IN ITALY FOR 'THE BIG PUSH'

BIOGRAPHY BY KIM NEWTH

Born in the South Canterbury township of Pleasant Point, Owen William Wilson grew up immersed in the life of a small country community.

His middle name comes from his father, William Thomas Wilson, a builder by trade[1]. William was born in Riverton in Southland. Owen says his father's name is on the gates at Riverton School as part of a memorial to local men who served in the First World War.

After William returned from that war, in which he had served in a medical corps role, he chose to settle at Pleasant Point.

"His mother was a widow. She had shifted up to Pleasant Point. There was quite a family of them – two or three of the boys went with her. When he came back from the war he went there and he decided it was a good place to start out as a builder on his own."

Owen's mother, Eliza[2], was from Pine Hill in Dunedin. The couple raised four boys: Owen, born on 18 April 1923, is their eldest child. They had three more sons, born over the following six or seven years: Norman[3], Trevor and Frank.

At the time of writing, Owen was the only surviving member of his family, yet he had started life as a sickly infant not expected to live beyond his first year.

"They couldn't get me going. Mum's milk was no good apparently. For my first year at school I only went for half a day – five half days for the week."

The following year he was well enough to attend normal school hours and soon blossomed into a high achiever. He came second in annual exams after another clever student whose name he still remembers well – "Betty Andrews". She and her siblings used to tease him for coming second, calling him "Woody Woody No Brain".

With characteristic humour Owen relates how, many years later, he met a couple from Pleasant Point after having had an operation to remove some shrapnel from his head[4].

"They said 'what the hell is wrong with your head Wilson? We always reckoned there was nothing in there!' I said, 'there is actually – I brought a wee memento home from Italy'. So they said, 'Oh, did they need to dig a big hole like that in your head?' I said, 'well, they had to make sure something was in there'!"

In fact, he consistently ranked second in class throughout his years at primary school and was runner up for the Dux.

At 14 he left school and started work as an apprentice carpenter for his father, also keeping himself busy by helping out a friend, Doug Brown, in his transport business.

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[1] Owen says his father was also a lay preacher. The rest of the family regularly attended church, but Owen says he later rebelled against "church three times on Sunday". It wasn't for him.

[2] Eliza Donaldson Wilson, nee Campbell. Owen says she had English and Scottish ancestry.

[3] Norman served in the Air Force in the Second World War. Owen says he served "up in the islands", working as a pay clerk.

[4] At time of interview in February 2015, Owen told me this operation had taken place 12 months earlier. The surgery had been for suspected skin cancer; instead the surgeons found a shrapnel fragment that had been lodged in his head for almost 70 years!

"I was truck driver mad. He [Doug] had three trucks and a couple of jokers. I used to put all my spare time in with him. We'd be carting lambs to the freezing works. My old man would wonder why I was so worn out next morning when I went to work. Sometimes we didn't get home until midnight."

Owen wasn't allowed to drive on the road until he got his heavy traffic licence; he got this the day after he turned 18. For several months afterwards he did a lot of driving for Doug[5].

Then he was called up to join the Territorial Force[6].

"Work had dried up by then. The old man had no work. He was actually sent up to Wellington to work: there was a group of builders on war defence work."

To Addington, as a driving instructor

Owen was ready to leave home at 18 and welcomed the opportunity to start a new life at Addington Military Camp in mid-1941.

"From then on, they were the happiest days of my life."

His skills as a truck driver were quickly put to use: he spent most of his first year at Addington teaching other young men how to drive.

He and another recruit, who had arrived from Lincoln College and who also had a heavy traffic licence acquired as a student, were called to the traffic sergeant's office. There they were told how train-loads of trucks and cars, bought for the armed forces, were being delivered to Addington. Once painted khaki, these vehicles were being parked in the middle of Addington Racecourse, where a driving course had been built. Owen and his roommate were needed as instructors[7].

"I was made a [temporary] corporal with two stripes on my arm. That was just to give you a wee bit of authority over these other jokers who were raw recruits like us and they could argue with us, but once we had the two stripes we were 'lord'…

"One bloke I taught to drive, he drove the road service bus from Akaroa to Christchurch for many, many years after so I did a wee bit of good there."

As well as teaching men how to drive trucks and cars, Owen also remembers instructing them on how to ride motorbikes since he also had past experience on two wheels[8].

After some nine months, Owen was transferred out of this role and lost his corporal stripes. He had received a draft letter to report to the Addington Showgrounds.

"That happened to be a transport unit: New Zealand Army Service Corps - NZASC."

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[5] Owen also helped with Saturday morning coal deliveries. He says driving in to make a delivery and backing out again using mirrors was invaluable experience, in terms of learning how to drive.

[6] By the end of 1940, the Territorial Force had 15,449 men. Home defence duties included manning coastal and anti-aircraft batteries, garrisoning ports, watching coasts, and maintaining mobile striking forces. A military camp was established at Papakura, and Trentham, with Burnham extended. From *An Encyclopaedia of New Zealand*, edited by A. H. McLintock, 1966.
http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/1966/defence-armed-services-army-new-zealand/page-5

[7] Apparently he and the other instructor were accommodated in campers' cabins at the show grounds, above the grand stand. It was of a good standard compared to the cattle pens – "like concrete troughs" – where some of the other men slept.

[8] Owen says he'd already had about two motorbikes by then and hadn't had any crashes; it was enough to qualify him as a motorbike instructor.

Service with the NZASC

As Owen recalls, there were barely enough trucks to meet the NZASC workload but it was interesting and varied work that involved delivering supplies throughout the South Island.

"We used to cart petrol, tucker and ammunition … We went away down the West Coast, down to Tekapo, Geraldine. We had a big ammunition dump in Fairlie over the other side of the Opihi River and blokes used to go down there for a fortnight at a time guarding this stuff and we used to have to take down daily rations to them."

For some time, the base of operations was in Ashburton. "We'd go and pick up the stuff in Timaru at the drill hall there and way back up to Fairlie then back to our base at Ashburton."

They slept at a draughty old glassworks in Ashburton. The glassworks building had been relocated to Ashburton from Mayfield. Owen remembers it as an essentially derelict building, with no doors. "Damn cold show it was! We only used it as a base … we slept on little wooden frames with straw peliasses[9]."

Often the days were long, starting out at dawn and returning at dusk.

Owen well remembers when disaffected West Coast farmer Stanley Graham went on a shooting rampage on 8 October 1941 resulting in the deaths of seven men, four of whom were police officers[10]. "They had blokes out hunting for him … We were caught up carting supplies down there."

Before Owen turned 21, he was given three months' leave without pay, but he recalls being told to be prepared at all times for possible invasion. "We were supposed to protect the beaches from Christchurch to Timaru so every time we went home on leave we had to take every piece of armoury we had with us." At the first sign of trouble, they were told to report back to the drill hall in Timaru.

From early in 1940, the threat of invasion – either by the Germans or the Japanese – had begun to seem very real. German raiders were cruising New Zealand waters, laying mines and attacking Allied ships. Fears of invasion were heightened on 7 December 1941 with the bombing of Pearl Harbour by the Japanese. However, these concerns had lessened somewhat by 1944, following the Battle of the Coral Sea (May 1942) and the Battle of Midway, both of which turned the tide in favour of the Allied forces[11].

Into the Army

As soon as he turned 21 – on 18 April 1944 – Owen received a letter telling him to report to camp at Burnham. He was initially drafted to join the 12th Reinforcements, but was left behind "as there was not enough room on the boat"[12]. Instead, he stayed on to

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[9] These were large sugar bags stuffed with straw.

[10] Christopher Carson, 'Graham, Eric Stanley George', from the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, updated 2-Oct-2013, http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/5g15/graham-eric-stanley-george

[11] See 'Challenges', http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/war/second-world-war-at-home/challenges (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 20-Dec-2012. 'Historians have since revealed that the Japanese threat was slight … Those who lived through that period, however, recall genuine fear. Speculation was rife about where the Japanese would land, and what they would do to New Zealanders. People in exposed coastal areas felt especially vulnerable.'

[12] The 12th Reinforcements departed New Zealand in late June 1944. Source: http://audiovisual.archives.govt.nz/wiki/index.php/(DEPARTURE_OF_12th_REINFORCEMENTS_FOR_2NZEF,_29.6.44)

complete further training before departing with the 13th Reinforcements on 28 September 1944 aboard *Dunottar Castle*[13].

Owen says the troop ship had arrived in New Zealand with servicemen returning home on furlough leave. "The desert war was over when we left.[14]"

As well as raw recruits, *Dunottar Castle*[15] was also to carry, on its outbound journey, seasoned servicemen who had used up their furlough leave[16]. As Owen recalls, they were unhappy about the cramped conditions on board. Sleeping quarters for most of the men were in an open area used as a dining room by day; hammocks were slung at night from hooks on the ceiling.

"Some of the returning blokes coming back by then reckoned that wasn't good enough to go through the tropics so they had a committee meeting on the boat and decided they would march on parliament … They said, 'right, we're going to get [Prime Minister] Peter Fraser down here[17]."

As Owen recalls, the men then left the ship, pushed over tall railings surrounding the wharf, walked to parliament and began chanting "we want Peter!"

After some delay he came out and asked what the trouble was. Owen says the Prime Minister was met with a cynical response. "*He* was the bloody trouble because he was a conscientious objector in the First World War and went to prison instead.[18] They threw all of that back at him."

Fraser ordered the men back to the ship after agreeing to go and take a look at it.

"We all hung our hammocks up in these mess rooms. As soon as he came in - he always wore a bowler hat, that was gone in about the first push … Eventually he got through and said 'all right, I'll go back to parliament and we'll do something for you'."

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[13] Date of departure is from this site: http://www.aucklandmuseum.com/war-memorial/online-cenotaph/record/C120988 '28 September 1944. The 13th Reinforcements for 2 NZEF and men returning from furlough (106 officers and 2022 other ranks) embarked in Dunottar Castle at Wellington for the Middle East. They reached Port Tewfik on 5 November.'

[14] The Axis resistance in North Africa had collapsed by May 1943. 'On 13th May, [General] Alexander was able to report to Churchill: 'We are masters of the North African shore.' From *History of World War II*, Editor-in-Chief AJP Taylor, Chapter – *Desert Victory*, p. 186, 1974, Octopus Books Ltd, London.

[15] 'Princesa Victoria was built in 1936 by Harland & Wolff, Belfast, for Union-Castle Line as the Dunnottar Castle. She was used on the London (Tilbury) - round Africa service until the outbreak of WW2, when she was converted to an armed merchant cruiser, and then later used a troop transport. In 1949 she resumed her London - round Africa service.' *Dunnottar Castle,* http://www.simplonpc.co.uk/ChandrisVictoria.html

[16] 'In 1943, 6000 men from 2NZEF were brought home on leave. This 'furlough' was intended to be for three months, but problems delayed their return to war…' From *Hello and goodbye*, http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/war/second-world-war-at-home/hello-and-goodbye (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 20-Dec-2012.

[17] In early 1944, many war weary furlough men had refused to embark when their leave was up. Defaulters were arrested, sentenced to detention, demoted or dismissed with all military privileges withdrawn. To try and ameliorate the situation, the War Cabinet stopped bringing home large numbers of men at a time and also, in the last year of the war, sent fewer reinforcements –10,000 replacements in all were sent. From *Tomorrow Comes the Song, A Life of Peter Fraser* by Michael Bassett and Michael King, 2000, Penguin Books (NZ) Ltd, pp, 262-3. NB I haven't been able to find a reference to the incident Owen describes about the protest over conditions on the *Dunottar Castle*, but against a background of the 'furlough strike', it is clearly consistent with the mood of the times.

[18] Fraser had opposed conscription in WW1. In December 1916 he was arrested for advocating the repeal of the Military Service Act, charged with sedition and sentenced to 12 months' imprisonment. From Tim Beaglehole, 'Fraser, Peter', from the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, updated 25-Sep-2013.
http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/4f22/fraser-peter

As Owen recalls, some 200 to 300 men – mainly married men with several children - were then taken off the ship to make more room on board. "So eventually, we sailed!"

A man called Frank White, a farmer from Hororata – a returning furlough man who had served in the First Echelon[19] – was put in charge of the South Island contingent on board the ship[20]. Owen recalls this man, who had served in the desert war with the Long Range Desert Group, wore a black beret and stood no nonsense "but was a hell of a super bloke."

They travelled via Freemantle, stopping there for a week, before departing for Egypt.

On arrival, Owen was sent to Maadi Camp[21] on the outskirts of Cairo for three months of infantry training. Having served as transport drivers up until then, he and the other NZASC men were regarded as "complete rookies".

Fierce desert sandstorms are something Owen vividly remembers. "A lot of us nearly lost our eyesight there. [I] got caught in a sandstorm and it has affected my eyesight ever since. They took us away and washed us out, or tried to – it was all this gritty stuff, you see. It ruined my eyes for life."

Onto Italy

On completion of training, the men were sent to Italy, arriving at Bari on Christmas Eve 1944. It was a white Christmas, but not a very pleasant one. They were accommodated in leaky old bell tents overnight. Owen found himself on fatigues next day at the camp cookhouse. "We got down there and they hadn't done a ruddy thing and it had snowed. There were heaps of pots and pans covered in snow from the night before. There was no hot water. They had no heat, nothing. That was Christmas Day!"

Around this time there was a divisional reorganisation, aimed at boosting the strength of the infantry. It was achieved by converting Divisional Cavalry and 22 (Motor) Battalion to infantry. The machine-gun battalion was also converted to infantry and an extra brigade was formed[22].

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[19] 'The First, Second, and Third Echelons (as they were called) departed as follows - First: 6,529 all ranks 6 January 1940; Second: 6,460 all ranks (plus naval details) 2 May 1940; Third: 6,434 all ranks 27 August 1940.' From *An Encyclopaedia of New Zealand*, edited by A. H. McLintock, 1966. http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/1966/wars-second-world-war/page-3

[20] In later years Owen says he did quite a lot of work for Frank at his farm. When Frank died, he bequeathed his farm to Lincoln College. 'Frank gifted his property "Silverwood" to Lincoln University for research and the education of others. He died at Darfield, NZ on October 1, 2001 at age 91.' From 'Long Range Desert Group Preservation Society'. It contains a section about Frank, extracted from *An Ordinary Man – Frank's Story*, Memoir by Frank White, link: http://www.lrdg.org/LRDG-Photo-gallery(Trooper%20Section).htm

Frank was an agricultural student at Lincoln in the late 1920s and purchased Silverwood just before the Second World War. He was a member of the Long Range Desert Group in North Africa and later became the group's patron. An article on his memoirs is at this link: http://www.google.co.nz/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=3&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CCkQFjAC&url=http%3A%2F%2Fcommunityarchive.lincoln.ac.nz%2Fassets%2Fdownload%2F11989&ei=LPn4VO-mOsr98QWYvIGADw&usg=AFQjCNGJ132aBdHlxO94jPnwebFc84LQWQ&sig2=0KSvuZiFfd8M-repktcJTA

[21] The 1st Echelon had first set up camp here in February 1940. From *Struan's War*, p. 7, Edited by John MacGibbon, Ngaio Press, first published in 2001.

[22] 'For the Division's last campaign another brigade, the 9th, was formed from the Divisional Cavalry, and machine-gun battalion reorganised as infantry units, and reinforced with anti-tank gunners and others no longer needed in their normal roles. The third battalion was 22 Motor Battalion from 4 Armoured Brigade. An assault squadron of engineers was ready to build bridges under fire. Flame-throwing "Crocodiles" and "Wasps" and troop-carrying armoured "Kangaroos" were to help the infantry across the

"It gave them another spare brigade – reserves. They spread all the machine gunners, a few of them in each company or brigade; the same with tanks, the armoured corps, they were split around; and motorised - transport - were put into action on the vehicles there … Us non-descripts, the inexperienced ones, we were just pushed in as foot sloggers."

Owen was posted to a newly formed battalion.[23]

By this time, plans for a final offensive in Italy were well advanced. Dubbed Operation BUCKLAND, it would see the New Zealand forces play a pivotal role. In front of them lay a series of rivers, protected by stop banks which were strongly held by the Germans. Lieutenant-General Bernard Freyberg, who had led the Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force since 1939, saw that air bombardment and artillery barrage followed by swift ground attack held the key to breaking through these river defences[24].

There was a pause while preparations were made ahead of this operation.

Owen's first six weeks in Italy were spent at Chiatona Beach, Taranto where he was put to work on cookhouse fatigues. It became a semi-permanent role so he missed the wider divisional training programme then underway[25].

"We had a great little holiday down there. Lots of vino too[26] - we were well lubricated! Some of the older hands found an eighteen gallon keg of vino rosso, which was a real dark red. We used to call it 'rooster's blood'. That was only drunk as a last resort if there was nothing else left to drink."

Food was cooked by placing dixies – large iron cooking pots – on bars over the top of trenches where a fire had been laid[27].

Operation BUCKLAND commenced at the Senio River on 9 April 1945 with a massive pounding of German positions by air and artillery[28]. By this time Owen had travelled north by truck to join the Division. "The Germans were on one side and we were on the other side. They blew hell out of it," he recalls.

At the time he was well back, waiting with his reserve battalion. "The experienced blokes went across and got them [the Germans] shifted off the other side of the bank."

By 8pm all the infantry were safely across the Senio and a few hours later those leading the advance had reached the next river, the Santerno[29]. The advance continued rapidly, with both the Santerno and the Sillaro rivers crossed by 17 April. The German defence finally broke with a bloody crossing of the Gaiana Canal before the Idice was reached and crossed on 20 April. The main crossing of the Po took place on ANZAC Day. By 2 May, tanks of 20 Armoured Brigade had entered Trieste. On that day, the German forces in Italy officially surrendered[30].

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stopbanks'. 'The Army', from *An Encyclopaedia of New Zealand*, edited by A. H. McLintock, originally published in 1966. Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, updated 23-Apr-09, http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/1966/wars-second-world-war/page-3

[23] This was probably part of 9 Infantry Brigade, formed in late January. From *Freyberg's War* by Matthew Wright, p. 218, 2005, Penguin Books.

[24] Ibid, p. 218.

[25] It included a mock crossing of the Lamone in the first week of March. Ibid, p. 219.

[26] The men collected this from a local winery in what Owen describes as earthenware caskets.

[27] Owen says everything was "petrol fired".

[28] 'The heavy bombers droned overhead in the early afternoon … The artillery barrage began late afternoon … All went like clockwork, and at 7.20pm the Crocodiles went into action 'all along the divisional front', spewing flame into the German positions with ruthless effect. It was an appalling spectacle…' From *Freyberg's War* by Matthew Wright, p. 220, 2005, Penguin Books.

[29] Ibid, p. 221

[30] Source for this section: 'The Army', from *An Encyclopaedia of New Zealand*, edited by A. H. McLintock, originally published in 1966, Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, updated 23-Apr-09,

Yet this final push up Italy came not without cost. There were some 120 casualties alone among the advancing forces within the first 24 hours of the commencement of action at the Senio River[31]. By 10 April, the New Zealand Division's casualties had mounted to 28 killed and 153 wounded[32]. Who knows how many Germans were injured or killed in the preliminary bombardment, where the air power used was said to be greater than that which had shattered Cassino[33]?

Every river crossing brought more casualties, including prisoners of war and civilians.

Owen does not know the name of the river where he was badly injured by machine gun fire. He thinks he was hit on his 22nd birthday – 18 April 1945 – which would have placed him at the Gaiana. On the other hand, he only remembers reaching one more river after crossing the Senio, which would suggest what happened took place at the Santerno.

What is not in doubt is his transfer to an armoured personnel carrier (APC)[34] after the Senio had been crossed. It was driven by a British serviceman and the APC's machine gun operator was also British. Owen was in this vehicle when it came under fire during one of these river assaults. He recalls that he and the other reserves had been ordered forward to relieve exhausted men who had been leading the action.

On a fine morning they had arrived at the river, but their attempt to cross would soon be over in a rattle of machine gun fire, almost before it had begun.

"We got to this next river with about a twenty foot high bank and there's all the Germans sitting up there waiting for us… The pommies got killed approaching the bank. They [the APCs] had wee slots to peer out of … they shot through this hole and killed this bloke [the driver] outright. Then the gunner bloke, he got out and I was out. To be quite honest, we wandering around like we were chooks without our heads on because there were no experienced blokes there to lead us. We didn't know what our next move was.

"We got behind a bit of a shelter, buildings that had got blown up, and this pommy bloke, the machine gunner from the APC, was in front of me and he said 'oh, come over here, let's build a shelter' and he started walking over there. Next thing … boom. Bloody mortar fell right in front of his feet. He was just blown to smithereens.

"I walked away and next thing – 'ping, ping, ping, ping, ping'. Felt this bloody lead going into me. I fell over, tripped over my rifle, broke my leg…

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http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/1966/wars-second-world-war/page-3

[31] From J.B. McKinney, *Medical Units of 2 NZEF in Middle East and Italy*, Chapter 20: *Surge to Victory*, War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington, NZ, 1952. http://www.ourstory.info/library/4-ww2/NZmed/nzmed12.html

[32] From *Italy Volume II : From Cassino to Trieste* by Robin Kay, p. 428. Historical Publications Branch, 1967, Wellington. Part of: The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939–1945, http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-WH2-2Ita-c9-4.html

[33] 'At ten minutes to two on the afternoon of 9 April a terrific bombardment was begun by Allied air forces and artillery on the Eighth Army front. Hundreds of heavy bombers, Fortresses and Liberators, followed by mediums and fighter-bombers, swung down with small bombs designed to kill men, shatter vehicles, and cut communications without blowing the impassable craters that had upset calculations at Cassino. Here the air power was greater than that which blitzed Cassino just over a year before. Then came the guns---more than were at Alamein. Twelve regiments laid the barrage while, in the safety of houses and ditches to which they had been withdrawn, the New Zealand infantry waited for H-hour.' From J.B. McKinney, *Medical Units of 2 NZEF in Middle East and Italy*, Chapter 20: *Surge to Victory*. http://www.ourstory.info/library/4-ww2/NZmed/nzmed12.html

[34] "They were like tanks without turrets," says Owen.

"This was midday – a beautiful day in the sunshine. I lay there and I couldn't even get the old first aid kits out. We had temporary first aid bags. I couldn't even get them out – I just had to let it bleed[35] … I didn't know what had hit me.

"I had three mates killed in action that morning and four more died of wounds the same day. We'd been together for just over three years in the army. All over in a flash like that. Bloody war…"

Owen says he lay injured and alone for many hours until medics finally arrived at 10pm. He does not remember being in pain though the bullet wounds left a burning sensation[36]. He wondered many times over those long hours if he would live to see another day.

"They [the medics] were working in pairs. If anyone was dead they would take his numbers. We had two ID discs, one with your name and the other was your blood group. [One of the medics] booted me in the arse while I was lying there on my back trying to make out I was dead, there wasn't too much movement. I had my steel helmet over my face[37]. He turned to his mate and said 'oh, he's had it'. I said, 'like bloody hell he has, get me out of here boy'. I can still see the picture on his face when I spoke. He thought I was a goner."

He was taken to a casualty clearing station. "They started bombing that and they all took off, our padres and nurses … they all disappeared and left us blokes lying on stretchers. We had to stay there. We couldn't move – I had a broken leg[38]."

After the dust had settled, he was flown down to 3NZGH Hospital in Bari. There, he was told he had been two hours from death when found due to loss of blood.

"The old serge trousers had partially sealed it. The bullet lead was a clean cut. So after [ten] hours out there it had sort of dried …"

His leg and hip injuries were severe and required a long period of recuperation. In Bari he remembers his injured leg being "strung up and stretched" as part of treatment for some two months. "By jeez, that was painful." He had time to take notice of the port city and its battered environs. "Bari was full of littered and blown up German ships … it was a mess."

Home to New Zealand

Peace in Europe had been signed before he left Bari on a Dutch hospital ship, the *Oranje*[39]. He was on crutches for the trip and reached shore in New Zealand on a stretcher[40]. By the time he arrived back home, less than a year had elapsed. Owen returned in much poorer condition than the man who had set out in September 1944.

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[35] He was also without water and unable to reach any.

[36] In total, he says 10 bullets had struck him on his right side from his hips and down his leg.

[37] He'd put the helmet over his face to shield himself from the glare of the sun that day.

[38] As the infantry pushed across the Santerno, those charged with treating the wounded faced increasing difficulties. 'The route of evacuation grew longer and longer, and in many places lay over poor roads that often permitted one-way traffic only.' From J.B. McKinney, *Medical Units of 2 NZEF in Middle East and Italy*, Chapter 20: *Surge to Victory*, War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington, NZ, 1952.

[39] Owen remembers the *Oranje* – the largest hospital ship operated from Australia - as "a brand new ship staffed by pommies." 'During her time as an Australian Hospital ship, the HMHS Oranje made a good 41 voyages in which she transported and cared for countless Australian, New Zealand as well as British and many soldiers from other nations.' Source: http://www.ssmaritime.com/oranje.htm

[40] There to be greeted by PM Peter Fraser. "He welcomed us all home: 'well done boys' and all this bloody crap!"

Once back home, he would require two hip replacements and a knee replacement. He never fully regained the mobility he'd once taken for granted.

Before the war he had been a keen rugby and tennis player, but the Italian campaign put an end to that. "When I was home in South Canterbury I was under-14, under-16 and under-18 representative at tennis and rugby. I never played either game again. I couldn't run. I took up the old man's game – bowls."

Owen was initially assessed at Wellington Hospital on his return. Two or three days later he travelled on a special hospital train to Levin, where his parents had moved during the war. "They were pleased to see me."

For some two months after that, he had to go to Palmerston North Hospital five days a week for treatment, travelling there by train. "They had a fleet of ambulances meet the train at Palmerston North to cart you over to the hospital which was quite a considerable distance out of the town."

In spite of the physical injuries, Owen says he largely escaped the mental trauma that afflicted many returning servicemen. He never had any qualms about sharing his wartime memories with other people, which he believes helped his recovery.

As soon as he was well enough – and against the advice of his father who had hoped he'd stay on in Levin and work with him as a builder - Owen moved south to be closer to his girlfriend, Mollie[41] in Timaru. They had been going out together before the war and had talked about getting engaged before he left for Egypt, but had decided to wait.

"I said I might come back minus an arm or a leg and we might not like one another." They wrote to each other frequently while Owen was away. "As soon as I came home, she met me at the Express and I had the money in my pocket with me and went to the jewellers and bought the ring there and then."

He boarded in Timaru and found work locally as a builder until he and Mollie married the following year, 1947.

"I built a house - slowly, I could barely get around but I saved a lot of money by doing it myself[42]."

The couple started their family in 1950 and had three children: Lorraine, Gaynor and Jeffrey. In 1955, the family left Timaru and moved to Darfield, where Owen had found work as a builder.

"Mollie had been a city girl all her life and I had been a country boy all my life [so] we didn't know how things would work out [in Darfield]. She wasn't sure anyway but we got up there and she was well received. We only had two kids then, the two girls: Lorraine started school as soon as we got there…. We had a young family living next door to us and another young family over the road. After the kids went to school, she started playing bowls and golf and going to the women's division.

"We used to go down to Timaru and see her people there. She had two sisters in Timaru. We used to compare our kids with their kids and she'd say, 'I'm glad we're living up in the country there now. Everyone knows what your kid is doing unlike in a big city like Timaru. You don't know where they are or what's going on.' We had a great country cop there – he knew everybody."

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[41] Mollie Barker. She had spent the war working at a footwear factory supplying the armed services. Owen says they had a temporary split at one point. "Her mother and father were pushing like hell for me. She'd had another bloke before me – he'd been in the Air Force but he sorted of jilted her …"

[42] Owen says Mollie's father also helped him build this house.

Sadly, Mollie died of breast cancer at the age of 40, when their youngest child, Jeffrey, was still only eight years' old. Owen continued to work in the building trade. "It was hard going … it was a hell of a blow." The couple had been happily married for 17 years.

As the years went by, the war injuries also took an increasing toll. Owen says he gradually lost his agility, which had already been compromised by his war injuries. "I couldn't climb up ladders, couldn't climb up steps, so I did all the hand sawing on the ground [such as] cutting out dwangs and frames. In the finish I couldn't even do that so I took a job in the workshop as a joiner on a wooden floor all the time with a machine to do your work and trolleys to shift your timber around."

In the late 1970s Owen, along with a young building apprentice, was made unemployed. Fortunately he was soon able to find work with another local builder.

After Mollie's death, Owen found a lifetime companion in Doris Harrison. "I was forty years with Doris. We never married but it was a long term relationship." For many years she had her own flat in Christchurch while Owen lived at Darfield but they would spend weekends together. Later, she became a resident at St Allisa, Christchurch and was there for 10 years before her death two years ago. Owen was also at St Allisa for some 10 years. "We got on well. The kids got on well with her … Lorraine was on a farm and she [Doris] used to love going out there at a weekend or holidays for a few days."

In 2014, Owen was awarded life membership of the Christchurch Memorial RSA, in recognition of his military service. He joined up as a member of the RSA the day after he was discharged in New Zealand. "I've paid my sub every year since then, up until last year." In his years at Darfield, he was a member at the Hororata-Malvern sub-branch.

Over the years, he has appreciated the RSA for offering fellowship through activities such as golf tournaments and regular meetings. "You sort of discuss things and bring back old memories."

His generous support of the Christchurch Memorial RSA was recognised with a certificate of appreciation in September 2014.

At the time of interview, he was looking forward to attending the formal opening on 27 March of the new Christchurch Memorial RSA building and the Memorial Plaza[43].

In February 2015, Owen had been living at Rannerdale Veterans' Care in Christchurch for three months and told me he was enjoying his time there.

Reflecting on his war memories, he says he never thought he'd make it through to his 90s. In 1945, in Italy, he knows he was lucky enough just to have survived his 22nd birthday. He lost his wife to cancer 50 years ago. Owen is now a great-grandfather, several times over, who marvels at his long life.

"Never in my wildest days did I think I'd live this long[44]!"

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[43] Owen donated $5000 towards the new building.

[44] He laughs while relating how he has accidentally ended up paying for two funeral plans: one with the RSA and another with Lamb and Hayward. "I've made sure!"

The author wishes to acknowledge the support of the Canterbury History Foundation through the 2014 Canterbury Community History Award and the RSA/NZ Institute of Professional Photographers' WWII Veteran Portraits Project for providing the original inspiration to write biographies for veterans in the Canterbury region.

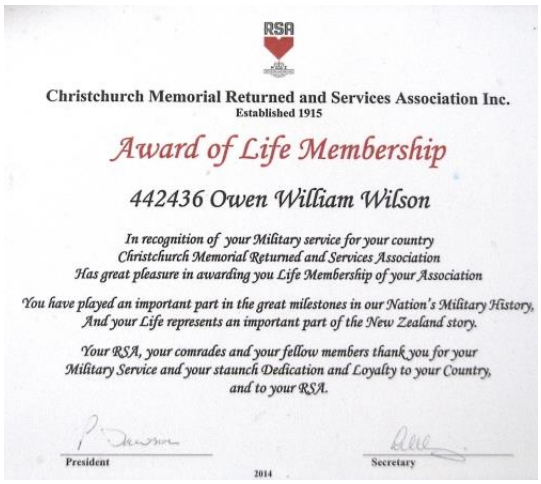
This biography was compiled in March 2015 from an interview with Owen Wilson on 26 February 2015 at Rannerdale Veterans' Care in Christchurch, as well as from a subsequent conversation on 6 March 2015. I extend my thanks and gratitude to Owen for his time and for sharing his memories. I have footnoted with other material to ensure this account is as accurate as possible.

PHOTOS – OWEN WILSON

I wish to acknowledge and thank Owen for giving permission to include these photos with his biography.

OWEN WILSON WITH HIS WWII MEDALS, RANNERDALE, 5/2/2015

OWEN'S WWII MEDALS: 'ONE FOR GOING THERE (1939-45 STAR), ONE FOR BEING THERE (ITALY STAR), ONE FOR COMING HOME AND ONE FOR B COMPANY – BE HERE WHEN THEY GO AND BE HERE WHEN THEY COME HOME.'



RSA

Christchurch Memorial Returned and Services Association Inc.
Established 1915

Award of Life Membership

442436 Owen William Wilson

In recognition of your Military service for your country
Christchurch Memorial Returned and Services Association
Has great pleasure in awarding you Life Membership of your Association

You have played an important part in the great milestones in our Nation's Military History,
And your Life represents an important part of the New Zealand story.

Your RSA, your comrades and your fellow members thank you for your Military Service and your staunch Dedication and Loyalty to your Country, and to your RSA.

President Secretary

2014

LIFE MEMBERSHIP OF CHRISTCHURCH MEMORIAL RSA, 2014

RSA

Christchurch Memorial Returned and Services Association Incorporated

Certificate of Appreciation

The Officers and Executive Committee of Christchurch Memorial Returned and Services Association Incorporated wishes to express its sincere appreciation to:

Mr Owen Wilson

For his continued very generous financial and loyal support of this RSA and particularly his support of the RSA rebuilding project.

This Certificate of Appreciation is presented on 10th September 2014 at Christchurch.

Signed: President Date: 10/09/2014

CHRISTCHURCH MEMORIAL RSA CERTFICATE OF APPRECIATION, RECOGNISING OWEN'S CONTINUED SUPPORT, PARTICULARLY FOR THE RSA REBUILDING PROJECT.

OWEN, PICTURED WITH DORIS HARRISON, (NOW DECEASED)