

Turnbull Library Record

volume 56 | 2024

Chaconne for Piano

Augustas Lithuanas

*Largamente,
ma sempre con moto*

The first system of musical notation is for a piano piece in 3/4 time. The key signature has three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The right hand plays a series of chords and eighth notes, while the left hand plays a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The tempo marking is 'Largamente, ma sempre con moto'. The first measure of the left hand is marked 'Ped.' (pedal).

The second system of musical notation continues the piece. The right hand features more complex chordal textures. The left hand continues with eighth notes. Dynamic markings include 'mp' (mezzo-piano) and 'mf' (mezzo-forte).

The third system of musical notation shows a change in texture. The right hand has a 'dim.' (diminuendo) marking. The left hand has a 'p' (piano) marking. The system ends with a 'pp marc. con pedale' (pianissimo marcato con pedale) instruction.

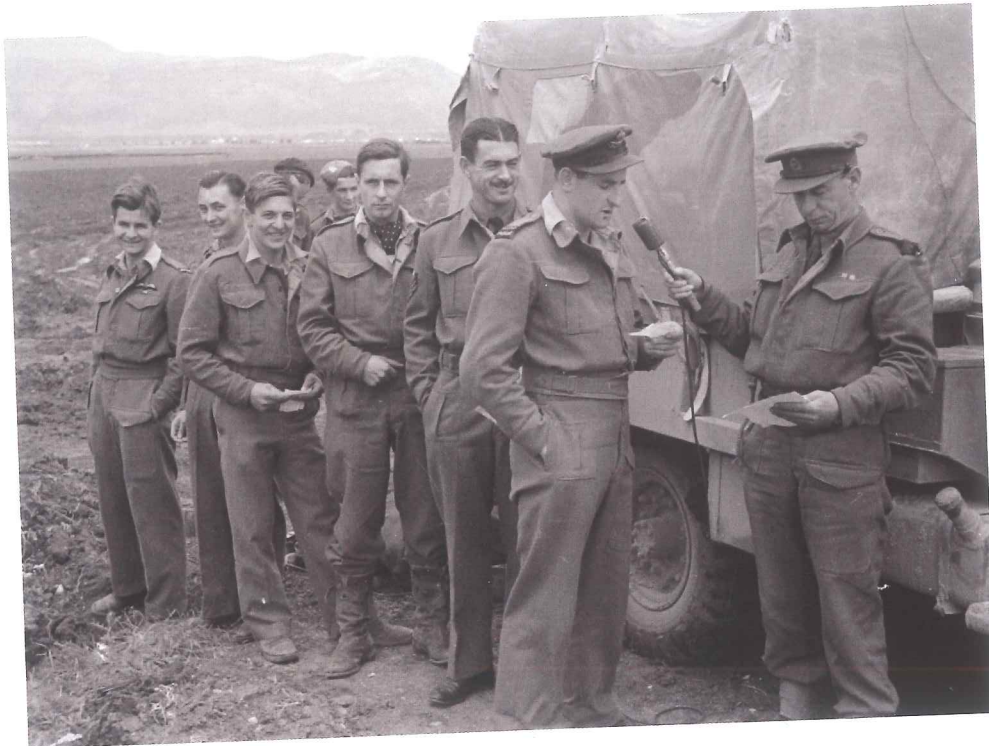
The fourth system of musical notation begins with a first ending bracket labeled 'I.'. The right hand has a 'poco cresc.' (poco crescendo) marking. The left hand has a 'mp' (mezzo-piano) marking. The system concludes with a final chord.

Mus. Arch.
Shelf
2a
7

Radio with Pictures

The Turnbull photographs of New Zealand's wartime broadcasting unit

Sarah Johnston



New Zealand personnel serving with the Royal Air Force in the Cassino area in Italy recording messages with Archibald Curry, New Zealand Broadcasting Unit, 25 April 1944. Photograph by George Robert Bull, Alexander Turnbull Library (DA-05600-F)

In April 1944, six New Zealand men serving with the Royal Air Force lined up beside an Army truck at Venafro aerodrome, east of the hilltop town of Cassino in Italy. They were photographed by New Zealand official war photographer George Bull, and the image is one of over 600 by him in the Alexander Turnbull Library's Department of Internal Affairs War History collection of official photographs, taken between 1939 and 1945.

The seventh man, holding the microphone, is Archibald Curry, better known as Arch, a long-serving radio announcer with the National Broadcasting Service's (NBS) Christchurch station 3YA. He was then in his third year of war service as a correspondent and commentator with the NBS mobile broadcasting unit, which travelled overseas with New Zealand forces. He is recording each man giving a short message for playing on radio back home. These are being captured on a sound disc recorder, probably inside the truck behind him.

The photograph is one of a series held by the Library that illustrate the work of the New Zealand Broadcasting Unit, which served alongside 2 New Zealand Division from October 1940 in Egypt until late 1945 in northern Italy after the end of the war. (A second unit served in the Pacific war from 1943.)

A decade ago, as a former radio journalist and archivist working with Radio New Zealand's (RNZ) sound archive (now held at Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision), I was fascinated by the voices and stories I heard on the 1600 surviving discs produced by the wartime broadcasting units and believed they were taonga worthy of further research.

In 2018, I successfully nominated the collection for recognition by UNESCO's Memory of the World Register. In 2021, I was fortunate to be the recipient of funding from the Judith Binney Trust and Manatū Taonga's Whiria Te Mahara history research grants to investigate the work of the broadcasting units and New Zealand radio during the war. Our wartime radio has not been studied in great depth – a fate common to much radio history worldwide. As media scholars Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio put it: 'Radio remains a difficult medium to study: invisible, evanescent, pushed to the margins of mainstream media, rarely talked about and easily overlooked.'

The ephemeral nature of radio means wonderful photographs such as these held by the Turnbull are especially valuable as a means of seeing the invisible medium at work, at the moment of creation. Valuable not only to the researcher such as myself, but also for illustrating the work of the broadcasters when I am describing it to other audiences – a case of a picture speaking a thousand words.

The men lined up beside the truck have been selected from among their unit by ballot. They are clutching slips of paper on which they have written brief messages home to whānau and loved ones: 'Hello Mum and Dad. I'm okay. Hope you are all well.' (The content of many of the repetitive messages verges on the mundane, but as broadcaster Peter Harcourt observed when he worked with the recordings during the war, the thrill and relief of simply hearing a loved one's voice from the other side of the world meant it almost didn't matter what the men actually said.²)

The messages have been checked for any details that could be of use to the listening enemy, and will then be committed to disc via Arch Curry's microphone. The recorded discs will next be passed by a military censor, carefully packaged and dispatched to New Zealand by air and sea, a journey that could take several weeks in the 1940s. In Wellington they will be edited together to form an episode of the weekly radio programme *With the Boys Overseas*. This aired for an hour every Sunday morning from early 1941 to late 1945, and was so popular it was repeated on Tuesday nights.³

The recording ritual was replayed throughout the war, with the broadcasters organising to record different New Zealand units in rotation, sometimes in several sessions a week. Keeping up with the popular demand to hear the voices of New Zealand's fighting men was a major undertaking for the broadcasting units and for their colleagues back home.⁴

The recording session captured by photographer George Bull in April 1944 is held on one of the 1600 lacquer discs that still survive today in the RNZ sound archive. The disc has been digitised and can be heard through Ngā Taonga's web catalogue.⁵ However, thousands of other recordings the unit produced have not survived. Due to the wartime shortage of aluminium, which formed the core of the lacquer discs, many were sent for re-coating after being broadcast. This meant they could be re-used, but erased their original recordings.⁶

We know the names of the six young men being recorded in this photograph, as Arch Curry introduces them in turn on the recording. One facet of my research is to verify the names and identities of all the voices heard on the wartime discs, a task facilitated by resources such as Auckland War Memorial Museum's Online Cenotaph database. The men in this photograph were experienced flying officers and Spitfire pilots, despite some being in their early 20s. The first two in line from

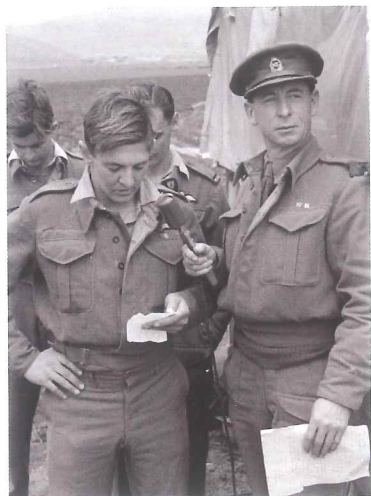
Curry are Flight Sergeants Leighton Montgomerie, 22, of New Plymouth and Morrie Cooper from Devonport. Montgomerie had already had an extensive wartime career, having flown operations in Europe and North Africa and shot down several German Messerschmidts in air combat by the time this image was taken.⁷ He would be awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his service, but would lose his life only a few months later in July 1944. Next in line is Hakataramea farmer Bob Aubry and then a younger man, Flight Sergeant A.G. 'Pat' Newman of Timaru. He would shoot down an enemy plane before being killed in a flying mission in January 1945, at the age of 24. The fifth man is Ced Young of Bulls, who also had at least one German plane to his combat record, and finally 21-year-old Alan Condon of Mosgiel.

Hearing the messages home from these six men over the radio would have been a great reassurance to their families and friends, but somehow the voices of all six sound rather flat and monotone, in comparison with many other surviving recordings I have listened to, in which the speakers send more upbeat and reassuring messages. The lack of enthusiasm is perhaps understandable, when we consider the time and place in which they were recorded. The men in the photograph were part of the Allied force which had been attempting to take Cassino from its German defenders since February 1944. The dominant position of the town on its hill with the famous monastery of Montecassino at its summit meant it was a strategic point the Allies needed to win in the push towards Rome. The monastery had been pulverised by Allied bombing in February, to little avail.

The men of the 2 New Zealand Division had managed briefly to seize the hill at one point in March, only to lose it again, and Cassino had become one of our costliest campaigns of the war. By the time these photographs were taken, 343 New Zealanders had already died at Cassino, over 600 were wounded and the hill still remained in German hands.⁸

As well as the group shot, George Bull also captured some close-ups of the men. In one (page 38), Flight Sergeant Pat Newman studies his written message intently. Having your words recorded was a new experience for most New Zealanders in the 1940s. 'Mike fright claims a large number of victims, rendering burly soldiers strangely silent and the toughest sergeant-majors all a-twitter', wrote the New Zealand Field Ambulance magazine *Fanz*, about the ordeal of being recorded by the mobile broadcasters.⁹

In the photo with Pat Newman, Arch Curry gazes off-camera. Thanks to the Library's high resolution digitised image, we can zoom in on the broadcaster's face, and the toll of covering the war for the past three years can perhaps be read in the lines beneath his eyes and behind his thousand-mile gaze. Before arriving in Italy in 1943,



Left: Flight Sergeant A.G. 'Pat' Newman, one of the New Zealanders serving with the Royal Air Force in the Cassino area in Italy, records his message to be broadcast in New Zealand, 27 April 1944. Archibald Curry holds the microphone. Photograph by George Robert Bull, Alexander Turnbull Library (DA-05602-F)

Right: Repatriated New Zealand prisoners of war recording a message for family back home shortly after their arrival at 1 New Zealand General Hospital, Helwan, Egypt, during World War, about 23 November 1943. From left: Charles Lewis (with recording equipment), John Proudfoot (holding microphone), Sergeant Harry A. Taituha, Private C. A. Petrie. Photograph by George Robert Bull, Alexander Turnbull Library (DA-03223-F)

he had spent a year constantly travelling the Egyptian and Libyan deserts, covering fighting there and winning acclaim for his reports from Tobruk, Alamein and Tripoli. These were filed via the BBC in London and then broadcast to New Zealand and the world via shortwave radio. Arch and his broadcasting colleagues had come under fire several times while travelling with New Zealand troops, including in the midst of the terrifying night-time 'break-out' from Minqar Qaim in June 1942, when they and the New Zealand Division narrowly escaped the surrounding German forces.¹⁰

As well as the photographs of the broadcasting unit in action, the Alexander Turnbull Library also holds the papers of another unit broadcaster, Curry's assistant commentator in Italy, John Proudfoot.¹¹ These provide valuable insights into the dynamics and personalities of the four-man team there. In letters home to his family, Proudfoot is often critical of the drink-fuelled, off-duty socialising that was a key part of life in the broadcasting unit in Italy. He disapprovingly recounts the frequent parties Curry and others held with members of the press corps and New Zealand Public Relations Service (NZPRS), whom he calls 'a quarrelsome and objectionable crowd'.¹² Besides the broadcasters and their engineers, the NZPRS included newspaper war correspondents, war photographers, film unit cinematographers and war artist Peter McIntyre, who shared apartments in the various Italian cities in which they were billeted.

John Proudfoot's family passed his wartime correspondence to broadcaster Peter Downes, who deposited it with the Library after Proudfoot's death in 1998. The letters to his family were written every few days during the final year of the war, and document his time with the broadcasting unit in Italy, although he first joined the unit in 1943 when still in Egypt, as seen in the image on the right.



Chief commentator Arch Curry was frequently away at the frontlines recording the action dispatches for which he became so well known, while Proudfoot, as his assistant, cooled his heels back at the unit's base, which moved from Bari to Naples and then Rome, as the Italian campaign progressed.

His job was to process and edit Arch's recordings when they arrived back at base, shepherd them through clearance by the military censor's office and then see them safely dispatched to New Zealand. His letters reveal his frustration at this work, which he felt was unimportant in comparison with Curry's celebrated reporting from the forward areas – or 'tiger country', as the unit called it.

Drinking sessions and the camaraderie of the press corps no doubt provided a release from the strains of covering the war and bearing witness to the brutal, grinding slog of the Italian campaign. Arch Curry can be seen with some of his press colleagues in this relaxed image by another official war photographer, George Frederick Kaye.

The role of a broadcasting war correspondent was a new one, having been created at the start of the war by soon-to-be-famous BBC reporters like Richard Dimbleby. When Dimbleby set off for Cairo in April 1940, London newspaper *The Star* reported, 'The radio war correspondent – a new, skilled and dangerous profession – has come into being.'¹³ Using the newly developed portable sound disc recording equipment, Dimbleby and men like Arch and his colleagues were taking radio into new fields and inventing the role as they went. Now, even far-distant New Zealand could hear the familiar voice of a local announcer such as Curry, talking about their men in action, sometimes within 24 to 48 hours of it taking place – a huge leap forward in news immediacy. In some cases, they could even *hear* the war in their sitting rooms, as in several dispatches the unit captured the sound of artillery fire and bombers droning overhead in the background to Curry's voice reports.

The connection radio could provide between the homefront audience and their men fighting on the other side of the world proved to be a morale booster, just as the NBS Director, James Shelley, had hoped in his initial proposal to send a unit overseas. He told the government in February 1940 that the recordings the proposed mobile unit would make of New Zealanders and their part in the war 'would be of immediate value in maintaining the morale of the troops and the nation'.¹⁴

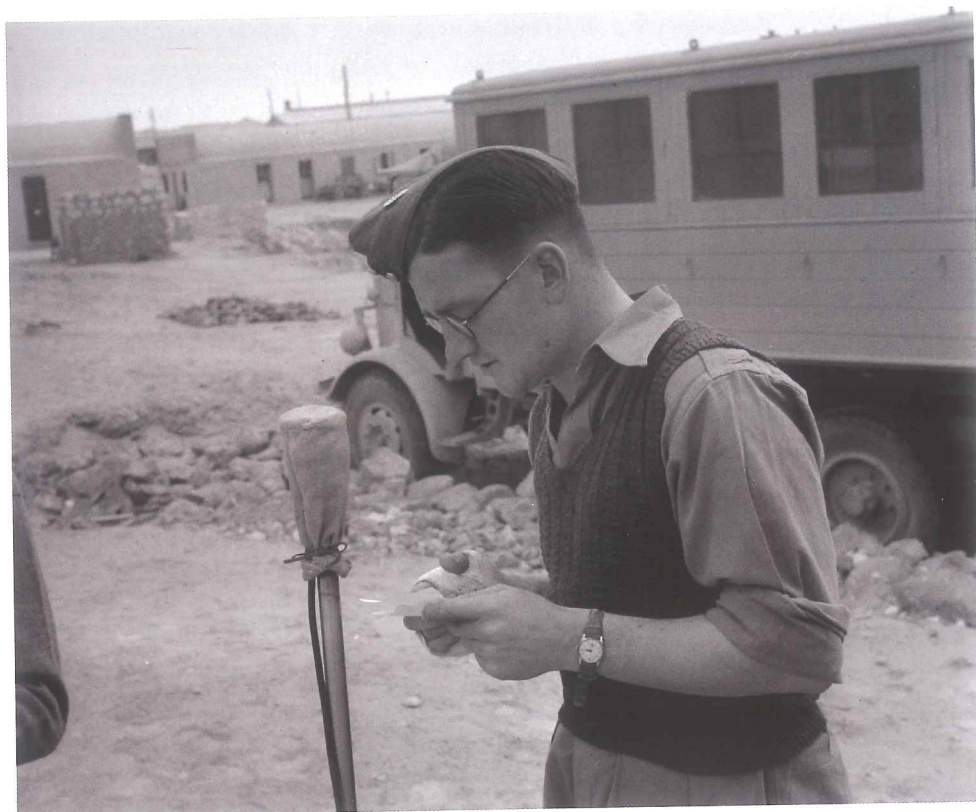
By 1943 the work of the unit, particularly the messages home, had become so popular that the Minister in Charge of Broadcasting cited it as justification for sending a second unit into the Pacific. 'Probably there is no feature so widely listened to in New Zealand as the programme *With the Boys Overseas*, which contains the messages and talks recorded by our forces in the Middle East,' said Hon. David Wilson.¹⁵

The popularity of *With the Boys Overseas* is possibly why there are so many

photographs of its recording ritual in the Turnbull's official war photograph collections. Besides George Bull's images of the RAF crewmen, there are further photos of New Zealand soldiers recording near Cassino, and earlier we see the unit in action in Egypt at New Zealand's Maadi Camp outside Cairo. Here the unit was able to use the large custom-built recording van it brought over from New Zealand. In May 1942, Mervyn Elias, a cinematographer with the New Zealand National Film Unit, took photographs of recording in progress at Maadi, with the van clearly in the background.



New Zealand war correspondents with the New Zealand Division on the Italian Front during World War II. From left: Bill Brody, Arch Curry, Bruce Hewitt, George Kaye, Cedric Mentiplay, Mervyn Elias, about 5 December 1943. Photograph by George Frederick Kaye, Alexander Turnbull Library (DA-04897-F)



The wooden recording van body was custom built by the Petone Railway Workshops in Wellington, shipped to Egypt with the broadcasters onboard a troopship, and eventually mounted on the back of a large Leyland truck. However, it proved to be too heavy and slow to keep up with the pace of the desert war, and too conspicuous to the enemy, so it spent its first two years of war service largely based at Maadi as a studio.

Instead, for mobile field work the broadcasters adopted 'Presto' brand portable disc recorders, like the one seen in the Proudfoot image earlier. These were carried in the back of their car or in borrowed Army trucks, which the New Zealand military supplied, together with an Army driver. (Tape recording technology would not come into widespread use by broadcasters until the 1950s.)

It is one of these trucks which can be seen in the only photograph of the unit recording 28 (Maori) Battalion. Despite a lack of photographic evidence, we have many surviving wartime recordings of the men of the famed battalion, more than any other individual unit. This was partly, I believe, in response to demand from Māori radio listeners, who had a powerful need to hear the voices of their men.¹⁶



Left: Unidentified New Zealand soldier recording a message home from the Broadcasting Unit at Maadi Camp in Egypt, 1 May 1942. Photograph by M. D. Elias, Alexander Turnbull Library (DA-02473-F)

Above: Members of the 28th New Zealand (Maori) Battalion with the New Zealand Broadcasting Unit, Captain Charles Bennett recording with Arch Curry, Libya, 1942. Photograph by Dr C. N. D'Arcy, Alexander Turnbull Library (DA-11481-F)

This photograph was taken by Dr Campbell D'Arcy, who was the medical officer attached to the Māori Battalion between 1942 and 1944. (He was awarded a Military Cross for his work treating the wounded during the March fighting at Cassino.) The photograph he took of the men recording with Arch Curry comes from earlier in the war, in Libya, in 1942.

Curry is on the far right, in front of an Army truck and the man speaking into his microphone is Captain Charles Moihi Te Arawaka Bennett (Ngāti Whakaue), who would later become the battalion's commanding officer. Bennett was a NBS broadcaster himself before the war and recorded several times with the unit, giving reports on the battalion's experiences in Crete and Libya. It is the latter which is being recorded in the photograph above. In this recording (largely in te reo Māori), he pays tribute to the men lost in recent fighting and sends condolences to Sir Apirana Ngata and Ngāti Porou for the loss of their men.¹⁷ The recording has been transcribed and translated on the Māori Battalion website, which has made almost all the broadcasting unit's surviving recordings of the battalion available online.

Despite the complaints about the press corps' excessive drinking, John Proudfoot's correspondence held at the Turnbull paints a vivid picture of some lighter sides of life in wartime Italy and the New Zealanders interaction with Italian families from whom they rented apartments, hiring local women to cook, clean and teach them Italian. His distance from the action and ready access to a car meant he had ample time for sightseeing, and he describes trips to Vesuvius and Pompeii, and visits to the opera, as well as his delight in the beauty of the Italian countryside as the seasons changed through 1944.

He also provides insights into the minutiae of the mobile unit's operations: we learn the recording van was nicknamed 'Esmerelda' and their Army drivers at times played substantial roles in keeping the unit functioning, troubleshooting mechanical problems with recording gear as well as the units' vehicles. In impoverished, war-torn Italy, theft by locals was such a problem that unit members took turns sleeping in the van with a rifle, after suffering several break-ins.

After his initial unhappiness, John Proudfoot did eventually get to play a more active role in the unit's war correspondence work. Arch Curry returned to New Zealand in late March 1945, leaving Proudfoot as the main commentator and he recorded a series of action reports from northern Italy in the final months of the war.

His reports on the Allied advance over the Senio and Santerno Rivers were carried by the BBC, as was his description of the New Zealanders being the first troops of the 8th Army to cross the river Po, as the Germans retreated. In April 1945, he recorded a lively description of newly liberated Venice and the New Zealand Forces' Club which was set up in the Hotel Danieli, housed in a luxurious fourteenth-century waterfront palazzo just off St Mark's Square.

Proudfoot ended the war in Trieste, where he covered the standoff between New Zealand forces and Yugoslav partisans over who had liberated the border city, then sailed for New Zealand in August 1945. The broadcasting unit continued operating until the end of the year, recording New Zealand servicemen, as it took several months for them to make their way home. The final surviving recording is from late November, when Lieutenant General Bernard Freyberg made a 'farewell tour' of the New Zealand Division in Florence. 'Esmerelda' the recording van was stripped out, with the radio equipment sent home, but the kauri wooden caravan body was apparently left behind.

Arch Curry returned to civilian life as a broadcaster and was Supervisor of Spoken Programmes for the N.Z.B.C. when he died in 1964 aged 58. John Proudfoot also rose in the broadcasting ranks, becoming manager of the Concert Programme (now RNZ Concert) and retiring in 1978.

Endnotes

- 1 Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio, *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio* (Routledge, 2002), p. xv.
- 2 Peter Downes and Peter Harcourt, *Voices in the Air: Radio Broadcasting in New Zealand* (Methuen, 1976), p. 124.
- 3 'Boys Overseas radio feature: NBS receives huge mail', *New Zealand Listener*, 9 May 1941, p.3.
- 4 Sarah Johnston, 'With the Boys Overseas: How Homefront Listeners Shaped the Work of Aotearoa New Zealand's First Battlefront Broadcasters', *New Zealand Journal of Public History* 9 (2023), pp. 44–45. <<https://phanza.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Sarah-Johnston-With-the-Boys-Overseas-1.pdf>> [accessed 30 November 2023]
- 5 Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision, U-series, *Personal messages from RAF Cassino area*, ID18882. <<https://www.ngataonga.org.nz/search-use-collection/search/18882/>> [accessed 30 November 2023]
- 6 '2,000 used discs sent to AWA Sydney for resurfacing', NBS Chief Engineer J. Smith to Noel Palmer, 8 July 1942, R22011495, Archives New Zealand, Wellington.
- 7 H.L. Thompson, *New Zealanders with the Royal Air Force Volume III* (Historical Publications Branch, 1959), p. 206. <<https://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-WH2-3RAF-c8.html#n206>> [accessed 30 November 2023]
- 8 'Cassino: New Zealand History, n.d. (Ministry for Culture and Heritage). <<https://nzhistory.govt.nz/war/the-italian-campaign/cassino>> [accessed 30 November 2023]
- 9 *Fanz*, magazine of the New Zealand Field Ambulance, in *Pahiatua Herald*, 26 January 1942, p. 3.
- 10 Norman Johnston (New Zealand Broadcasting Unit assistant engineer), personal correspondence to his parents [n.d., c. August 1942] (private collection).
- 11 John William Proudfoot, Papers, Alexander Turnbull Library (MS-Group-0769).
- 12 John William Proudfoot, personal correspondence, 11 April 1944, Alexander Turnbull Library (MS-Papers-6252-2).
- 13 Jonathan Dimbleby, *Richard Dimbleby, a Biography* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1975), p. 102.
- 14 James Shelley to the Hon. The Acting Minister of Broadcasting, 7 February 1940, Accounts Broadcasting Unit – Middle East, Archives New Zealand (R22011495).
- 15 *Evening Post*, 'Recording unit in the Pacific', 22 March 1943, p. 3.
- 16 Johnston, *NZJPH*, p.50–54.
- 17 Charles Bennett, *The Māori Battalion in Libya. Part 5*, Māori Battalion website <<https://28maoribattalion.org.nz/audio/libyan-campaign-part-5-captain-charles-bennett>> [accessed 30 November 2023]