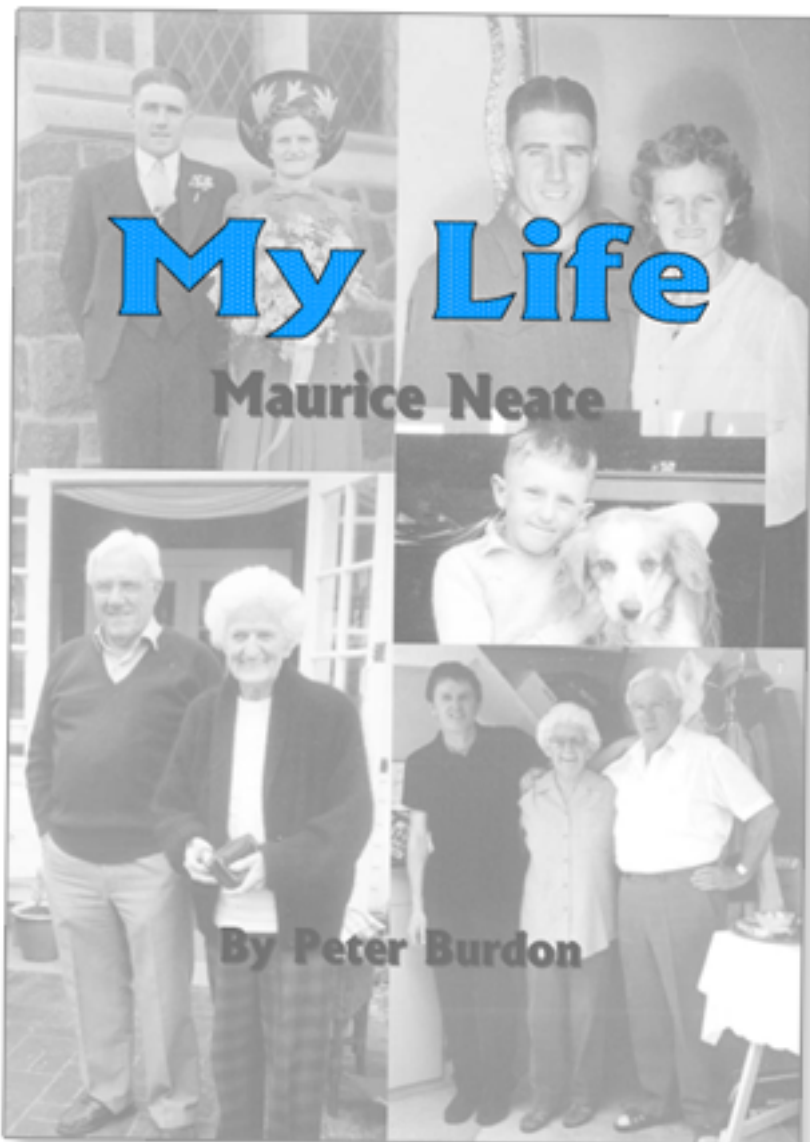


Extract from  
**'My Life - Maurice Neate'**

By Peter Burdon



## **War service begins**

Maurice arrived at Trentham in early October where he undertook his military training for what would be an eventful few years in the Pacific.

When the men were on final leave before they were due to leave New Zealand shores, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour on December 7, 1941.

*"We had assumed we would be sent to the Middle-East, but after Pearl Harbour, everything changed."*

Maurice left New Zealand on new-year's-eve 1941. He was part of the mechanic section of the Divisional Ordinance

Workshops. It was not until they were on-board the ship that they were told their destination was Fiji.

He was aboard the Wahine, an inter-island passenger ferry that was converted into a troop ship. It sailed in convoy with another former ferry, the Rangatira, and the Mongawai, a New Zealand frigate.

*"When we got to Suva we worked in the Ordinance Workshops repairing trucks and other vehicles from throughout the Pacific."*

The men slept in cockroach infested wooden huts in stinking hot and humid conditions.

*"It was so hot that when we got up from the wooden stools after dinner, the seat would be wet and the backs of our shirts would be saturated with sweat."*

The men had a two hour siesta in the middle of the day to recover from the heat, while most men had several showers a day.

It was during one of these showers that Maurice suffered a serious injury. The showers had concrete floors and there was

a small gap between the floor and the corrugated iron walls.

Maurice slipped on some soap and his foot slammed into the sharp under-edge of the corrugated iron. This put him on light duties for about a month as he could not walk on the affected foot. He would get the wound dressed every day and used a walking stick to get about.

It was while on light duties, known as compo, that Maurice experienced the most frightening episode of his war service.

One night at 1 a.m. a lieutenant stormed into the hut screaming at the men to get up immediately. Initially no-one took much notice of him, but the men were soon given rifles and bayonets and taken by truck to a nearby bay.

*"News had come through that a Japanese convoy was on the way down to Fiji and we were given the job of repelling them."*

At that stage of the war, there were very few men in Fiji. It was just an outpost and the Americans had not even arrived.

But thankfully, it was the Americans who saved the day. To the relief of Maurice and the other men, the Americans had anticipated the Japanese convoy and intercepted it at the famous Battle of the Coral Sea.

*"I thought that was the end of the road because there were very few of us and we had no ammunition, but luckily nothing happened thanks to the Americans."*

Soon after that incident, Maurice's foot healed and he was promoted from Private to Corporal.

One of his first jobs with the new title was to take some men down to the wharf to help the Americans land and unload their ships.

*"They were all landing with their fancy uniforms, modern vehicles and I specifically remember a crane on one of the ships slipping and a jeep falling straight into the harbour. It's probably still there."*

When the Americans arrived, the New Zealanders were sent home in July 1942. Once on-board the President Coolidge for the journey home, Maurice was told he had become the uncle of two nieces. Clem had become the father of Jackie and Frank's wife had given birth to Margaret.

He landed at Papakura after three days sailing before a week's leave was granted. Maurice returned to Christchurch to see Rene and the rest of the family before it was back to Trentham.

*Maurice and Rene  
during the war.*



At this stage the New Zealand Third Division was being formed to go back into the Pacific to fight the Japanese. Maurice was appointed the official driver of Major Signal, while he also undertook the usual military training of marching, parade-ground work and how to use rifles.

He left New Zealand shores with the Third Division again on New Year's Eve 1942, exactly one year since he left for Fiji.

*"Once again we didn't know where we were going, but we soon found out that we were heading for New Caledonia."*