12.6.1941

My dear Guthridge

Your copy of “Despatches” 1941 cam into my hands and on it is written “Please Pass On. Best wishes from the old Mob”. I have tried to face up to writing to you, and through you to so many of that old mob whom I know. The story I have to tell is that you are but one of the “Old Mob”. There is another valient “Old Mob” and a “New Mob” is in course of assembly.

I was unable to write for censorship reasons, until I knew that the casualty list had been cabled home and is now published.

I will tell you of the actions in Greece and the very little we know of Crete. If you will call at my office and see my secretary Miss Bagnell and tell her to give you material as for others on the distribution list you will then get something of the campaign in the Western Desert.

Walkers mob left for Greece in good form and full of fight. They had got something of the measure of the German Airman on their last desert job and had beaten him. Their tails were well up.

The nature of the campaign in Greece and the fast changing situations found brigade headquarters with the Vic Scottish securing a flank about the centre of Greece. Walker and the middle number Bn. Were to join me with a Westralian lot but were turned back to hold a line to cover the withdrawal. Although they had no land fighting they had a full issue of bombing. The commander of the force told me what a fine mob and commander Walker and his mob were.

I first saw them some days later. It was about midday. They had come in through the new line at Thermopylae after a bad plastering by the Hun airmen. During that day they got a lot more while dispersed in their bivouac area. We were ordered to take up certain dispositions for which walker carried out his recce that afternoon. At dark new orders forced an entirely different job and Bn. was on the move all night. The front to be occupied by the Bn was in a huge sump. As it were, and into it the men slid and climbed. At the end of two days the grand withdrawal commenced. The Bde holding 4 ½ miles of the toughest country imaginable had to withdraw and embus. I chose Walker for the rearguard and timed the sh\_\_ to have him embussing at 1.30 am. Just before the show started new orders forced the creation and despatch of a mixed force to cover a flank further south. Despite this the withdrawal, with a sharp little fight thrown in for luck, went like clockwork. Walkers Mob beat my timetable by five minutes, the chances were they would not make it on account of the ground and the almost impossibility of scaling up to the Rd. They did it.

Before pushing off to the beaches we smashed all wind screens to give the drivers better vision. The troop carrying three-ton trucks were filled with men but a margin of trucks allowed for vehicle casualties. We arrived not so far from Athens by dawn. The TPS. were very weary and the drivers particularly so. No rest had been possible for many days. I consider that the feat of Walkers Mob and the Wrigleys Mob (is the centre number) withdrawing as they did and travelling approx. 100 miles ranks as the greatest feat of this AIF and other observers say of the old AIF too.

We hid under olive trees by day which reminds me to suggest to you the planting of an olive tree as a memorial to these fellows. Walker and I often said during these days that we would grow an olive tree on our return as a shrine. That expressed the point of view of all of these fellows.

That night we set off again, passed the Corinth Canal and wound our way along the narrow winding road of the mountains, Wrigley was ordered at about 2am to detach most of his show to guard important points against parachutists.

Though not strictly a story of your mob but because of Wrigley’s association with past days you may be interested to know that his A & B Coys fought a great fight against para troops. A was on the North side and B on the South. A got mixed up in a very unequal fight against land troops when the para troops were dropped. Most of B got out. A were fighting on and around the bridge when it was blown. We have one lad back with us so we know a little of ‘A’.

We lay up all of Anzac Day chatting and trusting that the low flying recce planes had not and would not spot us. Walker and I (I remember so clearly) pictured the situation in Melbourne the great march and the proud hearts of the “Old Mob” as they gathered together. We wondered, as we talked how you all would have felt had you known our desperate situation that day.

At dusk we were off again, and the going was terrific. The mountains seemed to get worse and the road narrower yet these wonderful drivers of our bowled along at 2-30 miles an hour. A number of vehicles had broken down and 30-35 men were jammed in a truck. The rule was that if a vehicle took longer than 5 minutes to get going then over the side with it. Not only were the troops weary beyond words but the drivers had reached the stage of utter exhaustion. They had been working day and night for at least two weeks and had faced all in the way of unrestricted bombing and machine gunning and what cuts that demanded. The problem of keeping the miles of column flowing was at least tough. It was overcome by making each truck a sub unit under command of an officer and when they ran out the balance under an NCO. We travelled using parking lights as we reckoned it would be difficult for the Hun to fly about these mountains by night. When a halt took place the driver put out the lights. In a great number of instances the lad would lean forward and switch off and then fall over his wheel asleep. To get a move on it was the duty of the truck commander to dismount and move to the truck ahead. When movement was heard it was his job to see that the driver was awake; so from rear to front, truck to truck, the drivers were kept awake.

We fetched up at Kalamai just after daylight, Walker and Wrigley were ordered to take cover before going through the town. The embarkation staff had been collected hurriedly and had not chance to plan. It was not known if the navy would come in that night, if so, whether we should embark from the jetty or the open beach. During the day, as on all previous days, enemy recce planes swept over us but never once saw us, so good was the discipline of the lads and control by officers and NCOs. We dribbled the troops forward to the beaches and dumped rations SAA and petrol nearby during the afternoon. Serials and march tables were worked out and by nightfall all were faced up to embark any way they wanted. The drivers remained with their vehicles to destroy them when ordered to do so. At about 11pm a belated order got the movement going to the pier. The destroyers were in. Some bloody fool staff officer got a bit excited (not Australian) and ordered any unit he met to proceed to the pier. Bang when the carefully prepared plans and out went our staff officers and leaders to keep the show together and the stream flowing. Walkers Mob fetched up on the Costa Rica without drivers. Vic Scots had little but any chance so my weary staff and I went for them, they got aboard to a man. Bde Headquarters Wrigley’s small lot and an arty. regt. were sitting pretty but alas the fortune of war intervened and those who were first were last and those who appeared would be last were first. The gangway was lifted and a good number of my Headquarters and some arty. didn't get aboard. The order to destroy the vehicles arrived just before the order to move. The carefully laid plans were beaten by darkness, difficulties of olive groves, winding streets and time and space. Our drivers missed out. Captain Grey of my staff, the only one familiar with rendezvous, volunteered to collect them and embark next night as was planned. My staff and I got aboard the last boat and as we left the pier it was reported that Bde Headquarters missed out. Captain Tyrrell volunteered to say as did Grey. No undue alarm was felt as we knew the navy were returning again net night and the German couldn’t make it by then. Wrigley’s men saw to that delay at the cost of a company and a half.

Dawn found us still landlocked in the Gulf and overcame the planes up to about 50 strong. The lads used Bren guns, anti-tank rifles and rifles. The price for a Bren was a fiver – reminder of prices for a possy to meet the big Turkish counterattack at Anzac. Here is the test of discipline. Every man took his rifle and complete ammunition abroad. Every Bren gun, anti-tank rifle and full complement of boxes of SAA were dragged aboard by men almost too weary to walk. The last attack was launched in the early afternoon. Already our lads had brought down at least 4 certain by their own fire. During the last attack and at the very end a plane came out of the sun with engines cut off and dropped a bomb near the stern of the Costa Rico. Plates were sprung and she began to list and settle at the stern. We watched and saw Walker’s mob and others fall in on deck. Boats were lowered and destroyers came alongside. Walker took post alongside the Captain on the bridge. Members of the crew threw rafts overboard and called “Every man for himself”. About a dozen accepted the invitation but none of Walker’s mob. Walker remained with the Captain until the last had left and then personally went below and searched the decks for any strays. The deck was awash as they stepped on the decks and it sank within a few minutes of them leaving. The behaviour of the troops was magnificent. They fell in and never moved except when ordered to march. The first direct blow from that unhappy sinking was that the destroyers were full of men full steam for Crete and couldn’t return to Kalamai that night. They did so next night but our fellows were fighting the German whom they had defeated but some confusion caused the vessels to put to sea. About 14 drivers of Walker’s show refused to capitulate and under Young, the transport officer, made it off. Young collapsed and couldn’t go further but the others escaped in native boats in a most incredible way.

Walker’s whole show fetched up in Crete but had lost most of their weapons with the ship. They had some pleasant days bivouacked under olive trees and enjoyed fish caught by Mills bombs.

They were caught up in the Blitz but held their ground and prevented the capture of areas they were responsible for. They littered the ground with dead paratroops. Things became worse and heavy attacks were launched by the enemy. There were never less than 200. They had full and complete mastery of the air. Movement by day was impossible except when the opposing forces were close joined. At night the fellows raided and cut up enemy elements.

When sufficient forces were concentrated and to give some idea of troop landings when once an airdrome was captured the timings for one day showed an average landing of 1 plane per 30 seconds and that went on for hours.

The big attack came with Walker’s mob in the centre and a unit on either side. The right unit gave way under pressure. Walker moved A company to fill the gap. The enemy were stopped there. The people on the left were forced back and by brilliant distribution of two other Coys. the old mob stopped the advance here also. Young Captain Nelson foremost Coy. advised that he had a bayonet charge teed up. Walker went forward and ordered Nelson’s Coy. to attack in conjunction with Major Miller’s Coy. Walker went up to lad and said “Give me your rifle, I want to be in it with the boys”. The lad simply said “Excuse me sir but I want to be in it too and it’s my rifle”. Marshall and the Adj. then came forward and persuaded Walker to refrain from going forward as his presence was still most valuable. Walker wisely consented to return to his Headquarters. Miller led his Coy. with splendid dash and the boys were on his heels cheering like hell. Nelson led his men and was bowled over with a bullet through his shoulder. The next senior took charge and was wounded, the next took command and was soon a casualty and the surviving officer finished the job. They chased the Germans for a mile and in front of one Coy. over 150 dead Germans lay who were killed in the initial fight for fire supremacy.

The boys tell me the only difference between the Dago and the Hun is that both surrender when attacked, the German runs better.

They then joined in the general withdrawal and, so far as I can ascertain, marched some 60 odd miles and found six to eight engagements. The goat tracks over the mountains were so rough that the men’s feet were soon raw. Sgt. Thomas, the Int. Sgt. like others carried men. At one stage he heard at 3am. that a party were still out and exhausted. He returned and brought them in.

During this time many unarmed service TPS. such as rear workshops etc. had made for the beach. Included in this horde were Greeks, Cypriats, Palestinians etc. Though there rations on the beach carrying parties could not be got from this now panic-stricken crowd. Some of Wrigley’s men heard of the plight of Walker’s mob and at once volunteered to take to them water and rations. Walker’s lot were on 1 tin of bacon to 19 men and ½ gallon water to 14 men plus two biscuits per man.

The greatest glory of all was that Walker’s men never moved except in threes or in battle formation. Not only did every unit on Crete hear of this but it spread to Egypt. They were a proud regiment and their CO was always an inspiration.

The last night brought tragedy. Orders came that they were not amongst those for embarkation that night. At about 9.30pm this order was reversed as none could be taken off. Walker issued his order clearly and to the point. They had about 6 miles to go and the last mile was down slopes and finally a track down a cliff. Walker ordered single file and each man to hang on to the belt of the man in front. Walker led and reached the beach. He stepped aside to turn the Coys. into line or groups of lines ready to facilitate embarkation on pontoons coming forward. His Bn. Headquarters was in front and close to the water. Before anyone realised what took place there was a stampede of the “Cave Dwellers” – who, uncontrolled, swept Bn. Headquarters personnel off their feet as the barges were rushed and pushed off. The last seen of Walker’s mob was them standing in formation without any movement in the ranks. Thus they were lost. Walker had enough ammunition for one day and he would probably fight. It is known that he had planned an attempt to escape through the country and hoped to get native boats. There is no word or sign of either alternative coming off. All I know is they never failed and would not fail. Walker served under me as a ‘Lieut’, a number of his officers started as privates when I had the old 24th at Surry Hills. Others served me when I had the 10th Bde and came from Gippsland, among whom is my cousin. You won’t mind me admitting that I had to leave this letter a few times to compose my emotion. They were and are very dear, to me.

You all can be proud of them. Just a reminder of some achievements at Bardia when the tanks did not turn up nor was the Cav. on the flank the Vic Scots moved forward at the appointed time. Walker came in when things were bad and pushed the show on. Sol Green lost his life but all through the night they gained ground. With bomb and bayonet and saved the day. Walker was brilliant and his command backed him up by fighting of equal brilliance.

At Tobruk he worked his show like an automatic machine. They advanced in the face of heavy machine gun fire and cleaned up the enemy on the flat ground and worried them out of the wadis. At Derna they marched distances over terrible country that will remain a record. They deployed, captured a fort, sent carriers ahead and captured an important town, and marched over 20 miles that day. Footsore and weary men refused a lift when offered. The mob always stuck together and were proud of their marching ability. “They did a job decently for their own self respect.”

Will you tell “Old Mob No. 1” the story. You might get in touch with General Drake-Brockman. Walker and most of his officers served under him and a good number of the troops came from his command. He may be interested. I simply can’t write this story twice.

Remember me to Geo. Holland and many other of my friends in your association. Each and all of you can say “The boys did us well”.

Yours sincerely

Stan G Savige