



War stories beautifully told

The reluctance of old soldiers to talk about the battles they fought in their youth is probably universal, but the children and grandchildren of the men who served in World War II probably think they have a reasonable understanding of what happened, if only in the historical sense, and the part their fathers and grandfathers played. Two new books give the lie to that.

A Job To Do, edited by John Gordon, and *Desert War: The Battle of Sidi Rezegh*, by Peter Cox, offer new understanding of the horrors thousands of New Zealanders endured, in the first case from training at home then in Egypt to triumph in Trieste, in the second by recounting in great detail one of the most important conflicts of the war, a battle that many will not have heard of.

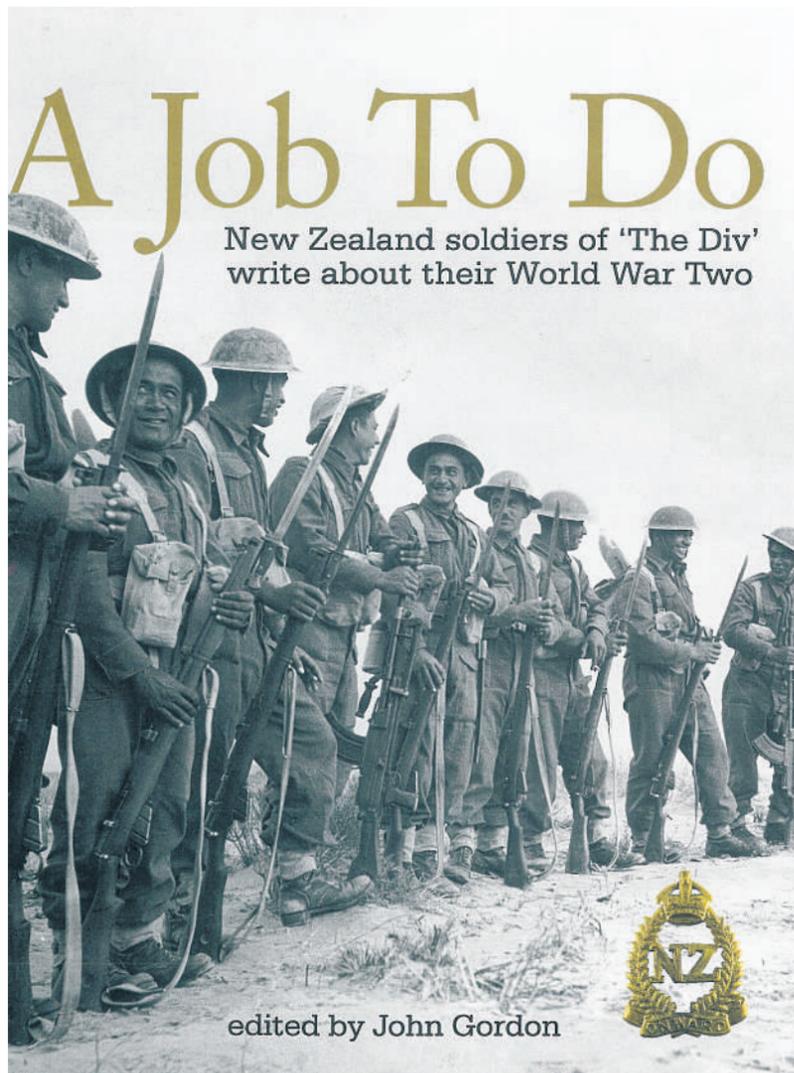
John Gordon has done a remarkable job of collating the recollections of New Zealanders, some written at the time, others committed to paper many years later. Collectively these stories reveal an extraordinary display of courage, compassion and humour, all the more impressive for the likely fact that such selflessness and commitment to a greater cause will not be seen again.

They might not have been the first generation to display the qualities of character in which we continue to take pride as New Zealanders today, but these men epitomised all that is good and admirable about the Kiwi spirit that we still like to think we possess, despite the plethora of evidence to the contrary.

Apart from superb training, those who served in 2 New Zealand Division had what one of their number, Geoffrey Cox, described in 1947 as the further advantage of common origin. "We were a segment of New Zealand life transferred overseas..." he wrote.

"Men who are fighting alongside their fellow from their own town, alongside men who will remember their success or failure throughout the rest of their lives, have strong incentives to do their best. You cannot let a man down if you are going to meet him in the street every remaining day of your life."

Fellow veteran Pat Kane wrote of marvelling at the wonderful



FIRST PERSON: Stories of 'The Div', told by the men who were there.

spirit of comradeship that grew amongst "this cosmopolitan group of citizens turned soldiers with the sprinkling of regular force officers and non-commissioned officers..."

"It is my firm conviction that the New Zealand soldier fighting in World War II was amongst the best disciplined soldiers in the world," he added — a view shared by friend and foe alike; and the 28th Maori Battalion took that reputation even further.

"His discipline under fire was superb, his response to leadership spontaneous, his execution of orders intelligent and his attention to personal cleanliness and hygiene, even in the most impossible situations, unbeliev-

able."

The privations suffered by these men are all but incomprehensible to the generations that have followed them. Their phlegmatic acceptance of triumph and disaster speaks more eloquently than words of the discipline they displayed even whilst being routed in Greece and Crete, in driving German troops from North Africa and in slowly but surely overpowering the best troops Germany could muster as they fought, mile by bloody mile, to expel them from Italy.

They wrote of the small pleasures that made their lives bearable, whether letters or parcels from home or the chance to sleep, briefly, sheltered from a freezing

Italian winter and beyond the range of German guns.

They express themselves in prose, in cartoons, and most compellingly in poetry.

Amongst the poets was Garfield Johnson, one-time teacher at Kaitaia College in the 1960s, one of a number of Far Northerners who contribute to the book:

'Young in heart and high in courage, they flung their gallant line

'And they heeded not the flying death, the bomb and shrapnel whine,

'Nor the probing tracer bullet with its comet tail ashine,

'They stood their ground, their faces wet with sweat's hot salty brine.

'Action left! The tanks are coming! It's action Right and Rear!

'Their fighting guns kept firing at the armour lumbering near,

'Till the Hun reeled back in wonder, his Panzers could not take

'The spitting bloody venom of the square that did not break.

'But he was round them and he had them — so his jeering spokesman said,

'On the morrow, in their thousands, they'll be captured, maimed and dead.'

Others include James (later Sir) Henare DSO, the last commander of the 28th Maori Battalion, whose finest hour perhaps was with the Ngapuhi Company at Cassino:

'On the 23rd October, on the day of the Battle of Alamein, I shared with thousands of other soldiers the proud honour of standing on the crossroad of history. That night I was wounded, so I thought to myself, well Dad, your debt to Ngapuhi is well and truly paid with my blood.'

These men — farmers, bank clerks, teachers, railway workers — are men to be proud of. The contribution they made to this country by serving half a world away is beyond measure, and the chance to read their thoughts as they themselves recorded them is a privilege.

Peter Cox's story of the Battle of Sidi Rezegh is part of the Anzac Battles Series of books, but serves as a tribute to the author's father, Brian Cox, who was amongst the thousands who contributed to one of the pivotal actions of the war in North Africa, and to

the ultimate defeat of the Axis forces.

Sidi Rezegh was by no means the end of the war in the desert but it paved the way for later, more famous victories, notably the Battle of El Alamein.

As part of the 118,000-strong British Eighth Army, 2 New Zealand Division crossed from Egypt into Libya on November 18, 1941, to launch the operation Crusader.

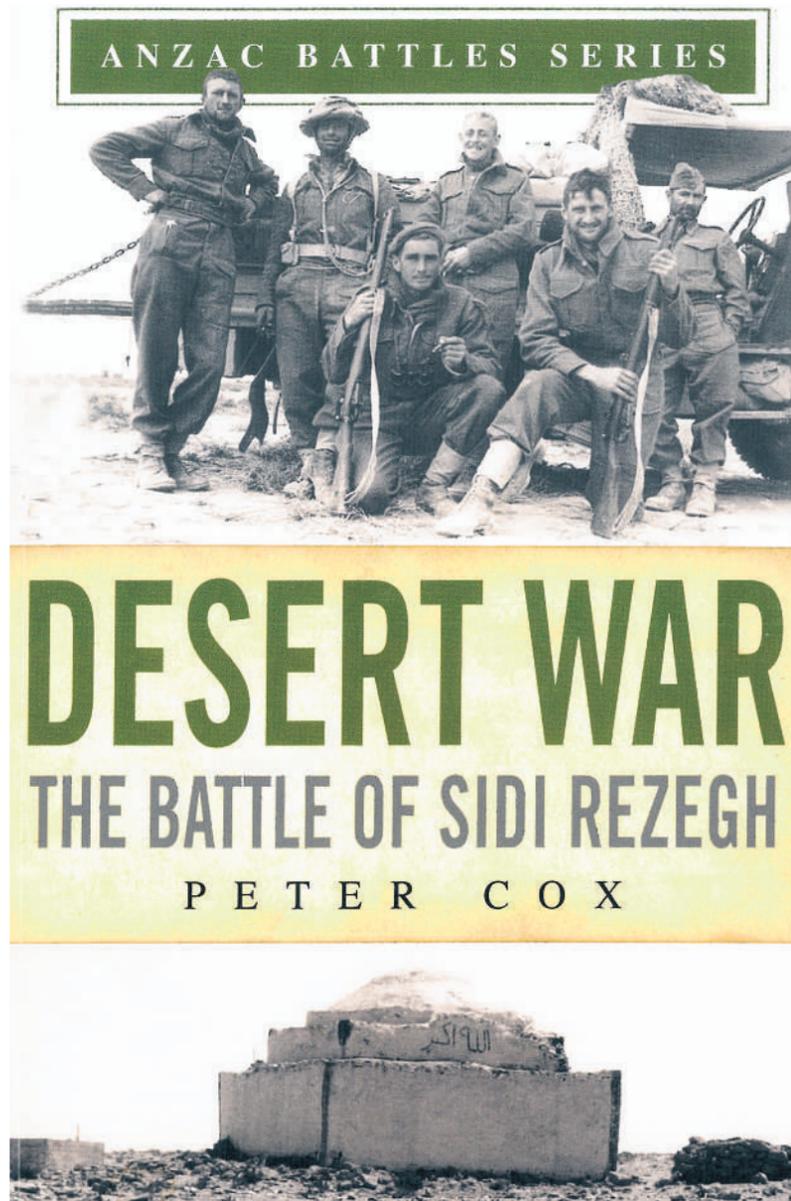
18 Battalion, which included many of those from the Far North who enlisted two years earlier, was there of course, and, like the other New Zealand battalions, was to suffer horrific casualties (the writer's father among them; he was wounded on November 28, 1941, was taken to a dressing station and was subsequently captured in the course of a German counterattack).

The overwhelming impression conveyed by the book, exhaustively researched not only from the official record but in the course of two visits to the battlefield by the author, is that of confusion. The manipulation of men and machines always sounds convoluted to the layman, but Sidi Rezegh was in a class of its own, friend and foe alike often not entirely sure where they were in relation to the other. Even the redoubtable Lieutenant General Erwin Rommel spent what must have been an uncomfortable night in the company of British troops, having misjudged his location.

By the time Crusader was over New Zealand had suffered 4620 casualties; 671 killed and another 208 who died of wounds, 1699 wounded and 2042 who were taken prisoner, 201 of them wounded. Another 202 died as the result of sickness or accident. That was a greater loss than those suffered by any other Eighth Army division, 1000 more than were suffered in the debacle on Crete, almost twice as many as were lost in Greece and three times the toll at Orsogna and Cassino.

It was also where New Zealanders first distinguished themselves as arguably the finest troops in the world.

"For the men attacking continually by day and night, the extreme fighting at close range (at which the 28th Maori Battalion excelled) with the bayonet in the face of tank attack, small arms, machine gun and artillery fire, must have been



OVERLOOKED: A battle many will not have heard of.

daunting" Cox writes.

"These men were not the SAS but ordinary New Zealanders: bank clerks, mill hands, labourers, accountants, farmers, civil servants, salesmen and schoolmasters. They were, indeed, ordinary men doing extraordinary things.

"This was a messy victory, but an important one. In a battle that was to have been determined largely by an armoured encounter, the New Zealanders, through sheer determination, had played a major part in the final outcome; their versatility and ability to cope with unexpected setbacks had been an important factor. As one New Zealander said succinctly, 'Jerry was mucked about and we were mucked about, but we were more used to it!'"

There were more desert battles to come, battles that have long

been remembered in this country if only as names, but none deserve a more honoured place in the history of New Zealand warfare than Sidi Rezegh. That is a name that deserves to be remembered along with El Alamein, Cassino and a dozen others as a place and time where New Zealanders truly earned everlasting honour.

Peter Cox has done a very good job of righting the wrong of allowing Sidi Rezegh to slip into obscurity. The descendants of those who fought there, particularly, should read this book, and wonder anew at the courage of their forebears.

■ *A Job To Do*, edited by John Gordon, published by Exisle. RRP \$49.99.

Desert War: The battle of Sidi Rezegh, by Peter Cox, published by Exisle. RRP \$34.99.