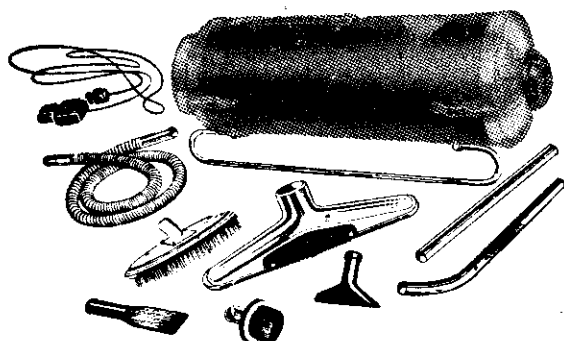


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BOOKS

THEY PASSED THE AMMUNITION

JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS: The official history of the 1st Ammunition Company, N.Z.A.S.C., 2nd N.Z.E.F., 1939-1945, by S. P. Llewellyn; War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington, 1949. 12/6.

(Reviewed by L.S.H.)

IT chanced that a young Englishman was in New Zealand in September, 1939. On the outbreak of war he enlisted in Auckland, was posted to the then Divisional (later 1st) Ammunition Company, N.Z.A.S.C., and entered Hopuhopu Camp in early October, 1939. "Most of us had sugar sacks on our backs and bottles in our pockets, and as we marched, heading for the railway station, we linked arms with girls, called out to friends, and took other steps to demonstrate our amateur status." From that day until the disbandment of the unit at Perugia, in October, 1945, he served with it. Not only served with it, but performed for it a service of which the unit was then unaware. He kept a diary. From that diary, from well-chosen extracts from the diaries of other individuals and from the records held by the War History Branch, this book was written.

The young Englishman was Peter Llewellyn. Before coming to New Zealand he had been to an English public school—Felsted—and had spent some time as a journalist. Llewellyn had found life in New Zealand very much to his liking, but he would have been equally content in Nova Zembla or in the Argentine. He had, and no doubt still has, a genius for extracting enjoyment from life under any combination of circumstances—and this because he demanded little from it: a few friends, a pint or, if you will, a gallon of beer and a longish piece of string from which, when time allowed, he might suspend his washing. To these simple and obvious demands might be added one more—opportunity to keep physically fit.

To this latter end he would sometimes take himself off to the wharves, there to shovel coal in the bowels of some coaster, subsequently passing piebald through the streets with a group of new acquaintances, bearing a long-handled shovel as the badge of his new office. When, his work at the War History Branch completed, the contrast between the summer sunshine without and the comparative gloom within struck him with added force, Peter Llewellyn felt that he could not do better than to become second cook to a forestry camp in the King Country—and so he did just that.

Some understanding of the personality of the author is essential to a proper appreciation of this book, for *Journey Towards Christmas*, although the first of the official Unit War Histories, is before all else Peter Llewellyn's book. With a wide toleration of human frailty, with good-natured irony and often with the eye of an artist, Llewellyn has painted into the official history of one New Zealand unit a picture of the New Zealander at war which has not yet been excelled. This book will be read, and should be read, with interest and enjoyment by all who served with the 2nd



PETER LLEWELLYN
Occasionally he had a grandstand seat

N.Z.E.F., and particularly by that vast majority who served in the ranks, for this is the driver's, the private's, the gunner's and the trooper's war. The author views the scene from the point of vantage of the cab of an Ammunition Company truck. When at times, notably at Cassino, this amounts to a grandstand seat, there is little evidence that the distance blunts the keenness of the author's observation. His view is always objective, but one never has the impression that Llewellyn was on the outside, looking in.

The history of the 1st Ammunition Company is a long one. A First Echelon Unit, it took part in every campaign in which the 2nd N.Z.E.F. was represented in the Middle East and in Italy, from the Wavell offensive of 1940, to the settlement with Tito at Trieste in October, 1945. Sir Bernard Freyberg, in a foreword to the book, has high praise for the work done by the Company over this long period. Llewellyn, without over-emphasis, makes clear the spirit which animated the unit and which made this result possible. Every man realised that, in general, his lines were cast in more pleasant places than were those of men in units further forward. It was therefore up to him to see that he left nothing undone which might ease the load on the fellow further up. So far as lay in their power, the First Ammunition Company lived up to that ideal. The price they had to pay was sometimes a heavy one.

Throughout this long book—over 450 pages—the reader turns to each new page with pleasant anticipation, and is rarely disappointed. Wherever one can apply the yardstick of personal experience, the book never fails. The *Odyssey* unfolds, enriched by an originality of metaphor and an aptness of simile, without hesitation. To how many does this summary of one's sensations during the night break-out from Minquar Qaim sound a familiar note?

"And so it went on—not for a long time according to the clock, but for ages as dreams go, and this was a kind of dream and therefore not really frightening. . . There was no background of normality, no touch of every-dayness, to

N.Z. LISTENER, FEBRUARY 3, 1950.