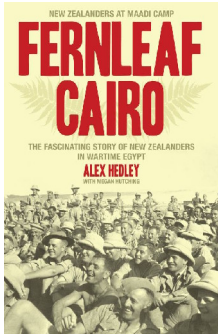


Fernleaf Cairo

The fascinating story of New Zealanders in wartime Egypt
Alex Hedley with Megan Hutching

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Maadi was a lovely sight. On the banks of the Nile just south of Cairo, its wide red roads shaded by purple jacaranda and brilliant flame trees, its big airy houses basking amidst lawns and scented gardens — this was elegance, this was style and comfort. This was the English community. We were headed three miles out into the desert.

During the Second World War, situated about 14 kilometres south of Cairo in the middle of the desert was the base camp for New Zealand's war effort in North Africa and the Mediterranean, and it was home to around 76,000 New Zealanders.

It was called Maadi Camp but affectionately renamed by the New Zealanders as Fernleaf in Cairo.

With its tarsealed roads, two cinemas, an open-air amphitheatre, canteens, chapels, sports fields, a meat-pie and ice-cream factory, bars, shops, a soon-to-be-famous rowing club, and, thanks to General Bernard Freyberg, swimming baths, at the time it was one of the largest urban centres built and lived in by New Zealanders anywhere in the world.

Very little has been recorded about this remarkable place, so 24-year-old Alex Hedley along with eminent military oral historian Megan Hutching felt it was time to record the historical story, memories and perspective of the New Zealanders who lived at Maadi Camp, before it was too late.

The result is *Fernleaf Cairo*. With unpublished images and first-hand accounts, *Fernleaf Cairo* offers a fascinating insight into the unlikely bond young New Zealanders forged with the people and city of Cairo, and their many highly colourful experiences on leave.

Alex Hedley was named after his grandfather who was based at Maadi Camp during the war at a similar age to what Alex is now.

I was inspired by Cairo, the mayhem, the heat and the vast cultural differences to New Zealand, thus I began thinking laterally about my grandfather's generation who lived here for the majority of the war years. I began to try to imagine parallels between my visits and theirs, knowing that they (including my grandfather) would have spent much of their youth wandering the streets of Cairo, thrust into all those awkward and alien situations I too was now thrown into.

Alex consulted many of his grandfather's letters home to Alex's grandmother for *Fernleaf Cairo* but began looking at other war veterans, those still with us, in order to recreate the first-hand image of wartime and the social dynamics behind the lines of the New Zealanders who were often unwillingly deposited into Maadi Camp.

Please Turn Over...

Needless to say, there were encounters between Egyptians and New Zealanders coloured with bewilderment, misjudgement and sheer shock.

Megan's interest in Maadi Camp was stimulated by the stories of Second World War veterans while recording interviews for the HarperCollins Oral History series, which she edited. Having travelled to Cairo, she now understands the vividness of these stories.

The humour of the New Zealanders is reflected in *Fernleaf Cairo* with stories about donkey derbies and other desert occupations, songs that were sung, and questions and answers written as retaliation to the officers for all the parades and drills they had to endure, such as:

Q. Why do we have a sergeant?

A. Investigations have been made, but no reason has been found up to the time of publication.

The majority of New Zealanders who had relatives serving in the Second World War can trace a direct connection to Egypt. Those who visit may know that horrific battles were won and lost there, but they might not understand that once, tens of thousands of Kiwis walked the streets of Cairo, bargained for gifts in its bazaars, heavily patronised its bars, indulged, lamented, celebrated, and wandered the escarpments overlooking it all, contemplating their great adventure.

Fernleaf Cairo is a tribute to those who lived in that culturally and geographically alien landscape for over five years when the world was at war.

Writer and editor Alex Hedley is the son of David Hedley, whose bookstore Hedley's in Masterston has just celebrated its centenary. Alex completed an honours degree in History and Media Studies at Victoria University of Wellington. More recently, Alex has pursued film-making ventures in the Middle East and North Africa, and continues to be involved with the history of the Second World War.

Megan Hutching is a freelance historian, living in Auckland. She has produced six books of oral histories of the Second World War, in the 'New Zealanders Remember' series commissioned by the Prime Minister at the time: *Last Line of Defence: New Zealanders Remember the War at Home*; *Against the Rising Sun: New Zealanders Remember the Pacific War*; *The Desert Road: New Zealanders Remember the North African Campaign*; *A Fair Sort of Battering: New Zealanders Remember the Italian Campaign*; *Inside Stories: New Zealand Prisoners of War Remember*; and 'A Unique Sort of Battle': *New Zealanders Remember Crete*.

Also releasing this April by Megan Hutching for the 65th anniversary of the Battle for Monte Cassino is the reformatted edition of *A Fair Sort of Battering: New Zealanders Remember the Italian Campaign*.

To schedule an interview with **Alex Hedley and/or Megan Hutching**
and/or more information, please call

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