to alter the arrangement for the embarkation of the Second Echelon, or its departure tomorrow' (2 May).⁵¹⁷ Yet aware of the potentially dichotomous situation he could find himself in, Fraser made it clear to London (and Canberra) that he recognised the viewpoint taken by the Australian Government being clearly mindful of the need to avoid the bad feeling of the previous November. He thus patently wanting to avoid 'the embarrassment which would result were Australia to take one course and New Zealand another'.⁵¹⁸

It seems very evident that in this telegram Fraser was not just in conversation with the British Government but also with his Australian counterpart too. He endorsed the diversion and hence agreed with the British assessment, but the approach he adopted moreover, signalled to Australia that its view was also important to him. In a further pointed reminder to Britain, he stated that the decision would be greatly assisted if explicit assurances were provided as to the escort proposed for the convoy's safety. He thus further reiterated that his *sine qua non* was the protection of the New Zealand troops at sea, along with his prerequisite for the overwhelming firepower of the escorting warships against any raider.⁵¹⁹

A few hours after Fraser's cable was transmitted, the first troopship of US3 departed from Lyttelton to meet the main part of the convoy in the Straits, leaving New Zealand waters by

⁵¹⁶ ANZ, EA1/436, 8th COC Meeting, 2/5/40.

⁵¹⁷ DRNZ Vol.I, Doc.128, 97, Fraser to Eden, 2/5/40; DAFP Vol.III, Doc.196, 250, Fraser to Menzies, 2/5/40.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid, Fraser to Eden.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid.

the morning of 2 May with 6838 troops of the Second Echelon, and a message was sent to London confirming the departure.⁵²⁰ At the same time Menzies cabled his acceptance to Britain, confirming that the Australian embarkation of the US3 troopships would proceed, but did not directly copy Fraser into this assenting message.⁵²¹ Instead he sent a similarly-worded one to him, in which in slightly pointed terms he added that 'it has been noted that you did not consider the situation at present warranted postponement of the convoy's departure'.⁵²² In so doing Menzies perhaps betrayed his annoyance at another contrary decision taken by New Zealand in siding with Britain, but there could be no complaint on his part as to his neighbour's informing process in these days.

This period of intense trans-Tasman communication now subsided. It revealed, on two separate occasions in short succession, Fraser effectively foisting upon Canberra an Anglo/New Zealand *fait accompli*, the first concerning the actual embarkation of US3 on 1 May and the second the possible change in the destination in the early hours of the following day. He informed them politely and diplomatically that he agreed with the British view on both issues, letting Menzies know the New Zealand decisions. Finally, as mentioned in Chapter Three, it is of paramount importance to re-emphasise the acute pressures upon Fraser at this time. The above negotiations with London and Canberra paralleled the most intensive domestic debates proceeding in Wellington on the conscription issue, and shortly after, that of coalition.

4-16 May 1940

Both Pacific dominions received the appreciation by the British Chiefs of Staff on 4 May, which, amid an expanding strategic overview, stressed that with respect to Italy they were

⁵²⁰ Waters, *Royal New Zealand Navy*, 82; *DRNZ* Vol.I, Doc.129 and footnote.1, 98, Fraser to Eden, 2/5/40.

⁵²¹ *DAFP* Vol.III, Doc.202, 254, Menzies to Eden, 2/5/40.

⁵²² *DRNZ* Vol.I, Doc.130, 98, Menzies to Fraser, 2/5/40.

awaiting events and if war did break out, then the first aim in the Mediterranean would be to ensure the security of shipping. It assessed that any closure of the Red Sea route would last no more than three months, but then surprisingly stated that ‘in the present circumstances diversion is unnecessary and the convoys should adhere to their programme’.⁵²³ This was because of received further intelligence that the Italian air force’s readiness and naval movements ‘remained normal’, meaning that Mussolini had at least decided on a temporary delay on entering the war.⁵²⁴

In a cable to Menzies on 5 May, Fraser commented on this changed appreciation concerning transportation through the Red Sea, emphasising that New Zealand was content for the US3 convoy to proceed as originally arranged. He again engaged Australia in a spirit of consultation by stating that before advising Whitehall to that effect, ‘we should be glad to have the views of the Australian Government’.⁵²⁵ This came on 9 May when, in a reply to the Dominions Office and Wellington, Menzies accepted that US2 and US3 should retain their original itinerary, prefacing his New Zealand version with the suggestion ‘that most close contact be maintained on this matter’.⁵²⁶ Canberra was then copied in when Wellington notified London of its approval for the convoys to proceed as planned, again with further reference to the need for the maximum firepower capability from the escorting warships.⁵²⁷ McClymont in his official history characterised this decision of the Pacific dominions as clearly indicating that they ‘were not subordinates, but members of a Commonwealth with equal status and equal rights’.⁵²⁸ Evidently, however, the documented exchanges over the

⁵²³ *DRNZ* Vol.I, Doc.135, 100-03, Eden to Fraser, 4/5/40.

⁵²⁴ Hinsley, *British Intelligence*, 202.

⁵²⁵ *DRNZ* Vol.I, Doc.136, 103-04, Fraser to Menzies, 5/5/40.

⁵²⁶ *Ibid*, Doc.137, 104-05, Menzies to Fraser, 9/5/40.

⁵²⁷ TNA, ADM 199/11, Fraser to Eden 9/5/40; *DAFP* Vol.III, footnote.4, 273-4.

⁵²⁸ McClymont, *To Greece*, 31.

preceding weeks reveal that such a state of affairs had already been demonstrated several times before during the preceding weeks.

In the event it was decided that US2 would enter the Red Sea on 9 May, arriving at Suez Bay one week later.⁵²⁹ However, a further accumulation of signals intelligence intimating Rome's intent to shortly join the war, meant that the 15 May War Cabinet decided that the Mediterranean should again be closed and US3 diverted.⁵³⁰ Both Fraser and Menzies were informed of the diversion in the early hours of 16 May by the new Dominions Secretary, Lord Caldecote (formerly Thomas Inskip), and the convoy turned west and headed towards Cape Town.⁵³¹ In response Wellington agreed to the convoy's diversion but did have concerns over possible overcrowding in the ships on the long sea journey. Additionally, its evident anxiety was expressed again as to the convoy's safety with the presumption that the escort would be strengthened if necessary.⁵³²

Following a brief stopover in Cape Town the convoy proceeded across the South Atlantic towards Freetown escorted by HMS *Cumberland* and *Shropshire*, both County Class heavy cruisers with 8-inch guns.⁵³³ To assuage concerns as to its journey through the submarine zone, the Admiralty cabled on 7 June informing the dominions that the escort would consist of the two 8-inch cruisers along with a destroyer screen and air reconnaissance. They would additionally be joined by the 15-inch gun battleship HMS *Resolution* on station at Gibraltar.⁵³⁴ And to further highlight their diligence in protecting these troops, and no doubt the political contingency, a further memorandum of 13 June mentioned that the battleship

⁵²⁹ TNA, CAB 65/7/8, War Cabinet 116(40)6, 9/5/40.

⁵³⁰ Hinsley, *British Intelligence*, 202; TNA, CAB 65/7/18, War Cabinet 123(40)6 15/5/40.

⁵³¹ TNA, ADM 116/4254, Caldecote, to Fraser (and Menzies), 15/5/40.

⁵³² Ibid, Fraser to Caldecote, 16/5/40; *DRNZ* Vol.I, Doc.151, 112, Fraser to Caldecote, 20/5/40.

⁵³³ *DRNZ* Vol.I, Doc.154, 114, Caldecote to Fraser, 27/5/40.,

⁵³⁴ ADM 116/4254, Devonshire to Fraser (and Menzies), 7/6/40.

HMS *Hood* would also join the convoy. To everyone's satisfaction, the New Zealand and Australian troops eventually reached the Clyde on 16 June without incident.⁵³⁵

Clearly, in the month since formally taking office, Fraser's forthright leadership with respect to the convoys was exemplified in defending New Zealand interests as he saw them. The surge in trans-Tasman cables was a mixture of mutual self-interest for the Pacific dominions, but also an attempt to strengthen relations with each other, as witnessed by their tone. In the early months of 1940, Fraser supported Canberra's view on censorship and concerns over the extension of the German blockade to the Far East to avoid antagonising Japan, but he tended to the British line with respect to the departure of the US3 convoy. Yet throughout, he wanted to remain on good terms with Australia, and during these months sought greater liaison with its government. In supporting the British view Fraser trod a fine line, yet repeatedly made it patently unambiguous his clear independent line to the authorities in London, namely reiterating the essential prerequisite that the troop convoys had adequate escort protection and fire-power.

An anxious interlude

Whilst the foregoing events were proceeding and the US3 convoy was in the latter stages of its transit, Caldecote cabled Wellington on 8 June, just after the Dunkirk evacuation. He conveyed the news that before being employed again, the BEF 'must be completely re-equipped', leaving unsaid the inevitable consequence of an ensuing delay in NZEF troops in Egypt becoming fully operational.⁵³⁶ Five days later two cables arrived from Churchill, now the British Prime Minister. The first stated that the British Government was 'very anxious to have a full expression of Dominion Government's views on the position as they see at

⁵³⁵ *DRNZ* Vol.I, Doc.174, 125, Cooper to Jones, 13/6/40; *Ibid*, Doc.183, 129, Caldecote to Fraser 16/6/40.

⁵³⁶ Caldecote to Fraser, 8/6/40, *DRNZ* Vol.I, Doc.212; Hensley, *Beyond*, 91.

present'.⁵³⁷ This was followed by a strategic appreciation eight hours later, that highlighted the consequences of the imminent collapse of French resistance, and its logical outcome stressing there 'would not be sufficient forces to meet the combined German and Italian invasion in European Waters and the Japanese fleet in the Far East'.⁵³⁸ The latter in effect meant that the Royal Navy would not be able to satisfy the guarantees laid down to Australia and New Zealand in the years preceding, that a fleet replete with capital ships would be sent to Singapore in the event of war with Japan.

As mentioned in Chapter Three these two telegrams would have been received in Wellington with dismay. It is evident that Fraser took time in composing his responses. To the first he replied via Batterbee stressing loyalty and commitment to the cause: 'we pledge this Dominion to remain with [Britain] to the end'.⁵³⁹ Fraser's reply to Churchill's second telegram though was more formal and sent via the office of the 'Governor-General'. Here he stated in a pointed manner, that

a departure is made from the understanding, reinforced by repeated and most explicit assurances that a strong British fleet..... would proceed to Singapore should circumstances so require, even if this involved the abandonment of British interests in the Mediterranean.⁵⁴⁰

In this, no doubt, he was referring to the assurances he received the previous November from the former First Sea Lord. Yet, in a more understanding tone he added that Wellington does

⁵³⁷ TNA, DO 114/113, Churchill to Fraser, 13/6/40, (Z105).

⁵³⁸ Ibid, 13/6/40, (Z106).

⁵³⁹ TNA, DO 35/1003/15, Fraser to Churchill, 15/6/40, (221).

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid, Fraser to Churchill, 15/6/40, (230).

not in any way demur to this decision [which they have always regarded as a possibility] if as they assume it is necessary in order to safeguard the position in [the] central and most critical theatre of war.⁵⁴¹

Churchill responded the following day, notably to Fraser's first cable expressing his deep gratitude for the Dominion's loyalty:

I am deeply touched by your message, which is only in keeping in all that the Mother Country has ever received in peace or war from New Zealand.⁵⁴²

Additionally, it must also be mentioned that in the final paragraph of his cable, Fraser included a request that a New Zealand minister be sent to Washington, the first step on the way to achieving full diplomatic relations with the United States.⁵⁴³ An outcome that noticeably contributed to the profoundly significant retention decision, three years later in 1943 (see Conclusion).

Following the formal surrender of France and the associated armistice, a grim pessimism abounded in Wellington with an ominous feeling regarding the Third Echelon - not about whether it should go to Egypt or Britain, but whether it should leave at all.⁵⁴⁴ Undoubtedly wanting to help as best he could, Fraser cabled Caldecote pointing to the futility of despatching the force at this time. He was, however, willing to send a brigade group to Fiji, and even as an emergency measure, and against the grain, contemplated the existing First and Second Echelons being brigaded with British or Australian troops to form a composite division.⁵⁴⁵ He offered more, but as events transpired British requests for assistance and New

⁵⁴¹ TNA, DO 35/1003/15, Fraser to Churchill, 15/6/40, (230).

⁵⁴² Churchill Archives, Cambridge [hereafter CAC], CHAR 20/14, Churchill to Fraser, 16/6/40.

⁵⁴³ Fraser to Churchill, 15/6/40, (230).

⁵⁴⁴ Hensley, *Beyond*, 91.

⁵⁴⁵ *DRNZ* Vol.I, Doc.213, 157-58, Fraser to Caldecote, 27/6/40.

Zealand willingness to fulfil them ran up against Fraser's *sin qua none*, that an insufficient convoy escort meant no departure.

The anomalous *Awatea* episode

Between the 13 June and 10 July, an unusual and probably mutually embarrassing dispute occurred between the United Kingdom and New Zealand. This has not been previously identified in any of the literature, being virtually unnoticed and obscured within the greater strategic picture of short-term doubts over the sailing of the Third Echelon troop convoy. Following the BEF's profound equipment losses on the continent, Fraser cabled Caldecote on 6 June. Conscious 'of the acute strain on the British armaments industry' he proposed to make available 'skilled mechanical engineers and operatives' for British industry.⁵⁴⁶ Eight days later, Caldecote gratefully took up this offer and requested that New Zealand engineers, railway and forestry specialists be sent to Britain as soon as possible.⁵⁴⁷

Batterbee in revealing the Dominion's zeal, cabled London stating that 'I have been asked by the Prime Minister to inform you that... Cabinet was summoned and at once agreed to provide the additional units asked for'.⁵⁴⁸ A most impressive feat of organisation followed as within four days, on 18 June, the Dominions Secretary was informed that New Zealand had organised these specialist units, two thousand men in all, to be available to sail on the RMS *Awatea*.⁵⁴⁹ This new liner had been built in 1936 for the trans-Tasman crossing, and importantly was on the Dominion's register and therefore the responsibility of the Wellington government, being used currently to transport EATS airmen to Canada.⁵⁵⁰ It was made available to leave within three weeks, and proposed to journey across the Pacific to

⁵⁴⁶ *DRNZ* Vol.I, Doc.330, 236, Fraser to Caldecote 6/6/40.

⁵⁴⁷ *Ibid*, Doc.293, 215-16, Caldecote to Fraser, 13/6/40.

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibid*, Doc.294, 216, Batterbee to Caldecote, 14/6/40.

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid*, Doc.295, 216-17, Fraser to Caldecote, 18/6/40.

⁵⁵⁰ <http://www.ssmaritime.com/Awatea.htm>

Vancouver with these specialists, who would then travel overland to the Atlantic coast, and on to Britain. However, the one proviso that Fraser once again made was that the *Awatea* be escorted by an adequately gunned warship, preferably HMS *Achilles*.⁵⁵¹ Such a stipulation became unavoidable, because armed raiders had evidently been in New Zealand waters as the RMS *Niagara* was sunk by a German mine, just out of Auckland.⁵⁵²

Ten days later the Dominions Secretary cabled Fraser to advise that Britain did not now require railway workers and hoped that New Zealand would therefore increase the number of forestry troops instead.⁵⁵³ Almost by return Wellington answered in the positive to this substitution, but reminded London that ‘they would be glad if they could be informed’ about the availability of troopship protection.⁵⁵⁴ Seven days later, Caldecote relayed the view of the Admiralty, which regretted that ‘it is impracticable to provide a special escort for the *Awatea*’, as the risks in the Pacific Ocean were considered to be very small. He advised that a rapid transit would provide a large degree of ocean security, and hoped that it would still sail unescorted, via the Cape route, further emphasising that the ‘supply position makes it very desirable that as soon as possible the Forestry Companies should reach this country’.⁵⁵⁵

This reply notably made no reference to the request for *Achilles* to act as an escort, so Fraser was now forced into a difficult position. His reply on 9 July acknowledged the desirability of these specialist troops to reach Britain, but stressed that, as

in the past, [his government] feel that they cannot divest themselves of their share of responsibility for the safe transport of these troops, [and regretted] that they feel themselves unable to accept the proposal.⁵⁵⁶

⁵⁵¹ DRNZ Vol.I, Doc.295, 216-17, Fraser to Caldecote, 18/6/40.

⁵⁵² NZPD, 19/6/40, Vol.257, 204; Wood, *Political*, 140.

⁵⁵³ DRNZ Vol.I, Doc.296. 217, Caldecote to Fraser, 28/6/40

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid, Doc.297, 217, Fraser to Caldecote, 29/6/40.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid, Doc.298, 218, Caldecote to Fraser, 6/7/40.

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid, Doc.299, 219, Fraser to Caldecote, 9/7/40.

A disappointed Caldecote replied, noted the view from Wellington and hoped that in the meantime whilst they were delayed, the specialists would receive basic military training.⁵⁵⁷ They did eventually leave New Zealand nearly two months later with the US4 convoy on 28 August, and at Bombay re-embarked to continue the voyage to the United Kingdom, arriving on the Clyde on 6 November.⁵⁵⁸

Therefore, it is undoubtedly evident that Wellington wanted to do what it could to help Britain in these dire times. Caldecote, conscious of the pressures on the Admiralty, but perhaps preying on traditional New Zealand loyalty, arguably hoped that they would just conform to London's view. Fraser, however, finding himself placed between a rock and a hard place by the Admiralty had no alternative but revert to the issue on which in effect he never compromised, that of maximum protection for the transport of his nation's troops across the oceans. He thus refused, although with deep regret.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, the hackneyed historiographical characterisation of New Zealand at this time as possessing a 'Mother Complex' was evidently erroneous. Whilst their economic dependency upon Britain is unarguable, the stand taken by Fraser at this crucial juncture was an unequivocal demonstration of independence and the prioritisation of the Dominion's interests. If there is one episode that belied such deleterious appellations then this was it, as even when the Mother Country was at its nadir in the war, Fraser was not prepared for his countrymen to undergo unnecessary risks that he viewed could be ameliorated in any way. The fascinating aspect of this event, however, is its virtual absence in the post-war official histories, only a cursory mention by McClymont.⁵⁵⁹ It is speculatively contended that the relevant trans-hemispheric cables were hidden in an obscure part of the

⁵⁵⁷ *DRNZ* Vol.I, Doc.300, 220, Caldecote to Fraser, 10/7/40.

⁵⁵⁸ *Ibid*, footnote.4, 226; Doc.312, 226, New Zealand Military Liaison Officer to CGS, 9/11/40.

⁵⁵⁹ McClymont. *To Greece*, 46.

453 documents within *Volume I*, under ‘*Railway, Forestry and Army Troops Companies, New Zealand Engineers*’, and not located in a more prominent position such as the ‘*Third Echelon*’ section, which this affair clearly warrants.⁵⁶⁰ It is tentatively suggested that this was because of immediate post-war political considerations (see Appendix).

The Third Echelon

On 3 July a Chiefs of Staff appreciation was conveyed to the dominions emphasising the importance of preserving the current position in the Middle East which hinged on retaining Egypt and the Suez Canal, and additionally the need to destroy Italian assets in the Red Sea.⁵⁶¹ A supplementary report of ten days later imparted to Batterbee by Caldecote, accentuated this strategic necessity as it anticipated that ‘operations on a large scale’ would occur by the end of the year and, to this end, it was hoped to reconstitute both the New Zealand and 6 Australian Divisions by then.⁵⁶² During mid-July, Fraser was informed of plans by the Admiralty to re-establish the US4 convoy and escorts for the Third Echelon to be ready to depart from Sydney on 23 August.⁵⁶³

Realising that this would mean an earlier sailing from New Zealand waters than he anticipated, allied with his own doubts on the strategic position, Fraser expressed his misgivings over the pressure in being ‘forced to make a very early decision on the matter’.⁵⁶⁴ He questioned the ocean route to be followed, the escort size and availability of equipment once the troops arrived in Egypt.⁵⁶⁵ In fact much of his anxiety was unfounded as already by the end of June, Italy’s submarine force in the Red Sea had been greatly reduced, and the

⁵⁶⁰ *DRNZ Vol.I*, 156-81.

⁵⁶¹ *Ibid*, Doc.216, 160-62, Caldecote to Fraser, 3/7/40.

⁵⁶² *Ibid*, Doc.218, 163-64, Caldecote to Batterbee, 13/7/40

⁵⁶³ *Ibid*, Doc.219, 164-66, Fraser to Caldecote, 24/7/40.

⁵⁶⁴ *Ibid*.

⁵⁶⁵ *Ibid*.

British convoy system had negated any serious incursions of their surface units.⁵⁶⁶ In a swift July reply, Caldecote emphasised this advantageous situation, stressed that two British convoys had already passed through without loss, and provided assurances over anti-submarine and anti-aircraft capability for the Red Sea. He also added that HMAS *Canberra* would be used as escort for the Indian Ocean leg.⁵⁶⁷

In a long and considered reply on 3 August, Fraser outlined his reading of the situation in the Pacific, expressing his anxiety over the worsening situation there. But in what became one of his archetypal messages of the war, he reiterated the essential strategic approach of a year before. He fully accepted that

a large view must be taken, that in the last resort this Dominion must stand or fall according to the decision in the main theatres of war, and that as a corollary it would be wise to have all possible forces at decisive points.⁵⁶⁸

His conclusion reaffirmed the primary strategic policy hallmark of New Zealand's war, and that 'the best contribution this Dominion could make to the common cause would be the despatch of the Third Echelon to the Middle East'.⁵⁶⁹

Yet again though, he added a characteristic postscript that the proposed escort of the convoy was 'materially smaller' than for previous ones, but assumed that all necessary protection will be provided.⁵⁷⁰ Confirmation that the Third Echelon would leave New Zealand shores greatly cheered Churchill, who, never reticent in providing approbation to the Dominion,

⁵⁶⁶ Ashley Jackson, *Of Islands, Ports and Sea Lanes. Africa and the India Ocean in the Second World War*, (Warwick, 2018), 122, 120.

⁵⁶⁷ *DRNZ* Vol.I, Doc.220, 166-68, Caldecote to Fraser, 26/7/40.

⁵⁶⁸ *Ibid*, Doc.224, 170-73, Fraser to Caldecote, 3/8/40.

⁵⁶⁹ *Ibid*.

⁵⁷⁰ *Ibid*.

stated that he was ‘greatly heartened as ever by New Zealand’s readiness to meet the needs of the situation....I feel that your decision is absolutely sound’.⁵⁷¹

In the following days the escort for the trans-Tasman crossing was arranged, with HMS *Achilles* designated for the role, which was acceptable to Fraser though he still expressed some apprehension about the Indian Ocean transit.⁵⁷² Caldecote in reply offered reassurance, mentioning that the Italian submarine threat in the Indian Ocean had been eliminated. Furthermore upon reaching India, the Dominion’s troops were to be transhipped into other vessels for the Red Sea passage, with escort provided by the ships of the East Indies Station.⁵⁷³ This partially satisfied Fraser, who nevertheless required a final say as to the protection provided in the Red Sea.⁵⁷⁴

The three liners of US4 left Wellington escorted by *Achilles* on 31 August, but, a few weeks later, awkward cables flowed once more between the two capitals. The New Zealand Government objected to the inadequate protection for their troops leaving Bombay for the Red Sea, which consisted of just a C Class light cruiser of First World War vintage, and an armed merchant cruiser.⁵⁷⁵ It was only placated by the enhanced protection provided by the addition of the modern Leander class cruiser HMS *Ajax*, two destroyers and an anti-aircraft cruiser, to the escorts, and the convoy eventually reached Suez without incident on 29 September, where the troops were met by General Freyberg.⁵⁷⁶

⁵⁷¹ CAC, CHAR 20/14, Churchill to Fraser, 9/8/40.

⁵⁷² DRNZ Vol.I, Doc.227, 174-75, Caldecote to Fraser 9/8/40; Doc.231, 177, Fraser to Caldecote, 12/8/40.

⁵⁷³ Ibid, Doc.234, 179-80, Caldecote to Fraser 14/8/40.

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid, Doc.235, 180, Fraser to Caldecote 15/8/40.

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid, Footnote.2, 180; Plowman, *Across the Sea*, 147;

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid; ANZ, WAI18/69, GOC to Jones, 29/9/40.

Déjà vu seems an apt description of the ongoing disagreements in the communications between New Zealand and Britain over the convoy sailings. Wellington repeatedly demanded what it perceived as the best possible protection that could be provided for the men of the NZEF. Yet from the Admiralty perspective only seven German raiders had entered the Indian Ocean in 1940, and although they achieved a creditable number of merchant sinkings, their disruptive presence was of greater significance.⁵⁷⁷ The increased transport of British and Empire troops by fast ocean-going liners meant that the Admiralty's recommended policy was to focus on providing protection close to ports of departure and arrival. Escorting these vessels in broad oceans with their speed, and the use of wide evasive routes, was viewed as sufficient risk minimisation, and such escort protection as advocated by Fraser, 'as of little value'.⁵⁷⁸

By the middle of 1940 it seems that Australia tended to this assessment. On 29 August, a week before AIF troops were to leave on US4, Menzies sent an extensive seventeen-point cable to the Dominions Office. In it, his only reference to convoy protection for both this and the next convoys, carrying 20,000 AIF troops, was to remark that 'it is assumed that the Admiralty will provide the necessary shipping...and escort for convoys'.⁵⁷⁹ Fraser, on the other hand, as already evidenced by the US1 and US3 convoys, was much more apprehensive, and wanted, if necessary, to over-insure with respect to escort protection. The Dominions Office appreciated his particular sensitivities on this issue, and in view of the concomitant political imperative gained by the presence of New Zealand forces in the line, London tended to placate and accommodate him whenever possible.

⁵⁷⁷ www.naval-history-net/WW2CampaignsIndianOcean.htm

⁵⁷⁸ *DRNZ* Vol.I, footnote, 218, Admiralty to NZNB, 24/5/40.

⁵⁷⁹ W.J. Hudson, *et al.* (ed's), *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy 1937-49*, Vol.IV: *July 1940-June 1941* (Canberra, 1980), [henceforth, *DAFP* Vol.IV], Doc.84, 119-21, Menzies to Caldecote, 29/8/40.

The repeated nature of the exchanges on this issue seems to leave the impression of both sides going through the pretence of a gentle game of poker, which New Zealand invariably wins. London having proffered the initial arrangements for the escort capabilities and armament protection of the convoys, largely folds its hand when the Dominion politely rejects them and trumps them. They then ‘pay-up’ by acquiescing to Wellington’s wishes and the convoy sails. As commented above, Fraser’s conduct in all this is hardly that of a satrap.

Déjà vu, Australia?

A postscript to the negotiations over the convoys with Australia occurred during the southern winter months of 1940. The War Cabinet of 8 July proposed

That the maximum liaison possible be maintained between Australia and New Zealand in defence matters, and that staff talks..... should be initiated....with the minimum of delay.⁵⁸⁰

These sentiments in seeking greater liaison were further evident at the end of that month, when Fraser was copied into a cable from Menzies to Bruce concerning Japan and endorsed Canberra’s suggestion to London that it should allow full expression of the views of the Pacific dominions and ending with ‘we attach the greatest importance to the fullest possible exchange of views on this matter between New Zealand and Australia.’⁵⁸¹ Possibly to their surprise in Wellington, there was a repeat of the previous August, when the Australians attempted to improve consultation across the Tasman, this time by the Minister for External

⁵⁸⁰ ANZ, AAFD 809, Box.3, War Cabinet Decisions.

⁵⁸¹ *DAFP* Vol.IV, Doc.34 ,46-48, Menzies to Bruce, 25/7/40; Doc.42, 56-57, Fraser to Menzies, 31/7/40.

Affairs John McEwen. He wrote a letter to Fraser on 11 August thanking him for copying in Canberra to the New Zealand cables to London and reciprocated the positive sentiments.⁵⁸²

On 13 August he made a submission of Agendum 437 before the full Cabinet in Canberra, stating that as 'it is obvious that it would be greatly to the advantage of both countries.... to have an opportunity of consultation before the formulation of policy'.⁵⁸³ Clearly McEwen sought greater liaison with New Zealand, but what came to the fore appeared more as a repeat of the Australian condescending attitude of late 1939 when he stated that

other dominions have felt the necessity of having closer inter-dominion contacts and consultation, to which end they have in some cases appointed High Commissioners to the *more important* (my emphasis) dominions.

Australia has followed this growing practice so far as Canada is concerned.

In the case of New Zealand, it is *not considered necessary* at the moment.⁵⁸⁴

McEwen 'believed a satisfactory alternative...could be the appointment of a liaison officer (in each other's external affairs department), permanent at least for the duration of the war'.⁵⁸⁵ The recommendation was approved and on 22 August he cabled Fraser expressing the desire for closer contact on 'questions affecting [their mutual] common external policy'.⁵⁸⁶ However, it was not implemented, ostensibly because there was no one to spare from Fraser's Prime Minister's Department, though Hensley was to comment that a solution could have been found.⁵⁸⁷

⁵⁸² Hensley, *Beyond*, 95.

⁵⁸³ *DAFP* Vol.IV, Doc.71, 104-05, Agendum.437, Consultation with New Zealand, 13/8/40.

⁵⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, footnote.1, 105; Hensley, *Beyond*, 95.

⁵⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

Despite the mutual resolve of both nations to improve close cooperation over the convoy arrangements, and an initiative to re-enact the Anzac Corps, problems in the relationship remained. Though this was a welcoming initiative from McEwen, an underlying condescension towards New Zealand at senior government level still endured. In Wellington, after all its entreaties over the previous year, Fraser displayed a surprising and perhaps enigmatic indolence in resolving this issue. Thus, a year into the war, these events perhaps summed up in a nutshell the perennial difficulties and misunderstandings in this relationship at the higher political issue.

Over the following months similar problems were repeated. The Australian minister, Larry Anthony, visiting New Zealand in February 1941, individualistically suggested, with support from Fraser, the establishment of a Council of Ministers.⁵⁸⁸ This was given a dusty response by the Canberra War Cabinet, citing the existing heavy demand on ministers, to which Fraser responded by suggesting monthly meetings held alternately in each country.⁵⁸⁹ Canberra's response was that a Consultative Committee was to be formed, but that later drifted into abeyance due to Australian lack of interest.⁵⁹⁰ Munitions though was one issue on which cooperation worked, and obviously in the interests of both, as New Zealand had a meagre war industry.⁵⁹¹

⁵⁸⁸ Hensley, *Beyond*, 96

⁵⁸⁹ *DAFP* Vol.IV, Doc.329, 469, Commonwealth Government to Anthony, 4/3/41; Hensley, 96-97.

⁵⁹⁰ *Ibid*, footnote.3, 469; Hensley, 97

⁵⁹¹ Hensley, 97.

Theme III

**Learning fast or not fast enough. New Zealand's relations with
Britain. Not quite dominion equality.**

Chapter Six

Freyberg and his early months in command. Learning the hard way.

The perception had become entrenched within the Dominion that the extensive losses on the Western Front suffered by the 1NZEF during the First World War was partly because the Wellington Government had given complete control of its force to British command. A more explicit and surer national consciousness with respect to their armed forces now meant that in 1939 the New Zealand Division would be a national army, and more than a component of a British imperial one. This meant that any officer commanding the Division in action would have to be an able administrator to conduct the affairs of an independent army, and also carry out the policy of the Dominion Government.⁵⁹²

Major General Bernard Freyberg was appointed by Fraser as GOC 2NZEF in November 1939, whilst the latter was attending the Dominion Ministers Meeting in London.⁵⁹³ In many respects, Freyberg's résumé made him the perfect selection. Though born in Richmond in 1889, he spent his formative years in New Zealand, returning to Britain in 1914 just after the commencement of the First World War.⁵⁹⁴ Through his bravery and leadership he became a war hero, gaining three Distinguished Service Orders (DSO), a VC and multiple wounds, ending the war as one of the youngest brigadiers in the British Army.⁵⁹⁵ In the years after the armistice, he stayed in the army, was rapidly promoted and within fifteen years had attained the permanent rank of major-general.⁵⁹⁶ Yet in 1935, a medical examination revealed a heart murmur and two years later he was retired and put into the Reserve.⁵⁹⁷ Despite this, in September 1939 Freyberg was not slow in putting his name forward as GOC of the proposed

⁵⁹² McClymont, *To Greece*, 11.

⁵⁹³ Stevens, *Freyberg, VC*, 15; ATL, 2000-094-5, Henderson interviews Stevens 6&9/6/69; ANZ. WAI/23/e, Draft Report. 20-22.

⁵⁹⁴ Freyberg, *Bernard Freyberg*, 9-27.

⁵⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 35-139.

⁵⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 175-76.

⁵⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 181-87.

NZEF when he contacted the New Zealand High Commissioner in London. Jordan informed Wellington on 16 September that Freyberg 'offers his services to New Zealand and would be glad to serve with compatriots again', being acknowledged by Fraser early the following month.⁵⁹⁸

Bernard Freyberg's Second World War experience was unique in that he commanded the same formation, the 2NZEF, for exactly six years from November 1939. Being in effect the commander of a national army within the British Empire coalition meant that, like other dominion commanders, he was a subordinate to two at times conflicting authorities, the British army command and his own Government. His handling of the pressures associated with this unique responsibility, amongst the panoply of all the others a divisional commander deals with, is the focus of this chapter and Chapter Eight. Within the context of this thesis his tenure in this position can be divided into two periods. The first, with which this chapter is concerned, extends from his appointment in November 1939 until July 1941, whilst the second is dealt with in Chapter Eight, covers July 1941 until November 1942.

Taking command of 2NZEF and his Charter

Freyberg, on taking up his new appointment, understood at once the legacy concerns of the First World War, and the minimal political control possessed by the Dominion Government regarding the 1NZEF. Shortly after taking over this responsibility he met the DMO General Dewing, who told him that both he (Freyberg) and the New Zealand Government should reserve 'certain powers' for themselves.⁵⁹⁹ This necessitated that the newly appointed GOC would need to fly out imminently to meet and consult with the government in Wellington.

⁵⁹⁸ *DRNZ*, Vol.I, Doc.27, 23, Jordan to Savage/Fraser, 16/9/39; Ibid, Doc.28, 23, Fraser to Jordan, 2/10/39.

⁵⁹⁹ Lord Freyberg in House of Lords Debate, 17/3/54,

<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1954/mar/17/the-statement-on-defence>, 473; Hensley, *Beyond*, 68.

Shortly before departure, he met Generals Birdwood and Godley who had both commanded New Zealand troops in the First World War and held similar sentiments to that of Dewing. They additionally recommended that Freyberg, on his stopover in Australia during his forthcoming journey should consult General Brudenell White, CoS to the Anzac Corps in that war. He had been deeply involved in the struggle to concentrate 1AIF, and thus retain its Australian identity within overall British command, and the new GOC would gain further insight into the issue.⁶⁰⁰

Whilst still in Britain Freyberg commenced a draft outline of a paper defining his position with regard to overall British authority. During the ten-day flight he worked on this and penned a complete precis of all the conditions he was going to advise the Government in Wellington to consider with respect to the force he would command.⁶⁰¹ This included, as GOC, his personal control over the administration of its troops, and that it should only be employed as a complete formation and when adequately equipped.⁶⁰² Significantly, it additionally included that the Cabinet ought at all times to have access to his opinion.⁶⁰³

He met White in Melbourne on 20 December, who undoubtedly warned him of what he was likely to contend with as commander of a dominion force, and the necessity of a right of appeal to his government.⁶⁰⁴ After reading Freyberg's draft, he strengthened it in several places, and advised that 'for national and political reasons, the identity and individuality of a

⁶⁰⁰ Freyberg, House of Lords, 17/3/54, 473; Hensley, *Beyond*, 68.

⁶⁰¹ ATL, 9030-36, 20, Freyberg, "The World War".

⁶⁰² Ibid, 13-14.

⁶⁰³ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁴ W.E. Murphy, "Blamey's and Freyberg's 'Charters': A Study in Civil-Military and Commonwealth Relations", *Political Science*, 16.2, (1964), 31; Christopher Pugsley, "The Evolution of Command Relationships Between New Zealand and Great Britain From 1898-1945", Staff College, Camberley, 1980 [now JSCSC, Shrivenham], 11.

Dominion force, must be preserved. History has proved this'.⁶⁰⁵ A few days later Freyberg arrived in Wellington and submitted two documents to the Government. They were approved with slight alterations and then returned to him, the first as a Charter over the signature of the Prime Minister, and the second as a schedule of authorities over the signature of the Minister of Defence. Both were dated 5 January 1940, the day the First Echelon embarked.⁶⁰⁶ In a letter to Dewing he commented that the Charter gave him wide powers, although 'I do not defend their form of words. I only defend the principles which are involved'.⁶⁰⁷

Pugsley reflected that even though powers were established, 'their effectiveness would remain tied to the ability of the man'.⁶⁰⁸ What though was unambiguously clear, despite a large degree of discretion, was that Freyberg was duty bound to keep his government fully informed of any decisions or orders of importance.⁶⁰⁹ This aspect was not to attain any significance until 1941, when he neglected to apply it when assenting to the New Zealand Division being used for the Greece campaign. It was to become arguably the most controversial decision he made in the whole war. However, the aspect that provided the earliest resonance in 1940 was that of splitting up the New Zealand forces, as the Charter contained no specific provision that the 2NZEF must not be fragmented and used piecemeal.⁶¹⁰ When the authorised version was first presented to him, the General raised this very matter with Jones, the Minister for Defence, who allayed his concerns and assured him that the powers vested in him were adequate to deal with any issues concerning the unity of his force.⁶¹¹

⁶⁰⁵ Freyberg, House of Lords, 17/3/54, 474; John Bentley, "Champion of Anzac: Sir Brudenell White, the First Australian Imperial Force and the emergence of the Australian military culture 1914-18", PhD Thesis, Univ of Wollongong, (2003), 327.

⁶⁰⁶ W.G. Stevens, *Problems of the 2NZEF. Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45*. (Wellington, 1958), 93.

⁶⁰⁷ ANZ, WAI18/13V, Freyberg to Dewing, 8/1/40.

⁶⁰⁸ Pugsley, "Evolution of Command Relationships", 13.

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁶¹⁰ Murphy, "Charters", *Political Science*, 16.2, (1964), 32.

⁶¹¹ Ibid.

There does not seem to be any evidence that the New Zealand Government sought validation from London on the Charter, though conversely, contemporaneous to these conversations in Wellington, the Australian Government did. Under the recommendation of General White, they enacted a Charter to be presented to their GOC, Thomas Blamey, but unlike their neighbour this was formalised with the British Government. It notably emphasised that no part of the AIF could be detached without the permission of their GOC, and additionally confirmed he would always have the right to communicate directly with his government.⁶¹²

On 8 January 1940, whilst sailing with the First Echelon just out of Wellington, Freyberg produced perhaps his most ill-starred prophecy. In a letter to Fraser he asked him to convey to the Cabinet his deep appreciation of the trust they placed in him by giving him the special powers, but then inauspiciously predicted that ‘I do not expect to have to use any of them, because I know the British Military Authorities will treat us with the greatest possible consideration’.⁶¹³

Anzac part 1, 1940

Accompanying Freyberg, Fraser and Berendsen on the long flight from Cairo to Sydney in December 1939, was Richard Casey, the Australian Minister of Supply, and their representative at the Dominions Ministers Meeting in London. He recommended to Freyberg that in addition to meeting General White in Melbourne during his Australian stopover, he should also see Generals Squires, the Australian Chief of Staff, and Blamey.⁶¹⁴ This probably was the first time he met his opposite GOC and, according to Freyberg’s private family

⁶¹² DAFP Vol.III, Doc.96, 133-5, Commonwealth Government to Eden, 9/11/40; Hasluck, *Government and People*, 217.

⁶¹³ Freyberg Papers No.6, Freyberg to Fraser, 8/1/40, in John McLeod, *Myth and Reality. The New Zealand Soldier in World War II* (Auckland, 1986), 173.

⁶¹⁴ ATL, 9030-36, Freyberg, “The World War”, 23.

papers, he described him as able, outspoken and ruthless in argument.⁶¹⁵ He did not, however, as became apparent in April, find him at this stage particularly agreeable and had already developed some misgivings regarding his character.

On the other hand, Freyberg seemed to have had a regard for Squires, as it is evident that in their conversations in Melbourne, they discussed amongst other things some form of arrangement for an Anzac Corps. This was clearly revealed in a letter Freyberg sent to the Australian less than three weeks later, written whilst crossing the Tasman Sea on his return to Egypt. He mentioned that he gained the powers he wanted from the New Zealand Government, but crucially divulged that

the feeling among the New Zealand troops towards the Australians is very strong. They long to serve together again. It will be popular among the men although it might be a little difficult nationally and politically. However, with good will, we could overcome that if it were necessary for us to serve together, so long as our identity is retained.⁶¹⁶

Thus, within this letter is the unmistakable implication that Freyberg had tentative hopes of an Anzac arrangement, although less than four months later, a noticeable cooling of the idea entered his thinking. As mentioned in Chapter Five, Menzies proposed to Wellington on 4 March that an Anzac Corps be formed with an Australian corps commander, and in response Wellington contacted their GOC in Egypt for advice.⁶¹⁷ Freyberg replied stating that though he was superficially supportive of such a scheme from a military viewpoint, citing the advantage of having an Australian division on his flank, he provided several caveats which

⁶¹⁵ Freyberg, *Bernard Freyberg*, 208.

⁶¹⁶ ANZ, WAI18/13V, Freyberg to Squires, 8/1/40.

⁶¹⁷ *DRNZ*, Vol.II, Doc.1,1, Menzies to Savage, 4/3/40; ANZ, WAI18/4/34, Fraser to Freyberg, 23/3/40.

clearly indicated a negative view of the proposal. The GOC mentioned that Wellington's desire to assist in the manner best conforming to the British war effort might not be associated automatically with a possible aggressive Australian attitude regarding strategy, and advised that his GOC's emergency powers and those associated with the Cabinet, should be fully retained if such an arrangement transpired.⁶¹⁸

Possibly at the forefront of his thinking on the matter was the notion that 'the British Military Authorities will treat us with the greatest possible consideration'.⁶¹⁹ Of additional interest is that he further emphasised his serious misgivings about serving under Blamey as Australian commander. He described him as a most capable and experienced soldier, but with a 'difficult temperament', stressing that

although confident I could work well with him in field, I should not rely entirely on his judgement during difficult times preceding active operations.⁶²⁰

In a further negative comment on his Australian counterpart, he asserted that his men should continue to train under the GOC British Troops in Egypt (BTE) until active operations are anticipated, as he [Lieutenant General Maitland Wilson] knows modern equipment and formations better than Blamey.⁶²¹

Freyberg thus seemed to be making it patently clear that as a smaller partner he would be more comfortable going to war alongside the British than the Australians, especially if

⁶¹⁸ ANZ, WAI18/4/34, Freyberg to Fraser, 26/4/40.

⁶¹⁹ Freyberg Papers No.6, Freyberg to Fraser, 8/1/40, in John McLeod, *Myth and Reality*, 173.

⁶²⁰ Freyberg to Fraser, 26/4/40.

⁶²¹ Ibid.

Blamey was commanding such a corps.⁶²² This was possibly as a result of Middle East Command (MEC) at this time being most welcoming to the New Zealand troops, and him being very content in rekindling old friendships such as those he had with Archibald Wavell and Wilson. He therefore took a more benevolent view of British leaders as against Australian ones. Thus, having conveyed these reservations to Wellington, plus the fact that following the defeat of the BEF, any subsequent prioritisation of equipment would be for the forces in Britain. Hence, any further planning towards the establishment of an Anzac Corps was not a high priority, and the concept drifted into abeyance.

But what became clearly apparent was that Freyberg's opinion of Blamey gradually changed to a more positive one, notably by the latter months of 1940. This was primarily the result of his changed perception of British command and the testy relationship he had with it over the borrowing of NZEF units, along with its reluctance in returning them to his command. The realisation that 2AIF had similar issues caused him to empathise with the more vigorous Australian attitude to any such disputes, as exemplified by General Blamey.

Early travails for Freyberg

On their arrival in Egypt, because of the incomplete state of its preparation, the First Echelon became part of the reserve force under MEC and proceeded with training in the Maadi area where it was shortly to turn into the Fourth Brigade Group. As the tensions with Italy were increasing, allied with the fact that its Libyan colony bordered Egypt, the New Zealanders became responsible for the security of Cairo to counter any possible fifth column activities. This was initially supported by Wellington, but on 16 May, knowing that they were insufficiently prepared and fearful that the troops might become militarily involved at this

⁶²² McLean, *The Prickly Pair*, 115.

time, Fraser contacted his GOC. He stressed to Freyberg that except in an emergency 'he should not commit troops to any operations for which....they are not yet adequately trained, fitted, and equipped'.⁶²³

It soon became evident that following the British debacle in the Norway campaign and the defeat in France, Mussolini accelerated his declaration of war, to 10 June, thus the emergency had arrived. The necessity for British troops to take control of all means of transportation in Egypt became apparent and GHQ Middle East asked Freyberg if he could provide troops to assist in the operation of railways and communications. This meant part of the NZEF being detached, but General Wavell, Commander in Chief (C-in-C) Middle East, whilst appreciating Freyberg's ultimate desire to have the New Zealanders working as a complete formation, emphasised the essential nature of the request. With some misgiving Freyberg agreed, stating that he was willing to help 'during the anticipated period of emergency', but reiterated his right to 'decide the scope of active operations in which my force should engage'.⁶²⁴ Over three hundred officers and men were detached on a 'temporary loan' basis for signalling purposes and to help run the railways. Additionally following the Italian declaration, New Zealand troops were ordered into Cairo to deter any sabotage activities, which they did expeditiously.⁶²⁵

This was indeed a most apprehensive period for Empire forces in Egypt. Wavell was in an invidious position, with the enemy already on the border and a severe lack of forces and equipment with which to face them. Furthermore, the presence of a hostile Italian navy along the shipping lanes where the Second Echelon would be sailing was an additional concern,

⁶²³ *DRNZ*, Vol.I, Doc.78, 64-65, Fraser to Freyberg, 16/5/40.

⁶²⁴ *Ibid*, Doc.238, 182, Scobie to Freyberg, 8/6/40; Doc.239, 183, Freyberg to Scobie, 11/6/40.

⁶²⁵ *Ibid*, Doc.80, 66, Freyberg to Jones, 13/6/40; ANZ, WAII8/69, Freyberg to Jones, 14/6/40.

which caused these troops to be diverted to the United Kingdom in May (see Chapter Five). This separation of his first two brigades by over one thousand miles and at least six weeks sailing time clearly frustrated Freyberg, as these events forced a postponement of the concentration of his forces.

The General soon came to realise that the situation in Egypt was not an immediate emergency, as any offensive from Libya by a largely unmechanised Italian army in the height of summer was not a realistic proposition.⁶²⁶ He was, however, looking ahead with anxiety to later in the year and the concomitant problem of concentrating his force and integrating the brigades into a divisional structure. He needed to train the troops then stationed in Britain to the standard he desired, and asked for permission from Wellington to visit them in mid-June, leaving Brigadier Puttick in command of 2NZEF (Mid East).⁶²⁷ Significantly he requested that the latter be granted the same powers of recourse to the New Zealand Government as himself.⁶²⁸

After what turned out to be a most adventurous flight from Cairo, Freyberg landed in Britain on 24 June.⁶²⁹ Although regretting the Second Echelon sailing to Britain, his outlook was to train these troops to a standard with which he was content, possibly seeing this as the best and quickest way for a prepared and concentrated force to eventually materialise.⁶³⁰ He was also conscious of the parlous military and strategic state of the United Kingdom, as following the surrender of France, it had lost a significant ally and gained an additional adversary in Italy. He believed that if there was to be any military action it would be in Britain and not

⁶²⁶ ANZ, WAI18/69, Freyberg to Fraser, 26/5/40.

⁶²⁷ Ibid, Jones to Freyberg, 15/6/40.

⁶²⁸ Ibid, Freyberg to Jones & Duigan, 16/6/40.

⁶²⁹ ATL, 9030-36, Freyberg, "The World War", 49-54.

⁶³⁰ WAI18/69, Freyberg to Jones, 22/5/40.

Egypt, and as much as he wanted his troops to remain concentrated under his command, this desire had to take second place in the current emergency in Britain, as it had in Egypt. He negotiated that once they were trained sufficiently as a concentrated brigade group, an active role for them in southern England would be found, under the command of the C-in-C Home Forces, General Alan Brooke.⁶³¹

On 1 July he received a cable from Puttick who mentioned that BTE had asked for a detachment of just under one hundred men, mainly from the divisional cavalry, for 'special patrols of a strategic nature'.⁶³² This was to become the forerunner of the Long Range Desert Group (LRDG) under Major Ralph Bagnold, who viewed the New Zealanders as ideal independent material for this force, to which Freyberg gave his approval the next day.⁶³³ However, on 3 July he was alarmed to receive another message from his deputy, who indicated that he would shortly be attending a meeting concerning a recent British proposal. This was that a new Egypt Corps be established which would involve amongst other things New Zealand troops being distributed among six different formations. Puttick commented that he 'strongly deprecated' this 'dispersal and loss of identity', notifying Freyberg that he (Puttick) 'will require reference by you to New Zealand Government'.⁶³⁴

It must have been almost by return on 4 July that Freyberg cabled Wavell directly and asserted that these proposals could not take place without governmental authorisation. No doubt confident that Wellington would support its GOC in such a matter, he further emphasised that he did not want to inform his government of these proposals as it would be

⁶³¹ ATL, 9030-36, Freyberg, "The World War", 63; *DRNZ*, Vol.I, Doc.193, 136, Freyberg to Dewing, 10/7/40.

⁶³² ANZ, PUTTICK4/1/1, Puttick to Freyberg, 1/7/40.

⁶³³ Barry Pitt, *The Crucible of War. The Western Desert, 1941* (London, 1980) 226; *DRNZ*, Vol.I, Doc.321, 232, Jordan to Puttick, 2/7/40.

⁶³⁴ ANZ, PUTTICK4/1/1, Puttick to Freyberg, 3/7/40.

viewed most unfavourably and met by an ‘uncompromising refusal’.⁶³⁵ Wavell in reply explained that due to a possible attack it was necessary to make the most efficient use of the limited troops available for such a corps. But, he had now decided on an alternative scheme with self-contained formations including a New Zealand group as well as an Australian one within such a corps. Wavell suggested that only the NZEF signallers to be temporarily attached due to his shortage of such specialists, to which Freyberg subsequently expressed relief at this decision.⁶³⁶

Therefore, at this time in early July, Freyberg’s twin loyalties to his government in Wellington and to MEC, ran mostly on parallel lines. He was happy to help and cooperate where he could, but had the ultimate aim, once fully trained, of concentrating all his troops into a New Zealand Division. He seemed at ease with himself at the rejection of the Anzac proposal, due to his greater fidelity to any British as against Australian command. Additionally, he could also perhaps justify to himself that the only time these twin allegiances travelled on a collision course was due to the necessities of the emergency situation, and even then, any tensions were soon quickly resolved as a result of his past personal relationships with British general officers.

Such an outlook is buttressed by Freyberg’s 82 page autobiographical narrative of the first thirteen months of the war which he named ‘The World War’.⁶³⁷ In places it is very detailed, mentioning in some depth the discussions involved in the establishment of his ‘Charter’, but crucially, it was clearly written contemporaneous to events, and thus did not become subject to post-war retrospection.⁶³⁸ Interestingly, there is no mention within this account of his 4

⁶³⁵ ANZ, WAII8/69, Freyberg to Wavell, 4/7/40.

⁶³⁶ Ibid, Wavell to Freyberg, 8/7/40; ANZ, PUTTICK4/1/1, Puttick to Freyberg, 5/7/40; WAII8/69, Freyberg to Wavell, 10/7/40.”

⁶³⁷ ATL, 9030-36, Freyberg, ‘The World War’.

⁶³⁸ Ibid, 13-14.

July communication with Wavell about the detaching of units. Such an absence certainly suggests that at this time, during the summer of 1940, following his cables to HQ Middle East on 11 June and to Wavell on 4 July, any concerns about the New Zealand forces in Egypt being dispersed was not prominent in his mind, as the issue was settled and put to rest.

Problems with MEC and progressive disillusionment

General Blamey arrived in the Middle East to take command of 1 Australian Corps on 20 June. His departure from Australia had been accelerated upon the recommendation to cabinet two weeks earlier by General White, that

Blamey should be on the spot to ensure that the known policy of the Australian Government was adhered to, and the fullest safeguards observed against the dispersion of the AIF.⁶³⁹

He too had to exercise the principles laid down in his charter on 3 July, as like Freyberg he objected to an Egypt Corps, exhibiting similar concerns as his NZEF counterpart, and subsequently accepting the revised proposal of the brigades being separate and self-contained within the corps.

Both dominion commanders got on well personally with Wavell, sympathising with his predicament of having to command across several theatres from East Africa to Egypt extending to Syria and Iran. In July and August Blamey certainly did his best to cooperate, and allowed his troops to be detailed for internal security duties, as well as forming part of the Egypt Corps.⁶⁴⁰ Yet in early September, the Australian 16 Brigade received an order from Wilson to move to the Western Desert, after just one week of training when an original

⁶³⁹ John Hetherington, *Blamey, Controversial Soldier. A Biography of Field Marshall Sir Thomas Blamey* (Canberra, 1973), 102; *DAFP* Vol.III, Doc.336, 383-84, War Cabinet Minute 296, 4/6/40.

⁶⁴⁰ Horner, *High Command*, 46-48.

agreement had been for one month. This caused dismay within the AIF and Brigadier Sidney Rowell, 2AIF's CoS, 'suggested that it would be well to make a stand on principle at once so that the position would be established for all time'.⁶⁴¹

On 21 September, he called on Wilson, met his CoS, Brigadier Alexander Galloway, describing him as 'a stern Scot to whom orders were orders and be damned to dominion rules'.⁶⁴² They argued over the responsibility of the issuance of such directives and an acrimonious meeting ended with Rowell leaving a copy of Blamey's Charter there. Later that evening, after a probable reflection on the repercussions of such a potential fissure, both Galloway and Wilson sought a more emollient approach. In discussion with the former, Rowell stressed that all the fuss could have been avoided, if only they had been contacted and the situation explained. Revealingly, later that day in conversation with Wilson, the latter apologised, commenting that 'I've been a naughty boy'.⁶⁴³ In reality he was hardly regretful, as within a month Freyberg too was to have clashes with both these senior British officers on the same issue, but with less success.

Following the Italian advance to Sidi Barani in mid-September, Freyberg realised that Egypt had become an active theatre of war and he should be back with the New Zealand troops there. He thus arranged to return to the Middle East on 22 September, arriving two days later.⁶⁴⁴ Knowing that he would meet the soon to disembark Third Echelon in Suez on 29 September, he went straight to the Western Desert in the interlude, staying with his 4 Brigade Group, around Maaten Bagush. To his intense annoyance, he found that a significant number

⁶⁴¹ Sydney Rowell, *Full Circle* (Melbourne, 1974), 49.

⁶⁴² *Ibid*, 49.

⁶⁴³ *Ibid*, 50.

⁶⁴⁴ ANZ, WAI18/69, Freyberg to Jones, 18/9/40.

of skilled men, notably engineers, mechanics and fitters had been detached from his command in addition to the signallers from early June. Moreover, the original plan of dispersal in early July, which he thought had been countermanded, had in reality been enacted under another guise that he would come to describe as ‘peaceful methods’.⁶⁴⁵

It seemed that Major-General Richard O’Connor, GOC of the Western Desert Force (WDF), became aware of Freyberg’s ire, and was probably also mindful of the Rowell dispute six days earlier with his theatre commander Wilson. He wrote two letters to Freyberg on 27 September. The first in official terms, expressed his gratitude for the help provided by Puttick and the New Zealand troops, emphasising he had ‘the greatest admiration for their fighting qualities’.⁶⁴⁶ In the accompanying hand-written letter, he repeated these sentiments, and invited Freyberg to spend the night at his headquarters. He then significantly added

now don’t think I don’t know the peculiar circumstances in them
(4 Brigade Group) being part of the WDF, and I fully realise that they are
only here while the crisis lasts. *You have only to say the word and they
will withdraw*’ (emphasis added).⁶⁴⁷

Clearly it seems, perhaps anticipating a similar disagreement with respect to the New Zealanders as his superior had with the Australians, the more enlightened O’Connor attempted to avoid such a scenario. This may have partially placated Freyberg, as on that same day in a cable to Wellington he mentioned his visit to 4 Brigade, commenting on their high morale, though did not mention the dispersion of some of his forces, possibly reasoning

⁶⁴⁵ Freyberg, *Bernard Freyberg*, 233; WAII8/69, Freyberg to Jones, 13/10/40.

⁶⁴⁶ ANZ, PUTTICK4/1/1, O’Connor to Freyberg, 27/9/40 (1).

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid, O’Connor to Freyberg, 27/9/40 (2).

that his contacts with old friends would allay any issues.⁶⁴⁸ Two days later, however, he was disabused of any such notions. Freyberg wrote to Wilson stating that with the arrival of his Third Echelon troops, divisional training could begin and ‘it is now necessary for us to recall those [detached troops] already made’.⁶⁴⁹ He further underscored how helpful the NZEF had been in the past, but that ‘the time has come when we can no longer comply with requests for detachments’, as he wanted to proceed with concentrating his force.⁶⁵⁰

In response Galloway, agreed that some detachments could be returned, but refused to concede on others, to which Freyberg retorted in a memorandum that there were an additional eight units he wanted to be re-united with his forces.⁶⁵¹ Evidently, the sentiments and mollifying expression of Wilson’s regrets about being a ‘naughty boy’ to the Australians did not apply to the New Zealanders. There had clearly emerged a distinct difference in the treatment of the two Pacific dominions by the military authorities in Egypt, probably due to the fact that Blamey was in place in the Middle East at the time to provide authority in repelling any erosion of his forces.

Freyberg, however, was in a different situation as he faced a *fait accompli* with his troops already dispersed and having to ask for them back. According to historian John McLeod, the General learned an ‘unpleasant lesson’ with this experience.⁶⁵² He argued that being a British officer, Freyberg had, unlike Blamey, taken time to realise what dominion status meant, and how that contrasted with the British view. He contacted his government to explain the events leading to this unsatisfactory position, but suggested that they ‘not make representations to

⁶⁴⁸ ANZ, WAI18/69, Freyberg to Jones, 27/9/40.

⁶⁴⁹ DRNZ, Vol.I, Doc.242, 184, Freyberg to Wilson, 29/9/40.

⁶⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁵¹ Ibid, Doc.243, 185-86. Galloway to Freyberg, 4/10/40; Doc.244, 186-87, Freyberg to Wilson, 10/10/40.

⁶⁵² McLeod, *Myth and Reality*, 174 &199.

the British Government at this stage (as) it would be better if I can settle the matter personally with the Commanders here'.⁶⁵³ Freyberg was probably still thinking, even at this late hour, reason and good past relationships would help resolve this issue and avoid the necessity of involvement by politicians. Though, unlike his communication of two weeks previous, this time he informed Wellington of the disputation.

The General also expressed his frustration by admonishing Puttick over the detachments made whilst he was in England.⁶⁵⁴ His deputy took great exception to this and gave a detailed account of the decisions he made, and pointedly stressed that the removal of some of those units occurred before he took over command, from Freyberg himself.⁶⁵⁵ In a hand-written reply, composed 'in haste', the GOC attempted to mollify him. In this letter was one of the most revealing of all the communications he made at this time, providing a valuable insight into the turmoil in Freyberg's mind. He in effect confided in his brigadier, mentioning a crucial aspect of his difficulties, which was that 'both Wavell and Wilson are old friends', and that because he wanted his units back, he was treated 'as if I was purely in the army for 5th column reasons'.⁶⁵⁶

This *cri de coeur* plainly illustrated the General's distress in being viewed in such a way by former companions. It seemed though at this anguished time these events did become the catalyst for a change in his perspective, vis-à-vis the beneficence of his old friends within MEC, with regard to the NZEF. The fact that he characterised his treatment as that of a '5th columnist' exposed the angst and indignity someone as collegiate as himself felt,

⁶⁵³ ANZ, WAI18/69, Freyberg to Jones, 13/10/40.

⁶⁵⁴ ANZ, PUTTICK4/1/1, Stewart to Puttick, 10/10/40.

⁶⁵⁵ Ibid, Puttick to Freyberg, 13/10/40.

⁶⁵⁶ Ibid, Freyberg to Puttick, 16/10/40.

exemplifying how erroneous his initial preconception was that his past friendships would garner influence.⁶⁵⁷

On 19 October the spat escalated into a further deterioration when the symptomatic *seigniorial* posture of Galloway provoked a response of such resolve that it attained iconic status within the historiography of New Zealand in the Second World War. The CoS wrote to Freyberg, mentioning his recent meeting with Wilson and the important role the detached units were playing in the Western Desert, but then added that it was ‘out of the question for the time being’ that they be withdrawn for divisional training.⁶⁵⁸ An incensed Freyberg contacted Galloway immediately, saying that he took great exception to his command being ‘treated as fifth columnists’, emphatically stating that

New Zealand Forces are not an integral part of the British Army—they are a distinct New Zealand force, proud of their own identity. They cannot be split up and used piecemeal, except with the consent of the New Zealand Government.⁶⁵⁹

He then concluded the confrontation by following the actions of Rowell by enclosing a copy of his Charter with BTE.⁶⁶⁰

In the immediate aftermath of this meeting, Freyberg started to show a bloody-minded side by questioning the movement of a company of New Zealand’s 19 Battalion with the WDF. This caused the inflexible Galloway to declare in a letter to O’Connor that there is no reason against their going, exclaiming that

⁶⁵⁷ Freyberg Papers No.6, Freyberg to Fraser, 8/1/40, in McLeod, *Myth and Reality*. 173.

⁶⁵⁸ *DRNZ*, Vol.I, Doc.247, 189-90, Galloway to Freyberg, 19/10/40.,

⁶⁵⁹ *Ibid*, Doc.248, 190-91, Freyberg to Galloway, 19/10/40.

⁶⁶⁰ Freyberg Papers No.33, Freyberg to Galloway, 19/10/40. [transcript of telephone conv.] in McLeod, *Myth and Reality*, 175.

I think that F is a complete menace, and possibly things may come to a head which will result in proper control of formations here *irrespective of whose Government they come from*⁶⁶¹ [emphasis added].

Thus, unlike the politicians in London, who generally appreciated the inevitable challenges of an imperial power dealing with the wishes of an important autonomous element of that empire, the interpretation of dominion status by the British commanders in the Middle East were ‘not always mindful of the constitutional niceties of using dominion troops’.⁶⁶² A significant gulf emerged between the expectations of New Zealand and Australia and the reality on the ground. Wood concluded that in essence the battle for dominion status was being fought again among members of a profession bred to obedience and respect for tradition, rather than sensitive to the importance, even in long-term military significance, of sound personal and political relationships.⁶⁶³

Yet, although Galloway’s actions clearly suggested an inability by senior British officers to adjust to the reality of dominion independence, O’Connor was one with a more subtle and enlightened view. Undoubtedly cognisant of his own positive experiences in dealing with the New Zealanders during the summer, he became aware of a dispute between Puttick’s 4 Brigade and the 4 Indian Division, which had nominal command over it. He provided perceptive advice to its commander, Major General Noel Beresford-Pierce, writing that the New Zealanders are a force

⁶⁶¹ Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, London [henceforth LHCMA], O’Connor, 4/2/7, Galloway to O’Connor, 20/10/40.

⁶⁶² Hensley, *Beyond*, 68.

⁶⁶³ Wood, *Political*, 176.

responsible only to their own Government and when they agree to serve under the command of an individual, they do so of their own free will.... You will, however, get the maximum by asking and the minimum by ordering.⁶⁶⁴

O'Connor was undoubtedly one commander sensitive to the importance of Wood's dictum of sound 'personal and political relationships'.

A new *modus operandi* with MEC and liaison with Australia

It is a reasonable contention that by October 1940 MEC was aware of NZEF discontent, and there appeared to have been a special effort by the British to reemphasise to their dominion partner their regard as valued allies. Eden, the Secretary of State for War, who had the keen insight into dominion relationships from his previous position as Dominions Secretary, was visiting Egypt and inspected both New Zealand brigades.⁶⁶⁵ In a letter to Churchill, Freyberg commented on how impressed Eden was by the New Zealanders, and that the feeling was mutual as the General mentioned the Secretary of State's 'great success with our men who like him immensely'.⁶⁶⁶ Thus, with a leading politician in attendance a distinct endeavour was made by MEC to cement this renewed concord, epitomised by Wavell dining with Freyberg on 26 October.⁶⁶⁷

This appeared to have been a period when a new *modus operandi* became established, whereby both sides appreciated the other's dilemmas, illustrated when Freyberg received assurances from Wavell about his intention to help enable the Division to become concentrated and fully equipped in early 1941. Undoubtedly the C-in-C appreciated the special demands on dominion divisional commanders, and that the Galloway approach was

⁶⁶⁴ LHCMA, O'Connor, 4/1/122, O'Connor to Beresford-Pierse, 20/10/40.

⁶⁶⁵ TNA, WO 201/534, 2NZEF Chronology, 16 & 22/10/40.

⁶⁶⁶ ANZ, WAI18/13V, Freyberg to Churchill, 28/10/40.

⁶⁶⁷ ANZ, WAI18/5/43, GOC's War Diary, 26/10/40.

manifestly unsustainable. He was already deep into planning for the coming offensive, fully appreciating that he needed these Antipodean troops, especially Puttick's 4 Brigade, though crucially Freyberg was not informed of these intimations.⁶⁶⁸ He further mentioned to the GOC that the borrowed units would be released back to the Division as soon as practicable, which resulted in a much happier Freyberg cabling Fraser on 28 October stating 'that the question of detachments from and the subsequent concentration of the NZEF has been settled with General Wavell'.⁶⁶⁹

It is a reasonable supposition that since arriving in Egypt the previous February, two aspects of Freyberg's attitude had changed. Firstly, despite the rapprochement with MEC in late October, he retained a degree of scepticism caused by the inherent cultural disdain by several senior officers (particularly displayed by Auchinleck in Chapter Eight), of him and the NZEF, who resented the autonomy he had as a dominion commander. Secondly his opinion of Blamey altered for the positive. Although undoubtedly distrustful of an Anzac alliance in the spring of 1940, this was amended by the autumn months, as he was conscious that 2AIF had similar disagreements with BTE, which Freyberg in fact mentioned in his angry telephone exchange with Galloway on 19 October.⁶⁷⁰

Blamey, whose resistance to the dispersal of any of his units was borne of his experiences of his role as CoS to General Monash in the First World War, had in fact told Freyberg that he had been a fool to have lent anything.⁶⁷¹ The General could perhaps now see the distinct advantages of an Anzac arrangement with the Australian leading it. It was no mere matter of sentiment as each knew that united, they would have more strength to protect their countries'

⁶⁶⁸ Christopher Pugsley, *A Bloody Road Home. World War Two and New Zealand's Heroic Second Division* (Auckland, 2014), 54.

⁶⁶⁹ DRNZ, Vol.I, Doc.249, 191, Freyberg to Fraser, 28/10/40.

⁶⁷⁰ McLeod, *Myth and Reality*, 175.

⁶⁷¹ Freyberg, *Bernard Freyberg*, 236.

national interests.⁶⁷² In the static months of late 1940 they had gone into the proposal together in some detail, as revealed in a 16 November letter from the Australian GOC to his CGS, General Vernon Sturdee. In it Blamey mentioned meeting Freyberg in Cairo and finding him ‘very desirous of linking the fortunes of the New Zealand Force with our own’.⁶⁷³ The two commanders had a further meeting on 30 November in Cairo, and five weeks later, Freyberg invited Blamey for dinner at the Turf Club, where he was introduced to the visiting Australian Defence Minister, Percy Spender, and Sturdee.⁶⁷⁴ It begs the question as to what could have been on their agenda, with a very realistic possibility that an Anzac arrangement would conceivably have been discussed.

Thus, it seemed that both Antipodean generals had a shared antipathy towards the diktats of MEC about the acquisition of units and were anxious to have some form of Anzac arrangement as a means of protection of their forces and domains. Additionally, Blamey certainly would have been aware that by January he would have three Australian divisions, ‘complete in units and men if not in equipment’, as the 6 and 7 Divisions would be joined by the newly incorporated 9 Division.⁶⁷⁵ This almost certainly would have been passed on to Freyberg. Therefore, whereas in the Allied armies in total, the Pacific dominions contribution was relatively small, in the Middle East, these three Australian formations plus the New Zealand Division would make their concentrated presence correspondingly disproportionate. Additionally, there was also the realistic prospect of their celebrated Anzac Corps once again coming into being, further cementing their mutual rapport, evidenced perhaps by Freyberg inviting Blamey and his wife to his flat in Cairo on 5 February.⁶⁷⁶

⁶⁷² Hetherington, *Blamey, Controversial Soldier*, 139.

⁶⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷⁴ ANZ, WAI8/13/O, Ausforce to Fernleaf, 28/11/40; ANZ, WAI8/5/43, GOC Diary, 3/1/41.

⁶⁷⁵ Long, *To Benghazi*, 123.

⁶⁷⁶ GOC Diary, 5/2/41.

Further disputations with MEC

On 20 November Freyberg cabled his government an audit of the state of training and equipment. Notably, for two of his three infantry brigades and field regiments, he described their training outlook as ‘fit for war’, but could not apply this term to the equipment situation, and appealed to Wellington to make representations to the War Office to provide more.⁶⁷⁷ This was the first time the General used this phrase in contact with his government, and it was to hold much resonance the following February when the Cabinet gave assent to the Greece expedition. This axiom was also repeated in a letter to Fraser on 6 December, where he stated that First and Third Echelons would soon be concentrated, and that when the Second Echelon Group joined them from Britain, ‘it will be a great day for all of us when I am able to report.....that the force is “fit for war”’.⁶⁷⁸

The 4 Infantry Brigade, based in Baggush, was, crucially, the only unit virtually fully equipped as well as suitably trained.⁶⁷⁹ The relevance of this became apparent the following month, after the initial success of the ‘5 Day Raid’ and the capture of Sidi Barani with 30,000 Italian prisoners, greatly assisted by NZEF signallers and transport.⁶⁸⁰ On 11 December, at the culmination of this offensive, a perspective is afforded of the sheer geographical and strategic extent of Wavell’s domain, when he made ‘perhaps the key decision of the whole East African campaign’.⁶⁸¹ He decided to transfer the two brigades of the 4 Indian Division to reinforce General Platt in the Sudan, seeing the imperative of victory there in order to fully secure his maritime supply routes.⁶⁸² The significance of this, is that he

⁶⁷⁷ ANZ, WAI18/69, Freyberg to Jones, 22/11/40.

⁶⁷⁸ ANZ, WAI18/23a, Freyberg to Fraser, 6/12/40.

⁶⁷⁹ WAI18/69, Freyberg to Jones, 22/11/40.

⁶⁸⁰ Ibid, Freyberg to Fraser, 13/12/40; ANZ, WAI18/23/f, Freyberg to Duigan, 30/12/40.

⁶⁸¹ Stewart, *First Victory*, 153; I.S.O. Playfair *et al*, *Vol.I: The Early Successes against Italy (to May 1941)* (London, 1954), 271.

⁶⁸² Ibid.

intended that the 4 New Zealand Brigade would take part in the follow up operation to replace the withdrawn brigades. This was a long-held idea of Wavell and his tight planning group, but he had been averse to have his plans discussed outside of this circle, thus unwilling to share it previously with Freyberg.⁶⁸³

However, the GOC, not only ignorant of the exact task proposed for his brigade, but also conscious that not all units were fully trained, with appropriated units not returned to the NZEF, was unwilling to break the understanding he had with MEC and go into battle without his complete division. He therefore refused the request which caused a second crisis between the two generals, much more serious than earlier disagreements, causing a severe fracture in their relationship.⁶⁸⁴ Freyberg's War Diary revealed that he subsequently met Wavell on 26 December and wrote a letter to him the next day.⁶⁸⁵ The contents of this communication are in the private family papers used by Paul Freyberg in the biography of his father, who in recollecting the meeting, described it as 'difficult and unpleasant', ending 'in a clash when things were said that cannot be too easily forgotten'.⁶⁸⁶ The following day Wavell sent a letter to Freyberg, along with an appended memorandum. In it he mentioned that he would like the contents of this note 'communicated to the senior officers of the New Zealand Division and especially those of Puttick's (4) Brigade'.⁶⁸⁷

In this extraordinary message the C-in-C explained why the New Zealand troops were not used in the recent offensive. He mentioned that he originally intended to do so, but their government

⁶⁸³ Pugsley, *Bloody Road*, 54.

⁶⁸⁴ McClymont, *To Greece*, 50; Ibid.

⁶⁸⁵ ANZ, WAI8/5/43, GOC Diary, 26 & 27/12/40.

⁶⁸⁶ Other Freyberg Papers in Freyberg, *Bernard Freyberg*, 236.

⁶⁸⁷ ANZ, PUTTICK4/1/1, Wavell to Freyberg 27/12/40.

quite naturally and quite rightly has always wished that the New Zealand Division should be employed in active operations only as a complete division under its own commander.⁶⁸⁸

He further added the reasons for the 6 Australian Division's presence in the operation and ended by thanking the Division for the assistance and contribution to victory by the signal and transport personnel.⁶⁸⁹ In his post-war Report for the *London Gazette*, Wavell also recounted in similar terms that he should have liked to have employed the New Zealand Brigade Group.⁶⁹⁰

It is undoubtedly conjectural as to Wavell's motive, but it is a realistic scenario that the feelings of the New Zealand troops had reached his ears, and was thus especially aware of the sentiments of 4 Brigade, and possibly played on this.⁶⁹¹ The troops were apparently 'hopping mad' at missing out on the advance against the Italians, and in post-war memoirs or diary entries, four future infantry brigadiers commented on their frustration at this.⁶⁹² Howard Kippenberger, then commander of 20 Battalion, wrote of the 'mortification felt almost as deep as despair', when they heard of the WDF 'sweeping forward from success to success, and we were not with them'.⁶⁹³ His second in command, Major James Burrows, added a twist of trans-Tasman rivalry when he referred to good New Zealand soldiers 'having to stand back while the Aussies took a swing at the enemy, and, as if that was not enough, we had to hold their coats while they did so'.⁶⁹⁴ The Division's Quartermaster General, William Gentry, remarked on how fed up they all were 'at not taking a slice out of

⁶⁸⁸ *DRNZ*, Vol.I, Doc.99, 81-82, Wavell to New Zealand Division, 27/12/40.

⁶⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹⁰ *Supplement to the London Gazette*, 26/6/46, 3264, General Archibald Wavell, Operations in the Western Desert, December 7 1940 to February 7 1941.

⁶⁹¹ Peter Singleton-Gates, *General Lord Freyberg VC, an Unofficial Biography* (London, 1963), 118.

⁶⁹² Pugsley, *Bloody Road*, 58.

⁶⁹³ Howard Kippenberger, *Infantry Brigadier* (London, 1949) 14.

⁶⁹⁴ J.T. Burrows, *Pathways Among Men* (Christchurch, 1974) 98.

the Italians’, and finally George Clifton, who as an engineer assisted the WDF in the battle area, but had to tread very tactfully when recounting these exploits to his countrymen.⁶⁹⁵

It seemed that Wavell wanted to make it clear where responsibility for the decision rested, and Freyberg must have felt isolated at this stage, describing it as a very unhappy period. It is inconceivable that he would not have been aware of the sentiments of his senior officers and the frustration and discontent of 4 Brigade, especially as its drivers and signallers were involved in the great victory. Here he was, this acclaimed fighting man with a VC, three DSO’s and beloved of Churchill, yet possibly the target for some opprobrium from his own troops, and additionally ‘treated as a “black sheep” by one’s old friends in the British Army’.⁶⁹⁶

During this period, on 18 December, he aired his frustration in a hand-written letter to Fraser, stating that

I am frequently at variance with Higher Military opinion. General Blamey will not lend a single Australian unit. His policy has made him non persona grata. While we lent everything, we were very popular. As soon as we asked for our units back, they looked upon me as a Fifth Columnist. While Egypt was threatened, we lent everything. We are only now getting our Division together.⁶⁹⁷

⁶⁹⁵ Sally Mathieson (ed), *Bill Gentry's War 1939-45* (Palmerston North, 1999) 67; George Clifton, *The Happy Hunted* (London, 1952) 29.

⁶⁹⁶ Freyberg, *Bernard Freyberg*, 237.

⁶⁹⁷ ANZ, WAII/23/f, Freyberg to Fraser, 18/12/40. [In this hand-written letter, Freyberg dated it as 18/12/41. This is clearly an error by the General, as within this file not only is there another one dated 18/12/41 to Fraser, but he stated in the former that ‘I have now been here a year’. He included the problem of lending units, which was an issue in December 1940, and additionally mentioned the Base Commandant, Brigadier Norris Falla. In the summer of 1941, he suffered a car accident and had returned to England by the December of that year. Murphy ascribed to the 1941 date of this letter in his Official History-*The Relief of Tobruk*, and a journal article on “Blamey’s and Freyberg’s ‘Charters’”.]

Freyberg was clearly dismayed, and the historical importance of this letter and a further one eleven days later to Duigan, are that they fully confirm his attitude of the time, which was identical in substance to those of his post-war writings.⁶⁹⁸ From the private Freyberg family papers, the GOC mentioned British generals greatly misunderstanding his character if they thought he would be bulldozed. Post-war in a 1953 House of Lords debate, he added that the New Zealand Government 'agreed entirely that the New Zealand Forces should be kept together'.⁶⁹⁹ Yet crucially in January 1941, Freyberg was impatiently waiting for his loaned units such as the signallers to return. He was about to begin divisional training with the 4 and 6 Brigades, and also informed that 5 Brigade would be departing Britain in early January.⁷⁰⁰

It must also be emphasised that during his command tenure, there were mostly good relations and mutual understanding between Wavell and the two Tasman dominions GOCs. In retrospect, when considering the extent of his responsibilities and the insufficient resources at hand, Wavell's conduct in the political side of his command had much to commend it. His successor though, with the advantage of both a reduced extent and resources far greater than his predecessor, failed miserably in this important dimension of supreme command.

At the turn of the new year, there was moreover, the probable realisation on both sides that such a situation was untenable, and relations started to improve with MEC, no doubt aided by the recognition on Wavell's part of the disproportionate weight of the Antipodean forces in the Middle East. On 14 January the CoS Arthur Smith wrote to Freyberg and stated that GHQ would return the borrowed personnel as soon as possible, and on the 25 January the

⁶⁹⁸ ANZ, WAI/23/f, Freyberg to Duigan, 30/12/40; [This it must be said was not always the case with him as on several occasions he tried to redact what he had said previously to official historians, J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and L.C.F. Turner, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles, 1941* (Cape Town, 1957), preface v]

⁶⁹⁹ Freyberg, *Bernard Freyberg*, 237; House of Lords, 15/4/53, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1953/apr/15/defence>, 770

⁷⁰⁰ TNA, WO 201/534, 2NZE Chronology.

GOC had a convivial meeting with Wavell over the New Zealanders in the now renamed LRDG.⁷⁰¹ Two days later, divisional manoeuvres commenced and a new accord seemed in existence as Smith actually attended the military exercises on 30 January.⁷⁰² From this improved atmosphere and the legacy of the events of late December, it is contended that there resulted arguably the most controversial decision Freyberg made in the whole war.

The Decision to Support the Greece Expedition

In order to fully appreciate Freyberg's decision, taken in mid-February 1941, in support of the expedition to Greece, an assessment of the complex milieu of interrelated issues that would have influenced his decision-making at this stage is essential. While it is correct to state that the General could not have been strong-armed into an operation he had severe doubts over, it is clear that Freyberg still found himself in a dilemma over his twin loyalties and subordinations to both the Government of New Zealand and to MEC. The situation was complicated by the recent acrimony that had appeared to weaken his long-standing friendships with generals in the British Army, although he would no doubt still have retained an appreciation of the pressure on resources that Wavell faced. Additionally, there was his severe frustration that events had interceded which caused his command to have been dislocated, with 5 Brigade in Britain and the 4 and 6 Brigades in Egypt. Furthermore, he must have been conscious of the resentment of his troops not being involved in the victory of Operation Compass, which Wavell played on in his 27 December letter to 4 Brigade, feelings confirmed in the memoirs of the four future infantry brigadiers.

⁷⁰¹ *DRNZ*, Vol.I, Doc.272, 205, Smith to Freyberg, 14/1/41; ANZ, WAII8/5/43, GOC's Diary, 25/1/41.

⁷⁰² TNA, WO 201/534, 2NZEFC Chronology.

It seems almost inconceivable that someone of Freyberg's reputation and demeanour would not have felt the same way as his subordinate commanders. In recent weeks divisional training involving the 4 and 6 brigades had successfully taken place and he was aware that the 5 Brigade had departed from Belfast on 12 January, due to arrive in Egypt in early March.⁷⁰³ He was thus on the cusp of achieving his ambition of having a full three-brigade division, trained and ready for active operations. Possibly also linked in his mind was the legacy of Anzac with its noble aura, and a desire for the 2NZEF to emulate the actions of its forebears. It is argued that a credible claim can be made that these aspects, plus the salient fact that twelve months since arriving in Egypt the New Zealand forces had not yet been in action, allied with his rapport with Blamey, influenced his ill-fated forthcoming decision.

On 17 February, Freyberg was informed by Wavell that the Division would move to Greece, being the advance guard of the imperial force, closely followed by 6 and later 7 Australian Divisions under the overall command of General Wilson.⁷⁰⁴ In recalling this event fifteen years later to Kippenberger, then Editor in Chief of the New Zealand War Histories, Freyberg said he asked Wavell if the New Zealand Government agreed to this, to which the latter replied they did, informing the GOC not to tell anyone of this proposed move.⁷⁰⁵ The next morning General Blamey was also told of the plan by Wavell, and that afternoon both dominion GOCs met, and according to Paul Freyberg, they 'expressed disquiet'.⁷⁰⁶

It must have been perfectly clear to both commanders that the fighting troops, at least initially, would be dominated by men of their two nations.⁷⁰⁷ This was commented on by Churchill in a cable to Eden on 7 March, in which he wrote that 'most of the troops to be

⁷⁰³ TNA, WO 201/534, 2NZEF Chronology.

⁷⁰⁴ ANZ, WAI18/1/8, Greece-Report by GOC to New Zealand Government, 1.

⁷⁰⁵ Freyberg to Kippenberger, 10/9/56, in Wood, *Political*, 179.

⁷⁰⁶ Horner, *High Command*, 473, footnote.4; Freyberg, *Bernard Freyberg*, 239.

⁷⁰⁷ Iain Johnston-White, *The British Commonwealth and Victory in the Second World War* (London, 2017) 206; Ian Wards, "The Balkan Dilemma", in *Kia Kaha*, (ed) Crawford, 20.

devoted to this solemn duty are the New Zealand Division and after March the Australians’, confessing his regrets that not one United Kingdom division could be used in the operation.⁷⁰⁸

The sparse documentary record of both GOCs at this time provides a credible premise that they advocated Wavell’s expedition, and notably a subsequent opaqueness descended on any written reference by them. A plausible explanation perhaps is that both saw an opportunity in this disproportionality of dominion vis-a-vis British forces to attain military glory for their nations by the rejuvenation of Anzac with all its valorous connotations. Hensley viewed that neither ‘Freyberg nor his Australian colleague, Blamey, felt they should go out of their way to dissuade their governments from taking part’.⁷⁰⁹

The documentary impenetrability alluded to is revealed in Freyberg’s GOC’s Diary. For example it does not record the critical meetings he had with Wavell and Blamey on the 18 and 19 February, nor one a week later with General John Dill, the CIGS, on 24 February.⁷¹⁰ Yet other events of almost trivial import are detailed, such as Blamey and his wife coming to dinner on 6 February, Lady Russell two days later, and a visit by Menzies to the Helwan Hospital on 13 February.⁷¹¹ Additionally, whilst considering his next step during the six days after being informed by Wavell, there is no documentary verification by Freyberg concerning the Greece expedition. Nor is there any evidence of any qualms he had about the directive for the New Zealand Division to be sent to the Aegean.⁷¹² The key point, perhaps, is that although he had to walk the fine line between being a loyal subordinate to his superior

⁷⁰⁸ Churchill to Eden, 7/3/41, in W.S. Churchill, *The Second World War. Vol.III, The Grand Alliance* (London, 1950) 92; J.R.M. Butler, *History of the Second World War, Grand Strategy, Vol.II, September 1939-June 1941* (London, 1957), 447.

⁷⁰⁹ Hensley, *Beyond*, 113.

⁷¹⁰ LHCMA, Dill, 3/2/7, Diary of CIGS Tour, 24/2/41; TNA, WO 201/534, 2NZEF Chronology.

⁷¹¹ ANZ, WAI8/5/43, GOC’s Diary.

⁷¹² Harold Raugh, *Wavell in the Middle East 1939-1941. A Study in Generalship* (London, 1993), 144.

commanders and also meet his responsibilities as an agent of the Government of New Zealand,⁷¹³ unlike the latter months of 1940 when he played the ‘national card’, now in February 1941 he chose not to.

On 23 February, in arguably his most infamous cable of the war, Freyberg contacted Wellington, but made no reference to the proposed expedition to Greece. He declared that ‘the Division is now fit for war as a two-brigade division’, and that in the near future 5 Brigade will join them, which meant ‘the Division could take the field complete’.⁷¹⁴ He ended this message in an almost acclamatory tone, stating that

should the British Government request the release of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force for a full operational role, the New Zealand Government can now do so with confidence.⁷¹⁵

Within hours Wellington received two additional cables from London. The first was an account of the strategic situation concerning Greece and the intention of Britain to send an expeditionary force, followed by a formal request for the immediate despatch of the Division, as it ‘forms an essential part of the plan for the reinforcement of Greece’.⁷¹⁶ In an immediate reply Fraser concurred ‘with the course proposed’, being especially enthused as the ‘Australian and New Zealand forces should be chosen to stand together in a common theatre of war’.⁷¹⁷ As Wood wrote, ‘Freyberg’s cable was naturally taken as an indication that he knew of the impending operation and that it had his general approval’.⁷¹⁸

⁷¹³ Christopher Pugsley, “New Zealand; ‘From the uttermost ends of the Earth’”, in *The Great World War 1914-1945, Vol 2, The Peoples’ Experience*, eds. Peter Liddle, John Bourne, Ian Whitehead (London, 2001), 218.

⁷¹⁴ ANZ, WAI18/69, Freyberg to Jones, 23/2/41.

⁷¹⁵ Ibid.

⁷¹⁶ DRNZ Vol.I, Doc.335-336, 239-241, Cranborne to Fraser, 25/2/41.

⁷¹⁷ Ibid, Doc.337, 242, Fraser to Cranborne, 26/2/41.

⁷¹⁸ Wood, *Political*, 182.

A further crucial point is that over the previous eight months Freyberg was never reticent in communicating any concerns or issues to Wellington. For example, the need for 4 Brigade to suppress any potential Italian fifth column activities in Cairo the previous June was cabled home, as was his request to fly to Britain to meet the Second Echelon in the same month, notwithstanding all the problems he had about concentrating and equipping the New Zealand Division in Egypt the previous autumn. It is also of significant relevance that the reverse of this also applied, as the Government in Wellington had never been slow to ask him for his opinion and advice concerning the NZEF. This had been the case with the proposed Anzac Corps in March 1940, the request to garrison Crete in November 1940, or Fraser soliciting Freyberg's views that same month regarding an appeal, for skilled men to work in the British munitions industry, and thus be detached from 5 Brigade.⁷¹⁹

Therefore, Freyberg's 1956 explanation that 'he had known little or nothing about the Greek campaign' defied his past actions.⁷²⁰ It certainly appears incongruous that the six days of telegraphic silence between being told by Wavell about the Greek campaign on 17 February, and the cable to his government that the Division was 'fit for war' on 23 February, was not a deliberate deception by Freyberg. Continuing the defence of his actions in his letter to Kippenberger, he stated that

the decision to go to Greece was taken on a level we could not touch...I was never in a position to make a well informed and responsible judgement... Wavell told me our Government agreed.⁷²¹

The implication that Wellington, despite never before withholding any communications of significance, had failed to indicate such a judgement to their nation's GOC appears at the least far-fetched.

⁷¹⁹ DRNZ Vol.I, Doc.332-34, 237-38, Fraser to Freyberg, 14, 15 and 18/11/40.

⁷²⁰ Freyberg to Kippenberger, 10/9/56, in Wood, *Political*, 182.

⁷²¹ Ibid, in McClymont, *To Greece*, 99.

Greece and a Temporary Anzac

By the 31 March the movement of the New Zealand Division across the Mediterranean to Greece was completed, and it moved north to concentrate in the Katerini area.⁷²² On the 5 April, the eve of the German attack, the Division came under GOC Aus Corps and Freyberg notified Fraser that 'we are now linked with 6 Australian Division; thus, the Anzac Corps is again in being'.⁷²³ One-week later, Blamey announced that the '1 Australian Corps will be designated Anzac Corps...., the reunion of the Australian and New Zealand Divisions gives all ranks the greatest uplift', and welcomed by Freyberg the next day.⁷²⁴

It thus seems clear that Freyberg was very satisfied in achieving his aim of this alliance, one that he pondered in his regular meetings with Blamey in Egypt throughout the winter of 1940/41. Interestingly however, ten days later, during the critical period of the evacuation of Allied troops from the Greek beaches, Arthur Fadden, the Acting Prime Minister in Canberra, in explaining to Wellington this status change to the Anzac Corps, specified that it ensued 'at the request of the New Zealand Division and with Blamey's full agreement'.⁷²⁵

In his message to Fraser of 6 April, Freyberg concluded that 'General Blamey's experience and the Australians' fighting qualities will prove great assets'.⁷²⁶ However, as events unfolded, though not doubting the latter point, the GOC was to have severe second thoughts over the competence of his corps commander. Within days of the German offensive, the Allied position became untenable, due to the risk of being outflanked and they withdrew to

⁷²² TNA, WO 201/534, 2NZEFC Chronology.

⁷²³ ANZ, WAI8/5/43, GOC Diary, 5/4/41; ANZ, WAI8/69, Freyberg to Fraser, 6/4/41.

⁷²⁴ DRNZ Vol.II, Doc.9, 7, HQ 1st Aus Corps to New Zealand Division, 12/4/41; Ibid, Doc.10, 8, Freyberg to Anzac Corps HQ, 13/4/41.

⁷²⁵ ANZ, EA1/624, Fadden to Fraser, 22/4/41.

⁷²⁶ WAI8/69, Freyberg to Fraser, 6/4/41.

the Aliakmon River-Mount Olympus line.⁷²⁷ After the Greek divisions on their left flank collapsed, which created a critical situation for the Anzac forces, they again retreated this time to the defensible position at Thermopylae.

Accounts of Blamey's conduct during these events are mixed, as on 18 April according to Rowell, the Brigadier General Staff (BGS) of the Anzac Corps, he was indolent in obtaining vital information from one of his divisional commanders, and four days later seemed to have had a partial breakdown, losing the ability to give clear orders.⁷²⁸ Nevertheless, excellent staff work from Anzac Corps succeeded in bringing large numbers of the retreating Allied troops to the beaches in sound shape and cohesion, but what followed was perhaps his most controversial decision of the campaign.⁷²⁹

On 24 April, Wavell ordered Blamey, Mackay (GOC Australian 6 Division) and Freyberg to leave Greece by flying boat.⁷³⁰ Both Australians complied, but this crucially caused the Anzac Corps headquarters to be closed down at the same time, to the profound consternation of Rowell.⁷³¹ Freyberg was at the Thermopylae Pass with his 6 Brigade, who were in contact with the enemy, received the same order and he subsequently tried in vain to get in touch with the Corps HQ to ascertain the situation.⁷³² In desperation he journeyed to Athens the following day and saw Wilson who reiterated the orders for him to leave Greece. Freyberg refused, an action that was to cause an ensuing 'invidious comparison with Blamey'.⁷³³

⁷²⁷ McClymont, *To Greece*, 171-73.

⁷²⁸ Rowell, *Full Circle*, 76

⁷²⁹ Horner, *High Command*, 89-90.

⁷³⁰ Gavin Long, *Australia in the War of 1939-1945: Greece, Crete and Syria* (Canberra, 1953), 151-52.

⁷³¹ McClymont, *To Greece*, 401; TNA, CAB 106/706, Freyberg, British Narrative; ANZ, WAI18/21/9, Greece-War Diary-ANZAC Corps; Long, 151.

⁷³² ANZ, WAI18/1/8, Greece-Report by GOC to NZ Government, 27.

⁷³³ Horner, *High Command*, 91.

On returning to the Division, he greeted his GSO1 Colonel Keith Stewart, with the words that 'Blamey's hooked it'.⁷³⁴ Stewart later wrote that if Anzac Corps HQ had stayed in place, then less confusion would have arisen and more troops would have been evacuated. He further mentioned the low opinion Freyberg had of Blamey about this desertion 'throughout 1941 at least'.⁷³⁵ As a result Freyberg became the commander of all the remaining troops in Greece, and performed highly creditably, notably in creating some sense of order during the Allied retreat to the waiting ships. In the official report of the campaign, Wilson commented that 'the battle discipline of the New Zealand Division was particularly high', for which their commander must take a great deal of recognition, with Freyberg characteristically being amongst the last to be evacuated on 29 April, from the beach at Monemvasia.⁷³⁶

Anzac part 2, 1941

As soon as he returned to Egypt on 23 April, Blamey was promoted to Deputy C-in-C by Wavell, which no doubt was due to the incontrovertible recognition that there were now three AIF divisions within the MEC, a significant proportion, which could not be moved without the full cooperation of the Australian GOC.⁷³⁷ In early May, Blamey was determined to gather his dispersed formations together as soon as possible, as returning to Egypt he found that they were 'scattered to the four winds'.⁷³⁸ His design in all this was not only to collect the Australian forces together, but also to establish in effect an Anzac Army, with himself as commander.⁷³⁹ He planned that his 6 Division would join with the New Zealand Division to form once again the 'Anzac Corps', as the campaign in Greece had awakened a

⁷³⁴ Pugsley, *Bloody Road*, 104.

⁷³⁵ ANZ, WAI11/Box 1, Stewart to Murphy, 19/9/55.

⁷³⁶ D. Horner, *Blamey. The Commander in Chief* (St Leonards, 1998), 206; McClymont, *Greece*, 446.

⁷³⁷ Playfair *et al*, *Volume II: The Germans Come to the Help of their Ally (1941)* (London, 1956), 214.

⁷³⁸ Blamey to Spender, 27/6/41, in Horner, *High Command*, 104.

⁷³⁹ John Hetherington, *Blamey. The Biography of Field Marshall Sir Thomas Blamey* (Melbourne, 1954), 96.

desire for closer association between the two nation's forces.⁷⁴⁰ Blamey discussed this concentration with Wavell on his immediate return to Egypt, and on 30 April, shortly after the latter instructed the newly evacuated Freyberg that he would take command of Crete, the C-in-C also discussed this renewed Anzac proposal with him. He mentioned that Blamey 'had expressed the desire to keep the Anzac Corps in being' for a possible campaign in Palestine, which Freyberg passed on to Wellington for an affirming decision.⁷⁴¹

A week later on 7 May, both dominion capitals were informed that Wavell would welcome the suggestion which had been made that 6th Australian and New Zealand Division...should again be formed into an Anzac Corps.⁷⁴²

Furthermore, it deemed that 'General Freyberg should be selected to command it'.⁷⁴³

Blamey in a separate initiative, proposed that 7 and 9 Divisions would form an Australian Corps commanded by Lieutenant General John Lavarack, and thus create a two corps Anzac Army.

Whilst Freyberg was preparing for the German assault upon Crete, his government conveyed Wavell's recommendation to him at his battle headquarters. They mentioned how warmly welcomed the proposals were, but crucially added that 'we are presently awaiting views of Commonwealth Government'.⁷⁴⁴ On the same day Nash (as acting Prime Minister in Wellington) cabled Fadden in Canberra and expressed the New Zealand government's support for the idea.⁷⁴⁵ Freyberg in his reply to Nash on 11 May expressed his gratitude for the honour, yet betrayed his enthusiasm for the proposal, just nine days before the imminent

⁷⁴⁰ Long, *Greece, Crete and Syria*, 539

⁷⁴¹ DRNZ, Vol.II, Doc.11, 8, Freyberg to Jones, 1/5/40.

⁷⁴² ANZ, AD11/9, Cranborne to Fraser, 7/5/41.

⁷⁴³ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁴ ANZ, WAI8/4/34, Nash to Freyberg, 9/5/41.

⁷⁴⁵ Ibid, Freyberg to Nash, 11/5/41.

German assault, when he mentioned that he was prepared to fly from Crete to Egypt and back in a day to talk to Fraser who had just arrived in Cairo.⁷⁴⁶ However, on 20 May, arguably the last thing on Freyberg's mind was Anzac, as the German parachute groups descended on the island.

After the Crete campaign was over and the initial post-mortem into Freyberg's conduct (below) in the campaign concluded, Fraser returned to the subject of the purported Anzac Corps, in discussions with Wavell, Blamey and his GOC, who all favoured the arrangement.⁷⁴⁷ In the meantime, on 7 June, the Australian GOC outlined his thoughts on the two corps suggestion to Menzies, stating that

I feel that if we could get two corps established, Australian Corps and an Anzac Corps and pull them together, it would help to establish the principle of working in fixed formations. That is my main reason for supporting the recommendations to that effect, which emanate mainly from NZ forces.⁷⁴⁸

Thus, for the second time within less than two months, Blamey had informed his nation's political leader (Fadden, as Acting Prime Minister in mid-April, and now Menzies), that the main driving force behind the Anzac arrangement was the New Zealand forces, i.e. Freyberg, and not himself. Such a claim by the Australian can be questioned, notably when considering his aggrandising conduct throughout the war. In fact, such a view was certainly confirmed on 27 June, when in a letter to Spender, Blamey mentioned his added irritation that as just a Lieutenant General, he was out-ranked by Wilson, now a full General, and did not out-rank

⁷⁴⁶ WAII8/4/34, Freyberg to Nash, 11/5/41.

⁷⁴⁷ DRNZ Vol.II, Doc.18, 11-12, Fraser to Nash, 9/6/41.

⁷⁴⁸ Hetherington, *Blamey, Controversial Soldier*, 166.

Smith the CoS. This less than subtle hint at a promotion, according to Horner, was a clear indication that Blamey's mind was working towards the view that 'he should be given an army command'.⁷⁴⁹

Both Blamey and Freyberg were undoubtedly interested in the Anzac idea in 1941, probably for similar reasons in that the valiant glory of the name with all its First World War connotations was perhaps a potential opportunity not to be missed. That this ambition clouded Freyberg's judgement was illustrated by his suggestion for a possible return trip from Crete to Cairo to discuss the idea with Fraser on 11 May, whilst awaiting the German attack.⁷⁵⁰ However, with potential manpower issues in Australia overshadowing the matter, nothing emanated on Anzac from Canberra, and the subject drifted into dormancy over the coming weeks. It is argued above though, that its historical legacy had a significant role in the decision making of both dominion GOCs, and such a contention does not seem to have been considered in the sizeable historiography of the Greece campaign.

A New Beginning

Following the forlorn battle of Crete and the subsequent evacuation, Fraser was on hand at Alexandria to meet Freyberg and the rescued men at the end of May and early June. He heard the initial reports on the intensity of the fighting and the opinions of his fellow countrymen 'of what they thought of the way the campaign was laid on'.⁷⁵¹ He was very concerned that twice the Division had come close to being lost, and became especially vexed at the allegations of inadequacies in Freyberg's leadership in Greece and Crete by two of his

⁷⁴⁹ Blamey to Sturdee, 27/6/41, in Horner, *High Command*, 113 & 480.

⁷⁵⁰ ANZ, WAI18/4/34, Freyberg to Nash, 11/5/41.

⁷⁵¹ TNA, WO 201/534, 2NZEFC Chronology; *DRNZ*, Vol.I, Doc 440, 313-15, Fraser to Nash, 2/6/41; Freyberg's Unpublished Narratives in Freyberg, *Bernard Freyberg*, 325.

brigadiers and other officers, who especially happened to have Fraser's ear as they were Members of Parliament.⁷⁵²

A few days later, Freyberg attended a debriefing meeting at the British Embassy with Fraser and Berendsen, at which the former, as revealed in a cable to Nash, expressed his surprise to learn now from Freyberg that he never considered the operation a feasible one, [though his telegrams, notably that of 23 February], conveyed a contrary impression.⁷⁵³

Fifteen years later, McIntosh described Fraser as having been 'staggered' when he heard at this time that the General had a dissenting view of the venture.⁷⁵⁴ Freyberg mentioned his difficulties as a subordinate commander criticising superior officers, to which Fraser reiterated that, no matter who his commander was, the New Zealand Government must always be kept in the picture.⁷⁵⁵

The following day, via Berendsen, these renewed responsibilities were entered as a policy addendum into the GOC Diary. It unequivocally stressed to Freyberg that he had a brief from his government to tackle Wavell, and the perfect right of free access to any question where the safety of the Division was concerned.⁷⁵⁶ It went further with a future decree on the employment of the Division being endorsed, which in effect acted as a codicil to his Charter, emphasising that 'the GOC NZEF has the right at any time to refer any matter affecting the safety of the NZEF to the NZ Govt or War Cabinet'.⁷⁵⁷ Finally, so as to counter in Freyberg's mind any notion that Wellington would go above his head with a superior

⁷⁵² McLeod, *Myth and Reality*, 176; Hensley, *Beyond*, 124

⁷⁵³ Freyberg, 326; TNA, WO 106/3128, Fraser to Nash, 7/6/41.

⁷⁵⁴ ATL, 2000-94-3, McIntosh to Kippenberger, 16/8/55.

⁷⁵⁵ WO 106/3128, Fraser to Nash, 7/6/41; Freyberg, *Bernard Freyberg*, 326.

⁷⁵⁶ ANZ, WAI8/5/43, GOC Diary, 31/5/41.

⁷⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

commander, it added that ‘the NZ War Cabinet will refer any proposal for the employment of the 2 NZEF to the GOC for his advice’.⁷⁵⁸ Of additional significance perhaps, this addendum also included a paragraph on the Anzac Corps, which ‘as far as you are concerned has already been dealt with by you..[and] at this stage there appears to be nothing more for you to do’.⁷⁵⁹

In the immediate aftermath, Freyberg, as mentioned above, was discomfited and anxious that he might be supplanted over the allegations of inadequacies in his leadership in Greece and Crete, being not oblivious to this, having friends in the War Office.⁷⁶⁰ The General felt hurt by this action, but nevertheless kept his council.⁷⁶¹ His conduct in the Greece and Crete campaigns was later upheld at a court of enquiry and Fraser was minded to retain him as GOC. In order to put his mind fully at ease though, he did seek advice from Dill, the CIGS, two months later when he was in London.⁷⁶² What does seem clear at this stage, however, is that for Fraser, having spoken to Freyberg and laid out unmistakably his expectations, any concerns he had as to his GOC’s competence revolved around his military oversight, and not that of his past inadequacy in contacting Wellington.

The Prime Minister in all likelihood was perceptive enough to know he had been deceived over the Greece decision, and acted to ensure this could not happen again. Though Freyberg, could see potential difficulties ahead with respect to pleasing Wellington within the context of operational secrecy, he fully accepted that ‘what a Prime Minister says goes and he is

⁷⁵⁸ ANZ, WAI18/5/43, GOC Diary, 31/5/41.

⁷⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁶⁰ Hensley, *Beyond*, 124; McLeod, *Myth and Reality*, 178.

⁷⁶¹ ATL, 84-006-2/3, Stevens, “Recall Without Repining”, 181.

⁷⁶² McClymont, *To Greece*, 490; Freyberg, *Bernard Freyberg*, 322-24.

perfectly right to lay down any conditions he likes for his national affairs'.⁷⁶³ This unambiguous directive that the GOC's political master took precedence over his British military superior, foreshadowed Freyberg's greatest examination with respect to his unique status of enduring dual overseers. This was to come the following winter throughout the post-Crusader period with General Claude Auchinleck, who succeeded Wavell as C-in-C just three weeks after the Crete campaign (Chapter Eight).

Therefore, this whole unhappy episode became the catalyst for an improved relationship between New Zealand's two principle wartime leaders, which ultimately exemplified their fundamental qualities. The two leading historians who have written about the military and political interrelationship of this time, Wood and Hensley, both agree that the post-Crete Cairo meeting between the two men was a crucial event in terms of the standing of New Zealand. The former wrote of 'the stiffening given by the whole episode to the concept of dominion status in wartime, and the clarification of the character of military cooperation'.⁷⁶⁴ The latter stated that 'out of the disaster came the unambiguous dominion status for New Zealand's forces which its government had long enjoyed'.⁷⁶⁵ Fraser listened to the siren voices, took stock and made his decision to retain Freyberg as GOC, although he sought a final endorsement from the CIGS. Freyberg accepted his admonishment, and although to post-war historians he obfuscated as to his responsibility over the Greece decision, he perhaps personally acknowledged his failings and ensured such an episode would not be repeated.

⁷⁶³ Freyberg, House of Lords, 15/4/53, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1953/apr/15/defence>, 771.

⁷⁶⁴ Wood, *External*, 188.

⁷⁶⁵ Hensley, *Beyond*, 130.

His loyalty to his adopted nation and to the spirit as to the wording of his Charter, allied with Fraser's steadfastness, engendered the huge mutual respect that they retained for each other until the latter's death. It meant that theirs became arguably the most successful Allied politico-military relationship of the war.⁷⁶⁶ The Prime Minister moved on to Britain for the next two months, where he was to confront British military leaders over their failings with respect to the Dominion, and the General went back and did what all his contemporaries said he did best, train and prepare the Division for the next battle.

⁷⁶⁶ McClymont, *To Greece*, 490.

Chapter Seven

The international Prime Minister-Fraser in 1941 dealing with Cairo and Whitehall

By mid-1940, Fraser had managed to reconcile his own party's and the Opposition's policies on conscription and achieve a workable compromise over a coalition government. His domestic position was secure, but ongoing economic issues were causing concerns at home, namely unease over New Zealand's food exports and he wanted these addressed. So, on 22 February 1941 the Dominions Office received a telegram from Batterbee stating that Fraser wished to visit Britain and hinted that the Prime Minister would appreciate a swift invitation to do so. This was enacted on 7 March with a suggestion that June would be a convenient time to arrive in London.⁷⁶⁷

It was to be profoundly fortuitous for his nation that he made his journey at this time, as by chance he arrived in Egypt between the two Aegean campaigns, after Greece and just before Crete. During the latter forlorn battle, he witnessed first-hand the decision-making at MEC, read the numerous telegrams from Freyberg to Wavell, and spoke to many of the evacuated New Zealanders. Realising how truly perilous the position his countrymen faced and gaining new insight, Fraser changed his outlook on the war. Thereafter, whenever New Zealand troops were involved, he became increasingly unwilling to defer solely to British authority. Although supportive of Churchill and his determination to win the war, and fully understanding the inevitable necessity for sacrifice, he was not prepared for the NZEF to be placed in such disadvantageous situations again. This chapter is about the journey, both geographical and personal, that Fraser undertook in 1941, and the enhanced leadership authority he gained as a consequence.

⁷⁶⁷ ANZ, WAI/23/e, Cranborne to Batterbee, 6/3/41 and Batterbee to Fraser, 7/3/41.

The Greece decision and Fraser's moral voice

The day after Batterbee's cable to London, Fraser received the infamous message from Freyberg (see Chapter Six) in which he stated that 'the Division is now fit for war as a two-brigade division'. The General further highlighted that 'should the British Government request the release of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force for a full operational role, the New Zealand Government can now do so with confidence'.⁷⁶⁸ Within hours, via the High Commissioner, Wellington received a formal request for the immediate despatch of the Division, as it 'forms an essential part of the plan for the reinforcement of Greece'.⁷⁶⁹ As mentioned, Fraser naturally took this as an indication that Freyberg knew of the impending operation and that it had his general approval'.⁷⁷⁰ Replying, Batterbee told London that the Prime Minister 'immediately summoned ministers and assures me that New Zealand Government will concur'.⁷⁷¹ The confirmatory telegram followed, acquiescing to the request on the understanding that the Division would be fully equipped, adding that it was a matter of 'great satisfaction that the 2NZEF should now be ready to play the full operational role for which it was formed'.⁷⁷²

These sentiments perhaps betrayed an anxiety and a desire on the part of Fraser for his country to now make a serious military contribution to this theatre of war. However, accompanying the formal request from Britain was a second cable, deciphered only after the affirmative response had been dispatched to London and giving a moderately detailed résumé of the operation, the units involved and the strategic outline.⁷⁷³ In response, a slightly perturbed Fraser explained that his cabinet had not seen this when it assented, but were still

⁷⁶⁸ ANZ, WAII8/69, Freyberg to Jones, 23/2/41.

⁷⁶⁹ TNA, DO 35/1009/8, Cranborne to Fraser, 25/2/41.

⁷⁷⁰ Wood, *Political*, 182.

⁷⁷¹ TNA, PREM 3/63/11, Batterbee to DO, 26/2/41.

⁷⁷² Ibid, Fraser to DO, 26/2/41, No.76.

⁷⁷³ Ibid, DO to Fraser, 25/2/41, No.99.

willing, however, to make the Division available despite the view that the task confronting the expedition was now a 'most formidable and hazardous one'. He ended with a request for an assurance that the force would in fact be adequate to meet the probable scale of attack.⁷⁷⁴

Following an appraisal by the Chiefs of Staff, this undertaking was given and on 2 March, in a guarded yet optimistic assessment, which included the possibilities of the involvement of Turkey and Yugoslavia joining on the Allied side, the British Government 'recommended the enterprise'.⁷⁷⁵ Yet over the next few days the strategic situation worsened, as the Germans had by now advanced through Bulgaria, and Turkey and Yugoslavia would not become co-combatants on the Allied side. The cables of the time revealed a continuous and convoluted series of discussions between Churchill in London and Eden and Dill shuttling between Athens and Cairo. The decision on the viability and political necessity of the Greece expedition and analysis of the communications between the British leaders is beyond the scope of this thesis, but a draft telegram was composed in the Dominions Office to be sent to Wellington detailing the worsening outlook.⁷⁷⁶ It does not seem to have been dispatched, as it was replaced on 7 March by a brief one from Churchill to Fraser, whereby the British leader asked for renewed 'assent to the employment of the New Zealand Division' appending a series of seven telegrams, 'which showed how the matter has been thrashed out' by the War Cabinet.⁷⁷⁷

Of these cables detailing the position sent to Wellington, the most pertinent was that of 5 March from Eden and Dill to Churchill, which described a defeatist General Alexander

⁷⁷⁴ TNA, PREM 3/63/11, Fraser to DO, 26/2/41, No.78.

⁷⁷⁵ TNA, DO 35/1009/8, DO to Fraser, 2/3/41.

⁷⁷⁶ Ibid, DO to Fraser, undated.

⁷⁷⁷ Ibid, Churchill to Fraser, 7/3/41.

Papagos, C-in-C Greek forces, needing buttressing by King George II of Greece.⁷⁷⁸ In this telegram they outlined three alternatives, two of which included either a half-hearted, piecemeal dribble of forces to the Macedonian frontier, or a withdrawal of British support altogether. It concluded though, with a fully committed third alternative of an advance by Greek and British forces to the Aliakmon line, with the New Zealand Division in the van.⁷⁷⁹ In fact before Churchill actually cabled Fraser, the Dominion's forces had already commenced the voyage from Egypt across the Mediterranean.⁷⁸⁰

The whole Greece episode was a controversial one, but Fraser was the one leader to emerge from this imbroglio with credit. He stated in his reply on 9 March that despite the increasingly inauspicious outlook, the War Cabinet could not

contemplate the possibility of abandoning the Greeks to their fate [and that] with a full knowledge of the hazards to be run,....agreed with the course now proposed.⁷⁸¹

He added, though, that

in the light of the hazards involved,...they urge the most careful attention to a strong escort for transports and second to a full and immediate consideration of the means of withdrawal both on land and sea should this course unfortunately prove to be necessary.⁷⁸²

Churchill, on 12 March, replied with his characteristic rhetorical flourish, stating that 'we are deeply moved by your reply, which whatever the fortunes of war may be....will shine in the

⁷⁷⁸ *DRNZ* Vol.I, Docs.346-52, 247-56; TNA, DO 35/1009/8, Eden and Dill to Churchill, 5/3/41, No.313.

⁷⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, footnote.246.

⁷⁸¹ DO 35/1009/8, Fraser to Churchill, 9/3/41.

⁷⁸² *Ibid.*

history of New Zealand’, concluding by assuring Fraser of his ‘faithful and unremitting endeavour’ with respect to arranging any necessary evacuation.⁷⁸³

Therefore, with regard to the decision to proceed with the Greece expedition on 9 March, it is of distinct importance to appreciate that political and moral aspects were central to Fraser’s judgement. Although Berendsen, in a briefing paper for the Prime Minister outlining the pros and cons of the expedition, concluded that the campaign could only end in another Dunkirk, Fraser, fully aware of the risks crossed this part of the paper out.⁷⁸⁴ Wood in his official history, implied that Fraser’s decision would not have been necessary at all if Freyberg had informed Wellington of his doubts on 23 February.⁷⁸⁵ It is clear, however, that two weeks later and with knowledge of the British cables, Fraser, fully cognisant of the perilous nature of the expedition still made what he viewed as the moral choice. A postscript to this event was added twelve years later in the House of Representatives, when Rex Mason, the Attorney General at the time, recounted the mood of the Cabinet in making that fateful judgement. He stated that it was ‘the gravest decision that ever I had to take part in..... [as] at that time we dared not do anything that might appear to be a failure morally or lacking in courage’.⁷⁸⁶

This sentiment was again apparent three months later, when Fraser and Berendsen prepared twenty-five questions of the whole Aegean campaign, and incorporated within the first page was a note stating that he was asking the questions ‘not by way of criticism’, as he believed that the ‘operation was necessary for non-military, political and *moral* reasons’ [emphasis added].⁷⁸⁷ Finally, so as to further underline this stance, Fraser in a confidential speech to the Parliamentary Empire Association in early July, stated

⁷⁸³ TNA, DO 35/1009/8, Churchill to Fraser, 12/3/41.

⁷⁸⁴ ATL, 2000-094-5, Henderson interviews Berendsen, January 1970.

⁷⁸⁵ Wood, *Political*, 186.

⁷⁸⁶ NZPD, 22/4/53, Vol.299, 213 & 215.

⁷⁸⁷ ANZ, EA1/624, Notes on points raised in Mr Fraser’s questionnaire

that it would have been an impossible and disgraceful thing for the British Commonwealth to cheer the Greeks on from the side-line when they were facing the Italians in Albania, and then run away from them when Hitler came in.⁷⁸⁸

It is therefore contended that an important and overriding aspect of the decision taken by Fraser, was for the moral reasons he espoused, and that these overtones entrenched still further the respect Churchill had for his New Zealand counterpart.

Defeat in Greece and an enhanced opinion of Fraser

As briefly described in Chapter Six, the British took the rest of March to move their forces under Operation Lustre to Greece, and the newly designated Anzac Corps became established on the Aliakmon Line. The considerable German attack there commenced on 5 April, putting the defences under severe pressure. Contemporaneously in Cyrenaica, an even greater burden had imposed itself upon Wavell. The recently arrived German General, Erwin Rommel, had advanced his forces from El Agheila, captured Benghazi, besieged Tobruk and moved towards the Egyptian border. As a result of this emergency, Freyberg contacted Fraser from the front line in Greece to suggest that MEC be offered 'liberty of action to use our troops in Egypt' to form, if necessary, a New Zealand infantry brigade to help the cause there.⁷⁸⁹ Thus in the extremis of the situation, and possibly as a result of his reconciliation with Wavell at the beginning of the year, Freyberg recommended temporarily suspending the requirement for New Zealand troops to fight only when concentrated as a division.

⁷⁸⁸ ATL, 6759-012, Speech at Empire Parliamentary Association, 8/7/41, 15.

⁷⁸⁹ ANZ, WAII8/69, Freyberg to Fraser, 10/4/41.

Four days later, this crisis in the Western Desert plus additional worries over Iraq and Syria, compelled Churchill to telegram the four dominion prime ministers outlining the worsening situation. In a separate paragraph to Fraser alone, he explained that the maximum number of units now must be retained in Egypt, which necessitated that neither 7 Australian Division nor the Polish Brigade would join the Allied forces in Greece as originally planned.⁷⁹⁰ If there was any residual hope of success in the Aegean, this in effect ended it.

A mutually cordial tone by both leaders was becoming increasingly apparent. On 15 April Fraser replied thanking Churchill for laying out the situation in a frank manner, and stressed that it had 'no way' affected what he viewed as 'the correctness of the Lustre decision both on strategical and moral grounds'.⁷⁹¹ But he did repeat the plea from his 9 March telegram re-emphasising the assumption that all 'preparations are being put in hand to facilitate evacuation' if such an eventuality arose, adding that he had instructed Freyberg to offer assistance to Wavell in Egypt if needed.⁷⁹² Churchill's reply reiterated his growing regard, assured him that all possible steps were in hand to facilitate such an eventuality, and throughout Whitehall people were 'deeply touched' by the offer of aid to Wavell, which 'is typical of the whole-hearted cooperation of your Dominion'.⁷⁹³

Such a prospect in fact became reality on 17 April, as the Greek Army on the left flank of the Anzac Corps neared collapse, and Papagos suggested that in order 'to save Greece from destruction', the British forces should proceed with evacuation.⁷⁹⁴ To cover the retreat, it was necessary to establish another line at Thermopylae, and this news generated an immediate and frantic response the following day from Fadden, the Australian Acting Prime Minister,

⁷⁹⁰ CAC, CHAR 20/37/98-101, Churchill to Fraser, 14/4/41.

⁷⁹¹ DRNZ Vol.I, Doc.363, 267, Fraser to Churchill, 15/4/41.

⁷⁹² Ibid.

⁷⁹³ Ibid, Doc.366, 268, Churchill to Fraser, 17/4/41.

⁷⁹⁴ Ibid, Doc.365, 268, Cranborne to Fraser, 17/4/41.

whilst Menzies was in London. He told Lord Cranborne, the recently appointed Dominions Secretary, that the ‘immediate evacuation of our troops from the mainland of Greece is essential’.⁷⁹⁵ This was relayed to Churchill, with the additional comment from Cranborne that ‘Mr Bruce also made this point to me with great force this afternoon, on the ground that adequate air protection is no longer available’.⁷⁹⁶ In response, Churchill stated that at this juncture ‘there is no question of the Australians being withdrawn from the fighting line’, and advised his cabinet colleague to consult with Menzies before replying to Canberra, and ended by opining that ‘Mr Bruce is not good when things are bad’.⁷⁹⁷

At the front, the position was becoming unsustainable, notably due to virtually unopposed German airpower. This caused Blamey, under severe German pressure, to cable Fadden on 20 April about the dire military situation, who forwarded a copy to Fraser.⁷⁹⁸ The New Zealander immediately appealed in measured tones to Churchill to ‘ensure a safe and rapid evacuation, should this necessity arise’, affirming that ‘we feel that we can ask no more and I am sure that you will agree that we can expect no less’.⁷⁹⁹ The British Prime Minister in reply thanked Fraser and pledged that everything possible was being done to safeguard the Anzac troops and ensure the safe withdrawal of the men. He then added his characteristic blandishments about ‘the grandeur of the attitude of your Government....and the fortune of your *one* [emphasis added] splendid New Zealand Division’.⁸⁰⁰

Differing British perceptions of the Pacific dominions

In this reply it is possible to discern at this stage Churchill’s growing irritation with Australian petitions from their three leading representatives, in contrast to that of their

⁷⁹⁵ TNA, PREM 3/206/1, Fadden to Cranborne, 18/4/41 (237).

⁷⁹⁶ Ibid, Cranborne to Churchill, 18/4/41.

⁷⁹⁷ Ibid, Churchill to Cranborne, 19/4/41,

⁷⁹⁸ ANZ, EA1/624, Fadden to Fraser, 22/4/41.

⁷⁹⁹ TNA, PREM 3/206/1, Fraser to Churchill, 22/4/41.

⁸⁰⁰ Ibid, Churchill to Fraser, 22/4/41.

Tasman neighbour. Whilst the AIF had three divisions in the theatre, and one in immediate peril, New Zealand's only division was in this position too. At this stage it is perhaps essential to recognise the inevitable challenges facing an imperial power such as Britain, dealing with the forces/wishes of important autonomous elements of that empire. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the disproportionality of the Antipodean presence in the Greece campaign troubled Churchill, and he was clearly aware of these critical noises.

From the outbreak of the war, Australia was 'determined to transform the imperial relationship' to one as they viewed, more consultative, and in fact as early as September 1939, Menzies was hinting to Whiskard his desire for dominion membership of the British War Cabinet.⁸⁰¹ The Greece campaign exacerbated that desire, and whilst in London in 1941 the Australian's diary revealed tensions and several clashes with Churchill, who retained perennial doubts about Menzies' appeasing tendencies.⁸⁰² The British war leader was intolerant of interference from the dominions wanting to keep them out of policy making.⁸⁰³ As attested to by his close friend Leo Amery, this was a long-held view extending to 1907, seeing no point in consulting the colonies (dominions) 'until they were military powers whose alliance could be of any real value to us'.⁸⁰⁴ Yet over thirty years later in 1941, when they had achieved this status, Churchill reiterated these sentiments, being not prepared to tolerate interference from the dominions' high commissioners, or that of the visiting Menzies.⁸⁰⁵ The ambitions of the Australian on this front was in direct conflict with those of Churchill, and further enflamed by the former's delusions of grandeur. His diary revealed

⁸⁰¹ Ashley Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War* (London, 2006), 473; *DAFP* Vol.II, Doc.237, 277-78, Whiskard to DO, 20/9/39.

⁸⁰² Martin and Hardy, *Dark and Hurrying*, 112, 116; Andrew Stewart, *Empire Lost, Britain, the Dominions and the Second World War* (London: 2008) 44.

⁸⁰³ Kent Fedorowich, and Carl Bridge, "Family Matters? The Dominion High Commissioners in Wartime Britain, 1938-42", *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History (JICH)*, 40:1, (2012)13.

⁸⁰⁴ L.S. Amery, *My Political Life*, Volume I (London:1953), 302.

⁸⁰⁵ Fedorowich, and Bridge, 8.

how whispers in his ear by Churchill critics, such as Hankey and Lloyd George, turned his head into believing he was a realistic alternative replacement as British prime minister.⁸⁰⁶

The smaller Pacific dominion clearly had a more realistic idea of its lack of power on the big stage than the larger.⁸⁰⁷ Australia struggled to reconcile its desire for a voice in the councils of the higher direction of the war, with the simple fact that it was populated by seven rather than seventy million people.⁸⁰⁸ This difference in outlook was starkly seen by the actions of their respective high commissioners in London. Bruce's 'over-weening ambition to sit at the centre of British wartime government' was in direct contrast to Jordan, who was content to be directed from Wellington.⁸⁰⁹ The latter in fact preferred to putter about in the garden rather than join wartime high commissioners' meetings, and when he did attend such gatherings 'said very little and contributed even less'.⁸¹⁰

In contrast, Fraser's general acceptance of Britain's strategic leadership, and Churchill's awareness of the different approach both dominions took regarding their expeditionary forces and convoy arrangements the previous year, would have provided some satisfaction to him at this time. He would perhaps have wanted such divergences to remain and so avoid a united and critical dominion front, which conceivably provided an additional motive for his characteristic purple phrasing. The frequently recounted adage of New Zealand having 'never put a foot wrong right from the start' used by Churchill in July 1940, would have been reaffirmed by the Dominion's reaction to the crisis in Greece.⁸¹¹ However, the British would soon learn that they did not have an uncritical or mute ally.

⁸⁰⁶ Martin and Hardy, *Dark and Hurrying*, 160; Stewart, *Empire Lost*, 57; David Day, *Menzies & Churchill at War* (North Ryde, 1986), 201; Jackson, *British Empire* 475.

⁸⁰⁷ Carl Bridge, 'Australia, New Zealand and Allied Grand Strategy', in *Kia Kaha*, (ed) Crawford, 61.

⁸⁰⁸ Jackson, 473.

⁸⁰⁹ Fedorowich and Bridge, 'Family Matters', *JICH*, 40:1, (2012) 15.

⁸¹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹¹ BLO, (MSS.NZ.s 13) Batterbee Papers, Box.6, File.1, Caldecote to Batterbee, 26/7/40.

The Battle of Crete and Fraser's visit to Egypt

Whilst the Greece campaign was reaching its inevitable finale, Fraser ensured his political back was covered at home before he departed for Britain. On 15 April, at his first Labour Party Conference since becoming premier, and with the conscription and coalition debates of a year before behind him, he produced a 'two-hour *tour de force*'.⁸¹² He spoke of the social and economic benefits flowing from his government's policies, urged people to support the armed forces by working harder and also managed to secure an uneasy political truce with Holland whereby active platform propaganda would be reduced to a minimum.⁸¹³ He left New Zealand with Berendsen on 3 May, intending to stop off in Egypt to visit his troops en route, where they arrived on 15 May.⁸¹⁴ On Fraser's departure, Batterbee sent a cable to his latest head, Cranborne, portraying the Prime Minister as shy and modest underneath, to which 'the unkind would call an "inferiority complex"'.⁸¹⁵ Yet as events were to transpire, this latter comment proved to be a most erroneous characterisation.

Most of the Australian and New Zealand forces were evacuated from the beaches of Greece, but so as to minimise the turnaround time to enable the maximum number of troops to be rescued, two brigades of the New Zealand Division and one from Australia were re-embarked in Crete, as was Freyberg, on 29 April.⁸¹⁶ A decision had previously been taken by Britain that the island would be defended, and within hours of arriving there, the General was informed by Wavell that he would command the forces for the upcoming battle, which was conveyed to Fraser on 1 May.⁸¹⁷ The GOC was reluctant, especially because his division was now split with 4 and 5 Brigades in Crete, whilst 6 had sailed on to Egypt. The C-in-C

⁸¹² Bassett and King, *Tomorrow*, 212

⁸¹³ Ibid; Wood, *Political*, 168-69.

⁸¹⁴ Ibid, 213; TNA, WO 201/534, 2NZEF War Chronology.

⁸¹⁵ Batterbee Papers, Box.6, File.1, Batterbee to Cranborne, 29/4/41.

⁸¹⁶ 2NZEF War Chronology.

⁸¹⁷ *DRNZ* Vol.I, Doc.388, 285-87, Freyberg to Fraser, 1/5/41.

acknowledged this, implying that when he had home forces available the New Zealanders would be relieved.⁸¹⁸ On the same day, Freyberg wrote to Wavell, in formal terms and mentioned the inadequacy of his force in terms of size and equipment necessary to repel any attack, stating that under the terms of his Charter he was obligated to inform Wellington.⁸¹⁹ He did this asking of Fraser to ‘bring pressure to bear on the highest plane in London’ to either supply Crete with sufficient means or abandon the island.⁸²⁰

Just before his departure to the Middle East, Fraser cabled Churchill about the situation as Freyberg saw it, and conveyed his GOC’s concluding sentiments, particularly with respect to aircraft.⁸²¹ Churchill assured him that everything was being done on the equipment front, and highlighted the difficulties of getting aircraft and service personnel to Crete, concluding with his characteristic rhetoric - about the dignity and stoicism of New Zealand during the anxious evacuation, and the inexpressible relief that it was successful.⁸²² As mentioned above Fraser arrived in Egypt just before the battle, and after it commenced he visited MEC headquarters every day, and thus received the reports emanating from the island about the intensity of the action and the extreme pressure his nation’s troops were under.⁸²³

The situation progressively worsened over the first few days, and reports about his countrymen’s ordeal as a result of Allied inferiority in the air, a repeat of the Greece encounter, certainly focused Fraser’s mind and unsettled him. This was perhaps reflected in his 24 May cable to Churchill, in which he urged him ‘in the name of the New Zealand Government’ to give all possible support especially air assistance from all quarters,

⁸¹⁸ ANZ, EA1/624, Freyberg to Jones, 1/5/41.

⁸¹⁹ *DRNZ* Vol.I, Doc.387, 285, Freyberg to Wavell, 1/5/41.

⁸²⁰ *Ibid*, Doc.388, 285-87, Freyberg to Fraser, 1/5/41.

⁸²¹ TNA, DO 35/1009/9, Fraser to Churchill, 2/5/41.

⁸²² *Ibid*, Churchill to Fraser, 3/5/41.

⁸²³ Hensley, *Beyond*, 122; *DRNZ* Vol.I, Docs.408,413,417,418, 299-304, Freyberg to Wavell, 20-23/5/41.

‘including the United Kingdom’.⁸²⁴ The British war leader sympathised with their plight, but gently rebuked the implication that air assistance was being held back by London, assuring Fraser that everything was being done.⁸²⁵ This cable, sent in such onerous circumstances, was arguably the only time throughout the war that the intense pressure of events unsettled Fraser sufficiently so that his anxiety was clearly reflected in his transmitted message.

Fraser’s Intervention

A few days later there occurred perhaps the most well-known intervention made by Fraser during the war. The basic facts are that on 26 May, Freyberg in a message to Wavell stated that the troops had reached the ‘limit of endurance’, yet a proportion ‘might be embarked provided a decision is reached at once’.⁸²⁶ The order was given and two days later Freyberg had reached Sphakia, a fishing port on the south coast of the island, where the evacuation was to take place.⁸²⁷ The original plan was for just three nights of evacuations, so after the first two the GOC logically assumed that the night of 30 May would be the last. However, with thousands of men still awaiting rescue, Freyberg mentioned his despair to Wavell about getting the rearguard troops off, appealing for ‘one last lift’, and additionally asked Fraser to ‘get more ships to evacuate us tomorrow night?’⁸²⁸

In a post-war Supplementary Report for the New Zealand War Histories, Fraser recounted that upon receiving the message from Freyberg that afternoon, he met General John Evetts, Wavell’s Liaison Officer on Cunningham’s staff, and was informed that a message of no

⁸²⁴ TNA, DO 35/1009/9, Fraser to Churchill, 24/5/41.

⁸²⁵ Ibid, Churchill to Fraser, 24/5/41.

⁸²⁶ *DRNZ* Vol.I, Doc.428, 308, Freyberg to Wavell, 26/5/41.

⁸²⁷ Ibid, footnote.1, 310

⁸²⁸ Ibid, Doc.436, 311, Freyberg to Wavell, 30/5/41; Doc.436, 311, Freyberg to Fraser, 30/5/41.

more ships was to be sent to Freyberg.⁸²⁹ He was asked to sign a ‘cablegram’ alongside those of the three C-in-C’s, authorising the Crete commander to surrender, to which Fraser refused. He argued that such a large loss of men for New Zealand from a populace of just 1.5 million ‘would be a crushing disaster for our country’. He also mentioned that listening in to this exchange was Admiral Cunningham, who ‘suddenly broke into the conversation and said “Mr Fraser is right”’, and arranged for HMS *Phoebe*, then returning from Crete, to be turned around quickly in order to make one last rescue attempt on 31 May.⁸³⁰

In his post-war Despatch published in 1948, Cunningham gave no reason as to why the last remaining cruiser, *Phoebe*, after only six hours in port, was turned around and joined the rescue.⁸³¹ Kippenberger, as Editor in Chief, and aided by British official history narratives, provided an answer. It emerged that a last rescue attempt on the fourth night was planned all along, but because of shipping losses, this would consist of just four destroyers with an aggregate lift of just 2000. This would invariably mean that fewer New Zealanders would be evacuated and more left behind to be captured.⁸³² Kippenberger’s analysis concluded that

it seems clear that Fraser’s intervention resulted in the *Phoebe* being added to the last embarkation force, and accordingly that as a result, the troops carried by that ship [estimated to be between 1000 and 1500, of which perhaps half were New Zealanders] were rescued.⁸³³

This further emphasised Fraser’s key role in influencing a military decision, enabling those extra men to be saved. Although in his report he mistakenly conflated the complete total of

⁸²⁹ DRNZ Vol.I, Doc.453, 329-32, Supplementary Report by Fraser, 5/10/48.

⁸³⁰ Ibid.

⁸³¹ *Supplement to the London Gazette*, 8/5/48, 38296, Andrew Cunningham, The Battle of Crete.

⁸³² ANZ, WAI11/2, Kippenberger to Heatley, 24/7/50.

⁸³³ Ibid.

the last lift, with that evacuated by *Phoebe* alone, Berendsen, who was with Fraser at this meeting, attested to its authenticity in both his unpublished memoirs written in the early 1950s, and an interview in 1970.⁸³⁴ He stated that

by his own courageous efforts, and by those alone, [Fraser] succeeded in evacuating more than a thousand New Zealanders who would otherwise unquestionably have been taken prisoner of war.⁸³⁵

Doubts over Middle East Command

A further point was revealed in Fraser's Supplementary Report, in that shortly after refusing to endorse what he thought was the authorisation for Freyberg to in effect surrender, Evetts informed him that officers of the General Staff in Cairo had attached his (Fraser's) name to the message for his GOC, as there was an alleged difficulty in reaching him.⁸³⁶ Fraser was undoubtedly angered over this peremptory assumption that he would accept the reduction of the rescue attempt proposed by Wavell's staff, and it certainly seemed to have enhanced his scepticism and reservations over how MEC was operating.⁸³⁷

Additionally, during this time and for several days afterwards, he and Berendsen were meeting and interviewing their evacuated compatriots. They quietly gathered information about the causes of the disaster, in which the New Zealanders lost 671 killed and 2180 prisoners of war, and extensively analysed the whole campaign in great length, especially the air aspects.⁸³⁸ Therefore, whilst continuing to repose faith in overall British leadership as mentioned above, this arguably was the point at which, if there ever had been a default deference to British authority, it ended. From mid-1941 onwards, although understated at

⁸³⁴ ATL, 2012-128-150, Sir Carl Berendsen's unpublished memoirs, Chapter IV, 5; ATL, 2000-094-5, Henderson interviews Berendsen.

⁸³⁵ Ibid, Henderson.

⁸³⁶ *DRNZ* Vol.I, Doc.453, 329-32.

⁸³⁷ Ross Mackie, "Freyberg's High Command Relationships, 1939-1941", MPhil Thesis, Massey Univ, (2014), 144.

⁸³⁸ Hensley, *Beyond*, 124; Davin, *Crete*, 486.

times and contained in tone, such restraint did not apply to the content of Fraser's scrutiny, nor his voicing of critical shortcomings.

In early June, Sir Miles Lampson, British Ambassador to Egypt, had a meeting with Fraser and Freyberg at the embassy and reported on it to Eden on 4 June. The General, having experienced German air superiority and its destructive effects in both Greece and Crete, commented to Lampson that unless Britain was 'prepared to give adequate air support to an operation, such operations should not be planned'.⁸³⁹ The Ambassador then added a paraphrase of Fraser's comments: 'we are past the stage of discussion, and that he will be taking it all up when he gets home'.⁸⁴⁰ Lampson thus, clearly forewarned London of Fraser's anxieties about aspects of the conduct of the war in the Mediterranean. Three days later, and more anxiously, he repeated the alarm.

As mentioned in Chapter Six, on 7 June Fraser sent a telegram to Nash in Wellington, in which he criticised Freyberg for allegedly withholding doubts about the Greece expedition.⁸⁴¹ In this same cable to his deputy, he additionally revealed his increasing qualms about Allied inferiority in both campaigns in armour and particularly in the air, exclaiming that without the necessary defence being available,

we must voluntarily embark on or acquiesce in no further adventures, and in no case must we again allow our New Zealand troops to be exposed to a ...highly developed attack armed only solely with their rifles and their courage.⁸⁴²

⁸³⁹ TNA, FO 954/11A/69, Lampson to Eden, 4/6/41.

⁸⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁸⁴¹ TNA, WO 106/3128, Fraser to Nash, 7/6/41.

⁸⁴² Ibid.

He concluded by saying that ‘unless adequate air protection is provided, we may well be obliged to evacuate Egypt’, and ‘it is my intention to discuss these matters in London on the foregoing lines and to emphasise these views as forcibly as possible’.⁸⁴³

Lampson lost no time in passing this telegram on to the Foreign Office.⁸⁴⁴ The following day Fraser and Berendsen left Egypt for Britain, and whilst their twelve-day journey across northern Africa proceeded, a compelling exchange of cables took place within Whitehall in response to Fraser’s message to his deputy. The profound disquiet of the British Government’s concern over its contents, notably the ‘we must voluntarily embark on or acquiesce in no further adventures’ line, is borne out as it warranted a file in both the Dominions and War Offices.⁸⁴⁵ In order to avoid the repercussions of such a scenario developing, Cranborne ensured that the Chiefs of Staff had advanced knowledge of the likely questions Fraser would ask. Colonel Leslie Hollis, Secretary to the Chiefs of Staff Committee, sent requests for an aide-memoire to be prepared across Whitehall departments informing the COS that such material was in the pipeline.⁸⁴⁶ Boyd-Shannon, now back at the Dominions Office after his return from Wellington, interestingly deduced that Fraser’s telegram bore no indication that he ‘was aware that his remarks to the New Zealand Government would be conveyed to us’, conspiratorially suggesting that in their dealings with him, the Chiefs ‘should not disclose that they have previously seen his comments’.⁸⁴⁷

In an analysis, the MO5 subsection of the DMO presented thirteen questions implicit from Fraser’s telegram, and indicated that there were no points broached that Churchill had not already raised in his post-mortem request to the Crete defeat, and thus in effect they were

⁸⁴³ TNA, WO 106/3128, Fraser to Nash, 7/6/41.

⁸⁴⁴ TNA, DO 35/1009/10, Lampson to FO, 7/6/41.

⁸⁴⁵ TNA, DO 35/1009/10; TNA, WO 106/3128.

⁸⁴⁶ WO 106/3128, Memo by Hollis, 14/6/41; TNA, CAB 80/28/75, COS(41)375, Note by Secretary, 14/6/41.

⁸⁴⁷ DO 35/1009/10, DO to Colonel Reid, 19/6/41.

already well prepared.⁸⁴⁸ These questions in fact were to be superseded by twenty-five others that Fraser and Berendsen prepared ‘in a detailed and uncomfortably penetrating critique’ during their long journey to Britain.⁸⁴⁹ What this episode and the minor subterfuge associated with it provided, was credible documentary evidence of British anxieties over any discontent Fraser might have with affairs in the Middle East. This aspect of British diplomacy would become an increasingly important and entrenched facet throughout Whitehall and Cairo over the ensuing two years with regard to New Zealand.

It is useful to put this in the context of the times and the mood perhaps pervading in London. Sir Maurice Hankey in 1936, then Secretary to the CID, expounded in a letter to Stanley Baldwin that ‘we could not have won the last war without the fullest support of the dominions, and we cannot hope to win any future world war without that support’.⁸⁵⁰ The disproportionate numbers and performance of the dominion troops in the Aegean and Libya would have reinforced their reputational legacy from the Great War, ‘as elite soldiers built on idealised and romantic views of white settlers living in rugged rural landscapes’.⁸⁵¹

A realistic likelihood is suggested that this view had become entrenched in Whitehall by 1941, and as mentioned in Chapter Six, it is of significant import to appreciate the influence of these dominion troops in the Middle East at this time. The strategic situation would have been far worse if these troops had not helped defend the Suez Canal, that all-important strategic pivot.⁸⁵² Their significance has been notably underestimated, as they not only outnumbered the British forces in Greece, but, more importantly than just general military

⁸⁴⁸ WO 106/3128, MO5 Minute, 16/6/19.

⁸⁴⁹ ATL, 2000-094-5, Henderson interviews Berendsen; ANZ, EA1/624, Notes on points raised in Mr Fraser’s questionnaire; Hensley, *Beyond*, 133.

⁸⁵⁰ Iain Johnston-White, “The Role of the Dominions in British Victory, 1939-1945”, PhD thesis, Univ of Cambridge, (2014), 9.

⁸⁵¹ *Ibid*, 208.

⁸⁵² Fedorowich, and Bridge, “Family Matters, *JICH* 40:1, (2012) 15.

personnel, they disproportionately offered combat troops, specifically infantry.⁸⁵³ As Carl Bridge so succinctly commented, ‘British forces provided the “tail” that made the dominions “teeth” possible’.⁸⁵⁴ This is reflected in the analysis conducted by Iain Johnston-White, of the wide differences in dominion personnel involved in various campaigns, not only in numbers, but those of their casualties, finding that these were ‘consistently over represented on the battlefield’.⁸⁵⁵ Extending his methodology, and using data published in the Official Histories, this thesis ascertained that the New Zealand share of British Empire forces was 26% of personnel and 41% of casualties in Greece, and 24% and 47% respectively in Crete.⁸⁵⁶ Thus, this imbalance clearly supports the disproportionality as suggested by Johnston-White.

Therefore, from London’s view, the disquieting logic of the Fraser letter to Nash was of a dominion possibly refusing to allow its troops to take part in a military operation.

Notwithstanding that it was New Zealand, the ally seen as the most loyal, contemplating this would have the most significant consequences for the imperial alliance.⁸⁵⁷ Such a scenario would have to be avoided at all costs, and it seems axiomatic that Whitehall would want to placate Fraser as much as possible. As mentioned in Chapters Two and Five, the clichéd cognomen of ‘mother complex’ has been used in a belittling fashion by historians in describing the relationship of New Zealand with Britain, implying that the Dominion did what the Mother Country required. It is contended that following the Aegean campaigns, a reversal seemed to pertain as profound anxieties, extending from Whitehall to Cairo, were revealed over any New Zealand discontent. From mid-1941 onwards, a repeated series of measures were put in hand with the distinct aim to nullify such concerns and placate Wellington in order to maintain their Division in the line.

⁸⁵³ Johnston-White, “Role of the Dominions”, 217.

⁸⁵⁴ Carl Bridge, Foreword, in Johnston-White, *British Commonwealth*, vi.

⁸⁵⁵ Ibid, 217-18

⁸⁵⁶ McClymont, *To Greece*, 486: Davin, *Crete*, 480 & 486.

⁸⁵⁷ Johnston-White, 220.

Fraser in London

The two New Zealanders arrived in Britain on Saturday 21 June, and Fraser almost immediately went to stay with Churchill at Chequers. As mentioned above the tone of the cables between the prime ministers over the preceding two and a half months revealed a noteworthy mutual regard. The moral grounds behind Fraser's decision to support the Greece expedition, and his lifelong single-mindedness about his causes, exactly reflected that of the British war leader in that 'nothing should stand in the way of victory for the Allies'.⁸⁵⁸ The weekend brought the two closer together still, as on the Sunday Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa, and Fraser was with Churchill when the latter broadcast his support for Russia, and discussed the terms of the speech with his guest.⁸⁵⁹ This invasion no doubt caused some relief, as not only was the British Empire no longer alone, but the immediate fear of a possible invasion of Britain was eased, and pressure on its position in the Middle East probably diminishing.⁸⁶⁰ The following day, to emphasise his valued presence, Churchill welcomed Fraser to his first War Cabinet.⁸⁶¹

A week later on 30 June, Fraser was at the War Office where his and Berendsen's three-page list of the twenty-five questions (five on the Greece campaign and twenty on Crete), prepared on their journey, was presented to the COS Committee of the War Cabinet.⁸⁶² The Secretariat was put to work, and a month later a detailed and lengthy twenty-six page account was provided, including two appendices consisting of the exchange of telegrams with Wavell, and an up to date résumé of current tank and air strength.⁸⁶³ The responses 'were only mildly reassuring' to Fraser, especially because the answer to his Question 10 on Crete, as to

⁸⁵⁸ Bassett and King, *Tomorrow*, 193.

⁸⁵⁹ Hensley, *Beyond*, 135.

⁸⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶¹ TNA, CAB 65/18/41, War Cabinet, 62(41)95, 23/6/41.

⁸⁶² Hensley, 133; ANZ, EA1/624, Fraser's questionnaire.

⁸⁶³ *Ibid.*, [This report minus the appendices was reproduced in McClymont's, *To Greece.*]

whether the aerodromes should or could 'have been rendered unusable prior to the German invasion', left him unconvinced.⁸⁶⁴ His continued scepticism on this aspect was further articulated two months later to Batterbee on his return to New Zealand.⁸⁶⁵

Additionally, his Question 15 on Crete was to attain noteworthy resonance the following October as it asked

what steps are being taken to avoid a recurrence of a situation under which well-trained and courageous troops find themselves battered to pieces from the air without means of defence or retaliation.⁸⁶⁶

This clearly was a running sore for Fraser, and just as in 1940 when convoy escort capability attained *cause celebre* status, so the following year it was that of enemy air superiority.

Although Murphy and Hensley both contended that the mere posing of 'the questions was enough to underline the lessons to be learnt', this is viewed as understating Fraser's disquiet, as his probing revealed a distinctly harder edge.⁸⁶⁷ It is maintained that the almost apologetic and polite initial tone, stressing that they were asked 'not by way of criticism', was a technique that he was to frequently use, to ask the pertinent questions in order to acquire the satisfaction he required.⁸⁶⁸ Churchill himself was not slow to recognise in broader terms that this whole process was 'in effect a challenge to the direction of the whole British Commonwealth war effort'.⁸⁶⁹ Specifically when reverberations linked to relative air-power capability broke out again in the weeks leading up to Operation Crusader, with Fraser asking

⁸⁶⁴ Murphy, *Relief*, 24; Hensley, *Beyond*, 134.

⁸⁶⁵ ANZ, EA1/624, Fraser's questionnaire; TNA, DO 35/998/13, Batterbee to Machtig, 19/9/41.

⁸⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁷ Murphy, 24; Hensley, 134.

⁸⁶⁸ EA1/624, Fraser's questionnaire; TNA, CAB 80/29/1, COS(41)405, Questions for Discussion with COS, 1/7/41.

⁸⁶⁹ Murphy, 24.

the most germane and pithy questions, the British war leader's response revealed how far he was prepared to go to allay such criticism (see below).

Fraser and New Zealand's economic interests

As an ally, Fraser toured Britain visiting bombed cities and greatly admired the war effort, being satisfied overall with the strategic direction. Nevertheless, apart from the events surrounding the Crete morass, the main issues Fraser wanted to settle were economic.⁸⁷⁰ As a result of merchant sinkings, problems had arisen over the decline in tonnage of their primary products exported to Britain and the need to finance surpluses in New Zealand resulting from the inability to transport them.⁸⁷¹ As Hensley so eruditely wrote, 'shipping was the invisible member of every war council and the dominant feature in all war plans'.⁸⁷² Behind closed doors in Whitehall, Fraser was a tough purveyor of the Dominion's interests.

On 23 June, on returning to London from Chequers, and just before his first War Cabinet, he attended a meeting chaired by Arthur Greenwood (Minister without Portfolio) concerning the problems of the shipping of foodstuffs from the Pacific dominions. Greenwood requested the approval of a policy statement, stemming from the adverse transportation situation, that 'UK purchases from the southern dominions had to be drastically reduced', which would call for heavy sacrifices from New Zealand.⁸⁷³ This was challenged clause by clause by Fraser, who added that 'it would be deplorable if the people of New Zealand after sacrifices and losses in the field were to suffer economic impoverishment', the meeting ended unresolved.⁸⁷⁴

⁸⁷⁰ Hensley, *Beyond*, 136.

⁸⁷¹ McKinnon, "Equality of Sacrifice": *JICH*, 12:3 (1984), 59-63.

⁸⁷² Hensley, 138.

⁸⁷³ ATL, 6759-011, Meeting held at Richmond Terrace, 23/6/41; *The Round Table*, Vol.124, September 1941, 822-24.

⁸⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

Shipping concerns were raised again on 4 July in a meeting at the Food Ministry. Here Fraser requested ‘an affirmation that commodity purchase arrangements are to continue for the full period of the war and at least for one season thereafter’.⁸⁷⁵ Britain was ready to buy everything that could be shipped, but the problem was how to store the rest. Fraser had already publicised plans months earlier for increasing storage capacity but hoped to get an agreement to finance this jointly.⁸⁷⁶ A further meeting with Greenwood ensued, and an understanding was quickly reached that the cost of building more refrigerated storage be shared on a fifty-fifty basis.⁸⁷⁷ Furthermore, by making the best use of reduced refrigerator space by techniques such as telescoping, deboning and dehydrating, economic hardship arising from the sinking of merchant shipping could be further reduced.⁸⁷⁸

In between these meetings, Fraser met his former adversary Chancellor Sir John Simon, on 2 July. Emboldened by the fact that much of the loan agreed in December 1939 had been repaid, he asked that Britain continue to finance the Dominion’s overseas war effort on an advance basis. Because of shipping difficulties, Fraser was reluctant to give a firm schedule of repayment, but undertook that his country would repay in sterling when it could.⁸⁷⁹ A similar positive result to December 1939 ensued, and his request ‘gave little difficulty’ being approved ‘with great pleasure’ by Simon, who ‘agreed that the UK should continue to meet the cost of New Zealand’s overseas war effort’ on an overdraft basis.⁸⁸⁰

Therefore, it is clearly apparent that Fraser, whilst as determined as ever to prosecute the war and for his nation to play its full part and the concomitant sacrifices that would entail, was not prepared for it to suffer disproportionately. Naturally mindful of New Zealand’s especial economic vulnerability with its large dependence on the British market, but aware also

⁸⁷⁵ TNA, DO 35/998/13, Points Prime Minister Wishes to Raise with Minister of Food, 5/7/41.

⁸⁷⁶ McKinnon, “Equality of Sacrifice”: *JICH*, 12:3 (1984), 60.

⁸⁷⁷ Hensley, *Beyond*, 139-40.

⁸⁷⁸ Baker, *War Economy*, 186-87

⁸⁷⁹ DO 35/998/13, New Zealand Note on Dollar and Sterling Requirements. 1/7/41, (161).

⁸⁸⁰ *Ibid*, Machtig to Batterbee, 10/9/41 and Clark to Cranborne, 11/7/41; Hensley, 137.

perhaps of British regard for the Dominion, Fraser was a hard-nosed advocate in achieving economic and financial concessions for his country. Thus, in all these negotiations, the supposed pre-visit ‘inferiority complex’ characterisation of Fraser, mentioned by Batterbee, proved to be a misnomer to say the least.⁸⁸¹ After this intense series of meetings and having accomplished all he could in terms of economic arrangements, Fraser departed for a tour of Britain, where in addition to seeing for himself bomb damage, he visited New Zealand servicemen and indulged his predilection for ‘freedom’ of a number of towns and cities.⁸⁸²

Fraser and War Policy

Fraser’s presence was especially regarded, as he was the only dominion premier in London at the time, notably corresponding with two events of global significance. Two weeks after he arrived, on 7 July, he was asked by Churchill to be present at War Cabinet as a draft proposal was to be sent to Stalin via British Ambassador Stafford Cripps.⁸⁸³ This was to emphasise British cooperation and unification of purpose against the common enemy, and Churchill wanted to stress to the Soviet leader that this included the whole Empire too, stating that ‘I have immediately convened the War Cabinet including Mr Fraser, Prime Minister of the Dominion of New Zealand who is with us now’.⁸⁸⁴

One month later, Fraser arrived back in London where again his attendance became one of profound importance as the senior dominion representative in Britain.⁸⁸⁵ Churchill and Roosevelt were off the Newfoundland coast drafting the Atlantic Charter, that great beacon for the future. Fraser was summoned by Attlee in the early hours of 12 August to attend an emergency War Cabinet at 1.45 am, which was to give assent to a version of the Charter

⁸⁸¹ BLO, (MSS.NZ.s 13) Batterbee Papers, Box.6, File.1, Batterbee to Cranborne, 29/4/41.

⁸⁸² ATL, 2012-128-150, Berendsen’s unpublished memoirs, Chapter IV, 9.

⁸⁸³ TNA, CAB 65/19/3, War Cabinet, 67(41), 9/7/41.

⁸⁸⁴ Churchill to Stalin, 9/7/41, in David Reynolds & Vladimir Pechatnov (eds), *The Kremlin Letters. Stalin’s Wartime Correspondence with Churchill and Roosevelt* (New Haven, 2018) 24-25.

⁸⁸⁵ ATL, 6759-457, Berendsen, “Reminiscences of an Ambassador”, 371; Hensley, *Beyond*, 144.

statement telegraphed through by Churchill.⁸⁸⁶ The text was reworked and completed later that day at an additional cabinet, where Fraser's contribution was considered specifically vital, as a trade clause within it and the possible repercussions for imperial preference had potential impacts upon the dominions.⁸⁸⁷ He was satisfied, and additionally made a proposed text alteration himself, probably the one on 'improved labour standards, economic advancement and social security'.⁸⁸⁸

During the time between these two significant events of global consequence, Fraser was alternately visiting the country and attending other meetings of the War Cabinet. Murphy's depiction of his attendance at these as saying little but learning much, is contradicted by his firm criticism of Eden on 7 July, about the latter's weak response to Japanese southerly movements.⁸⁸⁹ Furthermore, ten days later, at the all-important Defence Committee (Operations) Cabinet, in the wake of the transfer of Axis air and other resources to the Russian front, an opportunity was discerned for an offensive in Libya. Churchill advocated such an operation for September, especially as large numbers of tanks and men would be shipped shortly from Britain to support this. Attlee agreed, as did Fraser, who stated that

we could not afford to allow the Germans to regain the initiative in North Africa, [and] we should if possible, take advantage of the present favourable air situation.⁸⁹⁰

Additionally he stressed the importance of air support for Cyprus as he did not want a repeat of being 'beaten out of this island' as his countrymen were in Crete.⁸⁹¹ Although a

⁸⁸⁶ TNA, CAB 65/19/16, War Cabinet 80(41), 12/8/41.

⁸⁸⁷ TNA, CAB 65/19/17, War Cabinet 81(41), 12/8/41; Hensley, *Beyond*, 144.

⁸⁸⁸ ATL, 6759-457, Berendsen, "Reminiscences", 371; Hensley, 144.

⁸⁸⁹ Murphy, *Relief*, 23-24; Ben Pimlott (ed), *Second World War Diary of Hugh Dalton, 1940-45* (London, 1986), 245.

⁸⁹⁰ TNA, CAB 69/2/3, Defence Committee (Operations), DO(41)51st Meeting, 17/7/41.

⁸⁹¹ *Ibid.*

summoned Auchinleck convinced the COS of the lack of readiness of the British and Commonwealth forces, especially with respect to armour for a September offensive, both these meetings reveal that Fraser at this time, was a voice not only acutely involved in and questioning strategic policy, but a keen advocate of taking the fight to the enemy.

Perhaps his reserved demeanour is best captured by Jock Colville, Churchill's secretary, who wrote that 'once his shyness was penetrated, gold shone and he was seen to be a sincere, unassuming and deep-thinking statesman'.⁸⁹² As mentioned above, his resoluteness during the Greece evacuation drew increased admiration from Churchill. Additionally, Fraser gratified the British war leader, because in contrast to Menzies, he did not press for permanent representation in the War Cabinet, so sought after by the Australian, but was, however, no less insistent on prompt, full and frank consultations on all matters of vital concern.⁸⁹³ By early July he had been assuaged on this point, reflected in a confidential speech to the Empire Parliamentary Association, where he stated that he found the War Cabinet to involve 'the freest and frankest discussion and expression of view'.⁸⁹⁴

Therefore, the events in the eastern Mediterranean in spring 1941 became the catalyst for a notable period in the history of New Zealand. During the delicate preliminaries to the campaign in Greece, it was General Smuts' views Churchill sought, not Fraser's, despite the basic fact that troops from the Dominion were serving there, and South Africa's were not. This was no doubt due to the former's significant military experience and being an established figure on the international scene, whilst the New Zealander Fraser was a newcomer.⁸⁹⁵ However, as the war moved towards its third year, events meant that Fraser,

⁸⁹² John Colville, *The Fringes of Power, Downing Street Diaries 1939-55* (London, 1985), footnote, 403.

⁸⁹³ Murphy, *Relief*, 24; Stewart, *Empire Lost*, 61.

⁸⁹⁴ ATL, 6759-012, Confidential speech, 8/7/41.

⁸⁹⁵ Murphy, *Relief*, 6.

though steadfast and supportive of the overall aims of imperial strategy, had developed an enhanced critical attribute. He had moved from a perhaps reflex acquiescence in the wisdom of strategic decisions taken by Britain, to one, particularly in operations involving the Division, of a more independent standpoint not hesitating to voice disagreement.

Significantly, up until this time, communications between Fraser and Churchill went through the usual Dominions Office route, but a reflection of his enhanced status was that Churchill, ‘a life-long believer in personal exchanges’, arranged for them to communicate privately whenever necessary.⁸⁹⁶ From this, the Winch (Winston Churchill) and Pefra (Peter Fraser) link became established, which attained great importance over the next two years.⁸⁹⁷

Early Crusader Plans; Fraser Asks Questions

When Fraser and Berendsen arrived back in New Zealand on 13 September, they were met in Auckland by Batterbee, who accompanied them on the train journey south to Wellington. Reporting back on his long conversations with them, he commented that Fraser had ‘been inspired with confidence in the higher direction of the war, but is clearly not at all happy about Crete,’ reiterating his dissent as to why the aerodromes were not put out of action.⁸⁹⁸ Back in Egypt preliminary movements had started in early September for the coming offensive, and Freyberg, acutely aware of his duty to keep his government informed, as Fraser had insisted, as well as the paramount need for military security, had a dilemma about how much to reveal to his government.⁸⁹⁹ Sebastian Cox wrote that Freyberg tended to err on the side of caution in what he sent back to Wellington, despite the injunction to give the War

⁸⁹⁶ Hensley, *Beyond*, 136.

⁸⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹⁸ TNA, DO 35/998/13, Batterbee to Machtig, 19/9/41.

⁸⁹⁹ Murphy, *Relief*, 25

Cabinet full opportunity of considering future proposals.⁹⁰⁰ Such a view is contested, as on his return to the Prime Minister's Office in Wellington on 14 September, Fraser found waiting on his desk a cable from his GOC stating that the Division was trained, in excellent spirits, and crucially, up to war strength and moving in stages to the Western Desert.⁹⁰¹

This could be interpreted as a hint to the Prime Minister from his GOC. Now more experienced and sceptical, and suspecting that an offensive was in the offing, Fraser was unwilling to defer solely to Freyberg's judgement, and replied with a penetrating list of seven questions. Numbers 6 and 7 particularly focused on those aspects which caused him most disquiet the previous summer, that of adequate armour and air support respectively.⁹⁰² He added that 'in view of the experience in Greece and particularly Crete', the Government required assurance that 'our troops have not been committed to battle without every possible precaution and preparation'.⁹⁰³ He followed this up with an additional request the next day, asking what corps the Division would be in, and which would be the partnering formations.⁹⁰⁴ Thus clearly, events had brought a change, not only between Fraser and higher British command, but also in his relationship with Freyberg. Unquestionably, he was not disposed to accede uncritically to British judgement or at this time perhaps that of his own GOC, being much more overt in attempting to elicit information than prior to the Greece and Crete ventures.

Freyberg drafted his reply, and having discussed it with the NZEF base commander W.G. Stevens, requested an interview with Auchinleck in order to obtain authorisation about

⁹⁰⁰ Sebastian Cox, "The Difference between White and Black": Churchill, Imperial Politics, and Intelligence before the 1941 Crusader Offensive", *Intelligence and National Security (INS)*, 9:3, (1994), 419.

⁹⁰¹ ANZ, EA1/626, Freyberg to Fraser, 14/9/41.

⁹⁰² Ibid, Fraser to Freyberg, 16/9/41.

⁹⁰³ Ibid.

⁹⁰⁴ Ibid, Fraser to Freyberg, 17/9/41.

conveying its contents.⁹⁰⁵ It seems that a protocol pertained concerning a dominion commander when contacting his government on military matters, with any draft or communique needing the endorsement of the C-in-C to avoid compromising security. In his note of introduction, Freyberg appended a ‘stiff postscript’ stating that ‘under my Charter I have the right to consult [the New Zealand Government] upon any question of policy’.⁹⁰⁶

Though ‘evidently expecting trouble’, the GOC was disarmed by Auchinleck, who had heard about the Charter, and replied very tactfully. He appreciated Freyberg’s initial responses to the questions and promised to help reassure Fraser as to the way the Division would be engaged.⁹⁰⁷ The GOC’s reply to Wellington stressed that adequate armoured fighting vehicles (AFV) and air support was ‘fully realised’, and, furthermore, ‘air cooperation between RAF and Army [had] completely changed’.⁹⁰⁸ Additionally Auchinleck approved that they should know that the Division’s corps and army commanders would be Lieutenant General Alfred Godwin-Austen and General Alan Cunningham respectively.⁹⁰⁹

However, two weeks later on 8 October, whilst Fraser was dealing with domestic issues relevant to postponing the General Election, a ‘relatively straightforward intelligence assessment concerning Luftwaffe strength in the Middle East’ by the AOC-in-C, Arthur Tedder, was added by Freyberg to an otherwise optimistic cable to his Government. It was to set off a chain of the most intense communications from Wellington to London and Cairo.⁹¹⁰

⁹⁰⁵ ANZ, WAI18/69, Freyberg to Fraser, 18/9/41; ANZ, WAI18/5/44, GOC Diary, 18/9/41.

⁹⁰⁶ Murphy, *Relief*, 25.

⁹⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁰⁸ ANZ, EA1/626, Freyberg to Fraser 19/9/41.

⁹⁰⁹ Ibid, Freyberg to Fraser 22/9/41.

⁹¹⁰ Cox, “White and Black”, *INS*, 9:3, (1994), 426.

A Potential New Zealand Crisis for Churchill

Tedder's assessment produced a probable ratio of 790 Axis to 520 British aircraft for the coming battle, and in his telegram to Wellington, Freyberg assured the Cabinet that 'there are no better equipped or trained troops than their Division in Middle East', but did mention this two to three inferiority in aircraft.⁹¹¹ Fraser took alarm and sent a 'Pefra' telegram to Churchill on 13 October. He characteristically apologised for adding 'unnecessarily to your burdens at such a time' but, with an unmistakable edge that clearly exhibited his strong feelings, stated that,

in the light of our experience in Greece and particularly in Crete you will understand that we are naturally apprehensive lest our troops should again and for the third time be permitted to (do) battle without adequate air support.⁹¹²

He further added that he required an appreciation of enemy air and AFV strength, and would greatly welcome an assurance also that the question of air support... has been fully considered and appreciated by those responsible, and that a situation in which our men are called upon to fight without the necessary means of defence and offence...will not recur.⁹¹³

Unmistakably, the experience of his troops in two campaigns, in which they had been 'literally blasted...from the ground',⁹¹⁴ begot within Fraser a distinct aversion to any repeat of the experience suffered by his countrymen the previous summer.

Coming so soon after the Australian demand for their 9 Division to be relieved from Tobruk, this triggered acute alarm in London and Cairo. The prospective ramifications of two

⁹¹¹ Cox, "White and Black", *INS*, 9:3, (1994), 405, 421; ANZ, WAII8/69, Freyberg to Fraser, 9/10/41.

⁹¹² J.M.A. Gwyer, *History of the Second World War, Grand Strategy, Vol.III, June 1941-August 1942 Part.I* (London,1964), 227; Cox, 419; CAC, CHAR 20/43/136-37, PEFRA No.2, Fraser to Churchill, 13/10/41.

⁹¹³ *Ibid*, Fraser to Churchill, 13/10/41.

⁹¹⁴ *DRNZ* Vol.I, Doc.440, 313-15, Fraser to Nash, 2/6/41.

dominions at loggerheads with MEC bore the direst implications for British command. For New Zealand, nominally the most loyal and possessing like its neighbour the most ardent infantry, the possible withdrawal of its Division from the order of battle was to be avoided at all costs. In order to obviate such a scenario, a Whitehall operation was set in train far larger than that of June, which epitomised British concerns to mitigate against such an eventuality.

In an excellent paper, Cox covered the sequence of events that ensued, examining in detail the intense dealings and subterfuge, especially during the week that followed Fraser's message.⁹¹⁵ Before Churchill could reply to Wellington an additional telegram arrived in London from Tedder in Cairo, on 14 October. This reaffirmed the inferiority in aircraft numbers he first described, though he did anticipate that air superiority would be gained because of the qualitative advantage of the Allies.⁹¹⁶ As there were such differing estimates of air strengths between London and Cairo, Churchill stated that *'the matter was of such importance'* [emphasis added], that it had been decided that Air Chief Marshal Sir Wilfrid Freeman should be sent to the Middle East 'to clear up the facts'.⁹¹⁷ The rapidity of the decision making over the coming three days provided the most compelling evidence of Whitehall's anxiety to satisfy Fraser on this issue, reflecting its profound apprehension lest he not be reassured.

In replying to this latest message from Tedder, the Chief of the Air Staff Charles Portal read out his proposed response in front of Churchill, in which he told Tedder that his 'message has caused me considerable disappointment' and that 'your comparison of strength is most depressing and I think unjustifiably so', further questioning his methodology.⁹¹⁸ He then

⁹¹⁵ Cox, "White and Black", *INS*, 9:3, (1994).

⁹¹⁶ TNA, PREM 3/291/2, PUNCH 14, Tedder to Portal, 13/10/41.

⁹¹⁷ TNA, CAB 69/2/3, Defence Committee (Operations), DO(41)64th Meeting, 15/10/41.

⁹¹⁸ John Kennedy, *The Business of War. The War Narrative of Major-General Sir John Kennedy* (London, 1957),173; PREM 3/291/2, PUNCH 9, Portal to Tedder, 14/10/41.

penned an additional cable wanting to know what operational units were kept in Syria and Palestine, stressing that

stakes are so high that we must both try to ensure by every means that nothing likely to contribute to success has been overlooked, either here or in the Middle East.⁹¹⁹

The high stakes mentioned was unquestionably the lack of presence of the New Zealand Division in Eighth Army's order of battle. It was likely that this last comment especially caused Churchill to annotate in his characteristic red pen 'Admirable' when he read it the following day.⁹²⁰ He knew the stakes.

Tellingly, the next day, 15 October, Portal sent a strictly private telegram, PUNCH 11, with his own views to Tedder, of which no copy was passed to Churchill. He revealed that Tedder's message

has unfortunately raised acute political difficulty because New Zealand Government had just asked HMG for an assurance that we shall have air superiority and Prime Minister feels unable to give such an assurance in the light of your unqualified figures.⁹²¹

Thus, in order to give Fraser

the required assurance.... it is essential politically that some very senior officer should go out to Egypt immediately.....I am therefore sending Freeman and greatly regret this intrusion, and this unfortunate development in no way affects my absolute confidence in your ability.⁹²²

⁹¹⁹ TNA, PREM 3/291/2, PUNCH 10, Portal to Tedder, 14/10/41.

⁹²⁰ Ibid, annotation 15/9/41.

⁹²¹ Cox, "White and Black", *INS*, 9:3, (1994), 426.

⁹²² Ibid.

That same evening, Churchill explained to Auchinleck the events that had taken place and appended Fraser's telegram 'which I must answer soon as New Zealand Division [is] involved'.⁹²³ If the C-in-C was unaware before, he must now have become fully cognisant of the importance his Prime Minister attached to any requests from Fraser. In his reply to Churchill, Auchinleck stated that

if New Zealand forces are committed to battle, I am satisfied that the measure of support by tanks and aircraft is sufficient and adequate for the tasks they will be called on to perform.⁹²⁴

Significantly he further added that he proposed to send a 'staff officer to New Zealand to explain personally to Fraser conditions and intentions'.⁹²⁵

The officer was Colonel Keith Stewart, formerly Freyberg's GSO1, who was returning to New Zealand because of ill health. In an accompanying personal letter to Fraser, Auchinleck wrote that Stewart had been 'placed fully in the picture of my future plans...(and) that he is to communicate his information verbally to you and you alone', which he did when he arrived in Wellington in early November.⁹²⁶ That this episode transpired within the wider Crusader story, illustrated the willingness of the C-in-C to divulge details of the forthcoming campaign to a colonel in order to placate Fraser. It is further testimony of the importance to the British of the Division's presence in the front line and the steps they were prepared to take to ensure it.

Fully aware of the political imperatives of his mission, Freeman arrived in Egypt on 20 October and immediately went into conclave with Tedder. They produced a revised

⁹²³ CAC, CHAR 20/44/2, Churchill to Auchinleck, 15/10/41.

⁹²⁴ TNA, PREM 3/291/2, Auchinleck to Churchill, 17/10/41.

⁹²⁵ Ibid.

⁹²⁶ ANZ, WAI/23f, Auchinleck to Fraser, 18/10/41.

comparison of air strengths, which was signalled to London the same day with comparative strength figures for British and Axis air forces in Cyrenaica of 660 and 642 aircraft respectively.⁹²⁷ Of these, the RAF had a serviceability advantage for the start of Crusader of three to two, and the British anticipated having 50 per cent reserves available for the battle, whereas all Axis forces ‘are in [the] shop window’.⁹²⁸

As Cox expounded, Freeman

performed a political conjuring trick aimed at providing the Prime Minister with figures, which he must have known bore little relation to the reality of the forthcoming battle.⁹²⁹

They studiously ignored

the enemy’s Mediterranean air forces not based in Cyrenaica and the Eastern Mediterranean’, [and included] four RAF squadrons in Palestine and Syria that neither thought would be deployed to the Western Desert.⁹³⁰

Whether Churchill really believed these new figures is doubtful, as evidenced by a cryptic hand-written annotation he applied to the message from Freeman, but this was immaterial, since he had what he needed to frame his reply to Fraser.⁹³¹ In his Winch 3 cable to Wellington on 25 October, Churchill quoted all these new figures, adding that ‘General Auchinleck assures me that New Zealand Division will have all proper protection’, and that ‘all the above is of fateful secrecy [and] War Cabinet here have declined to be informed of offensive’.⁹³²

⁹²⁷ Cox, “White and Black”, *INS*, 9:3, (1994), 433; TNA, PREM 3/291/2, Freeman to Portal, 20/10/41.

⁹²⁸ *Ibid*, 430-33.

⁹²⁹ *Ibid*, 433.

⁹³⁰ *Ibid*.

⁹³¹ annotation, Freeman to Portal, 20/10/41,

⁹³² CAC, CHAR 20/44/50-52, WINCH No.3, Churchill to Fraser, 24/10/41.

Therefore, a relatively straightforward intelligence assessment concerning Luftwaffe strength in the Middle East created anxieties in Wellington that engendered a state of high anxiety in Whitehall, leading to fast dealings and subterfuge amongst the Air Staffs which prevented embarrassment for both Churchill and Fraser. It ultimately succeeded in staving off the prospect of New Zealand withholding its troops from Crusader.⁹³³ Stevens in one of his official histories commented that the adjective ‘fateful’ in Churchill’s cable to Fraser carries the mark of a well-known hand, [and] the intimation about the War Cabinet was a delicate way of stopping any insistence from the New Zealand Government.⁹³⁴

There is a strong accord with this observation, yet whilst acknowledging that there were few limits to Churchill’s subterfuge, interestingly at the very top of the page of this telegram was an instruction by Churchill that it was ‘*To be deciphered by Prime Minister’s Private Secretary*’ [emphasis added].⁹³⁵ This is the only such instance observed by the writer in the Chartwell Papers whereby such an instruction was issued by Churchill in his Winch cables to Fraser. An initial interpretation was that this was perhaps a ploy, which in association with the verbal information he would soon receive via Stewart, was a subtle way of letting his Wellington counterpart appreciate his inclusion in the most exclusive top-secret information concerning Crusader. The fact that other British cabinet members allegedly self-denied themselves foreknowledge of the operational date, was another manoeuvre to further help elicit a positive response.

⁹³³ Cox, “White and Black”, *INS*, 9:3, (1994), 433.

⁹³⁴ Stevens, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War, 1939-45, Problems of 2NZEF*, (Wellington, 1963), 43.

⁹³⁵ CAC, CHAR 20/44/50-52, WINCH No.3, Churchill to Fraser, 24/10/41.

However, although the correct result eventuated such a construal seems incorrect, as on that same day, in notes exchanged between Churchill's Office and the Dominions Office, extra strict regulation applied at the Whitehall end of this message too. Leslie Rowan, the Prime Minister's Private Secretary in Downing Street, explained that he had handed the telegram personally to Arthur Clark of the Dominions Office, who underlined that it 'would be enciphered only by the Chief Cipher Clerk. The enciphering would then be burnt, and the original copy then returned to us', which Clark then undertook and confirmed.⁹³⁶

Thus, the deciphering instruction seemed much more than an expedient stratagem intended to flatter Fraser as to his cognisance of the offensive. It reflected how far Churchill was prepared to go, aided by an act of artifice, in order to mollify his counterpart and ensure that New Zealand troops were in the line. That he needed to extend so far to achieve this was a manifestation of the respect he had for his counterpart's commitment to fight the enemy. It was also a reflection of his understanding, that if necessary, his fellow prime minister was perfectly prepared to take the hard decision to refuse to give authorisation if he thought his countrymen were to be severely disadvantaged and vulnerable as they had been in Greece and Crete.

This whole episode is revelatory, as it unmistakably showed that Fraser was now perfectly willing to get involved in some wider tactical aspects of the forthcoming operation if his compatriots were engaged. He was clearly prepared to by-pass his own GOC and the C-in-C in order to go direct to Churchill. This not only reflected his enhanced status, partly borne by the fighting commitment of his troops, but also his own staunchness in the cause, borne of his actions over Greece and intimate conversations with Churchill.

⁹³⁶ TNA, PREM 3/291/2, Note by Peck, 24/10/41 and Clark to Peck, 24/10/41.

Thus, in conclusion, Fraser's second trip to London was even more successful than the first in 1939. Then, he was Acting Prime Minister of a nation viewed by some in Whitehall as a financial basket case, and he used his skill in advancing the despatch of the First Echelon in order to elicit financial aid. Now, some twenty months later, with good trade terms in his pocket, he must have been gratified and reassured that he was at the centre of the decision-making and a well-regarded member of the Empire coalition. Yet events also stimulated and elicited a critical facility demonstrated by his unwillingness for New Zealand troops to approach battle with the same level of disadvantage that pertained in Greece and Crete. This undoubtedly caused a shudder in the corridors of power to prevent the great unsaid - New Zealand troops withdrawn from the Crusader order of battle - leading Churchill to pull out all the stops.

Joe Garner, who was Principal Private Secretary to the Dominions Secretary at this time, wrote that Fraser elicited Churchill's admiration for his solid support, forthright honesty and steadfastness, qualities that he did not always attribute to his fellow dominion prime ministers.⁹³⁷ And as Andrew Stewart summarized, 'it is hard to find a view of him as having been anything other than as a giant, both as leader of New Zealand and as a wartime prime minister'.⁹³⁸

⁹³⁷ Joe Garner, *The Commonwealth Office, 1925-68* (London, 1978), 154.

⁹³⁸ Andrew Stewart, "At War with Bill Jordan: The New Zealand High Commission in Wartime London", *JICH* 40:1, (2012) 76.

Theme IV

Well into their stride. Lessons learnt and
dominion equality achieved.

Chapter Eight

Freyberg, leadership renewed

From the summer of 1941 Freyberg's reputation and career was at a crossroads on two main counts. Firstly, his military reputation was questioned over the debacle in repelling the German assault on Crete, which generated a whole literary canon on the competency of his command of the island but is beyond the scope of this thesis. Secondly, his role as GOC 2NZEF and his failure to balance the inherent twin subordinations to his government and MEC, by the deliberate decision not to inform Wellington over the Greece expedition placed him effectively on probation. This chapter is concerned with the aftermath of the latter of these two failures, and recounts how Freyberg, tempered by experience, responded and the ensuing decision-making he undertook over the next seventeen months. It is a direct chronological and thematic continuation of Chapter Six, extending to November 1942.

As mentioned in Chapter Six, Fraser had largely settled in his mind that the dressing-down he gave Freyberg on 1 June over this and the associated reiteration of the responsibilities he expected, was a sufficient admonition. Yet the Prime Minister was still troubled over the allegedly fraught relationship the General had with his subordinate commanders and retained a last vestige of doubt. He needed a final confirmation from the higher British command regarding his suitability, and he requested and received testimonies from Freyberg's past and present C-in-Cs, via the CIGS, concerning this dilemma. Both Wavell and Auchinleck came back with strong recommendations that he be retained in his post.⁹³⁹

⁹³⁹ Kennedy, *Business of War*, 160; TNA, WO 216/125, Dill to Wavell and Auchinleck, 20/8/41; Ibid, Wavell to Dill, 21 & 27/8/41; John Rylands Library, University of Manchester [henceforth JRL], Auchinleck Papers, Auchinleck to Dill, 2/9/41, (306).

Auchinleck

Despite their occasional differences with Wavell in his time as C-in-C Middle East, Freyberg and Blamey had developed a marked respect and regard for him, and a mutually satisfactory *modus operandi* became established by the spring of 1941. Both GOCs regretted his departure.⁹⁴⁰ General Sir Claude Auchinleck replaced Wavell and as events were to show, he was unsuccessful in reaching such an understanding with his dominion GOCs, which indicated a character weakness and signal failure in appreciation by the new C-in-C. This was especially evident after the Crusader campaign in his dealings with Freyberg, and to gain a fuller appreciation of this, it is deemed essential to consider the temperament of Auchinleck and his relationship with the dominion forces even before battle commenced.

Auchinleck, had served his military career in the Indian Army and thus conceivably had that quasi-colonial outlook in which national interests would be subordinated to that of military command. He unfortunately did not seem to fully appreciate that the dominions had a different one being very conscious of their independent status.⁹⁴¹ On taking command and meeting Australian leaders, instead of perhaps voicing support for their endeavour in retaining Tobruk, he notably got himself off on the wrong foot, as Rowell recalled, ‘with a crack at our indiscipline’.⁹⁴² He was then immediately thrown into the maelstrom of the request, initially from Blamey and then from Canberra, to relieve 9 Australian Division in Tobruk, which ended with the Commonwealth Government insisting on the relief being undertaken in the weeks leading up to Crusader. This left a bad taste in MEC, and an affronted Auchinleck needed to be placated by Churchill, ostensibly to avoid resigning over the issue.⁹⁴³

⁹⁴⁰ Johnston-White, *British Commonwealth*, 239; Hetherington, *Blamey*, 177; Murphy, *Relief*, 10.

⁹⁴¹ Cox, “White and Black”, *INS*, 9:3, (1994), 408-9.

⁹⁴² Horner, *High Command*, 114.

⁹⁴³ Churchill, *The Grand Alliance*, 369-70.

Furthermore, it caused a rupture in his relationship with Blamey, who became outspoken in his view of the C-in-C and the employment of dominion forces. He always sensed that Auchinleck did not quite 'get it', as his predecessor had done, mentioning that 'the Auk and I don't get on'.⁹⁴⁴ In all likelihood Wavell, who had a greater empathy with the Australian viewpoint than his successor, might well have sought to settle the dispute within the confines of the Cairo high command.⁹⁴⁵ During this time, Freyberg was refitting the Division and integrating the reinforcements. He met Blamey in August, and almost certainly became aware of the Australian issues, but there seems to be no contemporary documents in which he displayed a view on the matter.⁹⁴⁶

Following his endorsement of Freyberg to the CIGS in early September, Auchinleck reiterated it two weeks later when he cited the General's ability as 'a good organiser and trainer'. However, in alluding to doubts expressed by Dill in a previous letter, he added that 'I will tell Cunningham and Godwin-Austen to watch him in the Western Desert'.⁹⁴⁷ Arguably such a prejudicial outlook by the C-in-C became a harbinger of the future difficulties in his dealings with the NZEF GOC, and crucially a disparaging and perhaps condescending attitude to the dominion formations in general started to become apparent.

This aspect was particularly displayed in appended postscripts in two personal letters he wrote to Dill. In the first on 16 September he alluded to differences in doctrine whereby Australia and New Zealand wanted their forces concentrated and not have units detached. Yet Auchinleck, no doubt wanting to remove their brigades when required, bemoaned that

⁹⁴⁴ Johnston-White, *British Commonwealth*, 242; Hetherington, *Blamey*, 179.

⁹⁴⁵ Cox, "White and Black", *INS*, 9:3, (1994), 409.

⁹⁴⁶ ANZ, WAI18/5/43, GOC Diary, 12/8/41. [The previously sparse entries in the GOC Diary, mentioned concerning the Greece decision, was corrected when John White, became PA to Freyberg, and a more detailed one resulted, becoming a valuable archival source.] ATL, 2000-94-2, King interviews Sir John White, 13/8/86.

⁹⁴⁷ JRL, Auchinleck Papers, Auchinleck to Dill, 16/9/41, (338).

such policy ‘makes for inflexibility’.⁹⁴⁸ The second on 8 November, just two weeks before Crusader was to commence, was quite a damning insight into his mindset with regard to the Pacific dominion forces. He mentioned his quiet confidence for the forthcoming campaign, and complimenting Freyberg: ‘I doubt if you could find a better trained or finer division anywhere’. But then ‘enclosed a statement which I think will interest you’.⁹⁴⁹

It shows conclusively that as far as actual numbers are concerned ‘British’ troops, ie those from the UK exceeded troops from the Dominions in Greece and Crete and suffered much more heavily than they did. I realise that a good many of these troops are administrative ones, but I do not think that is really material. In view of the ideas so often expressed about the ‘sacrifice’ of Dominion troops in these operations, you might like to use these figures.⁹⁵⁰

Such a postscript seems astonishing in that the C-in-C deemed it worthy of his time, just before a crucial offensive, to establish a numbers game from previous campaigns of which he was not the commander in order to deprecate the relative contribution of New Zealand and Australian troops in Greece and Crete. At best he just wanted to stress that the dominions were not bearing the disproportionate burden often ascribed them. However, it could be interpreted that, at worse, this reflected not only a condescension towards the Pacific dominion divisions, but arguably a deep-seated animus to their partial military independence. Whatever the motive though, this negative facet of the character of Auchinleck became

⁹⁴⁸ JRL, Auchinleck Papers, Auchinleck to Dill, 16/9/41, (338).

⁹⁴⁹ Ibid, Auchinleck to Dill, 8/11/41, (427).

⁹⁵⁰ Ibid; [The figures in the British Official History is virtually 50-50. (Playfair *et al*, Vol.II, 147). However, in both the Greece and Crete evacuations, priority was given to the fighting men rather than administrative ones. As a larger proportion of British were of this latter type, then they consisted a greater number of captured. In fact, at Sphakia, Kippenberger made the decision that the Kiwi Concert Party and Brigade band must stay behind, so that more riflemen could depart. (Kippenberger, *Infantry Brigadier*, 75.)]

markedly apparent at the end of the year. It was to cause the most complex and at times vexatious challenges Freyberg faced in his dealings with his superior, notably in the period from December 1941 to February 1942.

Crusader

Freyberg himself, not only because he was senior to virtually any other General Officer in the Eighth Army, but also having gone through the recent experiences of aerial bombardment, was not backward in making his voice heard in the planning stage for Operation Crusader. In recounting the events nine years later, Freyberg, at a conference on 6 October, six weeks before the battle commenced, cast doubt on the outline plan and almost to the point of insistence stated that

unless we had tanks under our immediate command, we should not be moved across the wire until the armoured battle had commenced. In this I was quite precise. I was not popular. They then agreed.⁹⁵¹

He visited Eighth Army commander General Alan Cunningham a month later, days before the offensive was to commence, and further forwarded his opinion stating that he thought that the initial thrust by the armoured brigades of XXX Corps ‘will fail, and [the New Zealand division] shall be ordered in the end to march upon Tobruk’.⁹⁵² It must be stressed there is contemporaneous confirmation of this sentiment, and that before the engagement, on both the 15 and 19 November, Freyberg wrote in his GOC War Diary about ‘busting through to’ or going ‘slap for Tobruk’.⁹⁵³ Evidently, it is clearly apparent that even with the constraints of being a subordinate commander in Eighth Army, Freyberg, like his Prime Minister, was willing to question the viability of an operation.

⁹⁵¹ ANZ, WAI11/1, Comment by Freyberg on draft of Official History, July 1950.

⁹⁵² ANZ, WAI8/23a, Freyberg to Fraser, 18/12/41.

⁹⁵³ ANZ, WAI8/5/44, GOC Diary, 15/11 & 19/11/41.

As events unfolded, Churchill's anxious manoeuvrings of the previous month over air superiority, thus ensuring that the Division was in Eighth Army's order of battle (Chapter Seven), would be extremely prescient. The opening stages of the battle were a disaster for the British as the armoured brigades of XXX Corps were heavily defeated by the Axis forces, which caused Cunningham to think about breaking off the offensive altogether. But a combination of Auchinleck's *sang-froid* and Eighth Army's determination meant this crisis was overcome.⁹⁵⁴ Arguably the greatest contribution was made by the New Zealanders, because as events transpired, Freyberg and 4 and 6 Brigades did indeed relieve Tobruk and saved the operation. In a post war account to the British official historian, the corps commander, Godwin-Austen, added that 'the story of this campaign is simple, Freyberg and the New Zealanders broke the Afrika Korps, but in doing so broke themselves'.⁹⁵⁵

In several distinguished accounts of the battle, such a view is maintained, with perhaps the most memorable characterisation being Murphy's description of Freyberg imploring his two-brigade division to join hands with Tobruk, which left 'an indelible imprint on the campaign'.⁹⁵⁶ The upshot, however, was that more New Zealanders died and were taken prisoner in Crusader than in any other campaign of the Second World War.⁹⁵⁷ Yet, despite being almost overrun, the Division made a 'masterly withdrawal from the battle' arriving at Baggush on 2 December, where Freyberg spoke with Auchinleck and the new Eighth Army commander, Lieutenant General Neil Ritchie.⁹⁵⁸

⁹⁵⁴ Jonathan Fennell, *Fighting the People's War. The British and Commonwealth Armies and the Second World War*, (Cambridge, 2019), 155.

⁹⁵⁵ TNA, CAB 106/709, Latham to Kippenberger, 28/9/50.

⁹⁵⁶ Michael Carver, *Tobruk*, (London, 1964), 126; J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and L.C.F. Turner, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (Cape Town, 1957); Murphy, *Relief*, 520.

⁹⁵⁷ Murphy, 521.

⁹⁵⁸ JRL, Auchinleck Papers, Auchinleck to Smith, 3/12/41, (509); [Ritchie replaced Cunningham a week earlier].

Immediate aftermath-concerns in London and Cairo

Whilst the Division was recovering and reforming just inside the Egyptian border at Baggush, Freyberg sent Fraser four telegrams over the following five days disclosing any information he knew as it unfolded, particularly the casualty estimates and the high rate of loss amongst senior officers of brigadier and lieutenant-colonel rank.⁹⁵⁹ Auchinleck, who was also at Baggush alongside Ritchie, obtained a draft of the first of these communications to Wellington, and forwarded a copy to his CGS in Cairo, Arthur Smith. The C-in-C instructed him to pass this cable to the Minister of State, Oliver Lyttelton, who expeditiously ensured that London received its contents.⁹⁶⁰ Additionally at this time, a concerned Churchill cabled Auchinleck wanting estimates of New Zealand (and South African) casualties, citing his need to contact their governments if they were heavy.⁹⁶¹

Freyberg journeyed to Cairo a few days later, and whilst there met Lampson and disclosed his third and more extensive message to Wellington. It is assumed that because New Zealand did not have any diplomatic representation in Egypt, or anywhere apart from London, they viewed the British Embassy in Cairo as having that role for the Dominion. It seemed normal practice for Lampson to see cables sent to the Dominion, as indeed he did six months earlier when he passed on to the Foreign Office Fraser's telegram to Nash. Freyberg mentioned to the Ambassador that he anticipated his government would be very critical over the campaign and expected the Prime Minister to send him another detailed questionnaire in his characteristic undiluted style.⁹⁶²

⁹⁵⁹ ANZ, WAI8/69, Freyberg to Fraser, 3/12, 4/12, 7/12, 8/12/41.

⁹⁶⁰ JRL, Auchinleck Papers, Auchinleck to Smith, 3/12/41, (509).

⁹⁶¹ Ibid, Churchill to Auchinleck, 7/12/41, (527).

⁹⁶² TNA, FO 954/4A/345, Lampson to Churchill, 10/12/41.

Lampson, from his experience in the wake of Crete the previous June, and the pertinent questioning by both Fraser and Berendsen, was naturally heedful of the thread running through the British politico-military leadership regarding the need to keep the New Zealand Government appraised and appeased. He forwarded a copy of this long cable and suggested that Churchill send a personal message to Fraser along the lines that ‘none of the lives lost would be wasted’.⁹⁶³ Although in effect this was previously undertaken, probably in the wake of Freyberg’s first cable via Lyttelton, it is patently clear that the two leading British political figures in Cairo reiterated the distinctive leitmotif running through the British command of that time. This was to have the profoundest sensitivity to any discontent emanating from the Dominion. Despite their disproportionately high battle casualties, it was of the greatest imperative to avoid a repeat of the acrimony after Crete, thus minimise any potential disquiet. Such an assertion gains added credence given Auchinleck’s earlier involvement emanating from his dealings in the backwash of the relative aircraft numbers dispute, two months previous. He was thus clearly apprised of the essentiality of such a policy, as evinced by his instruction to his CGS, back in Cairo, to pass Freyberg’s first message to Lyttelton.

Churchill’s subsequent message to Fraser on 9 December was fortunately perhaps not a Winch telegram, and thus went via the Dominions Office. It stated that ‘I am deeply grieved about the severe losses your heroic division has *again* (emphasis added) suffered in the forefront of the battle’.⁹⁶⁴ The Dominions Office expressed apprehension over the word ‘again’, and memos were exchanged with Number 10, as Cranborne thought ‘that this might lead to misunderstanding on Mr Fraser’s part’.⁹⁶⁵ Fortuitously it was removed, as the ‘misunderstanding’ that Cranborne alluded to was undoubtedly to dampen any perception

⁹⁶³ TNA, FO 954/4A/345, Lampson to Churchill, 10/12/41.

⁹⁶⁴ TNA, DO 35/1009/13, draft, Churchill to Fraser, 9/12/41.

⁹⁶⁵ Ibid, Garner to Stapely, 9/12/41.

that the Dominion troops were dying at a much greater rate than British troops, being victims of British ineptitude. This was logical when considering their Crusader casualty numbers, and by using the Johnston-White methodology as previously for Greece and Crete, the New Zealand Division comprised 17% of the men of Eighth Army yet suffered 26% of total casualties, including 34% of those killed.⁹⁶⁶

Therefore, ample reiteration is provided of the concerns the British expressed from the top downwards on this issue from Cairo and London. Although this thesis does not go quite as far as supporting Johnston-White's dictum that 'put simply, men from the dominions were in the desert to fight and die', the Division's casualty rate of double the proportional death rate certainly does provide convincing resonance to that view.⁹⁶⁷ What seems unquestionable, however, is that there was a distinct vein running throughout Whitehall to avoid such a perception becoming rooted.

Probably to London's surprise, a warm reply resulted from Wellington, with a request that Churchill's message be released for the New Zealand press, which was forthcoming.⁹⁶⁸ The fact that nothing further ensued was plausibly because essentially it was a victory with the Division in the van, and the pride this would have stimulated. Freyberg's report mentioned the reassuring accounts of Allied air superiority, so in effect the Freeman/Tedder conspiracy over aircraft figures of the previous October was reflected in the battle reality. Moreover, perhaps most significantly, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor would have focused Fraser's increasing anxieties upon the Pacific, and perhaps have partially obscured any severe uneasiness resulting from Crusader. However, what was starting to emerge and become noticeable in the diplomatic exchanges between both nations was, as mentioned previously,

⁹⁶⁶ Murphy, *Relief*, 521 & 524.

⁹⁶⁷ Johnston-White, "Role of the Dominions", 217-18.

⁹⁶⁸ TNA, DO 35/1009/13, Churchill to Fraser, 9/12/41; Fraser to Churchill, 10/12/41.

an undoubted consideration on the part of British politicians and diplomats to any restiveness emerging from Wellington. As for MEC, this started to move in the opposite direction.

Freyberg and Auchinleck - the first dispute

In order to assess Freyberg's leadership in the Second World War, and how he interpreted and conducted his role, it is essential to appreciate that possibly nothing so incensed him in his six years as GOC, as his relationship with Auchinleck and MEC in the two months after Crusader. He was still conscious of, and a little defensive about, the disquiet Fraser had felt the previous summer over his command, and in addition the Division had just incurred a considerable blood cost. During this period three contentious strands arose both sequentially and simultaneously to each other with MEC.

The first evolved in the immediate aftermath of the withdrawal to Baggush with the remnants of 4 and 6 Brigades on 3 December. 5 Brigade, which was largely intact, was still in Libya ensconced under the wing of 4 Indian Division, but Ritchie, keen to continue to press the enemy, wanted to use it. Freyberg agreed, but 'in view of our heavy casualties' asked that they would not be 'used in further offensive operations'. He understood that this had been approved by the Eighth Army commander, and that the brigade would remain under Ritchie's command. Freyberg sent orders to the Maadi base camp for Lieutenant Colonel Tim Wilder to come up to Baggush to take over as acting brigadier of 5 Brigade.⁹⁶⁹

On his arrival two days later, the latter received instructions from the General 'not to be committed to active operations'.⁹⁷⁰ What eventuated though, without the GOC's knowledge, was that Wilder was put under Godwin-Austen's command for operations west of Tobruk, and the acting brigadier informed the corps commander of the restrictions imposed on him to

⁹⁶⁹ Freyberg to Auchinleck, 12/12/41, in Murphy, *Relief*, 517; ANZ, WAI8/5/44, GOC Diary, 3/12/41.

⁹⁷⁰ GOC Diary, 5/12/41; Murphy, 515.

avoid further heavy New Zealand casualties, who passed this onto Ritchie.⁹⁷¹ The next thing Freyberg knew was that Auchinleck wanted to see him on 10 December where, at a stiff meeting, the C-in-C upbraided him for interfering with active operations, stating that this would not be tolerated.⁹⁷² Freyberg did not attempt to answer the charge immediately and bit his tongue, as he viewed that judgement had already been passed ‘upon me without asking for my side of the case’, preferring instead to think the matter over.⁹⁷³ He replied with a long and ‘difficult letter’ of explanation to Auchinleck, where he outlined his recollection of the 3 December conversations with Ritchie, to which notably the C-in-C was also in attendance.⁹⁷⁴

In order to understand in general terms Freyberg’s leadership of the NZEF in December 1941, it is of fundamental importance to appreciate the discontent and disillusionment he felt with MEC at this time over a number of issues. The Division had amply demonstrated its loyalty and fighting ardour, having given the ‘Boche a knock that turned the scales’, yet regrettably, such fidelity made ‘the later disagreement about the use of 5 Brigade all the more painful’.⁹⁷⁵ His despondency was additionally coloured by his belief in the ‘need to fight his division as an integrated unit with armour under command’, which ran counter to the prevailing brigade-group doctrine advocated by Auchinleck.⁹⁷⁶ Freyberg had expressed this latter view ‘on questions of policy and equipment’ both in writing and verbally to Smith on 8 December, something to which the C-in-C took exception to six weeks later.⁹⁷⁷ Finally, he was disconcerted that MEC unilaterally used the Division’s Petrol Company trucks and drivers for the Polish Brigade, to which he protested.⁹⁷⁸

⁹⁷¹ Murphy, *Relief*, 515.

⁹⁷² ANZ, WAI8/5/44, GOC Diary, 9/12/41; Freyberg, *Bernard Freyberg*, 363.

⁹⁷³ Ibid.

⁹⁷⁴ Murphy, 517; GOC Diary, 11/12/41.

⁹⁷⁵ Ibid, 8/12/41; Murphy, 520.

⁹⁷⁶ Pugsley, *Bloody Road*, 549.

⁹⁷⁷ GOC Diary, 8/12/41.

⁹⁷⁸ Ibid, 12/12/41.

On 13 December the gloom and stress felt by Freyberg manifested itself physically, when he suffered a possible recurrence of his pre-war heart condition, recording that he ‘had a poor night with a fluttering heart due to being tired’.⁹⁷⁹ Additionally, he drafted a message to Fraser which, as it transpired, was not actually sent but does provide an insight into his outlook at this time. The context was the proposal for the Division to recuperate and refit in Syria soon, and Freyberg possibly anticipating active operations there, stated that

I feel that if we were to fight the Germans in the Caucuses next spring, it might be prudent for us to range ourselves alongside the Australians either as an Anzac Corps or direct into their corps, Australia understands our point of view and would not try to break up organisation.⁹⁸⁰

It seems evident that in his despair Freyberg wanted to get away from MEC and knowing the belligerency of his Australian counterpart on the issue of brigade groupings, considered foregoing his ambition of becoming the Anzac commander to fight alongside a like-minded GOC such as Blamey. One year earlier, in the wake of the acrimony with MEC and BTE over the return of the previously dispersed New Zealand units, he sought the security of an Anzac Corps. Now in December 1941 following Crusader, and the dispersal of 5 Brigade, such an idea gained prominence in his mind again. This time, with the added advantage of the Division being several hundreds of miles away from MEC in Syria.

Operation Graduate - the second dispute

In early autumn 1941, the great Allied strategic goal was to capture Tripoli and liberate Tripolitania, thereby creating a base from which to attack Sicily.⁹⁸¹ This was Operation

⁹⁷⁹ ANZ, WAI18/5/44, 13/12/41.

⁹⁸⁰ Ibid; ANZ, WAI18/4/34, Freyberg to Fraser, undated and unsent.

⁹⁸¹ I.S.O. Playfair *et al*, *Volume III: British Fortunes Reach Their Lowest Ebb (September 1941 to September 1942)* (London, 1956), 119.

Acrobat, which was planned to ensue after a successful Crusader. In December, as the Axis forces were retreating westwards from Tobruk to Benghazi, it was anticipated they would withdraw as far as the naturally strong defensive position of Agheila, and here the Eighth Army would face them. An offensive involving a corps-sized British frontal assault was proposed, which would act in tandem with a lightly equipped brigade group to be landed on the coast at Ras-el-Ali, to the west of the enemy position. This would prevent reinforcements reaching the Axis forces, thus ensuring their complete destruction.⁹⁸² The landing expedition aspect was attributed firstly as Operation Blood Orange, but then subsequently as Graduate or Acrobat Minimus.⁹⁸³

This project was first hinted to Freyberg on 17 December when Smith, as CGS, relayed to him instructions from Auchinleck that changed the proposed move of the Division from Syria to one along the Suez Canal at Kabrit. This ostensibly was because MEC ‘must have a really good division as GHQ Reserve’.⁹⁸⁴ Smith further asked whether there would be any adverse reaction on the part of the New Zealand Government if when the time comes your Division is used as a spearhead in an overseas expedition.⁹⁸⁵

Interestingly, five days later on 22 December, Freyberg received a reply from Auchinleck over his explanatory letter of 11 December concerning the orders to 5 Brigade.⁹⁸⁶ The C-in-C

⁹⁸² Scoullar, *Battle for Egypt*, 11.

⁹⁸³ TNA, WO 201/2256; ANZ, WAI8/3/22; TNA, WO 201/2258.

⁹⁸⁴ ANZ, WAI8/3/22, Smith to Freyberg, 17/12/41.

⁹⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁸⁶ Murphy, *Relief*, 518; ANZ, WAI8/5/44, GOC Diary, 22/12/41. [Murphy revealed that Auchinleck answered, and presumably dated Freyberg’s letter on 15 December. The GOC Diary refers to the General’s receipt of it].

accepted ‘unreservedly’ that he acted in ‘good faith’, mentioned that the brigade would be withdrawn at the first opportunity, and then finally thanked him ‘for your very straightforward and soldierly letter’.⁹⁸⁷

It is perhaps no coincidence that this response from Auchinleck, nearly two weeks after Freyberg’s explanation, came just after Smith’s enquiry about the Division being used in an ‘overseas expedition’.⁹⁸⁸ The question is surely open as to whether the conciliatory tone of the C-in-C’s letter was a device to obtain Freyberg’s compliance for this operation, since in the wake of a disagreement of this sort, he could hardly request that a subordinate commander lead such an operation with such a dispute still in the air.

Furthermore, on 23 December, the following day to the receipt of Auchinleck’s assuaging reply, a letter arrived from Smith to arrange a subsequent meeting three days later with Freyberg, where they ‘discussed future plans’, no doubt related to the message of 17 December.⁹⁸⁹ What eventuated was that New Zealand 5 Brigade was cast in the role of the seaborne force, and Freyberg, assisted by the 22 Guards Brigade, would join the landing troops from the desert to the south and thus form a divisional-sized blocking force under his overall command.⁹⁹⁰

The juxtaposition of Smith’s letter suggesting a meeting, just one day after Auchinleck’s friendly message, despite his animus towards the New Zealand commander, provide credible evidence that the C-in-C’s tone and implied regret was just an expedient manoeuvre to attain Freyberg’s acquiescence. It was clear that the GOC would need to inform Wellington about

⁹⁸⁷ Murphy, 518; Freyberg, *Bernard Freyberg*, 364.

⁹⁸⁸ Ibid; ANZ, WAI18/3/22. Smith to Freyberg, 17/12/41.

⁹⁸⁹ GOC Diary, 23/12 & 26/12/41.

⁹⁹⁰ Scoullar, *Egypt*, 11.

this prospective overseas expedition, but he delayed at first, possibly because he hoped that under penetrating analysis the unviability of the operation would become apparent.⁹⁹¹

Scoullar, the official historian of *Battle for Egypt*, presented a detailed assessment of the dilemma facing Freyberg. This included the reasons why he could not, at this early stage, refuse the assignment, which he was entitled to do within the terms of his Charter. These included the effect on Eighth Army morale if it was thought that the Division ‘had the right to pick and choose their tasks’, and additionally his own troops ‘would resent any suggestion that it would not essay dangerous operations’. Freyberg, in a finely balancing predicament, thus did not refuse, yet ensured that he would supervise the detailed planning, and ‘urged his views in MEC, asking questions...and raising still further objection’.⁹⁹² He was augmented in this role by information from his intelligence officer, Captain Geoffrey Cox, who revealed that there was a shortage of landing craft for training.⁹⁹³

This undoubtedly would have increased Freyberg’s foreboding, as being such an assiduous trainer, the opportunities for preparations were distinctly limited. Furthermore, on 4 January, Auchinleck initialled and dated a preliminary report on the operation, the conclusions of which highlighted the problematic weather conditions at that time of year, notably that ‘the chances of landing.....on a selected day are much less than evens’.⁹⁹⁴ Freyberg almost certainly saw this, as a copy resides in Archives New Zealand, and the GOC Diary revealed a meeting between the two on the same day.⁹⁹⁵ The upshot of all this was that MEC thought the plan still viable, and as a consequence, the C-in-C requested the matter to be referred to the New Zealand War Cabinet.⁹⁹⁶

⁹⁹¹ Scoullar, *Egypt*, 12.

⁹⁹² Ibid, 12-13

⁹⁹³ Geoffrey Cox, *Tale of Two Battles* (London, 1987), 212; ANZ, WAI18/3/22, DOL to Freyberg, 3/1/42.

⁹⁹⁴ TNA, WO 201/2258, Acrobat Minimus, 4/1/42.

⁹⁹⁵ ANZ, WAI18/3/22, Acrobat Minimus, no date; ANZ, WAI18/5/44, GOC Diary, 4/1/42.

⁹⁹⁶ Ibid, 10/1/42; Scoullar, *Egypt*, 13.

Freyberg wrote of ‘having [the] greatest difficulty in drafting’ his 10 January dispatch to Wellington, and appended a copy of the CGS’s message of 17 December about the overseas expedition.⁹⁹⁷ This problem was almost certainly the attempt to square the uncompromisable dilemma of respecting the military chain of command over an operation he did not agree with, alongside the letter and spirit of his Charter in the light of the clarification by Fraser of the previous June. The intensive consultations that took place with MEC concerning this operation, must also be seen in the context of Freyberg’s first disputation with Auchinleck over 5 Brigade and his declining confidence in him. Nevertheless, in his telegram to Fraser he mentioned that he stressed to the C-in-C that any operation must have sufficient air cover, but then, citing Wellington’s ‘present preoccupation in Pacific affairs’, suggested that he be granted discretion in deciding the viability of small operations.⁹⁹⁸

During the period in which a reply from the Government was awaited, planning continued to proceed, and on 12 January Freyberg flew to Eighth Army headquarters, where in a long conference with Ritchie they decided that any seaborne operation ‘must be consequent upon the main plan of defeating the enemy’s forces now facing us, and not the reverse’.⁹⁹⁹ Thus clearly, Freyberg was making this expedition behind enemy lines contingent on the Axis forces being severely degraded, without specifically applying a refusal of 5 Brigade’s use. Additionally, other problems were becoming apparent. In a 12 January letter to Auchinleck by Ritchie, but not divulged to Freyberg, the Eighth Army commander indicated concerns that the light from the moon period between 25 January and 12 February would make the venture ‘decidedly dangerous’ on account of the submarine attack risk. Therefore, much to Ritchie’s chagrin, it became necessary to postpone any operation until mid-February.¹⁰⁰⁰

⁹⁹⁷ ANZ, WAI18/5/44, GOC Diary, 4/1/42. 9/1/42.

⁹⁹⁸ ANZ, WAI18/69, Freyberg to Jones/Fraser, 10/1/42.

⁹⁹⁹ JRL, Auchinleck Papers, Ritchie to Auchinleck, 12/1/42, (630).

¹⁰⁰⁰ Ibid.

The reply from Wellington to Freyberg's 10 January cable, was received on 21 January, a surprisingly long eleven days. Fraser, with his inbuilt caution and scepticism borne of the high casualty rate suffered by his countrymen in Crusader, refused to give his GOC the requested *carte blanche*. He emphasised his wish 'to be consulted before they are committed to any particular operation', stressing that without specific information 'we do not feel that we are in a position to make any detailed comment'.¹⁰⁰¹

Fraser's concerns though, had been made null and void at the final planning conference, three days previous, when Royal Navy attendees, fully aware of the lunar-induced delay, scuppered the operation as their stipulation for 24-hour air cover could not be guaranteed.¹⁰⁰² In recounting the meeting, Freyberg mentioned how he vigorously expounded his reservations, but was apparently beckoned out of the room by Admiral Cunningham and apprised of naval objections, arguing that the operation was off.¹⁰⁰³ Interestingly a copy of the agenda for this conference has a pencilled annotation, initialled by Ritchie, dated '22/1' with the accompanying comment, 'Now off'.¹⁰⁰⁴ It is unclear whether this was as a result of Royal Navy insistence or because Rommel's limited offensive from Agheila the day before, had made Graduate unviable. Although not knowing this was the case for several days, Freyberg was relieved not only about the abandoning of the operation, but that any necessity for him to make a decision of such magnitude was rendered redundant. His brigade continued to train at Kabrit, but by late January the German advance had created sufficient alarm for Smith to warn Freyberg that now the whole Division 'might be wanted in the forward area'.¹⁰⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰¹ ANZ, WAI8/3/22, Fraser to Freyberg, 21/1/42.

¹⁰⁰² Freyberg statement to Scoullar, 3/5/48, in *Egypt*, 14.

¹⁰⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰⁴ TNA, WO 201/2256, Operation Blood Orange, 19/1/41.

¹⁰⁰⁵ WAI8/3/22, Smith to Freyberg, 27/1/42.

Intriguingly, whilst constructing his narratives for the *Battle for Egypt*, the War History Branch narrator Ronald Walker, in a letter to Scoullar in 1948, stated that in the cables that passed between Freyberg and the Government

there are references to documents, apparently not now in existence,
...[of] notes from him to the Government asking for support against the
desert landing scheme.¹⁰⁰⁶

Such opacity still exists in the archives to the present day, and it is a contentious point as to whether the General actually attempted to forestall the normal chain of military command in order to subvert the operation because of his profound doubts and his higher loyalty to the Government of New Zealand. Tentative credence to such a proposition is provided by the eleven-day period it took to elicit a reply from Wellington to the General's 10 January telegram, being very unusual on such a crucial issue, but at this juncture such a suggestion is clearly conjectural.

Freyberg's Report - the third dispute

It is of some significance that whilst the first dispute over the use of 5 Brigade left a sour taste, it lasted less than two weeks and almost sequentially Operation Graduate followed. Yet when Fraser replied on 21 January about Graduate, it coincided with the publication of Freyberg's 50-page report of the Libyan Campaign, which became the third dispute the General had with his superior. The convergence of these latter two differences occurred as Freyberg had to submit separate cables to Wellington which procedurally were perused by Auchinleck. The first was the GOC's narrative of the campaign, his 'Report', and the second the required response to Fraser's telegram of 21 January.

¹⁰⁰⁶ ANZ, WAI111/Box 3, Walker to Scoullar, 28/1/48.

Being fully aware of Freyberg's views on brigade groups, Auchinleck requested an advanced copy of the account to oversee, feeling that 'nothing should go in it that is not in accordance with the policy he wishes to adopt in tactical operations'.¹⁰⁰⁷ In a detailed four-page scrutiny, which revealed the C-in-C's increasingly thin-skin and authoritarianism, he demanded that any negative reference to battle groups be erased as this 'runs completely counter to....policy'.¹⁰⁰⁸ This caused the already awkward relationship that existed between the two to be further amplified. In Archives New Zealand today, there are both the expurgated and unexpurgated versions. The former having had statements removed such as 'the inherent weakness of the two-brigade division', and that the Brigade Group 'is unsuitable for attacking organised positions in daylight ...[and] gets into immediate trouble if it is attacked'.¹⁰⁰⁹ Auchinleck was clearly not going to tolerate the publication, even on a secret basis, of any aspects than ran counter to his prevailing view.

The day after receiving Fraser's reply with respect to the 'overseas expedition', and not knowing that Operation Graduate had effectively been cancelled, Freyberg drafted his response to Wellington. This too was overseen by Auchinleck, and just as he had with the GOC's report on the Libyan campaign, he edited this draft mentioning that 'it gives too much detail of a very secret nature'.¹⁰¹⁰ Freyberg was unimpressed and disliked the amended account written for him in the first person, which was 'not likely to meet NZ requirements'.¹⁰¹¹ After discussions with the CGS though, he did decide to 'to send it off as quotation', and thus avoid appending his own opinion.¹⁰¹²

¹⁰⁰⁷ ANZ, WAI8/3/20, Smith to Freyberg, 21/1/42.

¹⁰⁰⁸ Ibid, "The New Zealand Division in Cyrenaica"; ANZ, WAI8/3/22, Smith to Freyberg, 23/1/41.

¹⁰⁰⁹ ANZ, WAI8/3/19, "The New Zealand Division in Cyrenaica"; ANZ, WAI8/11/E.

¹⁰¹⁰ ANZ, WAI8/3/22, Freyberg to Smith, 22/1/42; Smith to Freyberg, 23/1/42.

¹⁰¹¹ ANZ, WAI8/5/44, GOC Diary, 24/1/42.

¹⁰¹² Ibid.

In this quotationally modified version, it mentioned that the C-in-C states that

there is no immediate operation contemplated in which it is
proposed to use the whole Division, [and] as in the past the New
Zealand Government will be consulted before any major role is
assigned to New Zealand Division.¹⁰¹³

But the extract further added that an ‘opportunity may arise during campaign to land Brigade Group in rear of enemy as part of larger plan’, and such an event might not allow reference to New Zealand Government and ‘the C-in-C would be glad of an assurance that New Zealand troops could be so employed’.¹⁰¹⁴

Thus, clearly it revolves around Auchinleck’s definition of the term ‘major role’. His use of the idiom was as reference to the whole Division as against that of a Brigade Group.

Freyberg no doubt hoped that the lack of any comment by him amidst this linguistic device would have been noticed back in the Prime Minister’s office. Fraser replied that

we should much prefer it if, when an operation of the kind referred
to.....we could be advised beforehand...(but) we would not insist on it
and would be prepared to leave the matter to your judgment.¹⁰¹⁵

The substance of this response seems quite different to the one of eight days earlier to Freyberg, where previously, veiled in his usual polite and punctual tone Fraser was unwilling to allow his GOC freedom of action, yet this time he was. This changed stance remains an enigma. Whether there was collusion between Freyberg and Fraser as to foreknowledge of Graduate’s cancellation as tentatively presented post-war by Walker is a moot point. This reply, however, although perplexing, does nonetheless reflect a distinct mode of cooperation and trust between the two prominent New Zealand leaders.

¹⁰¹³ ANZ, WAI8/3/22, Freyberg to Fraser, 24/1/42.

¹⁰¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰¹⁵ Ibid, Fraser to Freyberg, 29/1/42.

Fraser (and Churchill?) act

The suggestion above of enhanced mutual confidence became further apparent a week later in early February, when Freyberg informed his Government that as a result of Rommel's advance to Gazala, he had 'just received orders for the New Zealand Division to move for a full operational role in the Western Desert'.¹⁰¹⁶ Fraser, by return, expressed his dismay that further operations were warranted by the Division 'so soon after its recent heavy losses', and wished his concern 'to be shown to the Commander-in-Chief'.¹⁰¹⁷ At the same time, he bypassed all other channels and contacted Churchill direct on 8 February with a Pefra cable, where he mentioned that the

Division has again been ordered to move for a full operational role in the Western Desert.....and that we are most disappointed that circumstances now require further operations ...so soon after its recent heavy losses, and that we assume that nothing but the serious nature of the emergency has made this step necessary.¹⁰¹⁸

He provided reluctant concurrence to the move, but subtly added that there was some sentiment in New Zealand that the NZEF 'should be returned to the Pacific area'.¹⁰¹⁹

In reply, Churchill, who never seemed to miss the opportunity to eulogise the Dominion or its Division, expressed his grief that the emergency meant its use 'again so soon', stating that 'I keenly appreciate your consent to the renewed engagement of your Division.'¹⁰²⁰

However, a most enigmatic decision followed, this time by Auchinleck, that conveys the

¹⁰¹⁶ ANZ, WAI8/3/22, Freyberg to Fraser, 6/2/42.

¹⁰¹⁷ Ibid, Fraser to Freyberg, 7/2/42.

¹⁰¹⁸ CAC, CHAR 20/69B/152, PEFRA 2, Fraser to Churchill, 7/2/42.

¹⁰¹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰²⁰ CHAR 20/70/2-3, WINCH 3, Churchill to Fraser, 9/2/42.

hallmark of suspicion of Churchill's and Britain's concern over the continued presence of the New Zealand Division in North Africa.

Freyberg met the C-in-C in person on 8 February, probably in the early evening, where he showed his communication from Fraser. This was followed by 'a very satisfactory interview' between the two.¹⁰²¹ Auchinleck indicated how much he understood the Dominion's position, appreciated 'the difficulties of the New Zealand Government', and revealed to the General that another division would take its place, although he did need to retain the 5 Brigade for a while.¹⁰²² Freyberg was delighted, and must have been stunned, as he described the C-in-C, presumably as he dictated to his PA for the GOC Diary, as a 'very nice man [who] has most difficult job'.¹⁰²³ Considering their mutual private antipathy and the disputatious milieu over the previous weeks, this reference to Auchinleck as a 'very nice man' raises some interesting questions.

Would the reading of this telegram from the New Zealand Prime Minister alone, despite Auchinleck being obviously aware of the regard felt for Fraser and the respect he engendered, have caused him to perform a *volte face* sufficient to generate such a eulogised response from Freyberg? It leads to a speculative alternative possibility. Fraser's Pefra cable arrived in Whitehall around 3.50am on 8 February and the meeting between Freyberg and Auchinleck in Cairo seems to have been early evening, about twelve hours later. Although no cable has been identified as coming from London to MEC at this time, could this remarkable turnaround in attitude have originated from an intervention by Churchill? He would no doubt have been aware of the dire situation in the Far East and perhaps knowledge

¹⁰²¹ ANZ, WAI18/5/44, GOC Diary, 8/2/42.

¹⁰²² Ibid; ANZ, WAI18/3/22, Freyberg to Fraser, 9/2/42.

¹⁰²³ GOC Diary, 8/2/42.

of the imminent fall of Singapore, with the resultant impact of that on the Dominion. It must remain at this stage conjectural. Auchinleck in fact wrote to Ritchie at the front two days later, and mentioned that he was sending up 50 Division as a replacement instead as 'I did not want to send [New Zealand Division] back if I could help it - for various reasons, not the least of which was political'.¹⁰²⁴

Clearly Fraser was now a leader whose reputation throughout Whitehall and Cairo was of such high standing that gainsaying him would be contemplated only very reluctantly. What was also revealed in their exchanges was an additional technique Fraser increasingly became adept at using to London when seriously concerned at an operation or policy. Pledging the loyalty of his nation to a British decision, but at the same time voice such doubts he might have, leaving unsaid the consequences that might befall if such concerns were not seriously considered. When he perceived the burden imposed on his countrymen to be excessive and communicated his carefully worded requests, he was invariably successful. As mentioned in Chapter Seven, this was no doubt because of his determination to do all he could for eventual victory by sticking to imperial strategy and his previous willingness for the Division to be placed in the vanguard in military operations.

Syria and Beyond

The long-delayed plan for the move to Syria was enacted, satisfying Freyberg's desire to get away from MEC. He told Brigadier Kippenberger, the new commander of 5 Brigade, on 10 and 11 February that he would be moving with his brigade almost immediately to El Adem and the Eighth Army.¹⁰²⁵ In a post-war letter to Scoullar, Kippenberger expressed surprise that he was given 'no directive...except to report to 8th Army. No restrictions were placed on the

¹⁰²⁴ JRL, Auchinleck Papers, Auchinleck to Ritchie, 10/2/42, (696).

¹⁰²⁵ ANZ, WAI8/5/44, GOC Diary, 10 & 11/2/42.

use of 5 bde as those [Freyberg] directed Wilder to observe'.¹⁰²⁶ It is reasonable to surmise that the GOC, very satisfied that the bulk of the Division was moving to Syria, was seemingly acting to avoid any repercussions as occurred two months earlier with the same brigade in the first of his post Crusader disputes.

Seven years later, in recounting his views to the Editor-in-Chief, he commented that

we saw the folly of the Brigade Group war and had foreseen this disaster developing in the Western Desert. That is why, early in 1942, we preferred to go to Syria.¹⁰²⁷

He further specified that he was additionally anxious to avoid the Division being involved in another questionable operation such as Graduate.¹⁰²⁸ Interestingly, during his sojourn with the Eighth Army at this time, Kippenberger witnessed the brigade group policy as propagated by Auchinleck, being imposed on Eighth Army. He commented upon General Ritchie expounding its merits with what seemed little conviction.¹⁰²⁹

Whilst in Syria, a directive was in fact sent to the Division in May 1942, as it would have been to all divisions, to re-organise into brigade groups. All the senior officers were united in their opposition to these theories as advocated by Auchinleck and MEC, and it was thus condemned and ignored.¹⁰³⁰ Earlier in February in fact, Brigadier Steve Weir, the Division's Commander Royal Artillery (CRA), recounted how he was given instructions to amalgamate each anti-aircraft battery with a Field Regiment, as requested by brigade group theory. He complained to his sympathetic GOC, who in effect ignored the order by insisting to his

¹⁰²⁶ ANZ, WAI11/2, Kippenberger to Scoullar, 23/9/48.

¹⁰²⁷ Ibid, Freyberg to Kippenberger, 3/6/49, in Scoullar to Kippenberger, 30/7/55.

¹⁰²⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰²⁹ Ibid, The Employment of the Brigade Group as a Fighting Formation, 3

¹⁰³⁰ Ibid, Kippenberger to Scoullar, 30/9/47; Scoullar, *Egypt*, 39;

artillery commander that whenever they would have to move to the front line, they would fight 'as a Division with the guns [centralised] under the CRA'.¹⁰³¹

Clearly, hundreds of miles away from GHQ, an increasingly confident Freyberg retained his long-held view as to how the Division was to be organised, being prepared to defy Auchinleck. He was further buttressed in this on 3 June, when his seniority and authority was augmented following Wellington's conferring his promotion to Lieutenant General.¹⁰³² Expressing his gratitude to Fraser, he stated that it 'will help me in my dealings here and elsewhere', which was prescient when he demonstrated this increased confidence and authority in three independent decisions he took during the following month.¹⁰³³

The first of these resulted from the nadir of brigade group policy, where in the 'Cauldron' at Gazala, the Eighth Army, outnumbering the Axis two to one, lost because Rommel concentrated his troops against isolated British formations.¹⁰³⁴ On hearing of this whilst in Iran, Freyberg instructed his staff to prepare the Division for a rapid move, and then flew to Cairo, meeting Auchinleck on 13 June, and was ordered 'to move your division at once to the Western Desert'.¹⁰³⁵ Because of the emergency, Freyberg decided to use his discretionary powers to commit the Division without awaiting the prior consent of the Government, which was acknowledged by Fraser on 22 June, who 'fully understood the situation'.¹⁰³⁶

Back in Egypt

After an epic journey from Syria, passing the flotsam and jetsam of a retreating army in Egypt, the Divisional Headquarters reached the Western Desert on 20 July, and four days later

¹⁰³¹ ANZ, WAI11/2, Weir to Scoullar, 9/6/48; Kippenberger to Scoullar, 30/9/47.

¹⁰³² *DRNZ* Vol.II, footnote.2, 109.

¹⁰³³ ANZ, WAI18/69, Freyberg to Fraser 4/6/42.

¹⁰³⁴ Scoullar, *Egypt*, 45-47.

¹⁰³⁵ *Ibid*, 50.

¹⁰³⁶ *Ibid*; *DRNZ* Vol.II, footnote.1, 111.

was ordered to the supposed fortress of Mersa Matruh.¹⁰³⁷ It was here that Freyberg took his second independent decision. He was quite disconcerted, not only by the shambles of a retreating army travelling in the opposite direction to them, but because the Division ‘seemed to pass from 10 Corps to 30 Corps every hour’.¹⁰³⁸ Crucially he also thought it wrong that the ‘highly-trained, mobile’ Division should be confined in a fortress, potentially becoming surrounded and isolated. Freyberg told his corps commander, Lieutenant General W.G. Holmes, that he was prepared to invoke his Charter and precipitate a crisis ‘for the sake of the Dominion and the Division’ unless they were re-located.¹⁰³⁹

Via Holmes, General Ritchie accepted this and the relief took place on 24 June, when the Division moved to the escarpment 25 miles to the south at Minqar Qaim.¹⁰⁴⁰ On the same day, and reflecting the bond of trust between Prime Minister and GOC, Freyberg ‘in great haste’ conveyed the dire situation in an unvarnished manner to Fraser.¹⁰⁴¹ He reported that ‘8th Army were in full retreat down the road’, and then possibly alluding to Greece and Crete, stated that ‘it reminded me of two other such occasions in my life. I am most anxious about this battle’.¹⁰⁴² Furthermore, with reference to MEC, he stated ‘we have made mistakes in our policy and in our training... [finally trusting] that the cost to our men will not be too great’.¹⁰⁴³

The following day, Auchinleck sacked Ritchie and took over command of Eighth Army himself, thus incorporating the roles of C-in-C MEC and GOC Eighth Army. He initiated Operational Instruction 83, which was the adoption of a policy of fluid defence in which

¹⁰³⁷ Scoullar, *Egypt*, 51.

¹⁰³⁸ ANZ, WAI8/5/44, GOC Diary, 22/6/42.

¹⁰³⁹ Scoullar, 56.

¹⁰⁴⁰ GOC Diary, 25/6/42.

¹⁰⁴¹ ANZ, WAI8/23, Freyberg to Fraser, 24/6/42.

¹⁰⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴³ *Ibid.*

infantry divisions were to reorganise into ‘brigade battle-groups, with one forward with all the divisional artillery and the other rearward towards the El Alamein position’.¹⁰⁴⁴ Freyberg executed his third significant decision by refusing to undertake this reorganization, ‘invoked his Charter’, and kept his two brigades forward. There was little Auchinleck could do about this intransigence and independence, as the need for the Division in the front line was more pressing than a question of organisation.¹⁰⁴⁵

The foregoing decisions of Freyberg are clearly a reflection of how far he had now come and gained from his encounters. He was sufficiently confident in the relationship with his Prime Minister to make a unilateral judgement over moving the Division and had acquired increased authority and experience. He was fully prepared for the Division, with 1 Armoured Division alongside, to face Rommel square on and accept battle, but was totally unwilling for it to be placed, as he saw it, into any confined disadvantageous position where its mobility could not be utilized, nor subject to a military doctrine he believed would endanger it.¹⁰⁴⁶

As events transpired, after the move of the Division from Matruh to Minqar Qaim there was a complete communications breakdown in both Army and Corps command, and the New Zealanders found themselves abandoned and surrounded there on 26 June. It was necessary for them to breakout that night and head eastwards towards the Alamein line, but whilst observing enemy activity and planning for this, Freyberg was severely wounded by shell fire. Brigadier Lindsey Inglis took over command and ordered 4 Brigade to lead the attack with a night-time bayonet charge, whilst the rest of the Division (and the General in an ambulance) followed behind with the divisional transport. It succeeded spectacularly and both 4 and 5

¹⁰⁴⁴ Playfair *et al*, *Vol.III*. 285-87

¹⁰⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 287; Scoullar, *Egypt*. 57.

¹⁰⁴⁶ Scoullar, 90.

Brigades reaching the Qattara Box area of the Alamein line later that day, disorganised but with a relatively low casualty count.¹⁰⁴⁷

However, as recounted to the War History Branch ten years later, on 29 June, two days after taking over command of the Division, Inglis visited the Army command position at Himeimat where Auchinleck was ensconced, and was ordered to reorganise his force into battle groups.¹⁰⁴⁸ Strengthened by the fact that he would have known the GOC's and senior commanders views on battle groups, as this had been discussed in early May in Syria, Inglis refused to comply. He stated that it was his intention 'to keep the Division concentrated in a central position', and the matter was then dropped.¹⁰⁴⁹ Other independent actions of dissent by the dominion commanders at Alamein were taken by the Australians (Morshead) and South Africans (Pienaar), and clearly were a manifestation of the crumbling morale of Eighth Army and the perceived ineptitude of Eighth Army command and MEC.¹⁰⁵⁰

Some undoubted bitterness within British command resulted as revealed by Auchinleck's DCGS and CoS in the field, Eric Dorman-Smith, in several post-war letters to Liddell Hart. He described dominion divisions as 'semi-independent expeditionary forces', whose commanders with 'a definite responsibility to remote dominion governments' were 'more trouble than they are worth'.¹⁰⁵¹ It was undoubtedly true that the complex constitutional arrangements of the dominion divisions in such a disparate army at this time made things more difficult for Eighth Army. However, the overriding problem was the inability of the British to produce effective all arms cooperation due to their doctrinal approach, which

¹⁰⁴⁷ Scoullar, *Egypt*, 99-120; ANZ, WAIH8/5/44, GOC Diary, 28/7/42.

¹⁰⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 143.

¹⁰⁴⁹ *Ibid*.

¹⁰⁵⁰ Corelli Barnett, *The Desert Generals* (London, 1983), 222-23; Jonathan Fennell, *Combat and Morale in the North African Campaign. The Eighth Army and the Path to El Alamein* (Cambridge, 2011), 44.

¹⁰⁵¹ LHCMA, LH 1/242/370, Dorman-O'Gowan to Liddell Hart 15/4/55; LH 1/242/417, 20/10/55.

resulted in the perceived repeated failure of the armour to support the gains of the infantry.¹⁰⁵² As Johnston-White underlined, this affected the dominions disproportionately as they were infantry whilst the British were armour, so when the infantry felt that the armour had failed to support it adequately, it was usually a dominion formation feeling left in the lurch by the British.¹⁰⁵³

Such was demonstrated in two operations at Ruweisat and El Mreir, when the New Zealanders became the victims of the lack of pre-arranged armour support after successful night attacks by their infantry brigades. These actions of 14/15 and 21/22 July caused the Division to incur the vast majority of their 4316 casualties in June and July 1942, just a few hundred less than during Crusader.¹⁰⁵⁴ The loss of Freyberg was undoubtedly badly felt and confirmed in a back-handed complimentary way by Dorman-Smith. In writing an account of the First Alamein battles 25 years later, he commented on Inglis that ‘it is still a matter of surprise that the commander of the New Zealand Division does not appear to have protested at the difficulty of this task’.¹⁰⁵⁵

Niall Barr criticised Inglis for wildly overestimating the capabilities of the British armour, and that his plan ‘for the operation flew in the face of the lessons which had been learned during Operation Crusader’.¹⁰⁵⁶ He then added that the whole point of Freyberg’s heated arguments with Auchinleck the previous winter, about concentrating his Division, and his eventual refusal to carry out the orders to form brigade groups, was to ensure that the

¹⁰⁵² Niall Barr, *Pendulum of War: The Three Battles of El Alamein* (London, 2004), 46.

¹⁰⁵³ Johnston-White, *British Commonwealth*, 213.

¹⁰⁵⁴ Scoullar, *Egypt*, 387.

¹⁰⁵⁵ Eric Dorman-O’Gowan, “First Alamein. The Battle That Saved Cairo”, in *History of the Second World War*, (ed) Barrie Pitt, Vol.3, No.7, (London, 1967) 1074.

¹⁰⁵⁶ Barr, *Pendulum*, 123.

fighting power of the Division could be combined.¹⁰⁵⁷ This principle was ignored when he was indisposed, and

there is little doubt that, during the unsatisfactory planning process [for the attacks at Ruweisat and El Mreir], Freyberg would have invoked his Charter and probably made certain that his division did not undertake such risky operations.¹⁰⁵⁸

Barr speculated that Inglis did not undertake such a step because he would not have wished 'to be known as the officer who stood on his rights as a dominion commander and....refuse[d] orders' to carry out such an attack.¹⁰⁵⁹ He did not have the experience or perhaps viewed he had authority of Freyberg to undertake this. Harper has defended Inglis by curiously stating that 'for dominion commanders orders from superior officers...were sacrosanct'.¹⁰⁶⁰ This point seems incongruous considering Inglis's past outspoken nature, notably speaking openly, six months before, of British armour deficiencies in Crusader at the Staff College at Haifa.¹⁰⁶¹ Pugsley criticised him for caving into the pressure from corps command in mounting such inept attacks, and cited three New Zealand brigadiers who fought the battles 'convinced that these disasters would not have occurred with Freyberg at the helm'.¹⁰⁶² Interestingly, and possibly as a result of the Ruweisat debacle, General Leslie Morshead, GOC 9 Australian Division, 'stood on' his rights to refer a planned attack in the north to his government, as he had 'no confidence in [the supporting] armour'.¹⁰⁶³

¹⁰⁵⁷ Barr, *Pendulum*, 138.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Ibid, 174.

¹⁰⁵⁹ Ibid, 123.

¹⁰⁶⁰ Glyn Harper, *The Battle for North Africa. El Alamein and the Turning Point of the Second World War* (Bloomington, 2017), 55.

¹⁰⁶¹ Kippenberger, *Infantry Brigadier*, 120.

¹⁰⁶² Pugsley, *Bloody Road*, 317.

¹⁰⁶³ Barnett, *Desert Generals*, 222.

Whilst these repeated battles of First Alamein were proceeding, an increasingly concerned Churchill and CIGS Brooke observed events and decided to visit MEC during the post battle lull to assess what changes were needed. On 5 August, they sent for Inglis at the headquarters of Eighth Army where he was questioned, with Auchinleck present, on the events of the preceding weeks and issues relating to the reinforcements of the Division. After the meeting, a fascinating by-play took place when the C-in-C took Inglis aside and ‘appeared anxious that General Freyberg should take [a] trip away’.¹⁰⁶⁴ Auchinleck asked if, because of the potential manpower issues in New Zealand, Wellington would like Freyberg to return to the Dominion and consult with them, and was ‘a bit stumped’ when Inglis questioned this.¹⁰⁶⁵ The latter recounted in the War Diary that apparently ‘there had been discussion about it in higher circles for some time’, as a few days previously Auchinleck had told Gott that ‘Freyberg *was* (underlined by Inglis in GOC Diary) going to NZ’.¹⁰⁶⁶

This episode seems to pose more questions than can be answered, but it is a perfectly valid inference that the conjunction of Freyberg’s incapacitation and the profound concerns in New Zealand over manpower issues, which was impacting on reinforcements for the Division (see Chapter Nine), was an opportunity for Auchinleck to hint at the General’s relief. What seems incredible is that in the midst of justifying his command actions to Churchill and Brooke, the C-in-C should seek to conspire to supplant a divisional general whose leadership and vigour headed ‘the dash from Syria to the Western Desert which stemmed the retreat and helped to save Egypt’.¹⁰⁶⁷ It is a realistic contention that as a result of Freyberg’s criticism of aspects of Crusader and Graduate, and his refusal to undertake brigade grouping, his wounding perhaps was seen as an opportunity to be ‘rid of this turbulent priest’. Additionally, as Inglis lacking

¹⁰⁶⁴ ANZ, WAI18/5/44, GOC Diary, 5/8/42.

¹⁰⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶⁷ ANZ, WAI18/69, Freyberg to Fraser, 13/5/43.

the authority and stature of Freyberg, assented to Eighth Army orders to attack at Ruweisat and El Mreir seemingly without serious objections, Auchinleck may have viewed him as more malleable and less likely to display any dissension.

However, such scheming came to naught as ironically three days later it was Auchinleck who received his letter of notice, not Freyberg, as Churchill and Brooke decided that the theatre needed a new and invigorated command. They appointed General Harold Alexander as C-in-C MEC, and following the death of Strafer Gott, Lieutenant General Bernard Montgomery became GOC Eighth Army. In a 1950s post-war reflection to his diary entries of 29 and 30 January 1942, Brooke wrote of Auchinleck that he

had most of the qualifications to make him one of the finest of commanders, but unfortunately, he lacked the most important of all - the ability to select the men to serve him,

citing Dorman Smith as ‘possibly the major cause of his downfall.’¹⁰⁶⁸

Yet, one aspect undoubtedly neglected by Brooke and virtually all historians bar Barr, is that ‘Auchinleck never really learned to deal with the distinctive political problems inherent in commanding dominion divisions’, and generated much resentment amongst their commanders as attested to by Freyberg, Blamey, Morshead, Brink and Piennar.¹⁰⁶⁹ The importance of this facet of the C-in-C’s failings is that the campaign in the Western Desert up to this stage was fundamentally that of a quasi-coalition of British and dominion forces. Therefore, although undoubtedly composed and unflappable in battle, his inflexible and antipathetic nature to any form of alternative view, meant he never rose to the challenge of dealing with the autonomous

¹⁰⁶⁸ Alex Danchev, and Daniel Todman, (eds), *War Diaries 1939-1945. Field Marshall Lord Alanbrooke* (London, 2001) 224-25.

¹⁰⁶⁹ Barr, *Pendulum*, 102.

forces under his command. Such incapability in dealing with his dominion commanders essentially demonstrated his profound inadequateness in the increasingly diplomatic aspects of the Commander in Chief role. Finally, as revealed by Dorman Smith, Auchinleck 'always felt uncomfortable with dominion troops, possibly a hangover from Tobruk 1 and Crusader', and unlike his predecessor Wavell, or his successor Alexander, to quote Blamey, Auchinleck did not quite 'get it'.¹⁰⁷⁰

A New Beginning

A few days after his meeting and the aside conversation with Auchinleck, Inglis handed back command of the Division to a recovering Freyberg, who in Cairo had expressed his indignation to Churchill and Brooke at the casualties suffered by the New Zealanders and the shortcomings of the British command.¹⁰⁷¹ On 13 August, he met Montgomery, and emphasised that he came under Army control 'only for operations [and] not for discipline or training', additionally stressing 'and only for operations when the New Zealand Government have given their consent'.¹⁰⁷² He complained about the previous regime's penchant for divisions split into brigade groups, and was pleasantly surprised when the new Army Commander stated that there would be 'no fragmentation into battle groups', and that he intended that divisions will fight as divisions.¹⁰⁷³

No doubt energised by this sentiment, Freyberg met with his most senior officers in conference, and, referring to the term 'battle-group', added that 'we do not want to hear this

¹⁰⁷⁰ LHCMA, LH 1/242/429, Dorman O'Gowan to Liddell Hart 4/4/57; Johnston-White, *British Commonwealth*, 242.

¹⁰⁷¹ ANZ, WAII8/5/44, GOC Diary, 6/8/42; John Connell, *Auchinleck. A Biography of Field-Marshal Sir Claude Auchinleck* (London, 1959), 703.

¹⁰⁷² *Ibid*, 13/8/42; ANZ, WAII11/2, Freyberg to Kippenberger, 5/11/47.

¹⁰⁷³ *Ibid*; Nigel Hamilton, *Monty. The Making of a General 1887-1942* (London, 1981) 620.

word again. We are a Division fighting as a Division'.¹⁰⁷⁴ The New Zealanders played their allocated role in the successful defensive battle of Alam Halfa, under the command of a fully recovered Freyberg, which further enhanced an already renewed morale and confidence in Eighth Army leadership. After a brief rest, from mid-September the New Zealanders then prepared for the great 'break-in' battle of Alamein. In a cable to Wellington on 3 October, the GOC highlighted the new doctrine of keeping divisions together, as espoused by Montgomery, and expressed his confidence in the future because of it.¹⁰⁷⁵

Further reassurance followed two weeks later, when in a letter to Fraser he mentioned that he was due to meet Alexander the next day. Freyberg acquainted the new C-in-C with the 'relationship of a dominion force to its own Government', and that as GOC he was duty bound to send a full and frank opinion on any operation involving the Division.¹⁰⁷⁶

Agreement was reached and he 'got matter settled', and in concurrence with Alexander, sent his Government an outline of the role the Division would play in the forthcoming battle.¹⁰⁷⁷

Additionally, speaking post-war to Kippenberger, he stated that 'there were no further difficulties' over his responsibilities and status as a dominion commander, and that Montgomery and Alexander 'accepted a position which their predecessors found difficult to accept'.¹⁰⁷⁸ In the Alamein battle, Freyberg was described by Montgomery as 'easily my best fighting Divisional Commander', and given the leadership of the Supercharge offensive on 2 November, which finally broke the Axis resistance.¹⁰⁷⁹

¹⁰⁷⁴ ANZ, WAI11/2, GOC's Papers, Minqar Qaim and Ruweisat, Notes on GOC Address to CO's, 16/8/42.

¹⁰⁷⁵ ANZ, WAI18/69, Freyberg to Jones, 3/10/42.

¹⁰⁷⁶ DRNZ Vol.II, Doc 163, 127-129, Freyberg to Fraser, 14/10/42.

¹⁰⁷⁷ ANZ, WAI18/5/45, GOC Diary, 15/10/42; WAI18/69, Freyberg to Jones, 15/10/42.

¹⁰⁷⁸ WAI11/2, Kippenberger to Scoullar, 23/9/48.

¹⁰⁷⁹ Hamilton, *Monty*, 817, 838.

Conclusion

When the period addressed in this chapter commenced in September 1941, New Zealand's two prominent war leaders, one political, the other military, were arguably at either end of the eminence and status spectrum. Fraser's high standing was indicated in early December, by the minor intra-Whitehall and London to Cairo flow of telegrams concerning British apprehensiveness over the scale of the Division's casualties in Libya. Additionally, following the communications between Churchill and Auchinleck over the New Zealand Division in October 1941, the regard and importance Churchill felt for his counterpart in Wellington must have been unmistakably evident to the C-in-C. Thus, when Freyberg conveyed to him Fraser's apprehension over the Division being moved to the Western Desert the following February, notwithstanding Churchill's speculated intervention, Auchinleck acted. After the Division moved to Syria, Fraser does not seem to have had so much need to become involved at a prominent level concerning the Mediterranean theatre, being very occupied with the burgeoning manpower crisis in the Dominion and concerns in the Pacific. His status and the high regard felt for him in London continued, as would be seen in the seven months that followed the great Alamein victory (see Chapter Nine).

Freyberg's position in September 1941 was much more problematic. He had experienced the twin nadir during the preceding months of his reputation as a military commander being doubted following his performance in Crete, and the confidence of his Government as a suitable GOC of the New Zealand Division being shaken. During those weeks preceding Crusader, he certainly felt, and probably was under probation. Although Cox argued that in balancing his dual responsibilities and subordinations, Freyberg still leant primarily to his

military superior and that messages to Wellington were deliberately of a ‘piecemeal fashion or not at all’ so as to achieve ‘relative harmony’, this is contested.¹⁰⁸⁰

In the build-up to Crusader Freyberg undoubtedly knew who his corps and army commanders were several weeks before he was able to inform Fraser that an offensive was at least two months ahead. This though is hardly in the realm of referring ‘any matter affecting the safety of the NZEF to the NZ Govt’.¹⁰⁸¹ Additionally, Fraser’s journey home from Britain took over three weeks, via Ireland, Canada, United States and various Pacific islands, arriving there on 13 September.¹⁰⁸² Upon his desk would have been the cable from his GOC with intimations of a move into the Western Desert.¹⁰⁸³ Clearly, Freyberg was still attempting to find the balance in achieving a concordance between his responsibilities to his twin superiors, and as a divisional commander his knowledge would have been limited at this stage. Moreover, he certainly was aware that Fraser was able to elicit confidential information from London, as was illustrated by the thanks he gave his Prime Minister on 18 December for the latter’s efforts to bring about air superiority.¹⁰⁸⁴

Essentially, Freyberg regained his military reputation by the stance he took, and his outstanding leadership at Sidi Rezegh, aided by the fighting ardour of the Division.¹⁰⁸⁵ He unequivocally expressed doubts on aspects of the offensive before Crusader took place, yet still ordered two brigades to where they were most needed, relieving Tobruk. In fact, a few weeks after the battle in December 1941, a circular arrived from MEC called ‘Lessons from operations in Cyrenaica No. 6’. This commented on the unavailability of 5 Brigade to join 4

¹⁰⁸⁰ Cox, “White and Black”, *INS*, 9:3, (1994), 440.

¹⁰⁸¹ ANZ, WAI8/5/43, GOC Diary, 31/5/41.

¹⁰⁸² Bassett and King, *Tomorrow*, 222.

¹⁰⁸³ ANZ, EA1/626, Freyberg to Jones, 13/9/41.

¹⁰⁸⁴ ANZ, WAI8/23a, Freyberg to Fraser, 18/12/41.

¹⁰⁸⁵ Matthew Wright, *Freyberg’s War. The Man, the Legend and Reality* (Auckland, 2005), 106.

and 6 Brigades in their great battle and reinforce their initial success. Freyberg in anger, illustrated his zeal by exclaiming that 'our operation was sabotaged'.¹⁰⁸⁶ He believed that keeping 5 Brigade in the Bardia area had cost the Division and Eighth Army complete victory.

The recovery in the political aspects of his role as GOC took longer to manifest. Evidently Freyberg played a difficult hand extremely well in his dealings with Auchinleck during the winter of 1941/42. He was very aware of his military responsibilities to Eighth Army, and it was within his power for 5 Brigade to be withdrawn from Graduate, but the granting of such special treatment for the Division was anathema to him. There was absolutely no doubt now that the primacy of his subordination to the New Zealand Government was paramount. Operation Graduate was one occasion when his dealings with his dual superiors, which usually ran parallel with one another converged, creating a disputatious situation and he had to display subtle political skills.

He did not update the War Cabinet about his first disagreement with Auchinleck over the instructions he gave Wilder, and thus avoided a rupture with MEC. However, having learnt the lesson from the Greece episode, Freyberg informed Fraser on 10 January of the possibility of Operation Graduate. Yet at the same time he was doing his best to subvert the expedition by displaying an overt opposition to its military feasibility behind closed doors. Aside as to whether he was in subtle cohorts with his Government in attempting to undermine the operation, the Royal Navy and Rommel forestalled any drastic decision that may have been contemplated. When the latter's offensive precipitated the ordering of the Division to be

¹⁰⁸⁶ ANZ, WAI11/2, The Employment of the Brigade Group as a Fighting Formation, 3.

moved again to the front line, the heightened cooperation between the two New Zealand leaders was exemplified as Freyberg used his Prime Minister's influence to avoid having the Division sent back to the line, thus enabling them to fully recover and train in Syria.

On his return to the Western Desert in June 1942, Freyberg displayed a renewed self-confidence and authority. He was undoubtedly willing to get to grips with the Axis forces, but explicitly disinclined to undertake any operation or tactical manoeuvre that placed the Division in a detrimental position. Notwithstanding the difficulties imposed on Inglis because of Freyberg's wounding, it is virtually inconceivable that the Division would have suffered as much if the General had been in command.

The fact that he was such an authoritative figure, and willing to offer a contrary opinion, was probably why a diminished Auchinleck attempted to take advantage of his incapacity and hinted that he should return to New Zealand. Therefore, the significant change that had occurred by the autumn of 1942 compared to a year previously was that Fraser's esteem in Whitehall had extended to the wider politico-military leadership in Cairo and Freyberg had regained his military reputation with the British. Furthermore, by exemplifying the most dexterous qualities, both in working singly and in cohorts with Fraser, he navigated the minefield of his twin responsibilities with a problematic C-in-C, and fully reclaimed and enhanced the trust of his Government.

Chapter Nine

Fraser, the long decision to remain in the Mediterranean

As mentioned in previous chapters, from August 1939 Fraser clearly saw the essentiality of the Dominion's role in imperial strategy, whereby it concentrated its forces in the main theatre of war against the principle enemy. He was also mindful of the necessity for New Zealand, being a small partner in the Empire coalition, to hold fast to such a strategy.

Testament to that commitment was the Dominion's casualty count from the three campaigns of 1941.

The Japanese entry into the war, however, and its rapid advances throughout the Pacific, dramatically changed this strategic priority. In a little more than two months Japan had severely disabled the American fleet, sunk two Royal Navy battleships and captured Malaya, Singapore and the Dutch East Indies. Wellington's immediate response was that the 8th Reinforcements, due to sail to Egypt, would be diverted to Fiji, 9th Reinforcements retained for the defence of the homeland, and the departure of the burgeoning Tank Brigade from the Dominion delayed until at least July.¹⁰⁸⁷ During this time, it is imperative to appreciate the psychological impact of this threat upon New Zealand and its concomitant effect upon the 2NZEF in the Middle East.

This chapter is about the events of this time up to May 1943, and focuses on how Fraser, a probable supporter at first of return, gradually changed his view to that of retaining the Division in the Mediterranean, buttressed by Churchill's entreaties. The period conveniently divides into two, around the end of 1942 during a lull in the diplomatic activity concerning

¹⁰⁸⁷ *DRNZ*, Vol.II, footnote 3, 36; *Ibid*, Doc.53 37-38, Puttick to Freyberg, 2/1/42; *Ibid*, Doc.54, 38-39, Freyberg to Fraser, 5/1/42.

the issue. The most significant shift at this point was that the person most prominent in advocating this decision to its conclusion changed, subtly at first but then explicitly, from Churchill to Fraser. It culminates in May 1943, where in a display of political guile and leadership, Fraser ensured the House of Representatives supported this view.

New Zealand anxieties and Churchill's response

In early 1942 rapid Japanese advances through South-east Asia completely changed the outlook of the Tasman dominions. The Australian 6 and 7 Divisions were to be shipped back to the Pacific theatre, whilst Fraser on several occasions cabled London to furnish his assessments, convey his concerns and appeal for more armaments. On 12 January he articulated his dilemma when he stated that

we have never deviated from a complete recognition...that the critical theatre of war has, up to the present...been the European theatre.¹⁰⁸⁸

However, he left his conclusion unspoken, in affirming that

as those responsible for the lives and safety of the people of this Dominion, we cannot wholly divest ourselves of this responsibility in favour of expert opinion, however authoritative.¹⁰⁸⁹

As in previous exchanges this would have caused concerns amongst British officials, who viewed New Zealand as a 'tower of strength', in significant contrast to the 'rather cantankerous attitude of the Commonwealth Government' and its 'craven view of events'.¹⁰⁹⁰ Churchill in placatory mode thanked him for the message: 'I welcome as always

¹⁰⁸⁸ CAC, CHAR 20/68A/60-66, Fraser to Churchill, 12/1/42.

¹⁰⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹⁰ LHCMA, ALANBROOKE, 6/7/2, Ian Jacob Diary 23/12/41; TNA, PREM 3/167/1, Cranborne to Churchill, 17/1/42.

the frank expression of your views' before customarily praising the New Zealand Government for its consistently 'helpful and realist attitude to the war'.¹⁰⁹¹

Yet three weeks later, in that noteworthy cable of 7 February mentioned in Chapter Eight, in which Fraser expressed his disquiet that the Division was to be moved to the Western Desert so soon after Crusader, other concerns came to the fore.¹⁰⁹² These laid bare the anxieties felt in the Dominion and the political pressure upon Fraser, who nevertheless in his understated manner firstly rendered his loyalty to the cause by stating that 'we have of course told Freyberg that we must accept the position'.¹⁰⁹³ However, he then requested Churchill's help to allay discontent in Parliament and voices calling for the return of New Zealand troops to the Pacific, particularly 'ill-informed comments' alleging that large numbers of British troops were inactive, whilst New Zealand troops were again needed to forestall Rommel.¹⁰⁹⁴

Churchill put Fraser's mind at rest by affording the numbers of British troops that had been transhipped to the Middle East over the previous year, but then entirely disingenuously added that 'I am most anxious to work *all* (emphasis added) New Zealand and Australian troops back into the Japan theatre'.¹⁰⁹⁵ Yet events became critical, when the day after Singapore's surrender (15 February), Curtin requested that in addition to the homeward dispatch of the Australian 6 and 7 Divisions, 'the recall of the 9th Division....requires early consideration'.¹⁰⁹⁶ A few days later, Batterbee commented upon the feeling of shock at the loss of Singapore in the Dominion. Ominously, he could 'foresee a movement to bring back

¹⁰⁹¹ PREM 3/167/1, Churchill to Fraser, 17/1/42.

¹⁰⁹² CAC, CHAR 20/69B/152, PEFRA No.2, Fraser to Churchill, 7/2/42.

¹⁰⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹⁵ CHAR 20/70/2-3, WINCH No.3, Churchill to Fraser, 9/2/42.

¹⁰⁹⁶ W.J. Hudson, *et al*, (eds), *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy 1937-49*, Vol.V: *July 1941-June 1942* (Canberra, 1982), [henceforth, *DAFP* Vol.V], Doc.336, 527-28, Curtin to Churchill, 16/2/42.

the New Zealand Division from the ME'.¹⁰⁹⁷ Thus at this stage, whilst Britain's martial prestige in the Pacific was at its lowest and allied forces in the region were on the retreat everywhere, the highest priority started to emerge within London to ensure the retention of the Pacific dominion divisions in the Mediterranean.

Churchill was not slow in his efforts to maintain this *status quo*, and in a long telegram to Roosevelt on 5 March lamented the 'greatest disaster in our history at Singapore', and then added how helpful it would be if American divisions could be sent to New Zealand and Australia as an alternative to the dominion ones being recalled.¹⁰⁹⁸ The President assented to this proposal, though stressed it was 'dependent upon the retention' of those divisions in the Middle East, which was conveyed to both Curtin and Fraser in near identical cables.¹⁰⁹⁹ To the latter though, Churchill emphasised this underlying imperativeness by skilfully adding that 'you have never asked for the withdrawal of your Division'.¹¹⁰⁰ This adroit allusion to loyalty and steadfastness was in the full knowledge (via Batterbee) that its departure was at least a topic of conversation in Wellington.

Fraser welcomed the message, was hopeful that any such help would not be too late to prevent a Japanese invasion, and noted Roosevelt's condition that New Zealand troops remain in the Middle East whilst American ones garrisoned the Dominion.¹¹⁰¹ He acknowledged the import Churchill gave to Wellington in not asking for the return of their troops to the Pacific, but emphasised the 'difficult position we will have to face here when

¹⁰⁹⁷ TNA, DO 121/116, Batterbee to Machtig, 20/2/42.

¹⁰⁹⁸ Churchill to Roosevelt, 5/3/42 in Churchill, *Hinge of Fate*, 169-70.

¹⁰⁹⁹ *DAFP* Vol.V, Doc.428, 660-61, Roosevelt to Churchill, 8/3/42 in Curtin to Evatt, 20/3/42.

¹¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*; CAC, CHAR 20/71B/128-29, Churchill to Fraser, 10/3/42.

¹¹⁰¹ CHAR 20/71B/160-62, Fraser to Churchill, 14/3/42,

[the return of Australian troops] becomes known'.¹¹⁰² At this time Fraser was starting to feel the impingement of Australian views. In February 1942, in an effort to 'concert their [mutual] defence more closely', Coates and Sullivan visited Australia for defence and supply discussions. They discovered that differences over whether all the troops should be brought home, was beginning to strain the relationship, as revealed in meetings described as 'cool' and with 'thinly-veiled grudges'.¹¹⁰³ As events unfolded, and much to the relief of Fraser, following appeals from both Roosevelt and Churchill, Curtin agreed to the postponement of the return of 9 Division until it could be replaced.¹¹⁰⁴

New Zealand and Australia return to the battlefield

During the spring of 1942 the issue of return or retention went into temporary abeyance as Canberra and Wellington focused on events in the Pacific, and both dominion divisions were in quiet sectors away from the front. However, following the twin debacles of defeat at Gazala and the loss of Tobruk, both the (now) 2 New Zealand and 9 Australian Divisions were rushed to the Western Desert to reinforce Eighth Army, making significant contributions in stemming Rommel's advance during the First Alamein battles. As mentioned in Chapter Eight, the New Zealanders in one of its most famous exploits, broke through the German encirclement at Minqar Qaim at night with the bayonet.

Less than a week later, on 2 July, in a confidence debate in Parliament on the running of the war, an under-fire Churchill, missing no opportunity to laud the Dominion, alluded to this breakout action. To the loudest cheers in the House, he spoke about the 'one reinforcement which has come, which has been in close contact with the enemy and which he knows all

¹¹⁰² CAC, CHAR 20/71B/160-62, Fraser to Churchill, 14/3/42.

¹¹⁰³ Hensley, *Beyond*, 181-84.

¹¹⁰⁴ *DAFP* Vol.V, Doc.465, 716-18, Curtin to Churchill, 14/4/42; Hensley, *Beyond*, 186.

about. I mean the New Zealand Division'.¹¹⁰⁵ He next praised its government, which had 'authorised the fullest use being made of their troops, whom they have not withdrawn or weakened in any way'.¹¹⁰⁶

This acclamation in London, described as 'a really remarkable ovation', was reported prominently in the New Zealand press, and Fraser probably requested a copy as an extract from Batterbee arrived in his office on 9 July.¹¹⁰⁷ What this seems to reflect is Churchill's knowledge, buttressed by Batterbee's regular missives, of the high regard in which he was held by the public of New Zealand. Fraser certainly knew this, as on more than one occasion he asked if a particular Churchill message to him, which displayed a lyrical portrayal of the Dominion, could be published in the New Zealand press. The British war leader in all likelihood sensed the political utility of such flattering references.

What additionally is essential to note though, is that the reverential remarks regarding New Zealand and its Division were not confined to the public domain or intended merely to flatter. They occurred in private between the British too. For example during the days before the Gazala battle of May 1942 Churchill enquired of Auchinleck: 'ought not the New Zealand Division to be nearer the Battle-front', adding, perhaps confident in his dealings with Fraser, that 'if you want any help in dealing with the New Zealand Government pray recur to me'.¹¹⁰⁸ As the disaster was unfolding nearly four weeks later and Eighth Army was retreating, he expressed to Auchinleck his relief that 'you are bringing the New Zealand

¹¹⁰⁵ <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1942/jul/02/central-direction-of-the-war>, 595.

¹¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁰⁷ "Mr Churchill's Speech", *Evening Post*, 4/7/42, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19420704.2.31.1>; ANZ, FRASER, P4/3/8, Office of High Commissioner, 9/7/42.

¹¹⁰⁸ CAC, CHAR 20/75/62-63, Churchill to Auchinleck, 20/5/42.

Division to the Western Desert [and] let me know dates when it can be deployed’, and followed this up a week later wanting to know their present location.¹¹⁰⁹

On 12 July, after the initial repulse of the German offensive, Churchill contacted both his dominion counterparts thanking them for the contribution of their nations’ troops to the battle, and to Fraser, Churchill extolled the ‘fresh fame [brought] to New Zealand’s arms’.¹¹¹⁰ In his reply the New Zealander turned this around a little by expressing how touched he was by ‘your reference... in your recent speech to...this Dominion’s attitude to the war’.¹¹¹¹ But he then enquired as to why Atlantic shipping losses (including New Zealand cargoes) had increased, adding that ‘I am very reluctant to bother you with such questions, but...I think it would be useful if I could be informed as fully as possible’.¹¹¹² This was classic Fraser, thanking or congratulating Churchill while in an understated way asking a searching question. In a strange mutual way, it seemed that both war leaders had developed the propensity to elicit from the other what they required, thus forming a unique symbiotic relationship.

Any historian studying these events cannot fail to be struck by the ceaseless efforts employed by Churchill to ensure that the 9 Australian and the 2 New Zealand Divisions would be retained in the Mediterranean. If there were two formations that Rommel most respected, it was these divisions. The former had given the Afrika Corps a bloody nose at Tobruk and the latter at Sidi Rezegh, and in his retrospective papers he gave them both his approbation.¹¹¹³ The wider context of this whole saga was Churchill’s recognition that American troops and materiel were ever-increasing and would soon make an overwhelming contribution to the

¹¹⁰⁹ CHAR 20/76/110, Churchill to Auchinleck, 14/6/42; CHAR 20/77/4, Churchill to Auchinleck, 21/6/42.

¹¹¹⁰ TNA, DO 35/1009/12, Churchill to Fraser 12/7/42.

¹¹¹¹ Ibid, Fraser to Churchill, 16/7/42.

¹¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹¹³ B.H. Liddell Hart, (ed), *The Rommel Papers*, (London, 1953), 299.

Allied effort, outstripping that of Britain. With Operation Torch impending in the autumn, he sought the prestige of a British land victory in the desert before this eventuated.

In order to gain such a victory and ‘affirm to the Americans Britain’s weight in the alliance’, the presence of these two dominion divisions in the British order of battle would have been viewed as absolutely essential.¹¹¹⁴ Thus, their removal to the Far East was profoundly anathema to Churchill and he was determined to do everything he could to forestall and obfuscate any transfer away from the Mediterranean. This is clearly evidenced by his response to a cable from Curtin on 16 July, whereby the Australian viewed that ‘the subject (return) must arise in the immediate future’.¹¹¹⁵ In his characteristic red ink annotation, Churchill noted to Ismay that ‘we must try to stop this’, and this is exactly what he attempted.¹¹¹⁶ With regard to Curtin, he was successful in his endeavours only until November. Yet with the New Zealanders, there occurred three periods of the most intense British diplomatic activity applied to Fraser over the following ten months. The latter, at the same time had to additionally contend with pressure from Curtin for the exact opposite.

July to August 1942, the reinforcement issue becomes conflated with retention

By July 1942, as evidenced by the flow of inter-departmental communications, it became clearly apparent the scale of the effort by Cairo and Whitehall to retain the New Zealand Division in the Mediterranean. Although, at this stage there had been no request from Fraser for the return of the Division, there were profound manpower issues in New Zealand, not least the need for troops to protect Fiji as well as the country itself. There had in fact been no reinforcement sailings over nine months, as Fraser notified Freyberg the previous December that in view of the situation in the Pacific, the sailing of the 8th Reinforcements would be

¹¹¹⁴ Douglas Porch, *The Path to Victory. The Mediterranean Theatre in World War II*, (New York, 2004), 320.

¹¹¹⁵ TNA, PREM 3/63/10, Curtin to Churchill, 16/7/42.

¹¹¹⁶ Ibid, annotation Churchill to Ismay 16/7/42.

‘indefinitely postponed’.¹¹¹⁷ This was not an immediate operational issue as there was sufficient reserve strength, but seven months later during First Alamein, it became one. Additionally, at this time the issue of reinforcements coalesced with that of the proposed move to Egypt of the New Zealand Tank Brigade, which by early 1942 was ready to sail overseas, but remained at home under review until July 1942.¹¹¹⁸

On 10 July, a recovering yet anxious Freyberg, enquired about future government policy with reference to both reinforcements and the retention of the Division in the Middle East. He mentioned to Fraser that ‘the Division is most highly thought of and withdrawal would cause dismay at GHQ.....especially at the moment’.¹¹¹⁹ This clear articulation of his own views, implying a distinct accord with those of the British, seems to have been further confirmed on 19 July. In a curious action, he left a copy of the above-mentioned cable to Fraser of nine days earlier, concerning the ‘reinforcement question’, at Middle East Headquarters in Cairo. This, as he wrote in his GOC Diary was ostensibly to give ‘ME a lead to cable War Office re policy regarding NZ Div in ME’.¹¹²⁰

Auchinleck, away at the front commanding the First Alamein battles, received this and cabled Brooke on 23 July expressing unease about the reinforcement situation for the NZEF. He concluded that the ‘value of trained acclimatised force such as NZ Div to ME is very great’, professing grave concerns over its possible reduction.¹¹²¹ Whilst not embellishing the point that in the midst of battle, Auchinleck would have interrupted his command to send such a cable to the CIGS, it does nevertheless clearly illustrate the value Eighth Army placed on the presence of the New Zealand forces.

¹¹¹⁷ *DRNZ* Vol.II, footnote.2, 35; footnote.4, 36.

¹¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, Fraser to Attlee, 9/3/42, Doc.81, 60. [Attlee replaced Cranborne at the D.O. in February 1942].

¹¹¹⁹ ANZ, WAI18/5/44, GOC Diary, 11/7/42; ANZ, WAI18/69, Freyberg to Fraser, 10/7/42.

¹¹²⁰ GOC Diary, 19/7/42.

¹¹²¹ TNA, PREM 3/63/12, Auchinleck to CIGS, 23/7/42.

The cable was passed to Churchill the following day with an accompanying memorandum from Hollis, indicating that because of security anxieties in the Pacific, the COS were reluctant to petition for the New Zealand Armoured Brigade to sail to Egypt.¹¹²² Therefore, acting on Auchinleck's concerns, yet cognisant of the problem Fraser faced with respect to the Dominion's safekeeping, Churchill contacted his counterpart on 25 July. He wanted 'to consider ways and means of maintaining this splendid unit on present basis', notably ending with 'I certainly would not press for [the Tank Brigade's] despatch overseas'¹¹²³

Batterbee was providing an important inside track on views emanating from Wellington at this time. On 28 July he reiterated that going 'for reinforcements rather than the Tank Brigade' had a greater chance of success, and requested guidance on what line he should take when he next met Fraser.¹¹²⁴ What then followed was an episode, smaller in scale but still similar to what had occurred in the lead up to Crusader, of a distinct effort to ease the path for Wellington on the issue and to facilitate a satisfactory result for British command.

A flurry of memoranda passed between the Dominions Office, Prime Minister's Office and the COS Committee, and a draft reply was devised that stated that Churchill was less anxious about obtaining the Tank Brigade than reinforcements. However, upon perusing this he was dissatisfied, wanting more emphasis on the central issue as he saw it, telling Ismay that 'we want the reinforcements. Please advise'.¹¹²⁵ A further draft was then created for Batterbee which stressed that 'we badly need reinforcements for the New Zealand Division, and feel justified in pressing for them', and although coveting the Tank Brigade too, it significantly

¹¹²² TNA, PREM 3/63/12, Hollis to Churchill, 24/7/42.

¹¹²³ CAC, CHAR 20/78/48, Churchill to Fraser, 25/7/42.

¹¹²⁴ PREM 3/63/12, Batterbee to DO, 28/7/42.

¹¹²⁵ Ibid, DO to Batterbee, 30/7/42.

inserted that ‘we do not feel justified in pressing for it’.¹¹²⁶ So as to underline his priority concerning this, in a concluding act of editing, Churchill replaced the final full stop with a comma, and annotated ‘*especially if it lessens the chances of getting the drafts*’.¹¹²⁷ (emphasis added). This then was the essential crux. Churchill needed the Division to remain in the theatre, so as to have the maximum effectiveness for the battles ahead and was willing for the Armoured Brigade to be the sacrificial pawn in this whole reinforcement and retention interchange.

At his subsequent meeting with Fraser on 4 August, Batterbee ‘made the strongest representations in favour of sending reinforcements’, whilst the New Zealander countered by mentioning the manpower crisis he was facing and his desire for offensive action in the Pacific.¹¹²⁸ The High Commissioner felt though, that Fraser would agree to reinforce the Division in Egypt. The following day, an affirmative reply reached London that stated that despite the present preoccupation in the Pacific ‘we must nevertheless, in the meantime at any rate reinforce the Division’.¹¹²⁹ This decision by Fraser to continue sending the pick of the Dominion’s manpower ‘to fight at the other end of the world when its own security appeared to be so direly threatened’, was described by Michael Howard as ‘requiring courage of a high order’.¹¹³⁰ It was almost certainly taken before the strategic importance of the Midway victory was appreciated, so that this maintenance of the clear strategy of deploying forces in the decisive theatre at this time, became arguably Fraser’s most onerous wartime decision.

¹¹²⁶ TNA, PREM 3/63/12, DO to Batterbee, 31/7/42.

¹¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹¹²⁸ Ibid Batterbee to DO, 4/8/42.

¹¹²⁹ CAC, CHAR 20/78/128, Fraser to Churchill, 5/8/42.

¹¹³⁰ Michael Howard, *History of the Second World War, Grand Strategy, Vol.IV, August 1942-September 1943* (London, 1972), 78.

An additional and not insignificant supplementary pressure was markedly applied by Curtin, too. Fraser visited Canberra and attended the War Cabinet there on 29 July, when Australia's determination for 9 Division to return was expressed, and it was trusted that New Zealand would act similarly.¹¹³¹ Following his return to Wellington, Batterbee detected a Curtin-induced hardening of view, as Fraser was 'clearly hankering after [the Division's] return to New Zealand', but this was evidently put into abeyance during the crisis period in Egypt.¹¹³²

Therefore, this episode can be analysed from two aspects. The first plainly demonstrated the regard felt in Whitehall and Cairo for the Division, and the attempt by the British command to conflate the reinforcement issue with the retention one. Clearly, for the Division to be fully effective for future operations it required reinforcement, and if this occurred then it would naturally aid retention, as the NZEF would become embedded deeper into the Mediterranean theatre.¹¹³³ Through Batterbee, London was totally aware of the conundrum and pressures that Fraser faced, but above all wanted the Division both reinforced and in the front line, and evidently manoeuvred accordingly.

The second was the enigmatic role of Freyberg, who began a sequence of cables that went via Auchinleck, Brooke, the Dominions Office, Churchill and finally to Fraser. This created the pressure upon his Government to make the decision to reinforce the Division. The GOC possibly calculated that a favourable outcome would result more quickly if an additional request came from London, and thus knowingly gave MEC 'a lead' to contact the War Office.

¹¹³¹ ANZ, EA1/626, Curtin to Fraser, 17/11/42; Hensley, *Beyond*, 218.

¹¹³² PREM 3/63/12, Batterbee to DO, 4/8/42.

¹¹³³ [The despatch of the 8th Reinforcement was approved on 29/8/42, which disembarked on 12/12/42], *DRNZ*, Vol.II, footnote 48.

The travails of Fraser and Churchill as Curtin insists on return, November/December 1942

As we have seen, Churchill did all he could to persuade his dominion counterparts to retain their divisions in the Mediterranean and was successful in this aim up to November 1942. Just before and during the great Alamein battle, however, Curtin reiterated his view that the postponement of the return of 9 Division could no longer continue and asked the British Prime Minister for its return, copying in Bruce and Morshead.¹¹³⁴ The latter passed this on to Alexander in mid-battle, who, horrified, conveyed it to the COS.¹¹³⁵ Churchill became energised on the issue again, and did all he could to forestall such a scenario, scrawling his characteristic red annotation on Alexander's cable, demanding of Ismay a reply from the COS committee 'to this question'.¹¹³⁶ Additionally, astutely as ever, he immediately apprised Roosevelt hoping that the President could encourage a change of mind from Curtin. On 29 October, the Australian was subsequently informed 'that our common cause can best be served' if 9 Division remains in the Middle East, and Roosevelt further proposed to send an extra American division to Australia.¹¹³⁷

Probably conscious of the ongoing battle at Alamein, Curtin waited until 16 November and then contacted both global leaders. His essential message was that now the situation in the Middle East has been cleared up satisfactorily,

I shall be glad of your personal assistance in seeing that early effect be given to return of Ninth Division in accordance with the understanding reached in April.¹¹³⁸

¹¹³⁴ W.J. Hudson, *et al*, (eds), *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy 1937-49*, Vol.VI: *July 1942-December 1943* (Canberra, 1983), [henceforth, *DAFP* Vol.VI], Doc.62, 134-36, Curtin to Churchill, 17/10/42; *Ibid*, Curtin to Morshead, 24/10/42 in Curtin to Bruce, 31/10/42, Doc.67, 140.

¹¹³⁵ TNA, PREM 3/63/10, Alexander to Brooke, 28/10/42.

¹¹³⁶ *Ibid*.

¹¹³⁷ *Ibid*, Roosevelt to Curtin, 29/10/42.

¹¹³⁸ *Ibid*, Curtin to Roosevelt, 16/11/42.

Despite one further appeal from Churchill, citing the viewpoint of the President and the severe 'shipping stringency', Curtin would not succumb, repeating his request and forwarded a copy to Wellington.¹¹³⁹ He appended a cable to Fraser where he forthrightly stressed that

possible contingencies of defence of Australia have a direct bearing on the defence of New Zealand...[and] it is important therefore that you should know our views.¹¹⁴⁰

He thus unequivocally signalled to his Tasman counterpart the explicit inference that he expected the Dominion to follow suit.

Three weeks earlier in fact, Batterbee contacted London about the issue of retention, reporting that the general mood in Parliament was for recall, and conveyed Fraser's anxiety about the pressure that would beset him if 9 Division returned to Australia.¹¹⁴¹ On 7 November he additionally indicated Fraser's embarrassment over manpower by the repeated requests by the American commander of the South-West Pacific area, of the need for more New Zealand troops in the Pacific theatre.¹¹⁴² This roused a concerned response from Whitehall, which whilst reiterating the policy of retaining the Division in the Middle East, added that they 'fully appreciate the difficulty which Mr Fraser will meet... if the Australian Division were returned'.¹¹⁴³ Additionally, on the issue of New Zealand troops in the Pacific, it also interestingly instructed Batterbee to advise Fraser to impress upon the US commander to 'secure the considered advice' of the Combined Chiefs of Staff (CCOS) in Washington, as they took a global view of all theatres and of shipping.¹¹⁴⁴

¹¹³⁹ TNA, PREM 3/63/10, Churchill to Curtin, 23/11/42; *DAFP* Vol.VI, Doc.83, 174-75, Curtin to Churchill, 30/11/42.

¹¹⁴⁰ ANZ, EA1/626, Curtin to Fraser, 17/11/42.

¹¹⁴¹ TNA, WO 106/4927, Batterbee to DO, 28/10/42.

¹¹⁴² *Ibid*, Batterbee to DO, 7/11/42, No. 460 &461.

¹¹⁴³ TNA, ADM 199/987, DO to Batterbee, 14/11/42.

¹¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*.

Such a recommendation was prescient, as there were concerns over the command abilities and nervous disposition of Admiral Ghormley at Guadalcanal, which culminated in him being replaced on 20 November by Admiral William Halsey.¹¹⁴⁵ Two months later, this global strategic view of the CCOS had undoubtedly reached the latter, as at a meeting with Batterbee the Admiral declared his 'entire appreciation of the importance of the Division remaining in the theatre of war in which it had special training and experience'.¹¹⁴⁶ Thus, a clear indication was afforded at the grand strategic level of the CCOS, of their view of the importance that the New Zealand Division stays in the Mediterranean theatre. This meant that Fraser's mind could be put at rest on this aspect with regard to the urgent need for Dominion troops in the Pacific.

Just after Fraser received his 17 November cable from Curtin, Batterbee had a 'long talk' with him, and as in July following the visit to Canberra, found the Prime Minister's 'mind had considerably hardened towards early return of [the] Division' as a result of this message.¹¹⁴⁷ Although strong representations were made, he found that he was swimming against the tide, and that Fraser's mood on the issue will be 'difficult to shift'.¹¹⁴⁸ Worse followed on 20 November, when Fraser dispatched a Pefra cable to Churchill in which he stated in a regretful tone, that 'the time has come I feel when I must raise with you the question of the return of 2 New Zealand Division from the Middle East'.¹¹⁴⁹ He cited a whole range of reasons, but especially the political difficulties of attempting 'to resist the strong feeling,should it become known that all three Australian divisions have returned'.¹¹⁵⁰

¹¹⁴⁵ Hensley, *Beyond*, 208.

¹¹⁴⁶ TNA, DO 121/95, Batterbee to DO, 5/1/43.

¹¹⁴⁷ TNA, PREM 3/63/10, Batterbee to DO, 18/11/42.

¹¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴⁹ CAC, CHAR 20/83/63-64, PEFRA No.8, Fraser to Churchill, 20/11/42.

¹¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

He additionally broached the question of the actual despatch of the 8th Reinforcements for the Division, he had assented to the previous August. Fraser mentioned that the liners for such were already bound for the Dominion, and concluded that ‘it will be necessary, therefore, to give further consideration to this matter on receipt of your reply to this telegram’.¹¹⁵¹ What followed was another intensive exchange of telegrams, repeating that of the previous July. As with that episode, a valuable additional insight is gained into the British approach by the messages and red-pen annotations of Churchill. Just hours after the telegram from Fraser arrived in London, one from Batterbee arrived too, which just as before, fortuitously provided greater clarity regarding Fraser’s thinking. The High Commissioner with his ear close to the ground in the two days since his previous cable, had gained the impression that the motive behind Fraser’s entreat to Churchill was political, so as to satisfy the Government’s supporters. Batterbee judged that ‘much of the pressure upon Fraser would be met by the simple fact that they could report that such a request had been actually made’.¹¹⁵²

Moreover, he allayed any fears that the 8th Reinforcements would not depart, as they ‘propose to adhere to decision to despatch to Middle East’ the reinforcements for the Division.¹¹⁵³

Interestingly, from an unnamed source, Batterbee learned that the CGS in Wellington, General Puttick, was not informed of Fraser’s request for the return of the Division from the Middle East, which adds credence to his assertion of the political imperative behind Fraser’s call.¹¹⁵⁴

Therefore, just as in the previous July, when the intent to despatch 8th Reinforcements became a proxy decision for retaining the Division in the Middle East, now in November, with the men ready for transit, the embarkation decision had the equivalent status. If the reinforcements sailed, then the Division remained in place for the immediate future at least.

¹¹⁵¹ CAC, CHAR 20/83/63-64, PEFRA No.8, Fraser to Churchill, 20/11/42.

¹¹⁵² TNA, PREM 3/63/10, Batterbee to DO, 20/11/42.

¹¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹¹⁵⁴ TNA, WO 106/4927, Batterbee to DO, 22/11/42.

Churchill would have been especially relieved, as during the last week of November there was profound anxiety in London. Although probably resigned to the loss of 9 Division, he received additional alarming news that Smuts had announced that he proposed to bring his troops home to South Africa for leave.¹¹⁵⁵ He expressed his disquiet to Brooke at the possible loss of these dominion divisions, enquiring ‘what is going to be left’, and requested a report as to the consequences for future offensive operations.¹¹⁵⁶ Alexander too was fearful that he would additionally lose both Antipodean divisions for the advance into Tripolitania, but was given partial assurance by Churchill, that with Roosevelt’s help, he was resisting the withdrawals and at least ‘*hoped to save the New Zealanders*’¹¹⁵⁷ (emphasis added). A week later Churchill’s determination was clearly evident after a further COS assessment, when he declared in red ink to Ismay that ‘we must fight hard to keep the New Zealanders’.¹¹⁵⁸

It is thus clear that in late November 1942, at the grand strategic level in the higher reaches of British command and the CCOS in Washington, arguably the single most important issue was the retention of the New Zealand Division in the Mediterranean. The anxiety experienced, manoeuvrings undertaken, and the Whitehall man-hours expended on the matter testify to this view. It was also further exemplified at the ‘Big Three’ level on 21 November, when in a message to Stalin, Roosevelt expounded his problem ‘in persuading the people of Australia and New Zealand that the menace of Japan can be most effectively met by destroying the Nazis first’.¹¹⁵⁹ As Hensley commented in referring to all these happenings about the Division, ‘the concern expressed by British commanders among themselves at the prospect of losing it was the sincerest tribute to its strength’.¹¹⁶⁰

¹¹⁵⁵ TNA, CAB 120/475, Alexander to Brooke, 23/11/42 in Churchill to Brooke, 25/11/42.

¹¹⁵⁶ Ibid, Churchill to Brooke.

¹¹⁵⁷ TNA, PREM 3/63/10, Churchill to Alexander, 24/11/42.

¹¹⁵⁸ Ibid, Price (MoD) to Churchill, 28/11/42 and Churchill annotation 2/12/42.

¹¹⁵⁹ Roosevelt to Stalin, 21/11/42, in Reynolds & Pechatnov (eds), *Kremlin Letters*, 177.

¹¹⁶⁰ Hensley, *Beyond*, 223.

On 25 November, armed with the crucial insight from Batterbee, Churchill cabled Fraser. He subtly mentioned that he understood the possible embarrassment caused by the withdrawal of 9 Division yet would 'regret to see the New Zealand Division quit the scene of its glories', and urged Fraser to be mindful of the views of the United States.¹¹⁶¹ He followed this up a week later, emphasising that 'the fact that we are losing the Australian Division makes the retention of the New Zealand Division...even more necessary for us'.¹¹⁶²

Fraser perhaps betrayed his own preference, on 4 December in a debate on the issue, where he used Churchill's telegram to take Parliament 'into his confidence', with the resultant outcome of the House was for the Division to stay at least to the end of the North African campaign.¹¹⁶³ In response a delighted Churchill voiced his gratitude, that 'the glorious New Zealand Division [would continue] to represent the Dominion on the African battlefield'.¹¹⁶⁴ Roosevelt then offered his appreciation too, praising the generosity of the decision.¹¹⁶⁵

However, on receiving this news a disappointed Curtin replied by attempting to dragoon his counterpart by firstly reiterating the 'substantial degree of co-operation' achieved, and secondly by stressing New Zealand's obligation to its neighbour, as the Commonwealth's endeavor in New Guinea aided the security of New Zealand.¹¹⁶⁶ In a carefully worded reply, which mixed a placatory tone with firmness, Fraser expressed his gratitude for Australia's munitions assistance, admiration for its military effort in New Guinea, but stressed it was the unanimous opinion of the Wellington Parliament, and that they reserved the right to raise the matter again if necessary.¹¹⁶⁷

¹¹⁶¹ TNA, PREM, 3/63/10, Churchill to Fraser, 24/11/42.

¹¹⁶² CAC, CHAR 20/84/36, WINCH No.10, Churchill to Fraser, 2/12/42.

¹¹⁶³ PREM, 3/63/10, Fraser to Churchill, 5/12/42; TNA, CAB 121/780, Batterbee to DO, 10/12/42.

¹¹⁶⁴ Ibid, Churchill to Fraser, 5/12/42.

¹¹⁶⁵ TNA, FO 954/4B/494, Roosevelt to Fraser, 6/12/42.

¹¹⁶⁶ ANZ, EA1/626, Fraser to Curtin, 4/12/42; Curtin to Fraser, 14/12/42.

¹¹⁶⁷ Ibid, Fraser to Curtin, 16/12/42.

What is most interesting about November 1942 is that this was Fraser's only request for the return of the Division, even though the military situation in the Pacific had clearly turned in the Allies favour against Japan, and that by now New Zealand had established a two brigade Third Division to garrison New Caledonia in the Pacific. In the previous March, to avoid or forestall such a scenario, Churchill pre-empted it by congratulating Wellington on having 'never asked for the withdrawal of your Division', and in July, whilst wanting the 8th Reinforcements, he avoided asking for the Tank Brigade.¹¹⁶⁸ Yet at the end of the year, with the Allies now returning to the offensive and the danger to New Zealand all but evaporated, Fraser now entreated.

Although Fraser had just received Curtin's telegram, Batterbee's insight appears crucial that there was a political dimension to the call in that the Prime Minister needed to placate some of his own members. He had clearly given himself a let out in his telegram, reserving the right to 'further consider this matter on receipt of your reply to this telegram'.¹¹⁶⁹ By reading out Churchill's reply with its usual valorous affectations and praise of New Zealand's signal contribution, he not only satisfied his Party, but provided tentative clues as to where his preference lay in the whole debate. The fact that he seemed to be holding his own preference very close to his chest, even from his own cabinet, is revealed from Labour's campaign in the Christchurch East by-election of February 1943. In a speech there on 21 January, Dan Sullivan, the Minister of Supply, spoke of the intention of the Government 'to return our Division to New Zealand from the Middle East as soon as it is possible to do so'.¹¹⁷⁰ He would hardly have uttered such words if he thought they were contrary to that of his leader.

¹¹⁶⁸ CAC, CHAR 20/71B/128-29, Churchill to Fraser 10/3/42; CHAR 20/78/48, Churchill to Fraser, 25/7/42.

¹¹⁶⁹ CHAR 20/83/63-64, PEFRA No.8, Fraser to Churchill, 20/11/42.

¹¹⁷⁰ "NZ Division" *Evening Post*, 21/1/43, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19430121.2.15>

Fred Jones visits the Division

On the domestic front, a General Election in New Zealand had been postponed twice in the latter months of both 1941 and 1942, as it was thought inappropriate to be electioneering whilst its countrymen were undertaking major active operations in North Africa. But on 25 February 1943, with the Division was in Tunisia, Fraser moved a motion in the House that in view of the ‘improvement in the war situation a General Election should be held during the present year’.¹¹⁷¹ Additionally a general consensus pertained that any consideration of where the Division should be in the future would occur ‘after Tunisia is cleared of the Germans and the Italians’.¹¹⁷² It became clear to Fraser that an important constituency in the whole deliberation were the soldiers serving in the Middle East, so in order to garner the views of the troops it was proposed that Defence Minister Fred Jones should visit them. Although characterised by officials in Wellington as a ‘nonentity’, he was viewed by others as ‘symbolising the ordinary Labour man’.¹¹⁷³

Both London and Freyberg were informed in early February, and the latter was asked to make all necessary arrangements for Jones to visit troops at base and at the front.¹¹⁷⁴ The GOC replied that he had seen Alexander, who had been additionally apprised by the War Office, emphasising that they were ‘most anxious this visit should be a success and all facilities put at Minister’s disposal’.¹¹⁷⁵ Thus, probably more so than the Defence Minister himself, both the British command and Freyberg could see the political imperative of the visit. The sheer weight of cable traffic attests to this contention, as punctilious care was taken to give Jones the ‘red carpet’ treatment during his time in North Africa and Britain.

¹¹⁷¹ NZPD, 25/2/43, Vol.262, 28.

¹¹⁷² NZPD, 18/3/43, Vol.262, 495

¹¹⁷³ ATL, 2000-094-5 Henderson interviews Stevens, Barrowclough and Ashwin; Erik Olssen and Shawn Ryan, “*Jones Frederick*”, Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/4j8/jones-frederick>

¹¹⁷⁴ TNA, WO 106/4927, Batterbee to DO, 9/2/43; ANZ, WAI8/14, Fraser to Freyberg, 11/2/43.

¹¹⁷⁵ Ibid, Freyberg to Fraser, 16/2/43; TNA, WO 106/4865, WO to Alexander, 17/2/43.

As offensive operations were underway in Tunisia, Jones went to Egypt and met NZEF base troops, where the main topic of conversation was the situation at home and the usual gripes about supplies of New Zealand tobacco and extra duty pay, characterised as the usual ‘old friends’.¹¹⁷⁶ Revealingly though, Stevens in reports to Freyberg and Army HQ in Wellington added that ‘there has been nothing which has caused us the slightest embarrassment’, and that Jones was ‘excellent to take round’.¹¹⁷⁷ As it became clear that he could not visit Tunisia and the frontline troops at this time, it was arranged that he leave for Britain on 1 April and return in about a month.¹¹⁷⁸

British Pressure

Churchill knew that the decision regarding the future of 2NZEF was just delayed, to be faced again in the spring. In the new year, the British diplomatic approach on this front started to gather pace, whereby several strands of pronounced telegraphic intensity and complexity started to unfold. Firstly, throughout this time as previously, Churchill never wasted an opportunity to assuage Fraser and employ his purple prose to venerate the Division and the Dominion. Now in early March 1943, such messages were associated with repeated military success. Following the capture of Tripoli, he expressed to his counterpart his

feelings of gratitude to New Zealand for the high and broad
strategic conception which has enabled her sons to fight in
the vanguard of the victorious Desert Army.¹¹⁷⁹

At the end of that month in Tunisia he wrote of the ‘deep pride....that they are at our side in the thick of the battle during these momentous days’, and a week later, the ‘Desert Army assaulted Akarit in the darkness....with your Division as ever in the van’.¹¹⁸⁰

¹¹⁷⁶ ANZ, WAI18/14, Stevens to Freyberg, 27/3/43.

¹¹⁷⁷ Ibid; ATL, 0616-3L, Stevens to Conway, 18/4/43.

¹¹⁷⁸ Ibid, Freyberg to Jones, 24/3/43.

¹¹⁷⁹ TNA, CAB 121/780, Churchill to Fraser, 6/2/43.

¹¹⁸⁰ CAC, CHAR 20/109/23, Churchill to Fraser, 30/3/43; CHAR 20/109/82, Churchill to Fraser, 7/4/43.

On 29 March Brooke telegraphed 18 Army Group to ask why the New Zealand Division in particular was needed for the forthcoming Operation Husky and the invasion of Sicily, emphasising the dilemma that any such request would have to be made at the highest political level.¹¹⁸¹ One week later, in reply, Alexander stated that Montgomery viewed that

it is most important for success of operation.....[and] he is most anxious to use 30th Corps intact, [which] consists of 51st Highland and NZ Division [and] I hope that you will exert every influence to bring this about.¹¹⁸²

At this point, as over the previous eight months, there was another episode in the intense intra-Whitehall departmental action, where everything possible was done to facilitate a positive decision regarding the Division's retention. This time it probably surpassed all such previous activity. On 7 April, a perturbed Attlee sent a long memorandum to Churchill in which he outlined the various difficult factors impinging on the New Zealand decision, concluding that 'we ought, in fact, not to trade on their loyalty'.¹¹⁸³ This provoked an irritated response, as evidenced by the characteristic red ink underlining of the phrase, whereby a patently annoyed Churchill perhaps reverted to a view of where the dominions should be in the pecking order. He commented that

I certainly do not think it would be trading on NZ loyalty...[as] it is a great opportunity for them to win honour, and the fact that Australia has failed us makes it all the more necessary.¹¹⁸⁴

He went on to mention the specific request for them by Alexander and Montgomery, and then emphasised that 'of course, if they refuse there is nothing more to be said... but I do

¹¹⁸¹ TNA, PREM 3/63/5, Brooke to Gairdner, 29/3/43. [On 20 February, 18 Army Group was formed, incorporating British First and Eighth Armies under the command of General Alexander.]

¹¹⁸² Ibid, Alexander to Brooke, 6/4/43.

¹¹⁸³ Ibid, Attlee to Churchill, 7/4/43.

¹¹⁸⁴ Ibid, Churchill to Attlee, 8/4/43.

not think they will refuse'.¹¹⁸⁵ Evidently Churchill was confident, as he was when pressing Auchinleck the previous May, in Fraser's fidelity to any request from him.

9th Reinforcements

Whilst this exchange between the Prime Minister and his deputy was taking place in London, Fraser cabled Attlee on 8 April and mentioned that he had just heard from the Director of Sea Transport that the liner *Nieuw Amsterdam* would not arrive until late May. This ship was due to embark the 3000 troops of the NZEF's 9th Reinforcements, required to make up losses for the Division following their advance in North Africa. Furthermore only 2000 of them could sail as there would already be 4000 US troops aboard.¹¹⁸⁶ Fraser was notably concerned that the 'heavily engaged' Division, 'will not receive its minimum of reinforcements', and requested, at the earliest, a fast and suitable ship to carry the whole draft of 3000.¹¹⁸⁷

Churchill received a copy of this message as well as Alexander's one to Brooke of 6 April asking for the Division to be used in the Husky operation. The CIGS, on this same day, attached a note to Churchill stating that it might now be a good time to apprise Fraser of Husky, and ask permission to use the New Zealanders for the expedition.¹¹⁸⁸ The Prime Minister naturally desiring this eventuality, decided to undertake this request at the most politic time, and three days later scrawled on this memorandum that '[we] must await the solution of the draft question before addressing my request to Mr Fraser'.¹¹⁸⁹ In fact, he had just previously received a minute from his office which stated that the COS had 'decided to do everything possible to meet his (Fraser's) wishes', and four days later a solution was

¹¹⁸⁵ TNA, PREM 3/63/5, Churchill to Attlee, 8/4/43.

¹¹⁸⁶ TNA, WO 106/4866, Fraser to Attlee, 8/4/43.

¹¹⁸⁷ Ibid; [It is also important to note that five days previous there was a mass brawl/riot between New Zealand and American troops in the Battle of Manners Street in Wellington. Fraser no doubt wanted to avoid a repeat on board. <https://teara.govt.nz/en/1966/riots/page-7>]

¹¹⁸⁸ PREM 3/63/5, Brooke to Churchill, 8/4/43.

¹¹⁸⁹ Ibid, annotation on above, 10/4/43.

found as the ‘*Dominion Monarch*, two days out from Durban en route to America, had been recalled’ and would arrive in New Zealand about 30 April.¹¹⁹⁰ Additionally, later that same day the First Sea Lord rang Number 10 to reassure Churchill that ‘everything has already been arranged’ with regard to an escort, thus ensuring that Fraser’s incontrovertible *sin qua non* was satisfied.¹¹⁹¹

With all these contingencies now in place, on 14 April Churchill felt able to contact Fraser with two Winch telegrams. The first mentioned the prospective ten division Husky operation, which he bracketed (‘for meaning see my immediately following’).¹¹⁹² He then continued with his perennial martial blandishments, stating that General Alexander

particularly asks for the New Zealand Division, [and that] we hope therefore that the New Zealand Government will allow its famous Division to win further honour for the Dominion in Europe.¹¹⁹³

Finally, the crucial reassurance was added, that a ‘special ship with escort’ had been arranged to transport the 3000 reinforcements.¹¹⁹⁴

Half an hour before this cable was sent from Whitehall, a forerunner was despatched which informed Fraser that ‘immediately following, Winch telegrams contain message of utmost secrecy...Please make special arrangements for de-cyphering’.¹¹⁹⁵ This second (Winch 2) telegram in effect contained just one word, which related to the bracketed part of Winch 1: ‘Sicily’.¹¹⁹⁶ Clearly, in attempting to cover all contingencies, Churchill was undertaking all he could to facilitate a successful outcome. He attempted to conflate the issue of remaining, but

¹¹⁹⁰ TNA PREM 3/63/5, Brown to Churchill, 9/4/43; Brooke to Churchill, 13/4/43.

¹¹⁹¹ Ibid, Bevir to Churchill, 13/4/43.

¹¹⁹² CAC, CHAR 20/110/20-21, WINCH No.1, Churchill to Fraser, 14/4/43.

¹¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁹⁵ PREM 3/63/5, DO to Fraser, 14/4/43.

¹¹⁹⁶ CHAR 20/110/22, WINCH No.2, Churchill to Fraser, 14/4/43.

this time with Operation Husky. If the Division took part in Husky, then they would inevitably be retained in the Mediterranean.

The whole episode illustrated the lengths that the British command was prepared to go to obtain a positive response from Wellington. The deciphering instruction was a repeat of the subtle stratagem Churchill used in October 1941 to avoid Fraser's misgivings over the balance of air power for Crusader, where he divulged the relative numbers to the New Zealander. Here, some eighteen months later, he overtly acquainted Fraser with the foreknowledge that Husky would be Sicily and repeated the device of making special arrangements for deciphering. Although there was undoubtedly a large element of justified strict security in this, however, when considering Churchill's past actions and subterfuges, it is contended that there is also the strong suspicion of a theatrical contrivance in Fraser's inclusion in this intelligence, as in October 1941. This would allegedly serve as a means to flatter him as to his awareness of the offensive, which along with the usual rhetorical effort made by Churchill, would elicit assent for the New Zealand Division to take part in the Sicily landings.¹¹⁹⁷

What though is of the most significant import, is again the sheer scale of the operation sweeping Whitehall from the Prime Minister's Office, Dominions Office, COS and Admiralty, so as to alleviate any concerns on Fraser's part. This dwarfed the similar diplomatic operations of October 1941, July 1942 and November/December 1942. Significantly, in a period of straitened global shipping as pertained in early 1943, a suitable ship such as the *Dominion Monarch* was found. Albeit one sailing westwards two days out of Durban, turned around 180° to proceed eastwards to New Zealand to embark the 9th

¹¹⁹⁷ [The Editor of Volume II of the New Zealand Documents series, incorporated Winch 2 within the Winch 1 cable and thus this alleged additional ploy by Churchill to elicit a positive response by Fraser was obscured, *DRNZ* Vol.II, Doc.210, 182.]

Reinforcements, and with an escort ship on hand; a testament to the Admiralty's organisational effort.

'Winches and Pefras', Fraser holds his ground

The scale of the telegraphic endeavour of early April intensified still further in the middle of the month, as six Winch and Pefra telegrams including Churchill's first two were exchanged over the next four days. McIntosh, now the Secretary to the War Cabinet, described this week as having to deal 'in nothing but Winches and Pefras'.¹¹⁹⁸ In his Pefra 1 reply to Churchill's request of 14 April, Fraser expressed his regret about his inability to provide an answer on the retention of the Division, as he had previously given a pledge to consult Parliament on the issue before making any such pronouncement.¹¹⁹⁹ As the House was next due to assemble on 19 May, he was reluctant to recall Parliament earlier.¹²⁰⁰

This setback was not going to deter the British leader, and in his Winch 3 of 18 April stated that a decision could not wait until May. He attempted to coerce Fraser by asking if 'we should be justified in acting on the assumption of a favourable response from your Parliament', and thus proceed with special amphibious training for the Division.¹²⁰¹ Then, just a day later, and before Fraser could reply, he despatched a Winch 4 telegram, to which he attached a telegram he had just received hours previously from General Alexander. The Army Group commander asked 'any news of New Zealand? This is causing me grave concern. I can make no plans for battle unless I get an answer'.¹²⁰² Churchill at his scheming best, used

¹¹⁹⁸ [His predecessor, Carl Berendsen became the first New Zealand High Commissioner to Australia on 17 March 1943]; ATL, 6759-228, McIntosh to Berendsen, 22/4/43.

¹¹⁹⁹ CAC, CHAR 20/110/32, PEFRA No.1, Fraser to Churchill, 16/4/43; NZPD, 18/3/43, Vol.262, 494.

¹²⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹²⁰¹ CHAR 20/110/39, WINCH No.3, Churchill to Fraser, 18/4/43.

¹²⁰² TNA, CAB 121/780, Alexander to Brooke, 18/4/43.

Alexander's entreat to further pressurise his counterpart in Wellington, adding that 'I earnestly hope you will be able to assume the responsibility of giving a favourable answer'.¹²⁰³

Despite the enormous pressure being applied, Fraser was having none of it. In two telegrams (Pefra 2 and 3) sent by return on 19 April, he thanked Churchill for 'the very high honour which is being paid to our Division', but regretted that he could not give in advance the decision required, and that such an action may be seen as 'not in the spirit of my original pledge and *would prejudice their final decision*' (emphasis added).¹²⁰⁴ This last comment arguably confirms the view, as alluded to in December, that Fraser's preference was for the Division to stay in the Mediterranean, and at this time in late April he did not want Labour members biased against retention by such peremptoriness.

Churchill, in his Winch 5, accepted a temporary tactical defeat but was already planning another route to his goal. He informed Fraser that he would update Alexander that an alternative division will have to be used in the 'HUSKY assault phase', but hoped 'on symbolic and historic as well as military grounds' the Division may be available for the follow up in Europe.¹²⁰⁵ This last phrase was to gain some resonance in the following days, but as of this time this facet of British diplomatic initiative closed. Churchill received an affirmative reply from Alexander that a 19 May decision date would be sufficient for such a follow-up role.¹²⁰⁶

By now Churchill had done his utmost over the previous nine months to achieve a positive retention decision, but his role and importance in the crucial final month before the debate in

¹²⁰³ CHAR 20/110/43, WINCH No.4, Churchill to Fraser, 19/4/43.

¹²⁰⁴ CAC, CHAR 20/110/46, PEFRA No.2, Fraser to Churchill, 19/4/43 and CHAR 20/110/47, PEFRA No.3.

¹²⁰⁵ CHAR 20/110/55, WINCH No.5, Churchill to Fraser, 20/4/43.

¹²⁰⁶ TNA, PREM 3/63/5, Churchill to Alexander, 21/4/43; Ibid, Alexander to Churchill, 24/4/43.

the House of Representatives was now to be overtaken by that of Fraser. As mentioned above, it is possible to identify Fraser's December speech in Parliament as tending towards retention. His Pefra 1 reply of 16 April to Churchill also indicated that with about a month before the debate, he had already possibly commenced manoeuvrings to realise such an outcome. Fraser was, however, in a considerable quandary as the main opposition to his aim came from members of his own party, whilst the official Opposition wanted to preserve the status quo. In any ballot, the votes of some Labour members with those of the National Party could suffice for retention. Yet this would mean not only a divided nation, but also a riven Government and a disastrous scenario for the upcoming election later that year. He therefore needed to persuade as many of his own party as possible to change their disposition.

Fraser intrigues towards retention with furlough

In order to achieve this, Fraser initially adopted an approach whereby he became the hub of three separate telegraphic strands of communication, which would be used in his presentation to Parliament. The first was to Jones, the second to Freyberg and the third to Churchill. It is imperative to underline at this point, that whilst the abovementioned mid-April conversations with Churchill about the possible use of the Division in Husky were progressing in the Pefra and Winch communications, within these same telegrams an additional parallel theme was emerging. This matter became one of crucial significance involving Jones, who had by now returned to London from Egypt.

Since the early months of 1943, low-key discussions had taken place between Wellington and the NZEF over the possible implementation of a relief scheme for troops who had served three years so that they could return to New Zealand. Early correspondence implied the

involvement of 1000 men in this programme.¹²⁰⁷ In a manpower debate in the House on 17-18 March, Fraser stated that ‘everything possible must be done to try and release some of the men who went away with the First Echelon’.¹²⁰⁸ At this stage the matter was primarily that of sound welfare and military concerns, as the troops had been away for over three years.

However, whilst it began for the reasons mentioned, it started to become increasingly enmeshed with the retention issue. Consequently two major considerations entered into calculations, ‘the views of the men serving in the Middle East, and, the domestic political situation’.¹²⁰⁹ It was clear to Fraser that most of those who thought the Division should be recalled were Labour members, and as the 2NZEF was disproportionately represented within its ranks by unskilled workers, it is a legitimate inference that they were ‘more likely to vote Labour’.¹²¹⁰ He was prescient enough to recognise that as a member of the War Cabinet, allied with his solid working class and trade union roots, Jones would be ideally placed to ascertain any such opinions. Fraser needed them to be positive about retention so that he could convey this to Labour members in the House, who would then vote accordingly.¹²¹¹ This perhaps casts some light on the visit by Jones, and provides the strong suspicion that all along this was Fraser’s ulterior motive.

For the British, the relief proposal was first recounted in Fraser’s paradigmatic Pefra 1 cable to Churchill of 16 April, when he mentioned the looming dilemma of declining manpower and how that was impacting upon the ongoing retention/return debate in the Dominion. He then significantly pronounced that ‘I would be glad if you can discuss the matter with Mr

¹²⁰⁷ *DRNZ*, Vol.II, Doc.249-252, 222-225.

¹²⁰⁸ *NZPD*, 17/3/43, Vol.262, 479.

¹²⁰⁹ Wood, *Political*, 258.

¹²¹⁰ Jonathan Fennell, “Soldiers and Social Change: The Forces Vote in the Second World War and New Zealand’s Great Experiment in Social Citizenship”, *English Historical Review (EHR)*, Vol.CXXXII, No.54, (2017), 86.

¹²¹¹ *Ibid.*

Jones.... who should still be in London'.¹²¹² On reading this message, and no doubt seeing a further path to achieve his aims, Churchill red-lined his copy of the cable, and arranged lunch with Jones for the following day. The Defence Minister broached this fast-developing issue of gradual release and relief of NZEF troops, and Ismay was called into the meeting and instructed to investigate and report on the practicability of the proposal.¹²¹³

Jones was also due to have a meeting with Attlee that evening, and Churchill rang the Dominion Secretary suggesting that he confer with the CIGS on the feasibility of such a plan before such a discussion.¹²¹⁴ The substance of this consultation became incorporated into Churchill's Winch 3 telegram to Fraser which stated that the 'necessary arrangements [for the relief of the longest serving troops] could be made for say 20% without impairing efficiency of Division'.¹²¹⁵

Hence, the additional element of furlough became not only another ingredient in the retention deliberations but would grow into an essential one. Furthermore, both prime ministers worked in tandem on the issue, as they realised the importance of the Jones mission to North Africa. It is also noteworthy to mention that only the War Cabinet in Wellington, and not the ordinary (Labour) Cabinet, knew any of this.¹²¹⁶

On 17 April, Fraser had already instigated his second telegraphic strand by contacting Freyberg about the upcoming Minister's visit, emphasising that 'it is most essential that Mr Jones should discuss with you personally at the earliest possible date the future activity of the

¹²¹² TNA, PREM 3/63/5, PEFRA No.1, Fraser to Churchill, 16/4/43.

¹²¹³ *DRNZ*, Vol.II, Doc.253, 225, Jones to Fraser, 17/4/43.

¹²¹⁴ *Ibid*; TNA, PREM 3/63/5, Downing Street note, no attribution, 17/4/43.

¹²¹⁵ *Ibid*, Garner to Martin, 17/4/43; CAC, CHAR 20/110/39, WINCH No.3, Churchill to Fraser, 18/4/43.

¹²¹⁶ ATL, 6759-228, McIntosh to Berendsen, 22/4/43.

Division'.¹²¹⁷ As Freyberg was at the front, this message arrived via Stevens, who appended a covering note to the GOC, implying connivance between the two, affirming that 'I think it most desirable that his (Jones's) moves in North Africa should be under our control'.¹²¹⁸ Virtually by return, the General replied to his Prime Minister and mentioned that because operations had reached a 'semi-static state', he could see the Defence Minister at once.¹²¹⁹

The British part in this scheming now came into play, and Jones, a pawn in the whole arrangement, was the last to know of this impending journey to Tunisia and certainly unaware of the man-hours and administrative load that went into realising it. On seeing the Pefra 2 telegram of 19 April, whereby Fraser wanted Jones to visit Freyberg, Attlee, that same day dropped in on the Prime Minister's Office to ask if Jones, who was visiting Oxford, could be informed and return so that arrangements could be made for a priority flight.¹²²⁰ Churchill contacted Alexander on 21 April and notified him that 'it is important to get NZ Defence Minister Jones in close relations with Freyberg...soon. We are facilitating his journey'.¹²²¹ This last phrase was emphasised in an internal memorandum from Number 10 to the Dominions Office, which stressed that the Prime Minister had 'given instructions that everything possible should be done to implement the last sentence'.¹²²² It resulted in a flight arranged for the early hours of the following day, 22 April.¹²²³

A final confirmation as to the imperative nature of this journey was provided by an exchange of memoranda between Churchill's private secretary F.D.W. Brown and his stenographer P.T. Kinna. This involved various officials searching out Jones' whereabouts, being

¹²¹⁷ ANZ, WAI18/14, 2NZEF to 2NZ Division, 17/4/43.

¹²¹⁸ Ibid.

¹²¹⁹ ANZ, WAI18/69, Freyberg to Fraser, 18/4/43.

¹²²⁰ TNA, PREM 3/63/5, Rowan to Churchill, 19/4/43.

¹²²¹ Ibid, Churchill to Alexander, 21/4/43.

¹²²² Ibid, Brown to Garner, 21/4/43.

¹²²³ Ibid, Garner to Brown, 21/4/43.

eventually found at the Dorchester Hotel, all so that a message could be given to him from Churchill, 'to convey the warmest regards to the splendid NZ Division' when he reached it in Tunisia.¹²²⁴ Clearly, this almost trivial and frivolous deed lends support to the premise that no act was too inconsequential, no stone to be left unturned in order to flatter and exhibit admiration for the Dominion, in order that Britain obtain the decision it desired.

Having learned that Jones had obtained a flight, Fraser cabled Freyberg and provided outline details of the replacement arrangement or furlough scheme. He afforded a forewarning to the General by informing him that 'the whole future role of the 2nd Division must now be decided by Parliament and much depends on Mr Jones's report to me'.¹²²⁵ Five days previously, having received the disappointing news that the Division could not be used in Husky from Brooke, Alexander would now have been consoled by being informed of the view of Jones, who 'feels that NZ Government more likely to agree to retention of Division if long service men were returned to New Zealand'.¹²²⁶ Clearly British command, as well as Freyberg and Stevens of the NZEF accepted the furlough scheme as a political necessity if the Division was to be retained in the Mediterranean'.¹²²⁷

On his arrival in Oran and Algiers, the red carpet was again rolled out for Jones and he visited all the prominent commanders and C-in-C's - generals Eisenhower, Alexander and Montgomery, Admiral Cunningham, Air Marshal Tedder and Air Vice Marshal Coningham, with whom he had 'interesting and valuable talks'.¹²²⁸ It is difficult to imagine this happening with any government minister from any nation, at any time if it was not viewed that the future presence of the Division in the Mediterranean lay in the balance.

¹²²⁴ TNA, PREM 3/63/5, Brown to Kinna, 22/4/43; Kinna to Brown, 22/4/43.

¹²²⁵ DRNZ Vol.II, Doc.255, 226-28, Fraser to Freyberg, 22/4/43.

¹²²⁶ TNA, WO 106/4866, Brooke to Alexander, 17/4/43.

¹²²⁷ Hensley, *Beyond*, 232

¹²²⁸ DRNZ Vol.II, Doc.225, 193-94, Jones to Fraser, 6/5/43.

Freyberg's War Diary is additionally quite remarkable during this period of the second half of April. To declare that he was disingenuous in his message of 18 April to Fraser that operations had reached a 'semi-static state', thus implying that Jones could quite conveniently visit the troops there, is a gross understatement.¹²²⁹ He was overseeing the Division's contribution to the 10 Corps' Operation Oration of the following day, in which a breakthrough at Enfidaville was the objective. From 19-21 April, in one of the Division's most famous actions, Takrouna was captured at a cost of 536 casualties, 27% of all those suffered post Alamein.¹²³⁰ It is hard to see Freyberg allowing such a visit to the front, and the diversion of his time involved, in any other circumstances than to facilitate actions to advantage the retention of the Division. Such a view is clearly enhanced by his War Diary of the latter days of April, which was dominated by military planning and meetings with his brigadiers, corps commander Lieutenant-General Brian Horrocks, and Major General Taker of the 4th Indian Division.¹²³¹

Jones in fact arrived at the headquarters of the New Zealand Division on 27 April, travelling there in Coningham's plane.¹²³² An understanding was quickly reached with Freyberg on the category of men to be released, and a draft agreement approved, which Jones forwarded to Fraser on 30 April.¹²³³ The General, forewarned by Fraser of the significance of the Minister's report, was fully aware of his own role and of the need to control Jones' itinerary in Tunisia for a successful outcome.¹²³⁴ Afterwards he was able to state to his Prime Minister that he felt 'certain that Mr Jones was satisfied with all he saw'.¹²³⁵ Whilst the Minister no doubt was aware that his visit and report carried some weight, it is likely that he was ignorant of the

¹²²⁹ ANZ, WAI8/69, Freyberg to Fraser, 18/4/43.

¹²³⁰ W.G. Stevens, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War, 1939-45, Bardia to Enfidaville* (Wellington, 1962), 339 & 385.

¹²³¹ ANZ, WAI8/5/45, GOC Diary, 22-29/4/43.

¹²³² *Ibid*, 27/4/43.

¹²³³ *DRNZ*, Vol.II, Doc.256, 228-32, Jones to Fraser, 30/4/43.

¹²³⁴ *Ibid*, Doc.255, 226-28, Fraser to Freyberg, 22/4/43

¹²³⁵ *Ibid*, Doc.257, 232, Freyberg to Fraser, 2/5/43.

behind the scenes operation, whether in Whitehall, the NZEF or between Freyberg and Fraser in order that a favourable report eventuated.

A week later Jones reported to Wellington on his ‘highly satisfactory talks’ with the officers and men, and was ‘very pleased with his reception.’¹²³⁶ In commenting on their mood, however, he detected that ‘there was a general desire on the part of the Division to return to New Zealand’, yet added that ‘I formed the impression that there was no desire on the part of the men here to fight in the Solomons’.¹²³⁷ This message rang alarm bells with Fraser, as virtually by return he replied stating that he was ‘at a loss to understand’ what was meant by having no desire to fight in the Solomons, yet wanting to return home to the Dominion.¹²³⁸ He sought a clarification from Jones and stressed the importance

which Parliament will attach to your views, [and whether in] your considered opinion [the Division] wish to return to New Zealand or alternatively that their desires would be met by furlough.¹²³⁹

In a 10 May clarification response, Jones stated he was ‘convinced that if given the option the majority would prefer this theatre of war’, as they were additionally wary of the perceived malarial and health issues prevalent in the Solomons.¹²⁴⁰ Fraser thus had the positive preference that he required from Jones’ visit and could present it to Parliament.

What this detail of Jones’s visit provides is compelling evidence of the subtle collusion between Fraser, the NZEF in the personage of Freyberg and Stevens, and the British. All viewed it a great success as his recommendation was in line with their desires. Stevens, as Base commander of the NZEF, wrote to McIntosh stating that ‘as far as our viewpoints were

¹²³⁶ *DRNZ*, Vol.II, Doc.225, 193-95, Jones to Fraser, 6/5/43.

¹²³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²³⁸ *Ibid*, Doc.227, 197-98, Fraser to Jones, 7/5/43.

¹²³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴⁰ *Ibid*, Doc.228, 198-99, Jones to Fraser, 10/5/43.

concerned, Jones was on the side of the angels throughout'.¹²⁴¹ Therefore, just as the two intense periods of 1942 involved in effect the conflation of reinforcements with retention, so in April/May 1943 it was the conflation of relief scheme with retention.

Fraser, Freyberg, and Churchill

Freyberg was also cognisant of the importance of his own views, and with victory in North Africa imminent, Fraser contacted his GOC expressing his gratitude for 'a great task successfully and nobly accomplished', and then explained the arguments and dilemma that he and Parliament faced.¹²⁴² The Prime Minister did not ask directly for the General's opinion, but clearly this was the great unsaid of the message, and his reply was to be read out to the House. Freyberg, whilst acknowledging his ignorance of the full facts and denying that anything he wrote was 'being put forward in support of any course of action', in effect did exactly that.¹²⁴³ He stressed that 'looking back over the very difficult years...your Division stands athwart most of the big moments', and after a brief chronicle of the campaigns fought, added in a stirring tone that 'it seems to me that just as Mr Churchill has inspired a nation with words, so your Division has been his counterpart with deeds'.¹²⁴⁴ Such a rousing and emotive testimony from someone who had by now attained a reverential status amongst the New Zealand populace, would hardly leave members of the House unmoved. Therefore, another aspect of Fraser's statement to Parliament was satisfied.

Perhaps the most informative evidence of Fraser's mindset was provided when he visited Batterbee at the latter's house, on 28 April, 'to have at his own request a personal and

¹²⁴¹ ATL, 6759-350, Stevens to McIntosh, June 43.

¹²⁴² DRNZ, Vol.II, Doc.226, 195-96, Fraser to Freyberg, 7/5/43.

¹²⁴³ ANZ, WAI18/69, Freyberg to Fraser, 13/5/43.

¹²⁴⁴ Ibid.

confidential conversation regarding the whole question'.¹²⁴⁵ The High Commissioner despatched to London two successive telegrams from Fraser, the second of which was an account of the approaching manpower crisis and the difficult decision to be met 'as to which division is to provide further reinforcements for the other.'¹²⁴⁶ The first cable, though, was a candid explanation of the political dilemma he faced. Though the nation was divided, with Labour tending to the early return and the Opposition to remain, Fraser above all wanted to prevent any general split, and sought 'as unanimous a vote as possible on whatever decision is arrived at'.¹²⁴⁷

Crucially, as Batterbee emphasised, Fraser had undoubtedly 'now come down on the side of the Division remaining with Eighth Army'.¹²⁴⁸ In attempting to garner as much support as possible, Fraser requested a message from Churchill for him to read in the House, appealing for the retention of the Division 'on symbolic and historical as well as military grounds' [which] would, I feel, have very great influence'.¹²⁴⁹ It seems clearly apparent that this phrase, originally used by Churchill in his Winch 4 cable, had struck a chord with the New Zealander, deeming that combined with his own designs, it could be used advantageously in the debate. He then additionally requested Churchill to enlist Roosevelt in this ploy because his 'name alongside your own, would powerfully reinforce the appeal'.¹²⁵⁰

In his immediate reply to Fraser's request, Churchill stated that 'I will certainly send you a message as you desire, and I have no doubt President Roosevelt will do the same'.¹²⁵¹ In the

¹²⁴⁵ TNA, CAB 121/780, Batterbee to DO, 29/4/43, (152).

¹²⁴⁶ Ibid, Fraser to DO, 29/4/43, (154).

¹²⁴⁷ Ibid, Fraser to Churchill, 29/4/43, (153).

¹²⁴⁸ Ibid, Batterbee to DO, 29/4/43, (152).

¹²⁴⁹ Ibid, Fraser to Churchill, 29/4/43, (153).

¹²⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹²⁵¹ CAC, CHAR 20/111/22, Churchill to Fraser, 29/4/43.

following days the importance he gave this was revealed in memoranda issued internally within Whitehall. He firstly informed his Office to ‘remind me of these and keep teleg 153 and 152 close at hand’, and then sought advice as to the most effective place the phrase requested ‘on symbolic and historical as well as military grounds’, should be.¹²⁵² He then telegraphed Roosevelt to apprise him of the situation, mentioning that ‘Mr Fraser is definitely in favour of this’, and asked the President if he too could send him a supportive message to strengthen the latter’s line of argument in the forthcoming secret session.¹²⁵³

The message from Churchill to Fraser saw him at his florid best with the most redolent phrasing, calculated to stir the pride of the Dominion.

Few episodes of war have been more remarkable than the ever-famous fighting march of the Desert Army from the battlefields of Alamein, where they shielded Cairo, to the gates of Tunis, whence they menace Italy. In the van of this advance the New Zealand Division has always held a shining place.¹²⁵⁴

He continued:

it is the *symbolic and historic* value of our continued comradeship that moves me. I feel that the intervention of the New Zealand Division on European soilwill constitute a deed of fame to which many generations of New Zealanders will look back with pride.¹²⁵⁵

Fraser was most grateful for the telegram, but let Churchill know that he had not yet received such a communication from Roosevelt.¹²⁵⁶ Churchill, now in mid-Atlantic on the *Queen*

¹²⁵² TNA, PREM 3/63/5, Churchill to Private Office, 30/4/43 & 1/5/43.

¹²⁵³ Ibid, Churchill to Roosevelt, 3/5/43.

¹²⁵⁴ CAC, CHAR 20/111/50, Churchill to Fraser, 3/5/43.

¹²⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁵⁶ PREM 3/63/5, Fraser to Churchill, 8/5/43.

Mary, journeying to the United States for a CCOS conference, at once cabled Harry Hopkins, the President's Special Advisor, to remind his chief to send the appropriate message to Wellington.¹²⁵⁷ After arriving in Washington, he received another cable from Fraser in which his opposite number explained that the manpower situation would mean that two divisions could not be adequately maintained beyond 1943, and inevitably, one must reinforce the other. He then asked a semi-rhetorical question to 'advise as to where.....the Combined Chiefs of Staff consider New Zealand troops could most usefully be employed?'¹²⁵⁸ Fraser indisputably knew what the answer would be, but was looking to reinforce every possible strand of support, emphasising that 'members will undoubtedly attach the greatest importance to the views of the President and yourself'.¹²⁵⁹ Churchill instantly got the point of the request and gave instructions to his staff to arrange an immediate meeting with Roosevelt, stating that 'I want to raise the question of the New Zealand Division with the President'.¹²⁶⁰

In the wider context, Churchill was in Washington with the British COS attending a hugely important conference on grand strategy at the CCOS, whereby the movements of armies, navies and air forces across the globe would be decided. The fact that he should arrange a meeting with the President discussing the fate of just one division is an indication of its perceived importance. A Winch telegram was sent to Wellington that explained how retrograde the consequences with respect to shipping would be if the Division was to return, particularly citing a reduction in American troop availability for the 1944 assault on France. Churchill added that

¹²⁵⁷ TNA, PREM 3/63/5, Churchill to Hopkins, undated.

¹²⁵⁸ Ibid, Cox to Churchill, 14/5/43; Ibid, Fraser to Churchill, 14/5/43.

¹²⁵⁹ Ibid, Fraser to Churchill, 14/5/43.

¹²⁶⁰ Ibid, Churchill to Rowan, 15/5/43.

The President and I both feel very strongly that it would be a great pity to withdraw the New Zealand Division from Mediterranean theatre where it has rendered such splendid service.¹²⁶¹

Fraser now had all his ducks in a row for his speech in the parliamentary debate. The positive views on the mood of the troops for retention in association with the furlough scheme from Jones, those of the esteem felt for the Division from Freyberg, and finally the reverential aphorisms of Churchill. It is, however, a matter of some irony, as Rabel identified, that virtually all the recent appeals from London were scrupulous in emphasising the operational efficacy of the Division's hard-won battle experience and how that might be best utilised, rather than posing it as a test of New Zealand's loyalty.¹²⁶² Yet it was Fraser at this late stage who wanted Churchill's appeal set in such grandiose terms. It is also further contended that at this juncture he had yet to play his master card.

Fraser's political triumph

In previous detailed accounts of the deliberations involved in the debates of 19-21 May, by McGibbon and Hensley, both writers relied heavily on the detailed exposition provided by McIntosh's letter to Berendsen six days after the event.¹²⁶³ What they did not emphasise enough was the domestic political situation pertaining, and both appear to have missed an important source provided by Wood in his official history.¹²⁶⁴ In returning to the earlier debate on the manpower issue on 17-18 March, Fraser was perhaps struck that there was a 'general uneasiness among Nationalist members' over the Labour members mood that the

¹²⁶¹ CAC, CHAR 20/112/8, WINCH No.7, Churchill to Fraser, 17/5/43.

¹²⁶² Roberto Rabel, "New Zealand's Wars" in *The New Oxford History of New Zealand*, (ed) Giselle Byrnes, (Melbourne, 2009) 257.

¹²⁶³ McGibbon, "Strategical Approach", in *Kia Kaha*, 17; Hensley, *Beyond*, 234; ATL, 6759-228, McIntosh to Berendsen, 26/5/43.

¹²⁶⁴ Wood, *Political*, 253.

Division should return.¹²⁶⁵ This aspect was mentioned in another private letter by McIntosh, a week before the House debate, this time to Stevens in Egypt on 14 May. In it he explained that the War Cabinet was in favour of retention but estimated that four-fifths in both the normal Cabinet and party caucus were opposed. He viewed that the only hope was that the furlough relief plan would enable Fraser to pilot Churchill's appeal through the House to a successful conclusion. Interestingly, however, later in this long despatch the Cabinet Secretary viewed that 'the whole question is going to be decided...by the Opposition in Parliament.....as a return vote would give the National Party an election platform to state that the Government has let England down'.¹²⁶⁶

Therefore, two questions are thrown up by this letter. Firstly where did McIntosh get the idea that a return vote would give the Opposition an election platform if it was not the subject of some conversation in the Prime Minister's Office, and secondly, as events were to turn out, what caused caucus to change their position from an estimated 20% minority to virtual unanimity of 100%? In his informative letter of the event, written six days after the debate to Berendsen, McIntosh described how Fraser achieved success, characterising his as being 'at his most impartial, calm and judicial best' in persuading the ordinary Cabinet.¹²⁶⁷ He provided an insider's detailed exposition of how the afternoon Cabinet session ended with just four ayes as against five noes and two neutrals, yet in the evening, with the Chiefs of Staff present, this shifted to nine ayes and two dissensions, and finally the next day to ten ayes.¹²⁶⁸ Thus, Fraser now had the ordinary Cabinet onside, but hitherto this was only a partial victory as the next day he faced arguably his greatest challenge, needing above all to

¹²⁶⁵ Wood, *Political*, 253.

¹²⁶⁶ ATL, 6759-50, McIntosh to Stevens, 14/5/43.

¹²⁶⁷ ATL, 6759-228, McIntosh to Berendsen, 26/5/43.

¹²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

persuade the Labour caucus and so enable ‘a parliamentary decision that would be virtually unanimous’.¹²⁶⁹

Batterbee, in his cable to London earlier, mentioned the context of a General Election looming in a matter of months, and that Fraser ‘is inevitably much swayed by political considerations’.¹²⁷⁰ This very aspect was underlined by Wood when he mentioned that Fraser presented to the Labour caucus an analysis in which he emphasised the importance of the impending decision. The official historian obtained the actual notes used in the meeting in which Fraser expounded to his parliamentary colleagues the view that

the decision of the Labour Party must be profoundly affected by the use to which the Opposition would put the refusal to agree to Mr Churchill’s plan and instead to bring the men back home.¹²⁷¹

Fraser continued to stress the need to avoid ‘giving the Opposition a political plank upon which they are to base their forthcoming campaign’.¹²⁷²

That evening, shortly after his session with caucus, Fraser spoke for over two hours to the full House in one of the best performances of his career.¹²⁷³ By its nature there was no Hansard documentary record of his speech in this Secret Session, but in Archives New Zealand are his own notes, consisting of twenty-four pages that provide an invaluable source as to the systematic way he elucidated his arguments to his fellow MPs. At the session he first gave an account of events of the preceding weeks, the reports of Jones and Freyberg, then the appeals from Churchill and Roosevelt.¹²⁷⁴ Fraser, who for several years had borne the high-flown

¹²⁶⁹ Wood, *Political*, 259.

¹²⁷⁰ TNA, CAB 121/780, Batterbee to DO, 29/4/43, (152).

¹²⁷¹ Wood, *Political*, 259.

¹²⁷² *Ibid.*

¹²⁷³ Hensley, *Beyond*, 234.

¹²⁷⁴ ANZ, EA1/391, Secret Session held 20/5/43.

petitions of the War Leader himself, but this time put it to his advantage when he incorporated the wording ‘on symbolic and historical as well as military grounds’ into his own appeal.¹²⁷⁵ Observing, McIntosh (in his letter to Berendsen) admired the manner in which Fraser’s speech was presented and described it as ‘a fine technical job’ which resulted in almost complete unanimity and no division, ‘entirely due to the Prime Minister’s skill’.¹²⁷⁶

The official historian Neville Phillips rather grandiloquently described the House as being ‘more impressionable from its unfamiliarity with eloquence...resonant with the cadences of Gibbon and ornamented by a reminiscence of Tennyson’.¹²⁷⁷ He went even further portraying the decision by his countrymen as ‘one of the great maturing moments of the national life’ and concluded that ‘never did a New Zealand Parliament make a more difficult, a more adult or a less insular decision’.¹²⁷⁸ This is viewed as an overstatement and whilst some members may well have attained such moral motives, it is argued below that more ignoble ones were the driving force adeptly manipulated by Fraser.

In his account, McIntosh expanded on two points: that Fraser’s ‘mind was not made up until the last moment’ and only when he saw the reaction of the Cabinet, and that ‘the factor which decided the issue was of course the return on furlough of the 6000 men’.¹²⁷⁹ The former opinion is contested in this thesis, as it seems unambiguously evident that Fraser displayed a firm resolve over several months for the retention of the Division. This is notably shown by his actions concerning Jones’ and the furlough scheme, and his private conversations with Batterbee. The latter estimation by McIntosh of the importance of the

¹²⁷⁵ ANZ, EA1/391, Secret Session held 20/5/43.

¹²⁷⁶ ATL, 6759-228, McIntosh to Berendsen, 26/5/43.

¹²⁷⁷ N.C. Phillips, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War, 1939-45, Italy, Volume I, The Sangro to Cassino* (Wellington, 1957), 30.

¹²⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 25.

¹²⁷⁹ McIntosh to Berendsen, 26/5/43.

relief scheme for the longest serving men is partially supported as it was clearly a necessary condition in achieving his goal, but it is maintained that it was not sufficient in itself.

If McIntosh was anywhere near correct in claiming that a week before the vote 80% of Labour MPs were in favour of return, then the question must be asked as to whether the furlough scheme alone could have caused such an about-face. It is deduced that with an impending election just weeks away, against a reviled Leader of the Opposition, Fraser's masterful tactic of encouraging naked political self-preservation was the crucial final ingredient in Labour members supporting retention. Wood's opus, written in 1958, would not have had access to the letters of McIntosh, whilst McGibbon and Hensley seem to have overlooked McIntosh's letter to Stevens of 14 May and Wood's account of Fraser's caucus notes. Therefore, presented above is a more complete account of that defining decision, incorporating the detailed events in the weeks leading up to it, and the crucial blending of the critical factors of furlough and avoiding electoral disadvantage to caucus.

Reactions

Fraser telegraphed Churchill with the news that 'Parliament today gave its concurrence today to the retentions of the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force in the Mediterranean Theatre', described how the decision was arrived at, and assured him that 'the House paid great heed to your very eloquent appeal'.¹²⁸⁰ He additionally expressed his gratitude for the arrangements that the *Nieuw Amsterdam* could transport the furloughed men back to the Dominion in June, and then requested, which in his understated way was an insistence, that it be escorted adequately and 'that no possible precaution should be omitted against any risk of attack'.¹²⁸¹

¹²⁸⁰ CAC, CHAR 20/112/12, Fraser to Churchill, 22/5/43.

¹²⁸¹ Ibid.

Churchill responded characteristically, applauding the leadership of his counterpart, adding that ‘the loyalty and courage of New Zealand, which is so dear to all of us, has never shone so brightly’.¹²⁸² With reference to the convoy escort he concluded that ‘I am very happy to give you the assurance to which you ask’, and that the C-in-C Eastern Fleet would provide fast cruiser attendance with HMS *Suffolk* and *Sussex* on station and ready to escort.¹²⁸³ Thus Fraser’s *sin qua non* was, as since January 1940, held still firmly in place. Roosevelt too expressed his ‘congratulations and thanks’, and then almost certainly aimed to help Fraser at the forthcoming election by deliberately timing a visit by Eleanor Roosevelt and a letter praising New Zealand’s war effort, just before the September 1943 general election.¹²⁸⁴

Curtin was much more problematic. In the days before the actual decision Batterbee’s report to London on 28 April alluded to the influence wielded behind the scenes by the Australian.¹²⁸⁵ Furthermore in a 15 May telegram to Berendsen in Canberra, Fraser outlined the competing factors he faced, to which the High Commissioner acquainted Curtin.¹²⁸⁶ In response, the Australian forwarded an *aide-mémoire* to Berendsen arguing that ‘all New Zealand troops should be available for the Pacific’.¹²⁸⁷ He further remarked, laced with an implied threat, that it was tough for Australia ‘to supply munitions to New Zealand while New Zealand troops are still in the Middle East’.¹²⁸⁸

When the actual result was conveyed to Curtin by Berendsen, the former’s reactions was understatedly described as ‘strong’.¹²⁸⁹ It was the most serious misunderstanding between the

¹²⁸² CAC, CHAR 20/112/12, Fraser to Churchill, 22/5/43; CHAR 20/112/19, Churchill, to Fraser, 26/5/43.

¹²⁸³ CAC, CHAR 20/112/19, Churchill, to Fraser, 26/5/43; TNA, ADM 199/988, Memo to 18th Army Group, 10/5/43.

¹²⁸⁴ DRNZ Vol.II, Doc.247, 220, Roosevelt to Fraser, 9/6/43; Bassett and King, *Tomorrow*, 245 & 399(54).

¹²⁸⁵ TNA, CAB 121/780, Batterbee to DO, 29/4/43, (152).

¹²⁸⁶ DRNZ Vol.II, Doc.232, 203-6, Fraser to Berendsen, 15/5/43; Ibid, Doc.236, 208-9, Berendsen to Fraser, 17/5/43.

¹²⁸⁷ Ibid, Berendsen to Fraser, 17/5/43.

¹²⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁸⁹ Ibid, Doc.242, 217, Berendsen to Fraser, 28/5/43; Ibid, Doc.243, 218, Curtin to Fraser, 1/6/43.

two dominions of the war and the admonishment to the High Commissioner described as that meted out to ‘an errant school pupil’.¹²⁹⁰ The private correspondence between McIntosh in Wellington and Berendsen in Canberra, published nearly fifty years later, affords the most valuable source as to the acrimonious feelings on both sides of the Tasman, though it did become the stimulus to the establishment of the Canberra Pact the following year.¹²⁹¹

Conclusion

This chapter commenced in December 1941 with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and throughout most of 1942 Fraser was on the back-foot coping with the anxiety engendered within New Zealand over the rapid Japanese advance and the loss of Singapore. Although in early January 1942 he reiterated to Churchill his nation’s essential strategical precept, recognising ‘that the critical theatre of war has, up to the present...been the European theatre’, there were concerns, notably as a result of the Australian departure that the Division would return.¹²⁹² Aware of these fears, but above all wanting both 9 Australian and New Zealand Divisions to remain, Churchill skilfully utilised Roosevelt’s influence and the fact that American divisions could be moved more swiftly than their own forces to the Pacific. This appeased both Fraser and Curtin, and additionally the conditionality of the President’s offer was also crucial.

During the middle months of 1942, Fraser’s commitment to his nation’s strategic doctrine was, as detected by Batterbee perhaps, weakened at times as a consequence of events and the

¹²⁹⁰ Harper, “Threat Perception”, *JAWM*, 20, (1992), 41-42.

¹²⁹¹ Ian McGibbon, (ed), *Undiplomatic Dialogue. Letters Between Carl Berendsen and Alister McIntosh, 1943-1952*, (Auckland, 1993); *Ibid*, 42.

¹²⁹² CAC, CHAR 20/68A/60-66, Fraser to Churchill, 12/1/42; TNA, DO 121/116, Batterbee to Machtig, 20/2/42.

result of strictures espoused from Curtin.¹²⁹³ At this time Churchill badly wanted a North Africa victory over the Axis forces, and after the defeats at Gazala and Tobruk, and the stalemate at First Alamein viewed that could not be achieved without the New Zealand and Australian Divisions. The scheming and intrigue he displayed to attain a continuing retention position in both July and November was peerless.

In the former period he saw clearly the link between reinforcing the Division with that of retention and viewed that giving way over the Tank Brigade was a small price to pay. At the end of the year, he was aided by Batterbee's intelligence that Fraser's request was essentially political grandstanding to appease Labour members, and to this he further applied the withdrawal of the Australians and the influence of Roosevelt to elicit a positive decision. Also, crucially, he knew that the 8th Reinforcements would embark which was in effect an affirmative signal that the Division would stay in the Mediterranean at least until final victory in North Africa.

Up until a month before the decision to remain was taken in the House of Representatives on 21 May, Churchill was the compelling force in the British operation to realise the objective of retaining the Division in the Mediterranean. He seemed to miss nothing, frequently glorifying the Division's achievements, engaging Fraser with morsels of secret operational intelligence, and skilfully delaying his request for the Division's use in Husky until the liner and escort was arranged for the 9th Reinforcements. Furthermore, he grasped the importance of Jones's visit for furlough and used the hankering pleas from Montgomery and Alexander to attempt to elicit from Fraser the outcome he wanted.

¹²⁹³ TNA, PREM 3/63/12, Batterbee to DO, 4/8/42.

However, his counterpart's refusal in his Pefra 2 reply of 19 April put an end to that, but he still provided hope to Churchill that such an outcome could be achieved.¹²⁹⁴ It was now left to the New Zealander, who especially understood the strategic principles of his country to have its forces at the decisive points in the main theatres, but also a keen appreciation these had to be balanced against domestic political requirements.¹²⁹⁵ Fraser above all needed to get his own members to support the retention of the Division, and in his Pefra 2 reply he additionally quickly quashed a suggestion from Churchill to pre-judge a 'favourable response' and withdraw Dominion troops for amphibious training, as this 'would prejudice (MPs) final decision'.¹²⁹⁶ He then instigated favourable reports from Jones on the troops support for a furlough scheme and remaining in the Middle East, and from Freyberg on the esteem felt for the Division within Eighth Army. Crucially he obtained appeals to remain in the Mediterranean from Churchill and Roosevelt, with the former's laced with his traditional symbolic and historical glorification. Finally, the enticement of his own members with the baser entreat of parliamentary self-survival to avoid providing the Opposition with an election opening, and thus attain a successful outcome, became arguably the most defining decision by New Zealand in the Second World War. It was a testament to Fraser's skills, political virtuosity and singlemindedness.

¹²⁹⁴ CAC, CHAR 20/110/46, PEFRA No.2, Fraser to Churchill, 19/4/43.

¹²⁹⁵ *DRNZ*, Vol.I, Doc.224, 170-73, Fraser to Caldecote, 3/8/40; McGibbon, "Strategical Approach", in *Kia Kaha*, 15.

¹²⁹⁶ PEFRA No.2, Fraser to Churchill, 19/4/43.

Conclusion

The years leading up to the Second World War was a time of great flux for New Zealand. Due to sentimental and economic attachment to Britain, it had not invoked the Statute of Westminster, and 'wanted no independence, theoretical or practical'.¹²⁹⁷ Nevertheless, according to Carl Berendsen there was not an instance when the Government was 'unable to do all..what it wished'.¹²⁹⁸ This was exemplified by its adherence to the principles of collective security as contained in the Covenant of the League of Nations, and a preparedness to criticise Britain's stance.¹²⁹⁹ However, the increasing powerlessness of the League in those crisis years, meant New Zealand tacked away from idealism back to the imperial umbrella, a realism notably exemplified in Berendsen's missive to Savage in October 1938. This appreciation, was one essentially grounded in the Dominion being a small nation of just 1.6 million citizens, with a consequential hard-nosed idea of its lack of power on the big stage.¹³⁰⁰

Yet in the year from Munich until the outbreak of war, a fundamental conflict arose in that the Prime Minister was revealed to be a leader out of his depth. Fortunately though, he seemed content to apportion military and preparatory decision-making to be quietly undertaken by Fraser, who even before attaining his 'Acting' role, was the true power in the Cabinet regarding defence policy. He maintained to the viewpoint of Berendsen that New Zealand needed to ascribe as much as possible to imperial policy, so as to endure the coming crisis. It is a valid assertion that, aware of the true extent of Savage's illness, he was laying the ground for his own succession in these months, both in his positioning within the Labour

¹²⁹⁷ Templeton, *Mr Ambassador*, 93.

¹²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹⁹ McKinnon, *Independence and Foreign Policy*, 14-15; Wood, *Political*, 44.

¹³⁰⁰ ANZ, EA1/553, Berendsen to Savage, 14/10/38; Bridge, *Australia, New Zealand*, in *Kia Kaha*, 61.

Party and in strategic policy terms. This adherence to imperial strategy, despite Pacific anxieties, was criticised by Belich for a missed opportunity for a ‘genuinely nationalist New Zealand Government’ to emerge and greater political independence.¹³⁰¹ It is clearly argued throughout this thesis, that despite the periodic constraints of being a small nation within a great Allied coalition, New Zealand, not only reserved the right to decide its policy for itself, but when necessary, undertook hard-edged independent decisions it viewed to be in their interests.¹³⁰²

The path to establish New Zealand on a war-footing

On becoming the *de facto* leader and Acting Prime Minister in early August 1939, Fraser additionally had to handle his own party carefully knowing that there was a significant pacifistic/appeasing strand within it. He trod tentatively through the twin political minefields of coalition and conscription, and made progress by resorting to semantic devices, notably by petitioning for volunteers in an initial ‘Special’ force, not an ‘Expeditionary’ one.

It was apparent that his grip on power was not fully secure as within a week of the war declaration, he faced a vote of confidence in caucus, which although seen off very easily, was a portent of the potential opposition within Labour. A further example of the questioning of his authority, completely absent in the literature, manifested itself again in October and November. A partly recovered Savage, though still ill, exhibited his previous vacillation and appeasing musings by instructing Fraser to go through the pretence of advocating generous peace terms and a world conference at the Dominion Ministers Meeting. It seems that a quiet, almost half-hearted power-struggle ensued, and that Savage’s deliberations were

¹³⁰¹ Belich, *Paradise Reforged*. 269

¹³⁰² Michael Ashby, “Fraser’s Foreign Policy”, in Clark (ed), *Peter Fraser*, 169.

tolerated, but as confirmed by Batterbee's messages to London, this changed when Fraser returned home.¹³⁰³

Things certainly did when he returned in late December, and it is argued that Fraser's attendance at the Dominions Ministers Meeting was of seminal significance, as it reinforced and recharged his previous policy persuasion. It elicited a convictional change on his return, that provided the catalyst for his actions; no more equivocation as to New Zealand's approach, nor toleration of contrary views. He displayed a hard-edged Machiavellian ruthlessness, by firstly deceiving the populace as to Savage's true condition and then acted as the ailing Prime Minister's organ grinder. This acquisition of virtual unqualified power in achieving the twin aims of a more resolute war policy and himself becoming Savage's successor has hardly been identified in the historiography.

Upon attaining the premiership Fraser had therefore ensured that his country was moving along the path he desired, the First Echelon had arrived in Egypt, the Second was a month from sailing, but the ongoing issues of conscription and coalition were still there. His negotiations over these are already well established in the literature, principally by Wood, and little has been added to that. However, regarding these early war years, what is gained in this thesis is a perspective on the long-game Fraser played as to the resolution of these latter two issues, and the adoption of an all-in policy to transform the Dominion into a war society; an indisputable testament to the range of skills and political craft he exhibited.

Additionally, what has been previously overlooked is how his actions were underpinned by a moral dimension, perhaps firstly identified by his (compared to Savage's) less well-known

¹³⁰³ TNA, DO 121/94, Batterbee to Machtig, 13/11/39.

war declaration broadcast on 4 September, to stand by the ‘principles of freedom and justice’.¹³⁰⁴ It is argued this was more than customary rhetoric, as the New Zealand Labour Party had a strong attachment to the covenant of the League of Nations of standing up to aggressors, and Fraser retained this strong principled purpose reflected in the decision to proceed with the Greece campaign.

Challenge of liaising with Australia.

Ever since Australian Federation and the formation of the Commonwealth in 1901, which New Zealand declined to join, there were regular intra-Tasman outbreaks of prickliness and misunderstandings between the two dominions on a range of issues. During the developing crises of the late 1930s and the war itself, New Zealand a small nation and isolated, felt that they could only gain from greater cooperation with its significantly larger neighbour Australia, thus explaining its repeated petitions for liaison.

The thematic approach of this thesis particularly lends itself to providing a detailed insight into the problematic relations regarding Australia, notably in 1938/39 and then episodically afterwards until 1943. The one-way nature of any telegraphic conversation in those early years, virtually absent in the literature, underscores the premise that for fifteen months, apart for a six-week historically unrecognised period around August/September 1939, any appeals for cooperation and liaison across the Tasman were unheeded and ignored. Evidently, at all levels of the Commonwealth Government there was an institutionalised condescension towards New Zealand, culminating in the ‘minor trans-Tasman crisis’ of 1939. This became

¹³⁰⁴ “Broadcast by Mr Fraser,” *Evening Post*, 4/9/39,
<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19390904.2.51.2>

the first (and second most prominent) of several such disagreements during the war, and greatly shocked Menzies when he heard of Wellington's independent decision.¹³⁰⁵

As a result of Menzies and Fraser resolving things whilst the latter stopped off in Australia on his return journey to New Zealand, the relationship changed to one of meticulous consideration and mutual respect. What later developed was a fascinating triangular interplay involving New Zealand and Australia and Britain. As recounted in the thesis, Wellington clearly sided with the views of Canberra against those of London on issues such as censorship and a vaunted blockade on Japanese controlled ports. Yet, after the intense diplomatic activity with both allies over the sailing timetable of US3 during those few days of late April early May 1940, Fraser aligned with Britain.

It is contended that nowhere was an elucidation of autonomy more evident than at this time, and whilst being the smallest ally, Fraser was formulating independent assessments on what he saw as his country's best interests. To a large extent this forced Menzies's hand to conform, but because Fraser had been in continuous contact with Australia and divulged his cables with London, all that resulted was a muted admonition recognising Wellington's, independent decision.

Over the next eighteen months occasional attempts were made for greater liaison at the higher political level, virtually all initiated by New Zealand but tending to flounder at Australia's door. This changed following the Japanese entry, as from then, the Pacific theatre started to seriously impinge in the decision making of both dominions as to where their troops should be, causing the profoundest of dilemmas for Fraser.

¹³⁰⁵ Harper, "Threat Perception", *JAWM*, 20, (1992), 36; TNA, FO 371/23967, Whiskard to DO, 24/11/39.

There was no such predicament for Australia, as by early 1942, the 6th and 7th Australian Divisions were returning home and there were preliminary requests for the 9th Division too. They clearly viewed that the New Zealand Division should follow suit, and visits by Coates and Sullivan in February 1942, and Fraser in July, were uncomfortable in that Curtin was forthright in the expression of his views. In December 1942 and May 1943, the Australian was particularly coercive, mentioning the important implications the struggle in New Guinea had for the Dominion's security, as well as the Commonwealth being a significant supplier of munitions for them.

The New Zealand decision to stay in the Mediterranean, made eighteen months after Pearl Harbor, took 'the longest to decide and gave us the greatest agony'¹³⁰⁶ It was the 'most serious of the misunderstandings that occurred during the war' between the two dominions.¹³⁰⁷ Australia, it must be said was the victim of its own condescension and attitude as repeated requests for liaison from Wellington over several years were ignored or obstructed. In retrospect closer and continued cooperation at the higher political level might perhaps have sufficed. The Menzies ministry in August 1939 gave a glimpse at what the relationship could have become, but the sheer demands on his time and his own overweening ambition, meant that Tasman issues were neglected. The tone of his cooperation in the first half of 1940 over the convoy discussions was creditable, and there was a later, though limited, approach by McEwen to emplace liaison officers in each other's external affairs departments. This seemed to be the only time at the political level of Menzies and Fraser did such an attempt approach the military one of Freyberg and Blamey in sincere cooperation.

¹³⁰⁶ McIntosh, "Working with Peter Fraser", *NZJH*, 10:1, (1976), 12.

¹³⁰⁷ Harper, "Threat Perception", *JAWM*, 20, (1992), 41

However, from 1942 the tenor of Curtin was that of a grudging bully with an overbearing grievance, expecting another sovereign state to do his bidding, and he ‘intensely resented New Zealand’s independent policy’.¹³⁰⁸ Essentially this whole saga was a symptom of the perennial misunderstanding of the two nations. New Zealand, smaller with a more realistic view of its lack of power, looked mostly to Britain but also to a significant degree Australia. The Commonwealth only looked to the north. What is remarkable, is that neither country had diplomatic relations with the other until 1943, and the retention decision acted as the catalyst for improved relations, as Australia saw the need to match New Zealand by emplacing a high commissioner in Wellington. Less than a year later the Canberra Pact was enacted.

Fraser and Freyberg

As a Dominion commander Freyberg was subordinate to both the New Zealand government and MEC, with primacy given to the former. He was in effect given virtual autonomy in his command of the NZEF by Wellington as to how he exercised his mandate on the condition he regularly informed them. Despite a problematic period in his dealings with MEC during the latter months of 1940 over the return of borrowed units, which caused Freyberg to in effect, ‘battle for dominion status...again’,¹³⁰⁹ this positioning remained intact, and is well represented in the literature.

It is, however, asserted that in February 1941 a whole series of factors, not the least being a previously unmentioned opportunity of a establishing an Anzac Corps, contributed to Freyberg’s decision to support the Greece venture without informing Wellington. The reprimand he received from Fraser in early June 1941, reflected by the emplacement of a re-

¹³⁰⁸ Templeton, *Mr Ambassador*, 152.

¹³⁰⁹ Wood, *Political*, 176.

kindled and re-emphasised charter in the War Diary, plus intuition of possibly being replaced had a salutary effect. As mentioned above, the twin disasters in the Aegean was a defining moment of the Second World War for Fraser as he assumed an enhanced criticality of British command. This politico-military watershed for the Prime Minister affected Freyberg, as by proxy he too acquired a changed outlook as to the relative weight of his responsibilities.

This was needed, as over the next year under Auchinleck's problematic direction, Freyberg faced his most testing politico challenge of the war, requiring the exercise of subtle diplomatic skills in his dealings with a flawed C-in-C. It is contended that up until the end of 1941, Freyberg viewed himself as still under a degree of probation and Fraser's request for pre-Crusader information from him was perhaps a legacy of mistrust of the summer campaigns. Yet an undoubted enhanced rapport developed between the two men by early 1942, as evinced by Fraser's willingness for his GOC to have autonomy over whether a brigade group seaborne operation took place, and when Freyberg in early February 1942 informed the Prime Minister of the Division's early return to the front.

His leadership of the Division in the days after the fall of Tobruk and at Alamein, and the way he adroitly reinterpreted his role, thus maintaining his independent position provided 'the unambiguous dominion status for New Zealand's forces which its government had long enjoyed'.¹³¹⁰ The affinity with Fraser and the great mutual trust regained since the summer of 1941, was notably reflected in the tone of the cables between the two men in the months leading up to the retention decision of May 1943. Freyberg intuitively sensed what Fraser required and played his full part in achieving it by facilitating Jones, and additionally provided his own opinion in such valorous terms.

¹³¹⁰ Hensley, *Beyond*, 130.

In fact, the relationship between Prime Minister and GOC was such, that a few months earlier in January 1943, it was an open secret amongst the Wellington cognoscenti, that ‘father (Fraser) ... would be thoroughly happy to see your boy (Freyberg) made top man of all (Governor-General)’.¹³¹¹ In retrospect it is clear that Fraser took another key decision in the summer of 1941, in addition to an enhanced judiciousness concerning British strategical oversight, when he rejected the siren voices and retained the General as GOC.

Fraser, British leadership and Churchill

Fraser fully appreciated that a small sovereign nation such as his, in order to play a full role, had to ascribe to imperial leadership. Wellington was fully conscious of its weight in the imperial alliance, and in terms of strategic leadership for the first two years of the war was content to entrust to the greater strategic wisdom of Britain. Early on in the war, Fraser’s independence manifested itself in the settlement of the recurrent economic and financial issues such as the guaranteed market for New Zealand produce and sterling loans.

Throughout 1940, the one regular expression of concern was in ensuring the maximum protection for the convoys, with negotiations regularly settled in New Zealand’s favour as the need to have these troops in Egypt was of overriding importance. On the one occasion when this could not be satisfied, over the purported voyage of the *Awatea*, Fraser refused to let it sail, an indisputable demonstration of autonomy. It is tentatively suggested that such an almost iconic manifestation of independent decision-making was deliberately underplayed in the post-war literature (see Appendix).

¹³¹¹ ATL, 6759-50, McIntosh to Stevens, 21/1/43.

Fraser's discontent with the management of the Greece and Crete campaigns in 1941 was a pivotal point, in that it led him to question and intervene in British strategic policy whenever New Zealand was involved. It is this changing relationship, in both the military and the politico/military spheres, and its subsequent increasing independent decision-making, that is the prominent strand or leitmotif that runs throughout this thesis. In early June 1941, Lampson's relay to London gave a foretaste of Fraser's forthright criticism which took a significant amount of intra Whitehall activity to placate him. Such inter-departmental endeavour was repeated four months later in the lead up to Crusader over comparative aircraft numbers, and this time Churchill, aided by an act of artifice, led the operation to assure Fraser, thus enabling the Division to take part.

Following Japan's rapid initial advance southwards, a major policy plank of Britain was orientated towards easing, as far as possible, New Zealand and Australian anxieties in the Pacific so that their divisions remained in the Mediterranean. Throughout 1942 there were perpetual machinations orchestrated by Churchill to retain those two Antipodean formations in the theatre. Whether that was the request to Roosevelt in the February to rapidly despatch two American divisions to the Pacific dominions, or ensuring in July that the 8th Reinforcements were available to sail to Egypt to maintain the Division's strength, to be repeated again in the November. It almost appears that contrary to the previously mentioned derided historiographical trope of New Zealand possessing a 'Mother Complex', it was Britain, who since November 1939, that displayed a 'Daughter Complex'. The repeated manoeuvrings and concessions to salve virtually every New Zealand concern is testimony to such a construal.

However, in reality what was Britain as head of a coalition expected to do with an autonomous ally during these critical years, whose troops were particularly needed at the pivotal point. In 1942, Churchill badly needed a British/Imperial victory in the Mediterranean, and in all likelihood viewed that this could not be achieved without the dominions, notably the New Zealand and 9th Australian Divisions being in the frontline.

He was also aware, especially after the Torch landings, of the added American power into the Allied alliance. The New Zealand presence after Alamein became proportionally of less military import, however, with 9th Australian Division returning to their homeland as well as the South Africans, Churchill saw the symbolic presence of New Zealand troops in the Mediterranean as providing added imperial weight to the British side of the alliance. In actuality Churchill played his hand consummately well in this regard, being unrelenting in resolving everything he could in maintaining the Division in the Mediterranean. Arguably one of his great achievements, less prominent in the vast Churchillian historiography, are his dealings with the dominions. His frequent memos, red annotations and machinations, attest to his repeated and successful efforts throughout 1942 in retaining their divisions in the Middle East, and thus achieve the Alamein victory.

He also seemed to appreciate that if Fraser had a weakness, it was the approbation and esteem for New Zealand and its Division by him, as epitomised by those purple phrases and cadences, which helped him elicit what he sought. Fraser often wanted to read these out in Parliament and give to the New Zealand press, which certainly greatly added to pride within the Dominion, and perhaps astonishment that a nation of just 1.6 million was so feted by Churchill (and Roosevelt). Fraser, it must also be stressed was a dab hand in getting what he desired. Not only obtaining favourable trade and financial terms for his country in both 1939

and 1941, but via polite requests or questions, often leaving unsaid possible consequences if he was not assured, gained what he sought-after in the politico-military sphere too. It is contended that their high mutual regard for each other, clearly apparent by the tone of their cables and reinforced by their shared moral imperative of ultimate victory, meant that both were predisposed to assent to any request from their counterpart, which can be characterised as a peculiarly symbiotic relationship between the two.

The influence of the Pacific theatre and the United States

Though this thesis is focused on New Zealand's leadership pertaining to the Mediterranean theatre, it becomes clear that Pacific issues were an ever-growing factor in New Zealand's calculations. It tended to be in the background up until December 1941, with no manifest impact on the Dominion's strategic policy of concentrating in the Middle East. Changes were already afoot by the time of the pivotal point of the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor, as a month previous, Walter Nash was appointed as the Minister in Washington.¹³¹² The significance of this decision is that Fraser viewed that only someone with the weight of his deputy would do for the post, as clearly it could only be American military power that would ensure protection and eventual victory in the Pacific. Thereafter paying heed to American wishes became the major theme of New Zealand's war diplomacy.¹³¹³

Fraser takes command of retention

In a continuance of the essential thread of New Zealand's developing and changing relationship with Britain during the war, it is argued that by late 1942, Fraser wanted the Division to remain in the Mediterranean. In addition to the potential demands involved in

¹³¹² Hensley, *Beyond*, 161.

¹³¹³ McIntyre, *Prepares*, 241.

transporting the troops homeward, he perhaps appreciated the importance for a small country to gain the approbation of Churchill and notably Roosevelt yet kept these views to himself. The telegram requesting the return of the Division in November 1942 was a pretence to satisfy his own party, and the postponement of the decision as to what theatre the Division would serve in was just a placatory device. He knew that to achieve success, he above all had to convince his own Labour Party members, and arguably this aim commenced in February when Jones was sent to the North Africa and Britain, with the outlines of the furlough scheme.

As recounted in Chapter 9 there was no let-up in the effort of Churchill and the Dominions Office in undertaking a whole range of stratagems in attempting to coerce a positive retention decision by New Zealand. In retrospect their most effective contribution to achieving this goal was their assistance of Jones in his mission, as by late April all other manoeuvrings had run their course. At this point, Fraser, effectively grasped the nettle and took the initiative in achieving his goal. He possibly viewed that the House would not be willing to gainsay Churchill, and considering the American influence in the Pacific, ‘the opinion of President Roosevelt weighed heavily’ too.¹³¹⁴

But his great aim was to obtain a virtual unanimous outcome, and thus avoid splitting his party. The range of appeals he used are narrated above and well entrenched within the , providing an excellent illustration of Fraser’s development as a war leader and statesman of the first rank. However, what has been previously missed are Fraser’s baser skills and craft as a party politician and leader, and his appeal to slightly disreputable motives of partisan self-survival, was a testament to his diligent groundwork and political cunning.

¹³¹⁴ McIntyre, *Prepares*, 241-42.

To conclude, there were two prominent New Zealand leaders throughout the Second World War. During those years relevant to this thesis, Freyberg, as GOC of 2NZEAF, regained his reputation and regard by the summer of 1942, being rightly celebrated as a successful commander, with his name forever synonymous with that of Second New Zealand Division.

However, clearly revealed as the standout representative of his nation, and furthermore a giant of the Allied alliance was the Prime Minister, Peter Fraser.¹³¹⁵ Berendsen, who worked so closely with him in those crucial years and often found him disagreeable, described him as possessing ‘no flaw at all in his patriotism and his determination to win this struggle’, adding that ‘our country could not have chosen a better war leader’.¹³¹⁶ He led a ‘startlingly small group of people, barely more than half a dozen’, with little involvement from others in government, depicted in September 1941 by the *Round Table* as ‘so much being concealed from so many by so few’.¹³¹⁷ Just as any account of Britain in the Second World War is worthless without the personage of Churchill, then the same can be said of New Zealand with respect to Fraser and the dominating all-embracing role he played.

¹³¹⁵ Stewart, “At War with Bill Jordan”, *JICH* 40:1, (2012) 76.

¹³¹⁶ ATL, 6759-457, Berendsen, “Reminiscences”, 308.

¹³¹⁷ Hensley, *Beyond*, 11; *The Round Table*, Vol 125, December 1941, 200.

Appendix

The non-sailing of the *Awatea*, July 1940- a disremembered event?

In 1940, less than three weeks after the Dunkirk evacuation when Britain's position was at its nadir, it appealed for assistance across the Empire, and in an impressive organisational performance Wellington had arranged for the RMS *Awatea* to sail with 2000 skilled forestry and engineering workers. Two weeks later, Fraser refused to allow it to put to sea at this time on account of the Admiralty declining to provide any substantial escort capability. That such a rebuff, viewed in this thesis as a markedly defining event and expression of the Dominion's autonomy, has merited only the most cursory mention in the official histories,¹³¹⁸ is viewed as questionable and tentatively suggests that a subtle form of censorship took place.

The intense trans-hemispheric exchanges on this issue were published in *Documents, Volume I* in 1949.¹³¹⁹ Evidently, General Howard Kippenberger, in his role as Editor in Chief, viewed them as being of sufficient historical importance to warrant their inclusion. However, they are located (arguably hidden) in an obscure part of the volume's 453 documents, in a sub-section of the chapter on *Special Units*, consisting of just 8 within the 27 documents of *Railway, Forestry and Army Troops Companies, New Zealand Engineers*.¹³²⁰ This it is maintained, almost certainly accounts for the reason why this disputation between the closest of all intra-Allied relationships has not been previously identified in the literature. The logical question is why they are not located in a more prominent position such as the 'Third Echelon' section, which historiographically this affair clearly deserves.¹³²¹

¹³¹⁸ McClymont. *To Greece*, 46.

¹³¹⁹ Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45, Volume I, (Wellington, 1949).

¹³²⁰ Ibid, Docs.293-300, 215-20.

¹³²¹ Ibid, Docs.212-237, 156-81.

Kippenberger in the post-war years was a man of ‘high status’, former GOC of the 2nd New Zealand Division, war hero, recently knighted and as Editor in Chief had ‘direct access to the Prime Minister’.¹³²² Additionally he was the highest paid public servant in New Zealand- a reflection of his prominence in New Zealand society.¹³²³ Having this level of responsibility and the personal ear of Peter Fraser, whilst in no way doubting his integrity, he must have been aware that in the immediate years following the end of the war, when the various histories were written, there was added a distinctive political dimension to his role.

In his role as a historian and his undoubted physical and moral courage, it would have been anathema to him in not including the relevant communications, particularly as it revealed that his nation’s government exerted their independence in refusing the *Awatea* to sail unescorted. However, considering that *Documents, Volume I* was published in 1949, when Peter Fraser was still in power and General Freyberg was Governor General, could Kippenberger have been trying to prevent political embarrassment for his Prime Minister.

This was a time of the warm post-war glow of victory, when a justifiable sense of national esteem existed at his nation’s disproportionate contribution to the great victory. A time also when the sentimental pride in loyalty to Britain would have been high, enhanced no doubt by those oft repeated words of Churchill, so replete with the cadences extolling the fidelity of his nation, of New Zealand having ‘never put a foot wrong’¹³²⁴ Within this milieu, was the Editor in Chief perhaps reluctant to prominently show a contrary position taken by his country at this pivotal time and chose to suppress it.

¹³²² Ian McGibbon, “‘Something of Them Is Here Recorded’”: Official History in New Zealand’ in J. Grey, *The Last Word? Essays on Official History in the United States and British Commonwealth* (Westport, CT, 2003), 59.

¹³²³ Ibid.

¹³²⁴ BLO, (MSS.NZ.s 13) Batterbee Papers, Box,6 File.1, Caldecote to Batterbee, 26/7/40.

A conjectural but realistic scenario put forward, is that regarding those almost iconic and renowned months of 1940, when Britain and her Empire stood alone, Kippenberger's solution to this 1949 conundrum, was to 'hide' the relevant exchanges by positioning the correspondence in an obscure part of the Volume. This perhaps was his way to disremember the event, possibly explaining its virtual absence in the literature. Though it must be stressed that other distinct examples of divergence with London are displayed under expected headings, the saga involving the *Awatea* was the only noteworthy time Fraser's bluff was actually called. Such a response from the Prime Minister was perhaps a contributory reason why Britain never called it again.

Such a viewpoint is by its nature exploratory, but it does bring to mind a comment by James Belich, who in writing a chapter about New Zealand historiography in the prestigious *Oxford History of the British Empire*, commended the scholarship of the fifty-volume *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War* project, but then added a cryptic postscript that it also 'demonstrated that there are two ways to bury history: writing too little and writing too much'.¹³²⁵

¹³²⁵ James Belich, "Colonisation and History in New Zealand" in *The Oxford History of the British Empire, Volume V, Historiography*, ed. Robin W. Winks, (Oxford, 1999), 186

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