

Retreat to Dunkirk

to commemorate
Capt. Arthur Lawn (1904-42)

THE NIGHT PRESS
Wellington

Retreat to Dunkirk

An officer's Account
by Capt. Arthur Lawn

(10th Battalion Durham Light Infantry)

Edited, and with a poem by Mark Pirie

**THE NIGHT PRESS
WELLINGTON**

The Night Press

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Poem and arrangement copyright Mark Pirie 2013

Editor's Note

The following letter written after the Dunkirk evacuation in 1940 is by my Great Uncle Arthur Lawn.

I found it in *The Evening Post* during a recent family history search on Papers Past, the National Library of New Zealand's digital newspaper collection.

I decided to collect the letter for ANZAC Day 2013 along with my poem 'The Snow Goose' c1994, written after reading Paul Gallico's book.

My Great Aunt Lucy Harris (1902-1993) of Okaiawa (Arthur's older sister) gave Gallico's snow goose story of Dunkirk to me as a child.

Inside my copy, there is a photo of Arthur Lawn that Lucy stapled in, which I've also reproduced here.

Mark Pirie
April 25, 2013

Arthur Lawn's Letter

FLANDERS EPIC AN OFFICER'S ACCOUNT RETREAT TO DUNKIRK

A vivid account of the retreat of the British Expeditionary Force to Dunkirk is given in a letter sent to his relatives by Captain Arthur Lawn, a member of a well-known West Coast family and a former New Zealand territorial officer, who is now serving with the British Army, states the "Press." The letter covers the period from April 24 till his arrival in England on June 1.

"Time has been a thing we know by hours," writes Captain Lawn. "Days were the same as dates, a nebulous quantity, and it was not until we reached England that I knew it was Saturday, June 1. The time was strenuous and there were periods when our food consisted only of hard biscuits. Our clothes and boots were never off, and so our feet suffered severely until it was painful even to stand up. But through it all the men were tough and cheerful, though the continual retreat without much contact with the enemy was hard on the morale of the troops.

"DEVASTATING FACTOR."

"The continual bombing and machine-gunning from the air were a devastating factor, though we soon became so used to it that we took to the ditches and hoped for the best. The refugees clung to the areas where British troops were and severely hampered any war movements. We felt the strain of their presence, but their weariness and fear were pitiable.

"We had to be on guard at every turn against 'fifth column' activities.

“We landed at Le Havre on Anzac Day and moved for concentration to an aerodrome near St. Pol. After a week here we were sent for guard duty to Authie landing ground to combat landings at night from troop aeroplanes and parachutists over a square mile of territory.

“After two days a move for the same duty was made to Crecy, where we only remained 48 hours. We were then sent to Lagnicourt Marcel to hold a defensive line in reserve near the Canal du Nord. Here we saw the bombing of the Bapaume road, which was packed with civilians. The sights we saw were pitiful.

“Two days later we were on the heights above Croiselles near Arras, in a line near a British 1914-18 war cemetery. We held this line only one day, when we were fired on repeatedly, and withdrew at night. I was sent by transport to Lattare, but the remainder of the brigade had a nightmare march and were harassed first at Mercatel but they escaped to again contact the enemy at Baumetz.

“THE MEN WERE DONE.”

“By this time the men were done. From May 14 to May 19 we had not had our clothes or boots off, and had little rest—if it could be called rest.

“Arriving at Lattare at 6 a.m., some six hours later, a retreat was made over the St. Pol road to Hermacourt, and thence by a march of some 18 hours to Bagligneuil to make road blocks, and to pass what was for me the most terrifying day of the march. We were fagged out and only a mile away were German tanks. Waves of German aeroplanes filled the air and over Arras I counted 150 at once. The noise was terrific. That night we escaped by Forest Road to Condecourt, and hoped for a rest. But we had to move by transport to Seclin. We were there for a

day, and again made a terrific march to the woods, where we rested all day, seeing some magnificent anti-aircraft shooting by French seventy-fives who once shot down five out of nine German aeroplanes.

“At 6 a.m. we moved off, and two further days’ marching brought us to Meterenand, where we sheltered, and had meagre food. From there we went to Stavele, where all our transport had to be destroyed.

“We later held a line on the Dunkirk Canal until 2 a.m. on May 31, when orders came to make for the beach. Four hours of hard marching brought us to the dunes, to see the ships lying off. Our division was now together and there were some 60,000 troops on the sands, we were divided into groups of 50 and faced a terrific march of eight miles to Dunkirk, being shelled all the way. It was a march I shall never forget. We pulled out at midday on May 31 with six feet of water to spare for the boat. Everyone fell asleep at once, and the reaction set in. Landing at Folkestone at 3 p.m. we entrained for Somewhere in England, and were cheered by all, and fed all along the route. We encamped at midnight and there was a bath for all. Now we are resting and awaiting orders.

“The retreat was a great blow, but it has roused people to the gravity of the situation, and England is striving with every sinew to catch up. In morale our men are superior to the Germans, and though it looks as if the struggle will be a long and grim one, we are all anxious to get into it and finish the job.”

(From *The Evening Post*, Volume, CXXX, Issue 13, 15 July 1940, Page 5)

THE SNOW GOOSE

For Paul Gallico

Your *Snow Goose*
is a memory
like Dunkirk's noose.

I see bravery written
on the faces of the English
sailors and tired soldiers.

Those who didn't escape
became like fish,
seabed sculptors.

Mark Pirie

About Arthur Lawn

Capt. Arthur William Lamason “Paddy” Lawn (10th Battalion Durham Light Infantry) was born in Stratford, Taranaki, in 1904. He was the third son of Charles Henry Lawn and Barbara Mary Lawn, members of the well-known Lawn family of Reefton, c1873-1900.

He was educated at schools in New Plymouth and Wanganui and at Stratford District High School. He received a junior national scholarship in 1918, passed Civil Service examinations in 1920 and matriculated to university. Arthur attended Victoria University College in Wellington briefly in 1923 then left. At Victoria, he acted in the Victoria College Extravaganza, “LUV”.

Earlier, he had passed teacher’s examinations in 1922 and became a primary school teacher.

He taught in New Plymouth, Wanganui and Hawera, before the Second World War. At Hawera, he was well-known as a swimming coach.

A relative Tom Lawn contributes his story on arrival in England from New Zealand: “He went to London in 1937 to help with unemployed youth auspices through the YMCA.

“When war started he went to NZ House to join up and was told to join the local Durham Light Infantry. Having been a Territorial in New Zealand, he was made a Captain right away and then found himself right through France and Dunkirk.”

He survived the Dunkirk evacuation in France, and his letter home appeared in New Zealand papers.

After Dunkirk, Tom Lawn contributes the rest of his story: “The Battalion reformed at Ilford and was sent to Iceland as part of the Garrison.

“Later Paddy was transferring to the NZEF [New Zealand Expeditionary Force] from the BEF [British Expeditionary Force] when the ship was torpedoed by U boat. He was last seen holding up another soldier in shark-infested waters near Iceland.”

His official death record states “1945 N/R”. His cenotaph record states “11 July 1942”.



Cenotaph record

Full Name Arthur William Lamason Lawn

Rank Last Held Captain

Forename(s) Arthur William Lamason

Surname Lawn

War World War II, 1939-1945

Serial No. 865

Gender Male

Occupation before Enlistment School teacher

Next of Kin Mrs B.M. Lawn (mother), Box 46, Stratford, Taranaki, New Zealand

Enlistment Address Opunake Road, Stratford, Taranaki, New Zealand

Body on Embarkation Second New Zealand

Expeditionary Force (2NZEF)

Embarkation Unit New Zealand Infantry Brigade

Nominal Roll Number WW2 9

Page on Nominal Roll 227

Last Unit Served New Zealand Infantry Brigade

Place of Death At sea

Date of Death 11 July 1942

Age at Death 38

Year of Death 1942

Memorial Name Wellington Provincial Memorial, Karori Cemetery, Wellington, New Zealand

Biographical Notes Arthur Lawn was the son of Charles Henry and Barbara Mary Lawn (nee Lamason), of Stratford, Taranaki, New Zealand

Sources Used

1. Commonwealth War Graves Commission. URL:
<http://www.cwgc.org>
2. Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force Nominal Roll No. 9 (Embarkations from 1st July, 1942 to 31st December, 1942)