

Amazing war shaped life

Love bloomed in a rural Czechoslovak hotel that prisoner-of-war Alan Hepburn visited after bribing German guards. The motive for the Mid-Canterbury soldier's visits quickly changed from liquid refreshment to the publican's pretty daughter. The couple married at war's end and settled in Methven.

Hepburn died recently, a year and a day after losing Vera, his wife of 65 years.

He grew up in the Methven area and worked as a musterer and shepherd in the back country. Too young to enlist at the start of the war, he lied about his age. His parents tried to stop him but, in an early sign of the defiance in his character, he threatened to change his name.

Years of deer stalking in the ranges had made Hepburn an excellent shot. He was attached to the 5th Field Artillery to man a Bren gun as protection for an artillery crew. His unit sailed for the Middle East but was diverted to England to help its defence against a feared German invasion. As the threat diminished, the New Zealanders were shipped to Egypt, and then Greece.

Hepburn fought in the failed defence of Greece as German armies streamed down from the north. He helped in the destruction of military vehicles and equipment to prevent them falling into German hands and was taken off Greece by ship to Crete. Again he fought in a failed defence against German troops, this time attempting to hold the airfield at Maleme. He told of strafing plane after plane with his Bren gun as the Germans flew airborne troops and parachutists into the area.

He described how he could see lines of bullet holes appearing in the sides of the German transport planes. He shuddered as he recalled the grisly sight of dead bodies being pushed out of the planes so parachutists could make their jumps.

The New Zealanders were overcome and Hepburn joined the general retreat over the mountains to the evacuation port at Sphakia.

He was captured by the Germans but escaped and headed back into the mountains. There, he lived as a fugitive for 14 months,



Vera and Alan Hepburn: Fell in love during World War II and stood up to health authorities when Vera was ill.

Photo: DAVID HALLE

secretly supported by brave Cretan partisans, before being recaptured. He was taken to Greece, then to Germany by train. He was incarcerated in Stalag VIIIb.

Hepburn found the confinement of prison life intolerable so volunteered to join a work party. The party camped in a forest across the border in Czechoslovakia. The men loaded logs for transport to a sawmill. Security was slacker than in the stalag and Hepburn operated a distillery. He used the spirits he produced, plus tobacco and chocolate from Red Cross parcels, to bribe guards for favours. One favour was to enter the hotel that the men passed on their way back to camp each evening.

Hepburn was attracted to the publican's pretty daughter. "I came to know the family which cemented a relationship with Vera," he once said.

The attraction prompted him to tunnel out of the camp, late in the war. Disguised as a Polish worker, he waited until it seemed safe, then

made his way to the hotel. The publican's family hid him until the war ended. He proposed to Vera and she accepted.

A British consular office was opened in Prague in 1945. The couple arranged and celebrated their wedding there and in a nearby church. Hepburn was then flown to England, where he cut through red tape to get Vera to join him.

Hepburn was scheduled to return to New Zealand but regulations forbade returning soldiers from taking their brides with them. He refused to go without Vera and deliberately "missed" three successive ships on which his place was booked. The authorities then relented and the couple sailed together.

Back at home, Hepburn was keen to take up land in the Lake Heron area but Vera found it too remote. So they settled in Methven, living with Hepburn's parents and in a hotel. Hepburn learned the building trade from a local firm and by regular

commutes to Christchurch for a training course. He set up his own firm and built their house, where they raised their four children.

Among his many community involvements, Hepburn established Methven Search and Rescue, in which he was active for many years. He served on local school committees and was elected to the Canterbury Education Board. School principals in the area remarked on his helpfulness in the difficult adjustment to Tomorrow's Schools.

In a final sign of defiance, Hepburn refused to be separated from his wife in 2008, when health authorities said she must go into care. Again, he won, and a place was found for them both. MIKE CREA

■ Alan Evan Douglas Hepburn, born Methven, 1923; died Christchurch, May 7, 2011. Pre-deceased by wife Vera; survived by sons David, Jeffery and Logan, daughter Kareen, 11 grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren.