

Copy of a letter by Lt/Colonel C.G.McDonald - Greece 1941

The following is an account of the Australian, New Zealand and English Nurses evacuating Greece, in a letter written home by Lt/Colonel C.G.McDonald.

"Here I am, safe and sound, on the southern shore of the Mediterranean after making an exciting escape from Greece. Let me tell my tale in brief.

We established our hospital at Volos, a town on the east coast of Greece, north east of Lamia, and the pass of Thermopylae, and south east of Larissa. On Sunday April 16 th 1941, Germany declared war on Greece and Yugoslavia, and at 9.30 that night hordes of German bombers came over and made a wreck of Piraeus Harbour. They blasted the docks and ships for two hours. It was my first experience of violent bombing - it was not to be my last. Went to bed at 12.30 a.m, but was awakened at 4.15 a.m by a terrific explosion. Some minutes later there was a second, and at 5.15 a.m a third. A ship at Piraeus containing high explosives had caught on fire, and when the flames reached the ammunition, disastrous fires occurred. One sergeant and six privates went to Piraeus at 6 pm Sunday to collect some equipment. The explosion killed two of them, poor chaps, and maimed a third. Others were injured but not seriously. On Tuesday, April 8 th, after a funeral of our boys, we went north to Volos, going by train from Athens. At the platform at Athens I heard disturbing news. The Serbs were retreating fast and the Germans had turned the Greek left flank. Salonika was in danger.

We reached Volos 10 th April. We heard the Germans had taken Salonika, and two trains of refugees moving south, proved it to be true.

On Easter Sunday, waves of German bombers came over - we saw their bombs dropping above us - We were at Church parade at the time, and didn't we disappear into our funk holes in double quick time. I was really scared and found the old heart pounding violently against my chest - but I maintained an exterior calm, cautiously bobbed my head up out of the trench to get a good view. I saw a Junkers 88 quiver in the sky as the ack ack guns got her, dive to earth and burst into flames. Found myself cheering like a school kid. Again and again the Bosche bombers came over, and again and again dropped their eggs. They were after two ships in the harbour near us, and got them.

Well, after Easter, we left Volos and went down to Ekali where the 5 AGH were stationed. I shall skip over the next few days (seven) except to say that the heavens grew more and more ominous every day. We had no peace. Air-raids on and off all day, waves of bombers coming over bombing the drome near us and the ships. Here they grew very cheeky, would swoop down to a height of thirty feet and machine gun their prey. They were systematically bombing dromes and ports,

hoping to trap us all. Can tell German planes now with a cock of the ear. We are experts.

Copp and I had been given charge of a big party of Nurses, Australians from the 5th and 6th AGH, and English and New Zealand.

Gloom had descended upon poor Athens, which was a bright and cheery place when we arrived.

At last on Wed. 23rd April at 4.30 pm, we set off with the Nurses in lorries. It was impossible now to make our escape by sea from Piraeus or Phaleron - we went to a railway station at Kato, near Athens.

We were to entrain there for Argos in the Peloponnesus and thence escape on a British destroyer. Alas on our arrival at Kato, we found the railway line had just been bombed and the trains would not be running. Then a German plane whirred over our heads, just as an all clear had sounded, and ack - ack fire broke out. We all crouched low in a field of wheat. We were right at the station and feared the Hun would bomb it.

At 11.10 pm, we moved on in trucks through Athens and on to Daphne - Athens was in a perfect blackout and long lines of Greek soldiers were parading the streets. No civilians owing to curfew. From Daphne we went along the Eleusses Road, hoping to pass through Negara and cross the Corinth Canal in darkness.

Road was crowded with refugees making south. Greek soldiers and civilians and our own Aust, N.Z. and British troops all making for different points on Peloponnesian Coast, or on the southern coast of Attica. Twice we got lost and had to retrace our steps. A map will show you that the road through Eleusses to Negara and on to the Corinth Canal skirts the sea coast. The road is dangerous and narrow. On our right were precipitous hills, and on our left a sudden sheer drop of hundreds of feet to the sea.

Again and again we were blocked on this dreadful road, dead horses and mules machine gunned by the Hun during the day, upturned trucks and large bomb craters made our passage slow and hazardous. We wondered whether we would ever reach the Corinth Canal, and when we did, if we would find it blown up. Once the Greeks tried to pull a lorry of theirs back on to the road. Seeing that we would be cut off, I said to my 'Tommy' driver 'You must get through'. He rose and swore at those Greeks, using the most profane language and made violent gestures to show them that he would cut them down. They scampered to avoid the on-coming truck and we got through. The left wheel of our truck must have missed the side of the road by inches. More dead horses and up-turned, more bomb craters and anxious waits. Copp and I were afraid we would be caught on this road at dawn,

and that the Nurses would be machine-gunned. There was no prospect of escape into a field.

6 a.m we crossed (not yet dawn) the Bridge over the Corinth Canal and sighed with relief. A quick run through the town of Corinth and on towards Argos.

We breakfasted on the way-side on the Athens side of Argos. Then on again for a mile or two and we found ourselves halted beside a grave yard on our left, and an aerodrome a short distance away on our right - a few miles from Argos.

Then on again for a mile or two from Argos. A lorry behind us containing NZ Nurses overturned and some were injured. No sooner had this happened that Bosche bombers came over and machine-gunned behind them. It was during this raid our Nurses got out of their trucks and hid in a field of barley. At 9 am 24 th April there was a violent air-raid on the aerodrome near us and on bodies of escaping soldiers who were around us. Later I ordered the Nurses into a cemetery, and each time the bombers came over they crouched behind the tombstones and in the ditches beside the grave mounds and against the stone wall encircling the graveyard. (Next day the Germans systematically dived and machine gunned the cemetery and made it a shambles.)

I did my best to keep the Nurses cheerful, but they were wonderful. I think they can stand up to bombs and shrapnel better than the men. There were 6 attacks on or around us up to 4 pm. Then at 4.45 pm we had a long and violent one, lasting 40 minutes. We would hear the machine gun bullets around us, but we were well hidden. 6 pm, a picnic in the cemetery - boy what a feed! Tinned sausages, spaghetti, sardines, salmon, biscuits, margarine and plum pudding, oranges tea and cigarettes.

Another raid at 6.45 pm. At last in the gathering dusk we got all the Nurses into trucks (8.45 pm) and ready to move for the port of Navplion. They were no sooner in than out they got - another raid - I gave the Hun 5 minutes to appear (but they didn't they were attacking troops further down the line), so back went into their trucks. Copp and I went around each truck ordering them that if they were attacked, to keep marching on. It was essential to work to the clock. Darkness came quickly. We all had a grim feeling. We passed long lines of soldiers marching, all silent, not a light showing, not a cigarette. The air was charged with drama.

9.35 pm, we drew up silently - a mile from the docks. All de-bussed and carried their frugal luggage. None could take what she or he could not carry. A young officer met us and whispered to me to follow him, with the Nurses. On we staggered, in the darkness, passing long lines of those silent soldiers. Every 50 yards a silent challenge, a soldier walks up smartly and bars our way. But the young officer with us knows the password, the sentry steps back and we pass on. At last we reach the dock and in darkness I see our vessel - a small Greek caique.

The weary nurses get aboard - and we wondered if this miserable vessel is to take us across the Mediterranean. We pull out soon and I hear the pleasant sound of English and Aussie voices rising above the shrill chatter of Greek sailors. We had moved out to an Australian Destroyer. (Voyager)

All of us had to climb from the caique to the Destroyer, both pitching badly in the swell of the waves. An English sister cannot make the gap and falls in, but is rescued by an Australian sailor. We all board the Destroyer, and wait till a convoy of ships is ready to depart.

All around us and along the Coast, crowds of Australian, N.Z. and English soldiers are being shipped. Some are wading out to reach a small ship, some rowing out, others embarking at wharves. Two ships are burning nearby. Warships are signaling frantically and then relapsing into darkness. I can't help thinking of the drama of this scene, the quarter moon in the dark sky, the silence, and the blackout, except for the fitful gleam of those burning ships, (bombed today) and the warship signals.

The nurses, weary and exhausted, are given tea by a sailor.

At last we move on. We all sleep well, wherever we could find a spot on the deck to lie down. We slept till dawn - awake at 5.45 am. Feel very cold, and extricate myself from hammock and hop on to the deck. 7.30 am - air raid alarm - but the visitor is one of our craft - 8 am, 4 ships in the convoy - later we were joined by four others. Two hostile aircraft came over at 8.45 am, but they were on reconnaissance and do not bomb. 9.30 am, the trouble comes (Anzac Day). Over come the German bombers, and they drop bombs astern of us and some near the others. But they claim no victims. One of their planes came down. We have another and still another raid before lunch. In the second we indulge in ack-ack fire, then there is silence. 1.25 pm, another raid after which our Destroyer is ordered to leave the convoy - make straight for port. We arrive at Crete about 3.30 pm. There is another air-raid alarm as we approach the bay, and our Destroyer manoeuvres for position - but soon we go to the wharf and disembark.

We remained on that island till May 4 th, while there some of us worked at a British hospital. Wounded were coming in fast. On the am. of Tuesday 4 th May, we boarded a Greek ship with our nurses and hundreds of wounded, almost 1000 in all. The Greek crew got scared, and half of them took to the hills, and our Australians stoked the ship. Scarcity of water - no washes. We had three alarms before we moved, but left at 11.50 am. Air-raid alarm 8.50 pm, but no bombing - 11.30 pm, great excitement. Hostile planes came over three times in the darkness - the Navy sends up flares into the sky, and we hear exploding depth charges. No one knows what has occurred, planes and perhaps submarines as well. But still we go on. Next day we get up and saw the sea swarming with the British Med. Fleet, probably all crowded with our men, and 8 Merchantmen including ours in the

centre of these protecting vessels. German planes came over at 10.5 am, but our ack-ack is violent. They got a warm reception and were beaten off.

Boys are pale and worn, but are happy to be making for safety. As the sun sets we see three of our fighters coming over us - flying low. What a change - CHEERS.

We are all used to sleeping in our clothes for a week or more on end, not having a bath for a fortnight and eating bully beef and biscuits for days, till the gums get sore.

The Greek captain and the loyal remnants of his crew are strangely nervous.

Next am, we berth at Alexandria at 10 am. We send the wounded off first, then the Nurses, and on the wharf we are given a cup of tea, eats and cigarettes. We are all billeted at a British Hospital, and next day we heard a wireless announcement "All Australian, New Zealand and British Nurses landed safely at Alexandria yesterday."

This is my brief story - We are all lucky to out of Greece. Other Australians were not so fortunate. They were killed on the way to the ports or were victims of bombs on the ships. Others had to fight their way through German paratroops who landed south of the Corinth Canal the day after we passed it. The staggering thing is that so many of us got out.

We all said "Thank God for our navy".