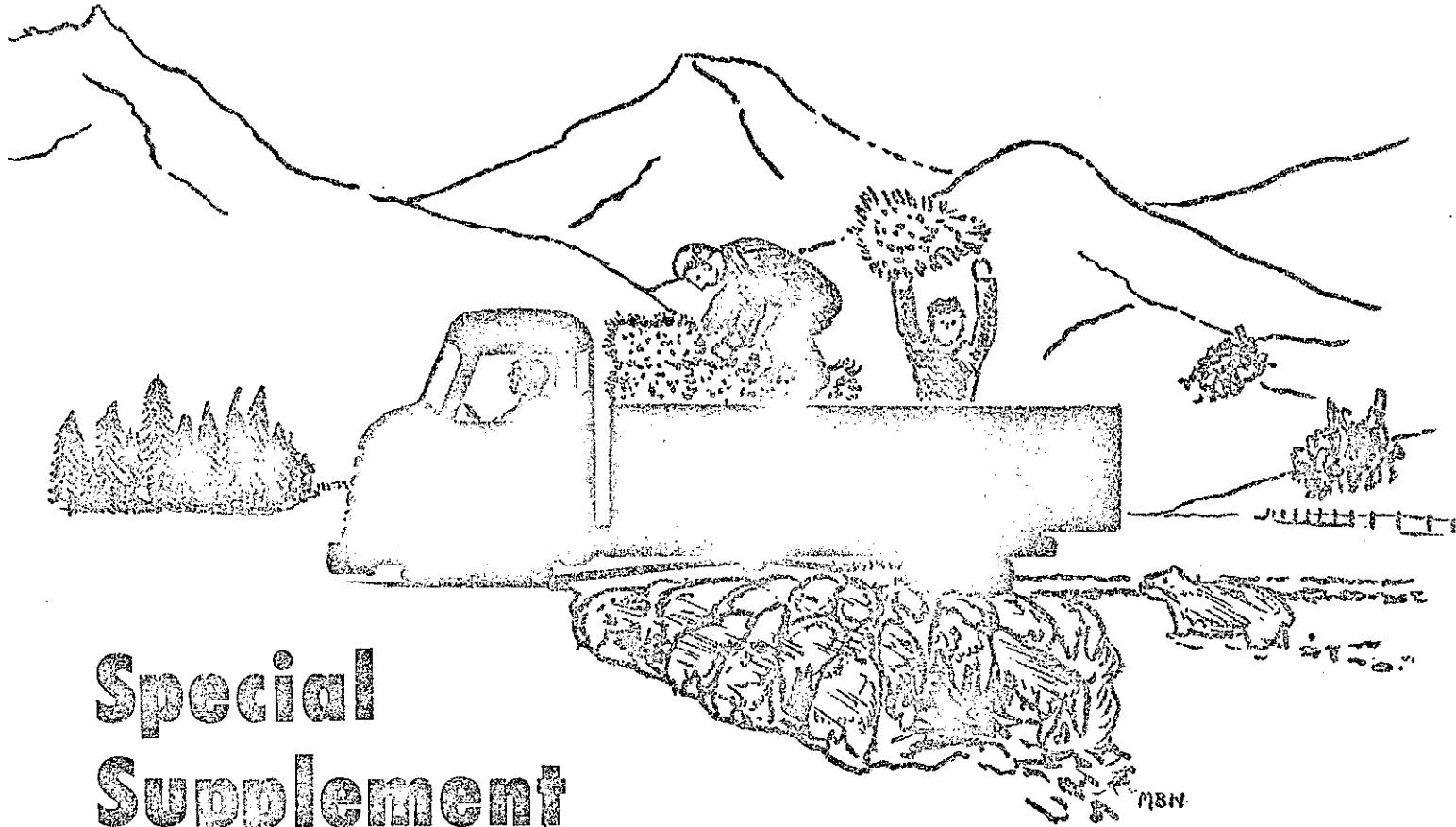
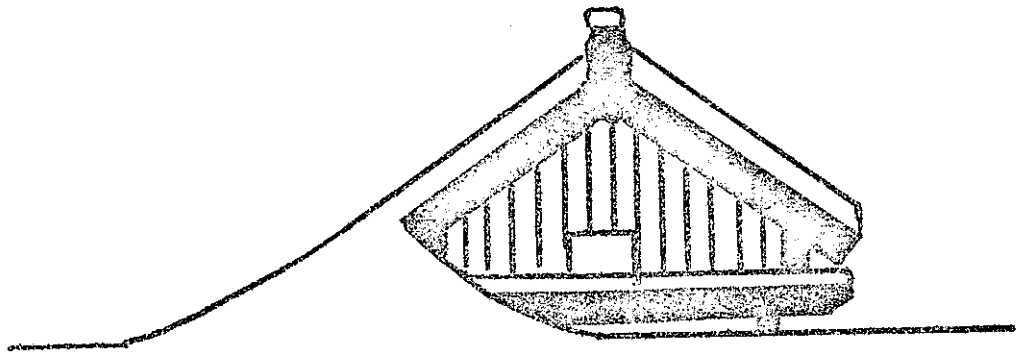


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DATATAKA

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# Special Supplement

September 1973

MBN

# PATAKA

The Magazine of the Royal New Zealand Army Ordnance Corps

11 September 1973

Special Supplement

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## EDITORIAL

This special supplement to PATAKA departs from normal practice in that we are not waiting until the distribution of the Quarterly edition before the publication of the article it contains.

We feel that the material in this article would lose its impact if published in the beginning of Summer - that an account of a blizzard is out of keeping with the sunny days of December. A second consideration is the importance of recognizing effort at the time of its creation and, in this, we feel that the effort expended by 3 COD personnel is worthy of recognition.

In printing a supplement to PATAKA, which is for, by and concerning Ordnance personnel, let us not forget the skills, hard work and effort put into the emergency by other services, Corps and units, without which Ordnance could not have produced such a fine show. In printing this account we are merely publicising the views and experiences of one unit since that is all we have at our disposal. We have no wish to appear parochial by failing to recognize the value of the work undertaken by all of the Army, Air Force and civilian agencies in relief and rescue operations in those early weeks of August 73.

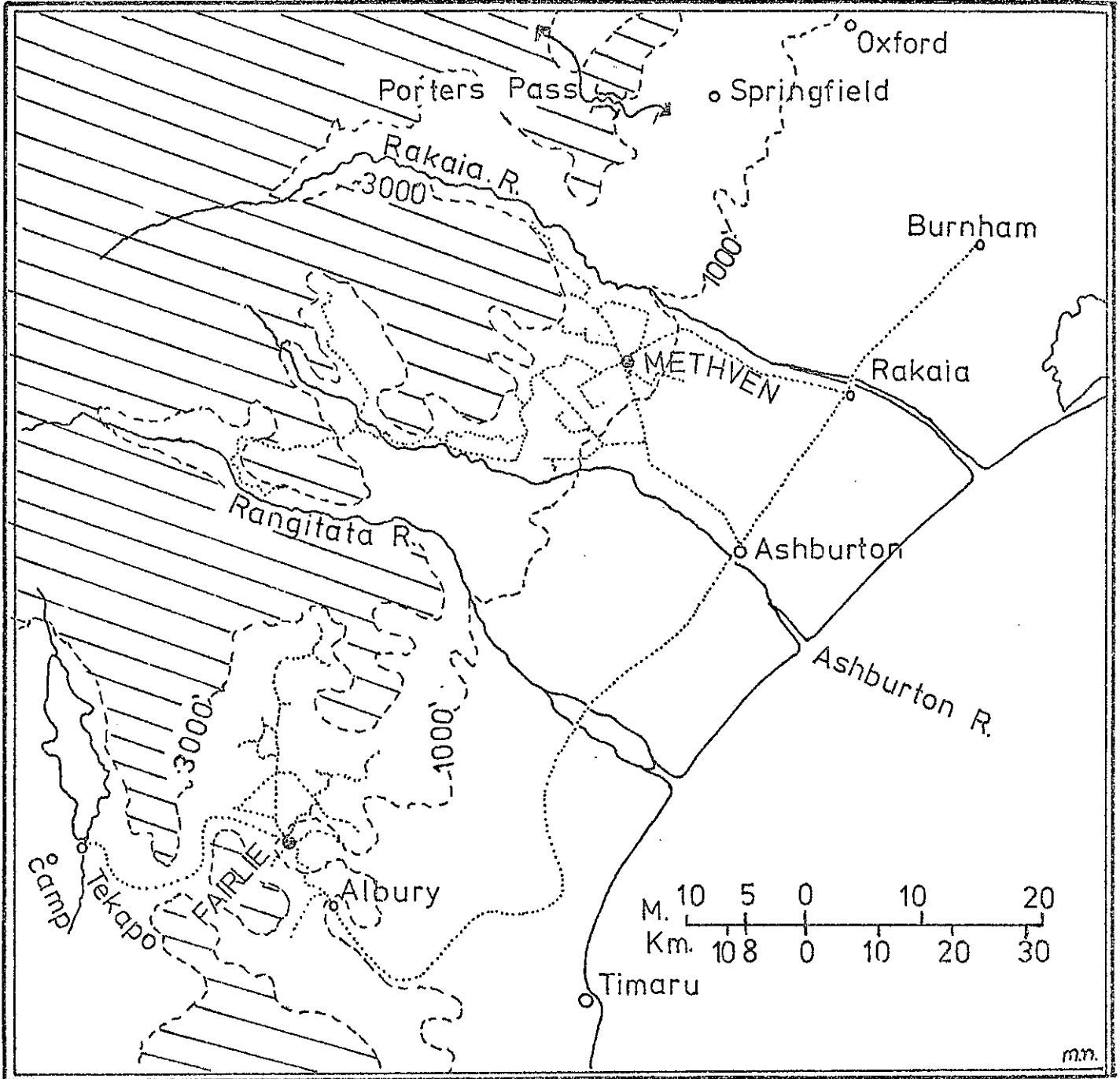
Congratulations are most certainly due, however, to those soldiers who have contributed to this account either in its writing or in its performance.

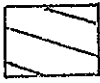


To the personnel of 3 COD, both those who remained behind in support and those who plodded the snowy wastes of Canterbury, we salute you,

AVE! AVE!

# OPERATION SNOWLINE

Snow level came to 800 ft approx.



-  Over 3000 ft
-  Contours 1000' & 3000'
-  RNZAOC personnel journeys, many farms assisted more than once.

# THEY MUST BE ORDNANCE — THEY'VE GOT SNOW ON THEIR BOOTS

(An article by - Cantabrian Novae Zealandis)

## THE EVENTS - 1

### Introduction

Everyone in New Zealand will have heard or seen something of the blizzard which struck the inland Canterbury plains early in August 1973. Above the 3,000 ft level snow is an expected and regular visitor and run holders operate high country stations accordingly. Snow occasionally falls in Burnham and Christchurch but melts either on impact or soon afterwards.

Over a 48 hour period through 6th and 7th August, persistent heavy snow fell ceaselessly on inland Canterbury from OXFORD in the North to FAIRLIE in South Canterbury. In some places the wind caused bad drifting. Such conditions had not been experienced before. Old hands in METHVEN pubs insisted they had had heavy snow the first winter after they got back from the War, but it didn't last long on the ground; (or words to that effect and with most of the four letter ones removed).

The news media have since dwelt on the variety and types of aid provided and the merits or otherwise of early shearing of sheep before lambing. I shall not therefore go over this well trodden ground except to say that all the sheep I saw and assisted were unshorn and encumbered with thick, heavy, cold and wet wool. Try spending 4 or 5 days without food wearing only 3 soaking wet greatcoats, lying the whole time in 4 feet of snow - if you're tired of living! Also bear in mind that many ewes were carrying lambs and so had two lives to support in these conditions. A few early lambs were in fact born into this bleak and bitter situation.

### Military Operations

3 COD was directly involved from the first moment when Defence assistance was ordered. Search and Rescue Block Scale 12/06 was collected and issued, together with  
/blankets,

parkas, overtrousers, etc. 1 QA Sqn (NZ Scots) used this gear in the arduous and prolonged efforts to rescue snowbound motorists (about 30 cars) on the West Coast highway in and beyond PORTER'S PASS. Once all human life was secure, their M113s (Armoured Personnel Carrier) and One M548 (Load carrier) were switched to stock relief. The tremendous cost of these vehicles has been fully justified by this work alone. No other agency in the South Island had a show of getting to the more distant and buried vehicles, anything like as quickly. It is highly probable that not all the trapped motorists could have survived without them. Whether this fact has registered with those who scoff and jeer at the Armed Forces remains to be seen!

The Post Office had had line troubles from the first day and 3 COD loaned 2 RLs in addition to the 29 loaned from Vehicle Group to 3 Tpt Coy. FFR Landrovers were also loaned to 3 Inf Bde Gp Sigs.

Hardly had the first issues been cleared when it became obvious that help on a larger scale was essential. 3 COD, 3 OFP and 6(Bath)Pl were virtually stripped of heavy trade licence holders. At the same time the Depot was required to issue sleeping bags, parkas, blankets, camp equipment items, vehicles, chains, etc., to the units.

Ordnance personnel called out, acted as drivers RNZASC under 3 Tpt Coy control. 3 Inf Wksp Stores Section personnel were placed on stand-by and at one point were called out, only to have this countermanded. The few who remained at 3 COD, together with the NZWRAC and civilian staff carried a hectic load as the Depot operated around eleven hours a day including Saturday and Sunday 11 and 12 August.

Two groups of personnel were sent away on Thursday 9th August, one to FAIRLIE and the other to METHVEN. On Friday a further group left for FAIRLIE. The Depot was fortunate because apart from the OC (Capt G.M. Corkin) nobody was absent on courses. One man had to be recalled from leave and another, in Burnham Camp hospital, got himself discharged to return to duty in the Depot on Sunday and went to METHVEN next day as relief driver.

Depot working strength over the week-end was 12 including three NZWRAC DPs. Five of the dozen lacked heavy trade or were without HT licences anyway. The remainder were kept busy preparing further vehicles for the road, receiving a huge consignment of chains from the North Island, and, including the NZWRAC, getting out further supplies of dry clothing and footwear for those in need on the operations. The considerable stocks of Working Dress plus handed-in Boots in RSDG provided a useful source of dry gear. An important item of new stock consumed on the operations was socks.

/At METHVEN,

At METHVEN, when those who needed them were handed a pair of thick dry socks when they came in at the end of the third day, the pleasure and appreciation of this small Ordnance service made it well worthwhile. The METHVEN party had 30 minutes warning to move, which gave time to draw protective clothing and bedding, etc., and to report to 3 Tpt Coy. Those living in Burnham also had time for a quick dash home or to the barracks to grab extra gear. Those of us living elsewhere had to go as we were, consequently a spare set of socks and boots was a great asset. Towards the end of the operation a clothes drier was brought in from Burnham, but this would have been more useful had it been there from the beginning.

An additional strain on 3 COD during this emergency was having to send 3 vehicles and 6 men to MAPUA, a small port near NELSON, to receive 16 tons of ammunition. Three of the 12 remaining in the Depot plus three who had returned from FAIRLIE and METHVEN took the trucks North. This ammunition should have gone direct to FAIRLIE -(approx 300 miles) but as the Ammo Area was snowed up the consignment posed an acute problem. Where to store it? Burnham was full and Fairlie was isolated. Some fast phone work to CATO and from CATO to Defence HQ secured the use of the Ammo Area at RNZAF Stn Wigram. A possible outcome of this is that Army may be able to use the Wigram Ammo Area in the future.

THE EVENTS - 2

Methven

First impressions are always the strongest. After the convoy turned off Highway 1 at RAKAIA on to the 23 mile road to METHVEN, it was not until we were some seven miles from the town that the snow appeared. Not gradually, but all at once, as if a gigantic brush had daubed thick whitewash over the green-brown wintery face of Canterbury. The snow rapidly deepened mile by mile, until at METHVEN it was some 2½ feet deep. The nearer the ranges the deeper it became. In the town graders were still clearing an area for the Army trucks to park behind the excellent Community Centre where we lived for the next six days.

METHVEN itself was confused and chaotic. Power had just been restored to the town centre. Outer parts were to wait two more days, whilst farms had to go anything from 4 to 20 days without electricity. As the streets had generally been cleared only to the width of one vehicle, and as there were graders, dozers, trucks, vans and cars all trying to move at once or to park, any movement was slow and very frustrating. These vehicles had good reasons for being there as they belonged to various organisations such as MOW, Ashburton Electric Power Board, Defence, Police, Agriculture and Fisheries and farming organisations and firms. At RAKAIA, ASHBURTON and other places the Police did a fine job in keeping gawpers, sensation seekers and week-end motorists out of the snowbound country.

The effect of dozing so much snow off the road on each side was to create banks of packed snow 4 ft high in the town, which in turn made movement off the road impossible. As the snow deepened further out, these banks rose up sheer each side as high as the cab roof of the RLs. Two lane sealed roads thus became a single line weavy canyon through which we drove hoping that traffic the other way was minimal. As always, everything seemed to be going towards METHVEN as we left, and heading out when we came back. Unless there was a convenient passing place such as a cleared out farm entrance, passing meant much edging, pushing and scraping. Where roads had been graded or dozed chains were not usually necessary. Movement off the roads required chains and four wheeled drive. In the first days, 15 miles could take an hour or more to cover.

The weight of snow brought down or smashed every line in the area. As the wires and insulators were able to carry the snow, it was the cross bars and often the poles themselves which snapped. Wooden poles snapped like matches at about one third of their height. The many steel poles of the type with two main beams interlaced with supporting struts,

/all folded

all folded over about half way up to droop their lines in the snow. In Methven there were festoons of cable and phone wires looping everywhere, often obstructing movement.

Trees in the area had grown without ever having to take the thick snow to which the same strain are accustomed in North America, Europe, etc. Consequently there were very few trees which didn't have large branches half snapped off or torn off completely. These had damaged power lines where otherwise the lines could have been sheltered from the snow. As livestock often sought shelter at the edge of windbreaks, etc., falling branches must have contributed to the destruction of some animals.

Accumulated snow on the roofs of buildings stove in many sheds and barns. Occupants of houses had realised the danger and went out from time to time to clear off the falls.

But the core of the disaster was to the sheep population, and to a lesser extent to the cattle. Had farm horses been retained in this mechanical age of diesel and petrol driven machinery, much relief work could have been achieved by these now vanished, long legged and sturdy creatures.

Sheep and cattle took what shelter they could find, usually alongside hedgerows and windbreaks. Sheep huddled together in congested groups with the ever falling snow gradually forming over their tightly packed masses. The animal warmth below tended to create igloos. Sometimes more sheep piled on top of those already there. After four days of these conditions it was usually the outer and colder animals which had died. The ones further in were living but were often in a bad way. Igloos of sheep could be detected by blow holes in the snow or by humped effects in the flat surface, or by probing for them in likely spots.

The drains and irrigation channels which sometimes run beside windbreaks and hedges proved to be killers. Some of the sheep were pressed into the mud and water to drown or die quickly in the cold water. Snow tends to insulate against outside temperatures and drains and channels flowed on normally below the snow.



THE EVENTS: - 13.

Fairlie

The writer was in the Methven group, therefore details of the Fairlie group are fewer, but this does not imply that their work was in any way less. It might be true to say that the Methven people travelled much greater daily distances over the inland plains and up the gorge, whilst those at Fairlie worked largely in the snowbound Fairlie basin with runs to Tekapo to uplift hay. On the other hand, Fairlie is higher and the snow was deeper, up to 10 ft in places.

The vehicles involved at Fairlie were 10 RLs and 2 Rovers.

The tasks were the same as at Methven, namely -

- a. Taking civilian volunteers to detailed areas.
- b. Distributing hay, etc, to farms in need.
- c. Clearing tracks etc., in the fields.
- d. Feeding out. (Usually this meant loading the truck from the farm's haybarns, then several hours of four wheel drive slow slogging through the snow to isolated groups and clusters of animals to get food to them.)
- e. Distributing 3 COD stocks of candles and Tilley lamps to isolated farms. (This last activity was not done in the Methven area).

One RL went off the road, down a bank into an 8 ft drift of snow. It took over an hour to get back on the road, partly because it proved impossible to get back up the way it went down. One FFR Rover of 3 Bde Sigs collided with a sheep. The effect on the sheep is not known but the driver collected a broken collar bone from the incident.

More trouble struck a 3 COD convoy en route back to Burnham. An NCO of 3 OFP, driving an FFR Rover came to an unwilling halt at ALBURY, some 8 miles from Fairlie. The Rover was then taken in tow. Near Ashburton the towing vehicle braked and our 3 OFP man found that the brakes of his unfortunate Rover were as useless as the motor. With swift presence of mind he managed to swerve past the towing vehicle. Luckily the tow rope snapped under the strain, otherwise he and his vehicle may have been tipped over. Eventually this highly undesirable vehicle was taken to Ashburton and placed in Police custody until EME arranged bail next morning.

The Fairlie group were less fortunate than those in Methven in that they had no cook with them, and so they lived

/on Ration

on Ration Packs except for the last day when fresh rations arrived from Burnham. The first night was spent in the comfort of one of the Hotels at Fairlie but subsequent nights were spent in the more spartan conditions in a Church Hall.

Sgt Brian SMITH worked long hours recovering the contents of farm deep freezers and taking them to still functioning commercial freezers for safe keeping. As everyone went out to do a job without thought of mention or reward, names have not been mentioned in the text. However, it seems Brian carried out this work under very difficult circumstances, including driving five miles to a farm, only to find there was no means of turning round, and having to back out again the full distance.

Another NCO of 3 COD used a Rover to search out farms and isolated homesteads which had thus far received no assistance. Their needs were then made known to Agriculture and Fisheries officers at Fairlie.

In the midst of all this, we are pleased to announce the birth of a baby boy to Sgt Robbie and Mrs. Turner at the Fairlie maternity hospital. Although clear details have not reached the writer despite enquiries from all who could or might know, it seems snow caused difficulties in getting from the Ammo. Area the two miles into the town. (Could it be the Stork found flying conditions hopeless?).

/Impressions

IMPRESSIONS

The events of the operations for the emergency are clear-cut. They happened or they didn't happen. Impressions, on the other hand are not always so clearly defined and I relate them as they were seen, gathered or felt, disjointed maybe, but lingering in our minds now that the thaw has taken place and the havoc has been fully revealed.

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Wading through thick deep snow and suddenly feeling sheep beneath your boots.

+ + + + +

Opening up an igloo of sheep and the foetid stench of dead and living animals coming up in your face.

+ + + + +

Lifting a cast ewe to her feet and having her give birth on the spot to a still-born lamb.

+ + + + +

Seeing a grader on a high country station up the Ashburton Gorge dragging out three dead prize bulls.

+ + + + +

Cast sheep still living, blood over their heads where gulls had pecked their eyes out. Little pools where their feeble kicking had scoured out the mud around their hooves.

+ + + + +

Hunger crazed sheep rushing towards an RF engaged on feeding out, and the other instinct, fear, overcoming that of hunger - forcing them to veer away until the truck has lurched past.

+ + + + +

Taking six young students from Lincoln College out to work on snow relief to a farm 20 miles away where we'd been told there was work to be done. On arrival the farmer said it had all been fixed up that morning by another group. Six disappointed lads on the tray of the RL. Rather than head back idle handed the two soldiers decide to check with other farms in the area. 'Thanks for looking in, but we're all right for the moment, thank you.' This seems to be the standard answer around here. 'Well, you could try ABC's place five miles up such and such a road. Heard they've had some trouble there.' What's five more miles anyway, so away we go. After four successive ABC's places they end up at a Station in the Ashburton Gorge area. Six other Lincoln students dropped off by an earlier RL were loading up the last bales of hay to be slung under an Air Force Iroquois chopper to be swept away to the high country stock. It

/comes on

comes on to sleet and bitter driving winds and dark, low scudding clouds. The chopper doesn't come back. Probably impossible for it to fly in here now, anyway. Time and bad weather wear on. Soldiers and 12 students take shelter in the haybarn. Around 1600 hrs decide nothing further to be gained by hanging around here, 12 lads scramble onto open tray of the RL. Noticed some of them badly dressed and told that weather was sunny and mild that morning at Lincoln! Bright pink cold flesh seen through well-holed jeans. Cotton shirts and pull-overs not much cop against sleet and wind. Soldiers give parkas and overtrousers to two worst dressed lads then away back to Methven. Get back about 1730 hrs and recover parkas and overtrousers. Being Sunday, Pub had front door and curtains closed, but back door and bar were open. Exchanged jugs and experiences with other drivers until booting out time around 2000 hrs.

+ + + + + + + +

Cold, wet and unhappy feet.

+ + + + + + + +

Lying on your back under an RL in slush and mud, while frozen fingers try to adjust and tighten chains.

+ + + + + + + +

Assuring a farmer's wife that the Army will not send a bill for transporting 30 bales of hay from Methven.

+ + + + + + + +

Walking over deep snow, crunch, crunch, and - suddenly! ... down you go, up to your acorn in soft wet stuff.

+ + + + + + + +

Seeing some sheep getting over snow without sinking in it, thinking - 'Good, if they can walk on it, it'll take my weight!' - only to find that it doesn't!

+ + + + + + + +

At a farmhouse half a mile back from the Rakaiia-Mt Somers road, the 60 plus farmer's wife told how, with the aid of a walking stick and feeling along the top strand of the fence just under the snow, she took half a morning to get out to the road. She waited some time for a grader to push its way through and then got the driver to clear a way back to the farm.

+ + + + + + + +

Rising above the distress and misery on the plains is the sheer magnificence of Mt Hutt, Mt Winterslow, Mt Alford and Mt Somers, thick with snow and ice. The snowy green forests on some slopes, the crags, spurs, ravines and gullies reflect the brilliant orange/white

/of early

of early morning sun to the chill blues and purples of dusk. Black-green plantations seen across a flat expanse of snow with these mountains behind, create a film set ideal for "Doctor Zhivago" or some Alaskan gold rush cinema saga. Can those be Diggers or Bolsheviks crazed by gold or revolutionary zeal, lurking at the edge of the frost? No! Only wretched miserable sheep.

+ + + + +

On feeding out work, driving steadily across a flat expanse of snow which the farmer says is 'firm going all the way', only to slurp to a sticky stop as the RL, despite four wheel drive and chains settles up to the cab door in mud and snow. Then a three hour wait until a caterpillar tractor is brought up.

+ + + + +

George the cook, a tower of morale-boosting strength, who using the limited facilities of the Community Centre and two M37 cookers, always had a hot meal laid on around 1900hrs daily, was always up to have a hot breakfast on at 0630 hrs before we left at 0700. George got next to no help from us, who had to be out most of the day, and he probably worked longer hours than anyone.

+ + + + +

Driving across level fields of snow towards a distant fence and gate. Shouts and yells from the locals on the tray - "Stop! Stop! You're just about in a 3 foot ditch across here!" Not a sign of it in the flat snow.

+ + + + +

Dusk falls unexpectedly on an RL far from any road in the highlands between the Ashburton and Rangitata rivers. What in daylight had all the contours and features seen and gauged by the eye, now looks flat and deadly dark. Where is that sharp drop that was away to our left? What way are we heading? We could go down here, but what's down there? We haven't a hope of getting back up it its a dead end, and the slope might get worse further down. Which way is what way, and what way is where? Oh thank Christ! Here is a set of tracks picked up in the headlights! Probably our own, but all we can do is follow them and hope they'll take us out, and not back to where we've just been! Luckily they do.

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The sheer maldening, frustrating, stupidity of sheep.

+ + + + +

/Conclusions

## CONCLUSIONS

There are a great many, too many conclusions to be set down here. It is to be hoped that a full study will be made of Operation Snowline, particularly of the weaker aspects and features.

### Vehicles

When a large number of vehicles is sent out to perform arduous work over several days, something like a LAD should accompany them, not just two EME mechanics with a couple of tool kits and next to no spare parts.

### Communications

Although 3 Bde Sigs had good communications with HQ 3 Bde, attempted comms between Methven HQ and individual trucks using 77 sets were futile. What might be good for use between an Infantry Platoon and Company HQ isn't much use on a truck 15 or 30 miles away from its HQ. After the first day, nobody bothered taking the 77 sets out! A painful Defence - Civilian comparison was the Red Cross Rovers in the area which could talk to Auckland at any time, and the numerous sheep transporters sending and receiving loud and clear to their various Firms' HQs. Having finished one job, the RLs might trundle back 20 miles to Methven only to be sent back to another farm not far from their last job. Reliable radio sets would have saved much time and mileage and permitted more jobs to be done in the time we were there. This is why Transport firms equip all their freight vehicles with radio sets. What about the Defence Dept's Transport 'firm', RNZASC!

### Disaster Scales

Getting into deep financial and organisational water for a moment. - It could be worthwhile having substantial stocks of relief equipment and supplies in all Ordnance, RNZAF and Naval Stores Depots. That this should not be a financial burden solely on Defence is obvious. The point is that only the Armed Forces have the built in structure, organisation and capacity to immediately administer and distribute such aid and relief. Defence can also provide better security and reliable, fairly inexpensive storage. Stocks of perishable and semi-perishable items could be turned over and consumed on a life table basis and replenished accordingly. Ration Packs and Clothing are two such items, POL could be another. Is there any Defence POL reserve against emergency or fuel famine?

/The blizzard

The blizzard was "one out of the box" but it could happen again next year or in twenty years. Earthquakes and floods are much more frequent visitors to these islands.

Thawing Out.

It is good to record that everyone who took part, regardless of rank, corps or trade, worked to give the best service and assistance that our facilities could provide. Despite the tremendous milage run up in difficult and sometimes dangerous conditions, damage to vehicles was minimal (though wear and tear will be costly) and only one collar bone broken seems to be the sum total of casualties.

Everyone emerged at the end of the operation, physically tired, but of good cheer and morale.

3 COD PERSONNEL ENGAGED IN RELIEF OPERATION SNOWLINE

AUGUST 1973

1. Snowline Personnel (Acting Drivers)

a. FAIRLIE - First Team

Robbie TURNER } Ammo Area  
John MELROSE }  
John BARKER 6 Bath Pl  
Brian SMITH  
Bill McGRATH (Civilian staff)

b. METHVEN

Eddie ADAMS  
Terry HEMI  
Merv HUTLEY  
Mike NICHOLSON  
Gil STYLES 6 Bath Pl  
Nig TAURUA  
Keith THOMPSON (Relief)

c. FAIRLIE - Second Team

Eric AUKEET  
Clint CATTERMOLE  
Malcolm CATTERMOLE  
Les DILLARD  
Lloyd HABGOOD  
Clarrie HESLIP 3 OFF  
Jim MUNRO  
Arthur VERLANDER

2. NELSON Ammunition Run

WO1 R. J. SONTGEN \*\* Cpl CATTERMOLE C.W. (F)  
WO2 PULLAR I.G. \*\* Pte BOX E.K. (6 Bath Pl)\*\*  
Sgt SMITH B.C.(F) Pte STYLES G.S( " " )(M)

(F) - Withdrawn from Fairlie )  
(M) - Withdrawn from Methven ) for Ammo run.

/3. Base Personnel



3. Base Personnel at 3 COD

Capt J.F. HYDE  
WO1 J.M. HOLMES  
WO1 A.C. LEWIS  
WO1 H.E. LUSKIE  
Sgt B. BURGESS ( recalled from leave)  
Lcpl K.M. THOMPSON (ex Hospital)  
Pte G. J. MEYER  
Lcpl J. WERAHIKO }  
Pte G. FIDDES } NZWRAC Data Processors  
Pte F. THOMAS }

Plus 3 personnel \*\* above.

Also (except for week-end and after hours duty,)  
the Public Service and Wage Worker staff of  
3 COD.

4. Course/Leave

Capt G.M. CORKIN (OC) on Course RNZAOC School  
Pte BALLANTYNE D. J. On Leave  
Lcpl PORTER L. On Leave

5. Vehicles

27 x RL Bedford Trucks }  
3 x .75 Ton FFR Rovers } Ran up 67,000 miles.  
1 x .75 Ton Cargo Rover }

Damage to vehicles totalled \$61

20 additional RL Bedfords were prepared for issue  
but were not in fact required.

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/Editor's Note.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

The opinions expressed in this article are those of the contributor and not necessarily those of the Directorate of Ordnance Services. So, too, are the suggestions contained therein. The merits of the opinions and suggestions will, it is to be expected, be closely examined by the Controllers of the emergency operation.

Sep 73