

NAPIER, THE PHOENIX CITY

Tenth Anniversary Of The "Blitzkrieg From Below"

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February 3 is still an ominous day to most Napier residents, but now, 10 years after the earthquake that wiped out one of the most charming of New Zealand towns, we may look back with mutual congratulations and feel that we haven't done so badly in the time. Napier to-day is a far lovelier city than it was before; its streets are wider, its civic buildings more dignified, its shops handsomer, and its sea front offers the visitor many attractions that were unknown in the past.

This I mention, not as a publicity agent, but as illustrating how one little city has risen phoenix-like from its ashes to an undreamed-of newer and fuller life, and with the confidence that far greater cities in Britain, too, will rise supreme over any blitzkrieg.

RECENT broadcasts from the BBC have told of the wonderful courage and cheerfulness to be found in all classes of people, and the need to put first things first. Well, we, too, knew something of that ten years ago, when death and destruction leapt at us not from the skies, but from the earth beneath our feet. I had a little experience of Zeppelin raids in the last war, and knew the small comfort of anti-aircraft fire and counter attacks, but when the earth that gives us life rises up to destroy us what can we do but realise the impotence of man?

It was a brilliant morning and the first day of the school year. I was sitting at my desk with my back to the empty fireplace after a hasty cup of morning tea, waiting for a telephone call from one of the school houses about some of the 60-odd boarders who had come in the night before. The bell rang suddenly in the far corner of my study and I hastened over, anxious to hear the report and get back to my desk. As I stood speaking into the telephone it was suddenly snatched from me, a mad giant under the aged three-story wooden building was thrusting the school up from the ground and another was knocking it over.

I was hurled back and forward, with a bookcase tumbling its contents over my shoulders, and it seemed ages before I was able to scramble over the wreckage of the door and along a distorted passage to look for my pupils. As it was interval time many were already outside, but a collapsing veranda caused several broken and dislocated limbs. My staff and I gathered them all on the front lawn which sloped steeply down, and behind us the crazy old building swayed and tottered and each moment we expected it to collapse on our heads.

The schoolgirls of that morning are women now, and if any of them have been lately in England we may be sure they will not have made us ashamed of New Zealand. Courage! It was almost worth a little of that terrifying experience to see it on those young, drawn

faces; and stricken fathers rushing up from the devastated town to find their girls were strangely comforted to see them sitting quietly on the grass, some singing quaveringly, others silently nursing an injured limb — seniors locking up valuable property and handing over the keys, juniors rescuing smaller juniors from under broken doors and splintered woodwork, and both professional and domestic staffs moving from group to group giving first aid, drinks of gritty water, comforting, making tremulous jokes, finding hats—for the sun was not dimmed that lovely summer morning.

First Night Out

That night we camped on some ground that had just been built up for tennis courts. The surface was like a hard-baked ploughed field, and great cracks were visible in many places. We had a few tents for the girls, and the rest of us lay on mattresses on the ground which we expected might at any moment open and swallow us whole! The moon was full, and that blessed wind which had changed during the day and so prevented the complete destruction of the residential hill district by fire, was now cool; but blowing gusts of smoke-laden air that made us cough and blink. All night long frantic parents kept arriving to claim their children and give news of the disaster in other parts of Hawke's Bay. By morning we had been joined by families from several small cottages nearby, so that there were still about 60 ready very early for breakfast. But the baker hadn't been! And the water, gas, and electricity were out of commission!

With the burden of such a large "family" on my shoulders I felt a little as a general may in charge of a desert campaign! However, a rain tank was found still half full, a fire was built, flour, bacon and butter were rescued from the wrecked larder, and a gallant little cook fried scones and bacon for 60, while smoke blinded her eyes and the fire scorched her shins.

As the day passed my "family" dwindled, but the earth continued to heave and writhe. The girls were kept going between 'quakes with a game of cricket, and sang songs to a portable gramophone, some of whose records were still miraculously intact. As dusk gathered we stood round a hurricane lamp and more neighbours joined us



NO, NOT LONDON TO-DAY, but Napier in 1931. A demolition squad at work

while I read from Holy Writ: "Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people. He giveth power to the faint, and to them that have no might He increaseth strength"; "Let not your heart be troubled. In My Father's house are many mansions."

The following day the last of my charges was got away to safety, and with one or two dauntless and indefatigable colleagues I went forth to inspect the damage. A fine new brick school, within a few weeks of completion and the pride of our hearts, was like one of Bairnsfather's pictures of a castle in France in the last war. "oo made that 'ole, Bill?" "Mice!" That ridiculous cartoon flashed through my mind to save me from despair as I looked at the gaping holes and found the inside corridor knee-deep in bricks and concrete.

The old wooden building didn't look so bad from the outside, though for a girls' school it seemed indecently tipsy, and the twisted doorway leered at us as we entered fearfully. Everywhere was wreckage, the wallpapers looked as if they had been slashed by gigantic scissors; ink and books were everywhere, even wedged under the skirting boards where the whole wall had lifted and settled down again. In my study the mess of books and documents was ankle deep, and the chair from which I had risen to answer the telephone was buried in the bricks from a three-story chimney.

As we toiled for the rest of the week with very inadequate help, rescuing valuable property, books, pictures, pianos, school records, and the clothing of over 60 people—with the old building open to the elements and its broken doors to the looter, we got our "sea-legs," and indeed often the earth would rise up to meet our feet in a most nautical way! One day as I sat on the grass eating "pot-roast," the ground seethed and quivered, and across the hill I saw a black "snake" crawl up a one-time lawn, as the earth opened and closed in a monstrous yawn.

Some Pictures

Little pictures flash through my mind as I look back across those ten years. A young white face and a girl's earnest

voice asking, "Miss Arthur, can't we pray?" And as I nod dumbly the prophet's words flit through my memory: "He taketh up the Isles as a very little thing." My first sight of the ruined city as a neighbour and I pushed aside the hedge in my garden and gazed on the smoking ruins. "And that's the end of lovely little Napier!" he murmured sadly. My first sight of the ships in the bay, which had brought doctors, nurses, food, and help of all kinds; they looked so sure and sturdy as they lay on the crinkled waters of the sunlit bay that we laughed in relief. And in my garden, too, a couple of pigeons were cooing comfortably that terrifying afternoon, and the jacquaranda and the scarlet gum bloomed more gorgeously than ever before.

In three weeks we were back. Fathers had to return to their jobs, mothers came to care for them, and children began to return too, so the schools re-opened. We began with 12 out of 300, but the numbers grew daily. All round us was the sound of demolition and the air was filled with grit and dust.

"It's hopeless," said a friend to me as we stumbled along the broken pavements, ducking to avoid twisted remains of shop verandas that dangled dangerously overhead.

"It's madness," said a visitor. "Napier's done for."

"I give it five years to recover," I replied, quietly smiling as I remembered the heroic cheerfulness I had witnessed among rich and poor.

Maybe we haven't remembered our high resolve all these ten years; maybe the glory of our vision has grown dim with time and our zeal a little chilled. But here is the little phoenix city to-day, and London, Coventry, Portsmouth, and all the cities at Home whose trial of faith is so much more terrible than was ours, they too will rise yet once more triumphant over the "terror of the night" and the "destruction that wasteth at noonday."