

## **Plimmer Presentation: Dr John Plimmer and The Road to Crete**

Good evening, everyone.

I welcome especially the members of the Plimmer and Meek families here this evening. The story of John Plimmer and how he met his death in Crete has been legend in our family. I was encouraged to explore his life last year when I was given this portrait of him which had been kept by one of his cousins and our aunt, Gladys Pledger, nee Meek.

So now I will take you on a journey through John's life in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, helped by a lot of material supplied to me by several members of the Plimmer family, especially Johnny, John's grandson.

### **PHOTO**

Researching his life story was fascinating, giving me a glimpse into a lifestyle long gone and especially the many important changes which occurred, both socially and medically, in his time.

John was related to my husband's family, through his mother Ethel Annie Meek, youngest daughter of William Henry an accountant. Her younger brother Harold – also an accountant, was my husband's grandfather.

There were twelve siblings in that family. Harold had three children, a daughter Gladys and two sons Eric (my father-in-law) and Noel. Members of all three branches are here tonight.

In February 1900, Ethel was 22 years old when she married William Roden Plimmer, one of four siblings and known as Roden. He was a grandson of the original John Plimmer and also an accountant.

John was born on 28<sup>th</sup> February 1901. The family lived on Crescent Road Khandallah. A younger brother William Alfred was born in 1906.

Certain names keep reappearing in the Plimmer family. Roden was the maiden name of the original John's mother Mary and is used as the family middle name to this day. The name John is given to all the first-born sons in the Plimmer Clan.

The Leonard in Dr John's name comes from the Meek side.

Much of what I am going to recount about John's early life and medical practice comes from gleaning reports in the various newspapers of that

time. They are indeed a wonderful source of information, the veritable social media of the day!

John attended Waitaki Boys High School in Oamaru. Their records show that he made good use of his time there, playing the clarinet in both the band and orchestra. He won several essay prizes from the Navy League and was involved in the Christian Union, debating, gymnastics and won a bronze lifesaving medal. He had also joined the school Cadet corps and was platoon sergeant when he finished school. He passed examinations in November 1916 – his final year- to be awarded a Senior National Scholarship. (Reported in the New Zealand Times 24/1/1917)

He then attended Otago University, managing to avoid the family tradition of accountancy and instead graduated in medicine July 1923 MB ChB.

However, two lifechanging events had happened in the year before, 1922.

The first was that John's father William died suddenly on 10<sup>th</sup> April aged 49 years, of a gastric haemorrhage, leaving Ethel a widow at the age of 44. Full details of this and the subsequent internment were reported in the Evening Post. I found it interesting that while both sons were named, and that John was pursuing medical studies at Otago University, Ethel, his widow, was not named.

The second event was John's marriage to Leah Saywell Burt- the second daughter of Mr and Mrs William Burt- at her home in Dunedin on 30 September. The report in the Evening Star on 7 October describes it as a "very quiet wedding". "The bride wore a beautiful frock of lemon crepe de chine with overdress of flannel lace and a silver-grey hat relieved with lemon". No mention of John's attire! It also reported that only very close relations were present. Leah was 22 years old.

Following John's graduation, the Otago Witness reported on 24 July 1923 that "Dr and Mrs Plimmer left by the express on Saturday en route for London where Dr Plimmer intends to continue his studies."

According to the Dominion later in November, in England, he and Leah were staying with an aunt of Leah's and that "Dr Plimmer intends to continue his studies at the Middlesex Hospital. He will be taking a few lectures this year but the course for the Fellowship commences in January."

John obtained his surgical qualification FRCS Edinburgh in 1926. This too was announced in the Dominion on 15 September 1926, with the added information that John “now holds an important hospital appointment at South Kensington London”.

The return of John and his family on 17 January 1928 was announced in the Dominion on 18 January.

SLIDE

“Dr John Plimmer, son of Mrs R Plimmer of Khandallah who has been attached to the staff of St Mary Abbott’s Hospital Kensington London, returned to New Zealand by the Marama yesterday for the purpose of practising in this country. Mrs Plimmer was a Miss Burt of Dunedin”.

Leah and their son, John William Roden born in London on 24 June 1927 travelled with him as First Class passengers on the intercolonial steamer Marama from Sydney. You will be relieved to know that the ship experienced easterly winds and moderate seas during the voyage across the Tasman!

The family home was established at 192 Willis Street and as was the custom in those days, John also had his surgery rooms there. He placed an advertisement in the Dominion as follows:

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“Dr John Plimmer wishes to announce that he has commenced the Practice of his Profession at No 192 Willis Street. Hours 9-11am 2-3pm and 7-8pm.” This ran until May that year.

Note that that it did not mention the days of the week he was available. We can only hope that he had Sundays off! The rules for doctors to advertise were strictly governed by the Ethics of the New Zealand Branch of the British Medical Association, the BMA, as the NZMA was then known. He was allowed to state only that he had commenced practice and to provide details of the site and hours.

As was common practice, John joined the BMA. Membership was voluntary but most doctors joined, as it provided a forum to meet with other medical colleagues and get to know what was going on in the medical world. It also provided a powerful political voice for the profession.

The New Zealand Gazette 1929 was the first to show the list of Medical Practitioners in the country. John's registration that year is dated 11 September 1923 with an address c/o Meek and Von Haast PO Box 669 Wellington.

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Later on, his name and qualifications appeared in the British Medical Register Colonial List 1931 with his registration there dated 1924 and an address in London.

In the register for the following year, his address was listed as 192 Willis St.

SLIDE of his letter head with his full qualifications.

He also acquired a new Oldsmobile Touring Sedan car and -at some stage - a dog.

SLIDE this is a photograph of three generations of John Plimmers taken in 1928. John, his grandfather John Alfred and his son John William Roden.

What was the medical world like in Wellington in those days?

His home and rooms in Upper Willis Street were in a very salubrious area. It was the Harley St of Wellington. 30 medical practitioners were listed, in 1929, as living or practising from rooms between 154 and 337 Willis St. Several had the same address, which were obviously professional rooms rather than homes. His was among some familiar names, three women, Agnes Bennett, Elizabeth Gunn and Sylvia Chapman, and men with names like Corkhill, Giesen, Luke, Lynch, Stout and Mc Evedy ( Dr Patrick who donated the McEvedy Shield that is still competed for today by four Wellington Colleges).

SLIDE of 192 Willis St now. I could not find a photograph of his actual home. It was situated opposite St Peter's Anglican Church, near the corner of Willis and Ghuznee Streets.

There was no state funded medicine in those days, so who were his patients? He had private patients of course, but they may also have come from the many Lodges, Friendly Societies and Medical Clubs which were in existence to provide medical services and medications to their members, contracting a doctor to fulfil this task. The BMA stipulated the terms under which doctors could be employed by these entities and the main edict was that the doctor should receive a minimum of 1 pound per member. In

today's money that would be about \$180. For this sum, the contracted doctor was obliged to attend members, and their families, whenever they wanted and to provide medicines at no extra charge. These doctors were appointed annually. While this system did provide doctors with a basic income, -especially in these years of the Great Depression- it also caused ill-feeling amongst the profession, not only for the remuneration received, considered by the doctors to be inadequate, but also because many people who were financially well off were able to enrol in these societies. There was unfortunately known corruption in the appointment of doctors and the services provided were often described as shabby.

In 1930 Wellington doctors- through the BMA- were actively negotiating with the Friendly Societies to increase the rate they were paid for their services. Over the years there were many battles fought between it and them, really until the advent of the Social Security Act of 1938 , when the need for these societies ended,

One of these societies The United Friendly Society Dispensary (UFS) continued in existence in Wellington until 2023.

What hospitals were in existence then?

According to Wikipedia, there were six private hospitals, some only recently constructed.

Three were situated not far from John's surgery, Bowen Hospital at 1 Bowen St- where the Reserve Bank building now stands, the Willis St Maternity Hospital set up by Dr Louis Levy in 1920 at 278 Willis St.

SLIDE ( John's house may have been in a similar style)

and the Central Park Hospital on Ohiro Rd Brooklyn.

Then there was St Helen's Maternity Hospital opened in 1905, run and staffed by midwives with no resident doctors. It catered for married women whose husbands earned less than 4 pounds per week .

The Karitane Hospital in Melrose had opened in 1927 and the Lewisham Hospital, subsequently renamed Calvary, then Wakefield, hopened in 1929 in Newtown, staffed by the nursing sisters of The Little Company of Mary.

Most prominent though was the Wellington Public Hospital in Newtown - opened in 1881- which was run by a Hospital Board and funded by local

rates and the Government. Would it surprise you to know that the BMA had frequent disputes with this entity?!

The Hospitals Act of 1908 provided the Hospital Boards with the implied duty of providing hospital services for the whole community, irrespective of their ability to pay. In the 1920s the hospital was expanding, which included adding Specialist Outpatient services and in doing so it employed doctors. Those on a full-time basis, were not seen as a problem, but those employed part-time, with the ability to practise privately, certainly were, because it brought them into competition with the local practitioners.

Then there were the Honorary appointments, such as John's. He was appointed Honorary Surgeon to the Children's Hospital, a post he held from 1930-1936. These doctors provided their services free of charge, but it was expected that their patients were the poor and indigent, not those who could pay. However, the hospitals declined to differentiate their patients on a financial basis, hence the arguments between them and the BMA. Honorary positions were abolished with the passing of the Social Services Act in 1939.

It was after WW2 and John's time that the profession became divided into specialists, who worked in the hospital and privately, and general practitioners, who worked privately and were usually not on the staff of public hospitals.

I was unable to find out if John was associated with any of the Lodges or if he performed operations in any of the private hospitals I have mentioned. However, he did do maternity work, including home deliveries, as grateful parents acknowledged in an announcement in the Evening Post dated 23/12/1930 "Vile: on 19<sup>th</sup> December 1930, a bonny daughter to Mr and Mrs Vile at 7 Guilford Terrace. Thanks to Dr J Plimmer and Nurse Perce." I think it highly likely that he would have used the facilities of the Willis Street Obstetric Hospital not far from his home.

Politically, throughout the 1930s proposals for a National Health Scheme had been widely discussed. I mentioned earlier that John had joined the BMA. He was much sought after for executive posts and was on the Executive of the Wellington Branch and present when the National Health Insurance Committee, set up by the BMA and chaired by the famous Dr Jamieson, first met on 12 June 1935.

Its purpose was to investigate how the proposed scheme would affect the profession. It was expected that Michael Joseph Savage's Labour government would be elected in November that year- the first time ever for Labour- and that they wished to introduce a universal health scheme with no financial restrictions, available to everyone as of right. Many in the medical profession, including John, feared that it would put an end to private medical practice.

No doubt because of their experience of the Lodges and Friendly Societies, the BMA objected and pressed for a fee- for -service scheme, providing the doctor with the freedom to set his/her own fee to the patient and for the scheme to be limited to those on lower incomes.

When the Social Security Act was passed in 1938 and came into effect on 1 April 1939 as a universal general practitioner service, the BMA had won some concessions with regard to the ability to charge an appropriate fee. However, as part of this Act, maternity services did become fully funded for those doctors who signed up to this scheme. They received 5 guineas , roughly \$ 450 in today's money, to cover the antenatal, delivery and post-natal services for a woman. This sum even then, was considered inadequate, as the current fee is still so regarded today!

To give you some context for this, there is a story that is legend in one branch of the Plimmer family, that of Dr John doing a tonsillectomy in April 1936 , in Wellington on one of his cousin Geoff's children – Arthur John from Auckland- and charging his cousin 7 guineas, which included the anaesthetic fee!

By the way,the Dental Association lobbied to have dentistry excluded from the Universal Health Scheme and so it remains today.

Happily for John, life in Wellington was not all work. Several of the comings and goings of the family were noted in the local papers, including events attended and holidays that were taken. Perhaps this was a way of letting his patients know that he would not be available to them during these times.

The birth of his daughter June on 30 June 1928 was announced in the Dominion and then their son Ian on 5/10/1933.

In 1933 they advertised the loss of a wire-haired terrier puppy and offered a reward for its return.

The couple attended dances at places now long gone, such as the Adelphi Cabaret and the Mayfair Cabaret, both of which were in Cuba St, The Town Hall and the Marsden Assembly. At several of these Mrs Plimmer's outfits were described: for example, Leah wore black embroidered tulle at the Wellington Free Ambulance event in June 1933.

In June 1934 they attended an event for the United Services Club held at Kirkcaldie and Stains Reception Rooms.

In July the same year, the first Annual Ball of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Field Ambulance NZ Medical Corps was held at the Pharmacy Hall – on Cambridge Terrace, the old Urgent Pharmacy building- and on this occasion John's title had changed from Dr to that of Captain.

SLIDE

In May 1935 they were guests at Government House for the Ball held in honour of the Jubilee of King George 5<sup>th</sup> and Queen Mary. Mrs Plimmer wore a dress of black lace with crystal trimmings. Here as well, John's title was Captain. Johnny sent me this photograph. While I do not think that it matches the newspaper report of a ball, it is important in that the elderly woman shown just behind Leah is Ethel Annie Plimmer. I am told, by the way, that Ethel made superb cheese scones!

SLIDE

For the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Ball of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Field Ambulance, the Plimmers held a Sherry party for guests at their home beforehand, as this report shows. Their house was obviously big enough to cater for some 32 guests! Could any of us put up with such scrutiny of our parties today?!

SLIDE

This is a photograph of John, taken in 1937 at Spencer Digby Studios and now in the Collections at Te Papa, (gifted by Ronald Woolf.)

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This is Leah his wife.

Dr John's work in the community continued as usual and it was reported that he attended a car accident on the corner of Willis and Ghuznee Streets on the evening of 27<sup>th</sup> June 1937, where a woman received head injuries necessitating her removal to hospital.

By the time of the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Ball of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Field Ambulance, held at St Francis' Hall – up on Hill St where the British High Commission building now stands- on 14 May 1938, John had been promoted to Major.

#### SLIDE

John's other great interest was in horse racing. According to his obituary in the NZ Medical Journal, he was a well-known member of the Wellington Racing Club, to which he had been an honorary surgeon for some years. Here is a photo of John and Leah at the races at Trentham on Wellington Anniversary Day 23 January 1939.

How did Dr John make the transition from practising in the community to becoming a war surgeon? Here, I am indebted to the NZDF Archives and Medals personnel for providing me with John's Army records.

The transition was gradual. At school he had been in the Cadet corps. While he was a student at Otago University he attended the Officers Training Corps, known as the OTC from 1918-1922. The OTC had been set up around 1910 to help train future officers for the NZ Territorial Force, which had been established that year.

John was enlisted into the NZ Territorial Force into the Central Depot NZ Medical Corps in October 1922.

The New Zealand Medical Corps was established in 1908 to provide a reserve of medical personnel should that be required in the event of war. Their motto is *Semper Agens Semper Quietus*, Always Alert Always Calm.

A year after he started his practice in Wellington, John rejoined the NZ Medical Corps, was commissioned in July 1929 as Lieutenant and attached for duty at the Central Depot NZ Medical Corps until May 1931.

For his uniform, which included a sword, scabbard, warm coat, two hats and a pair of officers' boots, he received a grant of 10 pounds. Then he received an annual sum, initially 1 pound 16 shillings, which increased to 2 pounds in 1937 for its upkeep.

SLIDE in NZMC uniform

He was assigned to 2<sup>nd</sup> Field Ambulance in October 1931 and was promoted to Captain in August 1932. The HQ of 2<sup>nd</sup> Field Ambulance was Garrison Hall, which is still there, the brick building on the corner of Taranaki and Buckle Streets. Field Ambulances were responsible for providing medical care and evacuation of casualties from the front lines, working in conjunction with infantry brigades.

In 1933 he passed the examinations with exceptional merit, to become Major and was so promoted in August 1937. He attended training camp in 1937 and 1938 where he was 2<sup>nd</sup> in command of No .2. If he wanted to take a holiday he had to apply for leave of absence approval, which he did for 2 months in 1937. There was a notice in the Evening Post on 20<sup>th</sup> July 1937 announcing that "Dr and Mrs John Plimmer will leave for Sydney and expect to be away for one month."

Although John left his position in Wellington Hospital to join the 2<sup>nd</sup> Field Ambulance in 1936, he continued his private medical practice, retained his BMA membership and served as Assistant Editor of the NZ Medical Journal until he left New Zealand.

We do know that he attended his cousin Gladys Pledger (nee Meek) when she was delivered of a son Ken, born in July 1938. Gladys was the lady who had kept this photo.

In 1938, he was briefly attached to the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Wellington Regiment but because he was still in private practice and unable to fulfil the duties required, he was put on the "Unattached" list for a year.

War was declared on 1 September 1929.

In November, John underwent a full medical examination to assess his fitness for service, either for Home Defence or Active Service in any part of the world. His stated profession was Medical Practitioner, his nationality was British and his religion was Church of England. He did not have a family doctor.

The examination gives us a good idea of his stature. He was 5ft 11ins in height, weighed 14st 10 lbs and had hazel eyes. His chest measurement was 43 inches. He needed to have some dental work done before being

assessed as totally fit for active service. He was then enlisted into the New Zealand Military Forces on 20 December 1939.

On 5<sup>th</sup> March 1940 he was called up to serve in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Echelon of the NZ Expeditionary Forces as a Medical Officer in the 6<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance. His service number was WW2 11716.

His departure was announced in the Dominion on 6<sup>th</sup> March that “Major John Plimmer Wellington of the New Zealand Medical Corps has left for the south to take up duties at the military camp at Burnham”. These included learning how to dig trenches. He had a chest x ray there and I note that he now described his civil occupation as “Surgeon”. As was standard procedure, he confirmed that he had made a Will.

Leah, along with two other wives, went down to Christchurch on 12<sup>th</sup> March to see him. He was back to Wellington for a party on 13 August at the Miss Phylis Bates Studio in honour of a colleague in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Echelon, before embarking from Wellington on 27 August 1940, on the ship HMT Orcades en route to Egypt via Lyttleton, Freemantle and Bombay.

Prior to leaving, he arranged for himself a position as Overseas Correspondent for the NZ Medical Journal.

The details of the next part of his life are provided by the article he sent to the NZ Medical Journal, which was published in December 1940 under the title “News From Abroad” and the 7 letters he wrote to his son John- whom for clarity I shall call John Og , Irish for Young John .

SLIDE of envelopes.

John Og collected stamps and his father made great efforts to send him as many as he could.

On 17<sup>th</sup> September John disembarked at Bombay, after a trip he described as uneventful and a pleasure. But the city did not impress him. In the article published in the NZ Medical Journal he stated, “The food and accommodation compare very unfavourably with the worst that Wellington can provide”. He found the city most unattractive due to “the smells, squalor, poverty and universal disease”. He thought it expensive and felt certain that he was being swindled in any transactions. They were moved to a camp at Deolali some miles north of Bombay on a plateau 2000 ft above sea level which was much more attractive.

John was fascinated by the work conducted by the Haffkine Institute in Bombay, which manufactured anti-snake venom, plague vaccine and also anti-diphtheria and anti-tetanus sera. There was a large biochemical department for the production of sulphathiazole and allied sulphonamide compounds (early antibiotics). He described how plague control was carried out in the hospitals. It involved catching the rats from each ward daily and examining them. I will not go into further details!

He sent John Og two letters, one from Bombay and one from Deolali. In them, he provided a history of Bombay- how it came under British control- the geography of the area and his location up in the hills. He observed the native people, especially on building sites, and saw that the women did all the hard work! He also described the money in use and the four types of poisonous snakes found there, going into great detail about how their venom was extracted for therapeutic purposes. He told his son that “all the regular soldiers carry a razor blade in the lining of their hats, if they or their friends are bitten, they immediately make a deep crosscut over the wound and suck out the poison”.

SLIDE of letter with snake drawing. Note the very legible script too!

The letters ended with lots of encouragement to do well at school. John Og was by then at Wanganui Collegiate.

The enforced three week stay in Bombay was due to having to find smaller transports for the next stage of the journey, which was considered too dangerous for the large ocean liners of the convoy to undertake.

From Bombay John sailed on the Orion to Port Tewfik, at the southern entrance to the Suez Canal, disembarking on 20 September and then travelling onwards by train to Cairo. The 6th Field Ambulance arrived at El Maadi Camp on 27<sup>th</sup> October, where they were issued with equipment and transport and underwent a course of training in the use of both.

His next letter on 5<sup>th</sup> November bore his official address 6<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance NZ Division Middle East Force. The El Maadi Camp was a 10-minute train ride from Cairo, a city which John found to be beautiful, modern, clean, cooler and less smelly than Bombay. He could see the Great Pyramids from the camp and hoped to get there. Indeed, he did do so, as this photo shows.

## SLIDE

He encouraged John Og to look at an atlas to see his journey from Bombay and recounted his trip through the Red Sea, during which time Italian planes from Massawa -in Eritrea- bombed them, then up to Cairo.

His next letter on 21 November described life at the El Maadi camp. He was getting used to the dust and sand and described how their tents are buried for about 3 feet to stop splinters flying from bursting bombs. Usually, “the soldiers get into a trench 4 foot deep or else lie on the floor of their tents under a sand wall”. He sent John Og this photo of himself in front of his tent.

## PHOTO

The short puttees round his boot tops were to prevent sand getting down into his boots.

On 13 December the unit moved with 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade to Helwan Camp, a mile or two into the desert beyond the township of Helwan. Here they undertook the management of a camp hospital for its brigade.

Slide of Group of Men ? at Helwan Camp

SLIDE Christmas Card from John

## SLIDE

This next slide is a drawing from Michael Shackleton’s book Desert Surgeons, which shows a place called Ikingi Mariut, near Alexandria which was the site of 6<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance where “in January 1941 Major Plimmer set up a small hospital for Australian troops.” He had been requested to do this for 18 Australian Infantry Brigade, as it was temporarily without its own medical personnel.

John’s next letter, 12 March 1941, was written in pencil, as he stated that he was living with very few clothes and no comforts. He was leaving Egypt and could only guess his destination. He was not sorry however to leave behind the sand dust and flies, though he hoped to return as a tourist with Leah.

He was delighted that John Og was settling in at school and recounted that he had been the victim of ragging at Waitaki School, when he was thrown into a bath on his first weekend there. It had not been a pleasant

experience, and he was pleased that John Og missed all that. He encouraged his son to play plenty of sport and learn to play the piano, as this would be of great value in the future. Because of his situation in the desert, there would be sand in the letter which John Og could feel for himself!

## SLIDE

The next entry in John's Army record states "Embarked for Lustre Force (Greece and Crete) 18 March 1941.

John's last letter to John Og was dated 1 April 1941. He was not allowed to state the country he was in, but could describe his current situation, He was in charge of a Main Dressing Station (MDS) well in the interior of the country at the foot of a 9000 ft mountain. He found it beautiful, surrounded by flowers and fruit trees, and green lizards, snakes and tortoises. He described the shepherds and how they cared for their flocks. I am sure that John Og worked out that his father was at the foot of Mt Olympus.

He described his journey from Egypt on a small uncomfortable boat with few rations, as "someone had blundered over the food in Alex". Their convoy was attacked by German planes, and two bombs were dropped within 20 yards of his ship. A tanker nearby was hit but managed to make it to a port. He found the dive bombing a "nasty business, quite different to the high bombing the Italians gave us in Port Sudan in October."

John also described his experience of being in a sandstorm when he was at Helwan camp. He had tried to move from his tent to another only 15 yards away but got completely lost and wandered around for nearly an hour before he got his bearings. No wonder that John then stated, "I never want to see sand again, so please don't suggest a picnic at the beach when I come home!"

He ended his letter exhorting John Og to improve his spelling and sent him his best love.

For the next phase, I obtained the following information from the History of Medical Units of 2 NZEF in Middle East and Italy written by JB McKinney.

Major John is mentioned as being in Greece near a place called Tyrnaros. He was 2nd in command of 6<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance from February 1940. On 15<sup>th</sup> April, he was put in charge of moving the MDS to safety in the face of

the German invasion of Greece. They had to move down the country, travelling at night to avoid the constant air attacks and reached Tyrnaros then retreated further through Larissa to the Molos area. They then travelled on to Athens via Thebes, then further on down to the coast at Porta Rafti ,where they were collected by the Royal Navy vessel HMS Calcutta. During this journey they learned from German prisoners that the flag of the Red Cross would always be respected, and it was, whenever they had to set up camp during daylight, but that was in Greece.

The next entry for John in his Army service record is “Reported safe in Crete 29 April 1941”. Would that it had been so.

Unfortunately, during their retreat from Greece, the unit had had to abandon a lot of its equipment and replacements were not easy to find. The unit landed at Suda Bay then moved on to camp near Canea. There they treated hundreds of casualties though supplies and materials were at a minimum.

SLIDE of Canea

General Freyberg was appointed to command the Allied forces in Crete on 30 April and the powers that be had decided that Crete had to be defended at all costs. John was appointed acting Lieutenant Colonel of 6<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance on 7<sup>th</sup> May and took over control of the unit.

For the 3 weeks after their arrival, they operated its small MDS below a little village called Galatas treating the sick and injured from 4 Brigade and assisting at the nearby British 7 General Hospital. The men slept outside but made dugouts or slit trenches for protection, drawing on their experience of their time in Greece. It seemed to be a relatively quiet time for the unit though everyone knew that an invasion was imminent.

On 18<sup>th</sup> May a German bomber released its load over 7 General Hospital despite the Red Cross flag being prominently displayed.

On 20<sup>th</sup> May, the invasion started with aircraft strafing and bombing from Suda Bay up to Canea and the Red Cross signs were disregarded. Quote footnote- “some evidence that the attacks on medical units were from ignorance of identity of the units rather than a deliberate breach of the Geneva Convention”

The staff at 6<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance were at breakfast when the Luftwaffe appeared overhead, strafing the area for two hours, then came the paratroopers, descending in large groups from the sky. They appeared on the ground and started rounding up the soldiers and patients.

I have read two accounts from soldiers who were there. One of them, Lance Corporal Allan Robinson described the events that followed.

“They strafed up and down our lines for two hours, at least two hours, up and down, crossways, all over the place. We weren’t bombed at all, we were strafed. We’d immediately gone to our funk holes, our slit trench and I was crouched down in this one. There is nothing worse than to sit in your slit trench and hear the bullets going through the olive trees. Hear the bits of bark and everything come down on top of you and to see the clouds of dust around the top of your slit trench as the bullets go round. To say that I was scared would be an understatement. The next thing I knew, somebody says “Ups the Hands”. And here is a German paratrooper above me with a machine gun. So, I “ups the hands” alright, very smartly. I’d just got out of the trench, hands on my head when the next thing I heard was a bang! Crack! A shot. I looked over and here was our colonel, Colonel Plimmer, he was our acting CO. He had a boil on his arm. All officers have a pistol. As he was told to get out, he must have put his arm down to help himself out and they must have thought he was reaching for his pistol and shot him. He just went back into the slit trench. We did our best for him but no, it was fatal. We tried to comfort him, but he died.”

John had sustained two wounds, through the abdomen and thigh and he died a short time later. He was the first surgeon in the NZ Army to die on active service.

The Germans gave permission for the Padre Hopkins and several men to bury John there.

Allan Robinson also described how the captured soldiers were used as shields by the German Army as they progressed through the country.

What happened afterwards?

In August 1945 John’s body was disinterred and reburied in the military cemetery at Suda Bay though with the rank of Major- a bone of contention with his family. This would not happen now, I am told by NZDF personnel.

## SLIDE of Death Notice

Leah was told of her husband's death in a telegram from the Minister of Defence dated 27<sup>th</sup> May She was left a widow at age 41 with three children aged 13, 12 and 7 years.

In a letter from The Director NZDF – I presume- dated 28 May 1941, she was informed that no further military pay would be credited to John's account. However, payments would be made for a period of 3 months on the basis of allotment and allowances, and she would then be advised on how she might be able to claim for a War Pension.

The Army record states that John's daily rate of pay was 27s6d (worth around \$87 today) and that Leah would get 25 s/day and 7s6d for each of their 3 children, for the 3 months.

In subsequent correspondence by her solicitor Alfred Meek - Ethel's older brother- with the War Pensions Department, John's rank is stated as Lt Colonel. A death certificate was requested for the purposes of obtaining Probate and this certificate was amongst John's papers!

## SLIDE German Certificate

How efficient!

The NZ Medical Journal published an obituary for John and apart from outlining his professional work, it also described his activities for the Association, as I have previously outlined. The article he submitted was described as " just such a cheery and informative letter as would be expected from him."

One of the people devastated by John's death was his cousin Gladys Pledger, whom I have previously mentioned. In August 1941 she gave birth to twin boys and named the first born John, in his memory. I am delighted that this John could be here tonight.

In 1946 an odd event happened concerning John's death.

## SLIDE

A report was published in the Otago Daily Times on 11<sup>th</sup> May concerning the testimony given at the trial of General Student, the German general responsible for the paratrooper invasion of Crete. He was on trial in front

of a British Military Tribunal in Luneburg, accused of two massacres of civilians on Crete and of the mistreatment of Allied prisoners of war.

The key witness in his defence was a New Zealander Brigadier Lindsay Merritt Inglis. He came from Mosgiel and had also been a pupil at Waitaki Boys High School though was 7 years older than John. He had assumed command of the 4<sup>th</sup> NZ Infantry Brigade on Crete on 17<sup>th</sup> May. In his testimony he stated that “one German officer entered the hospital and sprayed a ward with his tommy gun and, it is believed, murdered Colonel Plimmer commanding the Field Ambulance. However, it was the act of an individual who had lost his head”

Replying to a question whether the German staff had not sufficient intelligence to know that the tented area was a hospital, Brigadier Inglis said: “I don’t think we could say that. To answer in the affirmative would be unfair to the defence.”

Inglis also denied that the Germans had used prisoners as a screen for their attack against Crete.

This immediately resulted in a flurry of letters to Army Headquarters from a man, whose name has been redacted from the files, but who identified himself as Colonel Plimmer’s Batman and Driver, disputing what he thought was the official NZDF version of events of 21<sup>st</sup> May 1941.

Colonel Plimmer’s Batman wrote that he had been wounded and was baled up against Colonel Plimmer’s tent by a German paratrooper, when he watched another soldier walk up to the Colonel’s slit trench and put two point blank shots into it.

He also confirmed that allied soldiers were used as a screen for attack.

He was concerned that what Brigadier Inglis had stated was the official Army record of the event and he knew this to be untrue. He wondered what information Mrs Plimmer had been given. Another report, this time from Christchurch (13<sup>th</sup> May 1946 Ashburton Guardian) also disputed Inglis’s version of events.

A letter from the Army HQ dated 23<sup>rd</sup> May informed the writer that Mrs Plimmer had been informed about the circumstances of her husband’s death 2 years earlier by someone else. They could not comment on the evidence given in the German trial but noted that no account of the

circumstances of John's death appeared anywhere in the Army files. He was given permission to visit Mrs Plimmer if she wished to receive him. I do not know if he ever did this. However, Leah did learn of the true circumstances because this is the story that has been passed down within our families.

On a happier note, Johnny Plimmer – John's grandson- very kindly sent me some more information about John's work in Crete.

During the time that the 6<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance was in Galatas, they had dug a well for the villagers. In 1977 John Og was invited to attend the unveiling of a plaque in memory of this.

The words on the plaque read: To the people of Crete who let the 6<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance dig this well for a Dressing Station whose commanding officer Lieutenant Colonel JLR Plimmer was killed in action nearby on 20<sup>th</sup> May 1940”

After the ceremony John was approached by an elderly Cretan lady who - through an interpreter- told him that his father “The Doctor” had helped her through a very difficult labour, saving her life and delivering her of a healthy child.

Here are some photos of that occasion and from a subsequent visit that John Og - now a grandfather- made with his family again in 2007. They discovered a museum in an old building at the entrance to Chania harbour and there they found this memorial to Dr John. Canea is now Chania and a twin city of Wellington

The Plaque reads:

Lt. Col. J.L. R. Plimmer, Commanding Officer of the New Zealand 6<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance, was one of the first soldiers who were killed in duty during the Battle of Crete.

He was shot by the enemy close to a well in the area of Galatas, the first day of the occupation of the island by the Germans. That well had been dug by the soldiers of his unit, before the beginning of hostilities, in order to supply them with water.

Thirty-six years later, his comrades -in- arms paid tribute to his memory by placing a memorial plaque on the well. This plaque was dedicated to the Cretan people who allowed the soldiers to dig that well.

The two photographs on the right describe moments of the ceremony of the unveiling of the memorial plaque 27<sup>th</sup> of April 1977.

SLIDE of The Military Cemetery at Suda Bay

SLIDE of three John Plimmers- John William Roden, John Roden, and the youngest also has the initials JLR but he is John Lanham Roden Plimmer.

SLIDE Medals

Leah and Ethel applied in 1947 for the New Zealand Memorial Cross. This, along with the four he was awarded, were issued on 22 May 1950. They were the 1939-45 Star, The Africa Star, The War Medal 1939-1945 and the NZ Medal.

Slide Lt Colonel JLR Plimmer.

I sincerely hope that I have done John justice in making his story and his sacrifice more widely known.

Áine Meek 4 February 2026

References:

The National Library Collection of Papers Past and Photographs

The New Zealand Defence Force Personnel Archives and Medals

Official History of NZ in the Second World War: Medical Units of 2 NZEF in Middle East and Italy

Photograph from the Te Papa collection of Spencer Digby Studio.

The New Zealand Medical Journal December 1940 p347 and Issue 40 198

Memorabilia provided by Johnny Plimmer ( grandson)

Photograph of Dr JLR Plimmer from John Pledger