

TARANTO AS I KNEW IT

A New Zealand Soldier Remembers

(Written for "The Listener" by Bernard Magee)

TO the hundreds of New Zealand soldiers who sailed into the Port of Taranto one bright morning in July, 1918, the sensational news of the severe handling by our Air Forces of Italy's southern naval base will make interesting reading. But the outcome of the attack may be tinged with some regret that the vicissitudes of statecraft should have converted our allies and warm friends of a quarter of a century ago into enemies.



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Oysters and Spiders

Taranto is one of the few places lapped by the Mediterranean that shows the ebb and flow of the great sea. The town proper is on an island, which formerly was connected with the land. A channel was cut through the peninsula giving access to the inner harbour—the *Mare Piccolo*—and in 1887 there was an iron swivel bridge across it, 196 feet wide. This inner sea is 6325 acres in extent and contains 93 different species of fish. The oyster industry is one of its principal claims to distinction

apart from its importance as a naval base.

Another product of Taranto, though

one the old city takes no pride in, is the poisonous tarantula spider. The corrective to this menace to life was supposed to be the wild dance known as the *tarantella*, beside which the tango, the bunny hug, the Lambeth Walk and other so-called barbaric modern dances were childish pranks. The *tarantella* was invented with the object of inducing perspiration in anyone bitten by the tarantula spider, thus driving out the poison.

Irish Bishop's Cathedral

The cathedral of Taranto dates from the eleventh century and, strange to say, is dedicated to an Irish bishop, San Cataldo, and the shrine to him inside is said to be "an orgy of rococo." Some forty years ago the remains of an earlier Christian church were discovered beneath the cathedral.

Taranto has had its ups and downs over a course of years. The Saracens, the Normans, and other warlike people have made forays on it and have been swallowed up in oblivion while the ancient city lives on. Taranto, too, has many literary associations. Two hundred years before the Christian era its streets were alive with pagan ladies in their gorgeous and glittering apparel who came from Sicily and from Africa to escape for a while the scorching sun

and inhale the exhilarating sea breezes of the harbour. There, too, delightful villas abounded and theatres offered diversion to visitors who flocked from afar in the dawn of history.

Classical Tributes

Its classical standing may be gauged from the tributes paid to it by men eminent in history and literature. Two thousand years ago the poet Leonidas, with wistful memories of the old Italian city, sighed for the town and associations of Tarentum. "I lie far from the land of Italy, my country, and that is harder for me than death," he exclaimed in a fit of home-sickness. Virgil and Homer visited it, dreamed their dreams in and departed from the historic town with fond memories of "molle Tarentum."

On to France

But New Zealand soldiers had little leisure to revel in the attractions of "molle Tarentum," for we were all cogs in a great machine—if one cog slipped the whole apparatus was thrown out of gear. Army orders were adamant and we entrained for that long and picturesque journey of nine days and nights, up the Adriatic coast, through North Italy, along the Italian and French Rivas, through the heart of France, thence to the coast and over to England.

What a welcome sight was that great gulf of vivid blue at the heel of Italy to the soldiers from scattered parts of the British Empire, after the tension of days and nights on the submarine-infested Mediterranean, in the great convoy of troopships that sailed out of Alexandria (Egypt) twenty-two years ago with Taranto as its objective.

Of the five transports the liner *Ormonde* accommodated (among hundreds of Tommies) some 1,200 New Zealanders, and it was an imposing sight as each great transport, throbbing to the motion of its engines, dropped into line with a Japanese destroyer slipping in alternately between the vessels, and headed for the open sea. Aeroplanes roared overhead, the transports manoeuvred into position and the nine Japanese destroyers formed a cordon round us.

We who entered Taranto and saw the city spread out in languorous ease by the waters of the great gulf lapping its shores, can visualise the different aspect it must now present with its battered wharves and great battleships with decks awash lying in that great inner harbour—the *Mare Piccolo*.

Rapturous Reception

As was to be expected from allies in the Great War, our reception was a rapturous one. On the *Ormonde* the New Zealanders lined the decks, the band blared out "Colonel Bogey" and other popular tunes of the time, the swing gates to the inner harbour opened, crowds of Italians lined every vantage point and cheered vociferously. Italian men-o'-warships tumbled up on to the decks of their battleships and added their quota of welcome to swell the volume of sound, and we sailed slowly into the inland harbour of Taranto little dreaming that we would read of the havoc wrought by British aircraft twenty-two years hence in that beautiful place.

It Happened To Me

THE BODY IN THE BAG

A Reporter's Experience

(Written for "The Listener" by W.H.T.)

LOOKING back over fifty years of journalistic work I can recall many queer experiences that should come within the category of "Stories From Life." Here is one. An elderly ploughman and a youth were employed on a farm where there were no farm buildings. The land was owned by a farmer who lived at his homestead on another farm about twelve miles away. The ploughman and youth lived in a portable wooden hut on wheels—a two-bunk affair known as a galley. After a period of hard work the old ploughman was in the habit of having a break, when he would go on the "bust" for a week or a fortnight in one of the cities, otherwise he spent every week-end at his lodgings in the nearby town. When he was absent his landlady knew that he was on his periodical drinking bout, but, when the time came that the lodger was missing for a longer period than usual the local police and detectives from the city got busy to investigate the disappearance, the employer being anxious about his man. The landlady held strongly to the belief that her boarder was somewhere in the city sleeping off the effects of too much "dope." The river was in high flood and mounted police (troopers) were sent to patrol the banks of the stream till the police concluded that the landlady was right. The suggestion of murder was dropped and excitement died.

My Theory

Despite this, as a newspaperman scenting a story, I had a kind of presentiment that the old man's body was lying in the riverbed over which flood water was then flowing. I felt sure that, when the flood subsided, the body would be found near the river crossing. For a week I kept making enquiries about the river until one day I heard it had made a decided drop. Now was the time to act! I mounted a bicycle—there were bicycles and horses in those days—and had only started on the adventure when the Sergeant of police called out "Where are you going?"

I grinned and he seemed interested. "I am going out to find the murdered man that you fellows are unable to trace."

"Wait a bit," he said, "I'll come with you."

I waited, although I was anxious to do the job on my own for the story that was in it.

It Was There All Right!

I told the Sergeant that I was making for the riverbed crossing two or three miles beyond the farm where the ploughman worked, but the officer would persist in searching the valley and haystacks to say nothing of spending two hours walking up and down water races on neighbouring properties. I got tired of the Sergeant's thorough methods and kept repeating that the body would be



near the crossing. In the end I got the arm-of-the-law to move in the direction of the river though he had no faith in my suggestion. But he was soon convinced.

We were fully 200 yards from the crossing when he exclaimed "It's there all right." The wind was in our direction! There could be no doubt about it! The Sergeant's face brightened. Here was the chance of a lifetime. Where detectives had failed he had succeeded. Flushed with excitement he obviously dreamt of the kudos that would come his way, if not promotion. I was only a pawn in the

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