

## APPENDIX 1

### PRISONERS OF THE GERMANS AND ITALIANS

By A. E. FIELD

The author of this appendix served in 1914-1918 with the King's Own Scottish Borderers and was awarded the D.C.M. and M.M. In 1940 he enlisted in the 2/6th Field Company, serving with that unit as a sapper and later a sergeant in Libya, Syria and Java. He was a prisoner of the Japanese from 1942 to 1945.

During the service of the A.I.F. in the Middle East campaigns of 1941-42, 7,116<sup>1</sup> officers and men were taken prisoner. Of these, 21 were captured before 28th March 1941 when the withdrawal from Cyrenaica began. From that date until the investment of Tobruk 507 Australians fell into enemy hands; of these the 2/13th Battalion lost 87, the 2/15th Battalion 162, the 2/3rd Anti-Tank Regiment 96 and the 2/8th Field Ambulance 42. Twenty-seven members of the 2/3rd Field Company also entered captivity during this phase.

During the siege of Tobruk 467 Australians were taken prisoner. The biggest losses were suffered by the 2/24th and 2/23rd Battalions when the enemy penetrated the positions at Ras el Medauuar during the second unsuccessful attack on Tobruk on 1st May.

In 1942 during the second visit of the 9th Division to the Western Desert 946 Australians were captured, including 697 of the 24th Brigade Group during July. The greatest losses in this month were sustained by the 2/28th Battalion in its attack on Ruin Ridge when 489 were taken prisoner.

Practically every unit of the 6th Division was represented in the 2,065 captured during the campaign in Greece, the heaviest losses being in the 6th Divisional A.A.S.C. (225) and the 2/6th Battalion (208).

The engagements on Crete provided the largest number of Australians so far taken prisoner in a single operation. It is difficult to assess the maximum number that actually were in enemy hands because of the chaotic conditions in the assembly areas after the fighting ended. A large number who were virtually prisoners of war walked out of the concentration areas—they could not be described as camps—and although many were eventually recaptured, there were also many who escaped from the island, some to reach Greece direct and others via Greece and Turkey.

<sup>1</sup> This total includes one (Pte G. H. Bamford, 2/33 Bn) who died of dysentery while a prisoner of the Vichy French in Syria. A total of 175 men of the A.I.F. were taken prisoner by the Vichy forces in the Syrian campaign, but, with the exception of Bamford, all were returned to their units on the signing of the armistice. Three officers and a warrant-officer of the A.I.F. were in a party of British officers and N.C.O.'s numbering 65 evacuated from Syria by air before the armistice. One plane-load of 13, which included Capt E. F. Aitken, 2/2 Pnr Bn, was forced to land on the island of Scarpanto in the Dodecanese and returned to Syria on 30th August 1941 by way of Rhodes, Athens, Corinth, Brindisi, Montalbo P.W. Camp and Toulon. The main party was landed at Athens, later transported to Salonika and eventually repatriated to Syria, but not before they had by train traversed Greece, Yugoslavia, Austria, Germany and occupied France to Toulon and thence by ship back to Beirut where they arrived on 15th August. This party included Lt G. B. Connor, 2/33 Bn, and Lt W. I. Summons and WO2 T. Hulse, both of 2/2 Pnr Bn. The Vichy French commander and others detained as hostages were not released until arrival of the party from Scarpanto—see G. Long, *Greece, Crete and Syria*, pp. 519-21.

The number that was eventually recorded as being taken prisoner on Crete was 3,109; of these 517 were of the 2/11th Battalion, 493 of the 2/1st Battalion and 410 of the 2/7th Battalion.

The unenviable distinction of being the first member of the A.I.F. to be taken prisoner in the second world war goes to Sergeant K. W. Walsh of the 6th Divisional Cavalry Regiment, who was captured by Italians at Giarabub on 26th December 1940, whilst the first Australian soldier to be captured by the Germans in this war was Lieutenant Rowley of the 2/5th Battalion.<sup>2</sup>

The combatants among the prisoners taken during the withdrawal to Tobruk in April 1941 were promptly marched away, but the 42 men of the 2/8th Field Ambulance remained near the scene of their capture for two days caring for British and German wounded in tents or in the open using medical supplies from their own vehicles. Later they were taken to Derna where they operated a hospital for wounded men, mainly Germans from the Tobruk perimeter.

The line of evacuation of prisoners of the Axis forces in North Africa was, generally, Derna (when capture was near to, or east of that town), Benghazi to Tripoli, with embarkation at either of the two latter places for the sea trip to Italy. When prisoners were taken by the Germans they were soon handed over to the Italians, the North African theatre being Italian "territory". The journey of three or four days to Tripoli was made in trucks into which the prisoners were packed with room only to stand, exposed to the sun and dust-storms with few stops between the nightly staging camps. At Benghazi, where the stay sometimes lasted days or even weeks, the prisoners were accommodated in bomb-damaged buildings or in a transit camp on the outskirts of the city. Between Benghazi and Tripoli the first night was usually spent at El Agheila at a ruined aerodrome, and the following night at Misurata where the men were quartered in an Italian-built Arab settlement consisting of several hundred squat, stone huts of two or three rooms each, devoid of furniture or appurtenances but certainly not of fleas! Around Tripoli there were three prisoner-of-war camps, two in use mainly as transit camps, while a third, at Gargaresc, was a work-camp, about which more will be said later.

The first batch of Australians to reach the Tripoli area were those captured at Er Regima and Mechili and they, after a four days' stop at Benghazi, reached Sabratha, some 30 miles beyond Tripoli. Here they stayed for a few days during which they received the Italian soldier's usual food. On 4th May, together with other British prisoners captured about the same time, they left for Italy, embarking at Tripoli for an uneventful crossing during which there were few complaints about the food. After disembarking at Naples they were taken to Capua, another transit camp. There they spent a week in tents; rain fell during the whole period and living conditions were very uncomfortable.

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<sup>2</sup> See Long, *To Benghazi*, pp. 285, 291.

At Sulmona was the next camp, known later as Campo PG78,<sup>3</sup> where there were already a number of British officers and other ranks including a few Australians. The officers and other ranks were each in separate compounds, the former in brick buildings, the latter in stone huts with cement floors; all had been used to house Austrian prisoners during the 1914-18 war. Conditions there were an improvement on those experienced hitherto; food was better, hot showers were available, walks into the mountains were organised and playing-cards (later banned), draughts and other table games were available. Lieut-Colonel Munro of the 2/3rd Anti-Tank Regiment became Senior British Officer and he instituted a system of contributions from officers according to rank to help out the other ranks who were receiving rations only. Those other ranks who received pay for working also contributed to the fund. Red Cross food parcels and clothing were also issued. One diarist<sup>4</sup> recorded on 28th May "We get olive oil, lettuce, onions and a ration of sugar fairly often. Also we sleep between bed sheets", whilst another related that "life was almost bearable". The camp hospital was woefully short of medical supplies; any patients gravely ill were transferred to a civil hospital in Sulmona.

The majority of the officers who were in the camp at this period remained there until June 1943 and much the same conditions obtained, except that food became scarcer and prices higher. On 17th July 1941 all Australian other ranks were given a few hours' notice to leave and were transferred to a camp near Bolzano in northern Italy, known as Campo Prato. Here they were housed in a winery equipped with three-tier beds and overcrowded. The medical situation was similar to that at Sulmona, but at the hospital in Bolzano, sufferers from beri beri and dysentery were given injections with favourable results. An extract from a diary for 23rd July reads:

Trouble for the first time—over the insubordination of the troops. Thirty of the boys went to gaol for 20 days. We soon got used to the Camp Commandant and he to us. He was a good old bloke in many ways and the boys had nothing to say against him. He used to let us go for walks two or three miles from the camp and we always got our Red Cross parcels and fags. We got one parcel each once a week. We also got writing paper, and letter cards once a week.<sup>5</sup>

It was also possible to send radiograms through the Vatican City Radio.

Owing to the congested nature of the area there was no sport or exercise other than walks, and to combat boredom the men played "two-up" and held concerts. The Italians made efforts to suppress gambling but with little success. All kinds of food, cigarettes or even clothes were staked in the games. A narrator drily remarks "Imagine backing a tail for a tin of jam at Thomo's".<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Abbreviation of *Campo concentramento di prigionieri di guerra*. These permanent camps were not numbered until early in 1942.

<sup>4</sup> Pte H. Stephenson, NX19374; 2/13 Bn. Labourer; of Wollongong, NSW; b. Northumberland, England, 27 Sep 1919.

<sup>5</sup> Pte H. Stephenson.

<sup>6</sup> Pte C. H. Jagoe, 2/13 Bn in the 2/13 unit history, *Bayonets Abroad*. Thomo's was a notorious two-up school in Sydney.



Towards the end of October another move found this party of Australians at Campo 57, Gruppignano, in north-east Italy. There they were joined a day later by a draft of 200, also from North Africa, mainly men of the 2/23rd and 2/24th Battalions. The camp, into which all Australians were being drafted, was situated in a wide plain surrounded by mountains and was a large compound of barbed wire containing wooden huts about 90 feet long by 30 feet with concrete foundations. The camp was then in the course of being divided into two compounds, but was capable of further sub-division as the camp population increased. Sanitation was at first inadequate but was gradually improved by the prisoners themselves.

Beds were in timber-framed tiers of two, already bug infested. Winter was now setting in, snow lay on the ground and prisoners, many still clad only in tropical clothing, were acutely affected by the cold, accentuated by the numerous and long drawn-out check parades which were the fiendish delight of the camp commandant, Colonel Calcaterra of the Italian Carabinieri. Calcaterra was a dyed-in-the-wool Fascist, who was formerly in charge of an Italian police district, and a sign over his office door read: "The English are cursed, but more cursed are those Italians who treat them well." There were few among his camp guards who did not carry out the implication of this message. Men were awarded 30 days' detention—both the minimum and maximum penalty—for minor offences such as failing to salute an officer passing at a distance, or failing to stand to attention at Retreat even though they had not heard the faint bugle call. Men were frequently handcuffed in the cells for up to four hours a day. Not only were the cells always full, but there was usually a long waiting list for detention. Punishments were summarily awarded, no opportunity being given the accused to offer an explanation. Many pinpricking regulations were imposed and several fatal shootings took place including one of an Australian,<sup>7</sup> who was shot at point-blank range while being led away by two companions to prevent further altercation between the guard and his victim.

One instance of Calcaterra's wrath is worthy of record if only to exemplify the sense of humour that never deserted the average Australian even in the direst circumstances. Calcaterra, inspecting the morning check parade, came upon an offending beard and ordered that all beards were to be removed. The murmurs and demeanour of the rest of the men conveyed to the commandant that the order was not popular and likely to be disobeyed. Thereupon Calcaterra ordered that not only beards but also hair on the head should be removed. Remonstrance by the camp leader, Warrant-Officer Cotman,<sup>8</sup> who was vociferously supported by the rest of the parade, further incensed Calcaterra who worked himself into such

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<sup>7</sup> Cpl E. W. Symons, WX1982; 2/32 Bn. Butcher; of Kalgoorlie, WA; b. Prahran, Vic, 7 May 1907. Killed while prisoner of war 20 May 1943. "Sox" Symons, a well-known identity in the unit was captured near Post S7, Tobruk, on 4th August 1941 when he, with another stretcher bearer, went into enemy-held territory after a counter-attack in search of missing men of his battalion.

<sup>8</sup> WO1 A. A. S. Cotman, PX8; 2/15 Bn. Planter; of Abau, Papua; b. Garstang, England, 24 Jul 1907.

a state that the prisoners' attitude changed from resentment to open amusement, bringing Calcaterra almost to apoplexy. He rushed out of the camp and returned with all available guards with fixed bayonets; a machine-gun was mounted and small hand-carts loaded with handcuffs were wheeled into the compound. Those who refused the ministrations of the barber were handcuffed. As the refusals increased more handcuffs were called for. Half way through the proceedings one humorist, on leaving the barber's chair, bleated like a sheep and scampered away jumping a non-existent hurdle in imitation of a sheep being released. This was taken up by others until the compound resembled a burlesque of a shearing-shed yard. Eventually "shearing" was completed, the handcuffed ones were led away to the cells and the camp quietened down. That night after the camp seemed at rest, a plaintive "baa" came from one of the huts, and was taken up from hut to hut until the camp was in a pandemonium which continued almost throughout the night. The climax arrived the next morning when Calcaterra discovered that those placed in detention for refusal had not been shorn! His wrath then fell on his guards.<sup>9</sup> Some months later the malcontents were removed to another camp—ironically, the best in Italy.

Later, the 500 Australians in Campo 57 were joined by a further draft from North Africa including 450 New Zealanders. In January 1942 a Red Cross clothing issue, including British battledress, was made, and, apart from the continued harsh discipline, conditions improved. Red Cross food parcels were issued weekly when available, but the camp suffered the reduction in rations which was general throughout Italy in March 1942. At Easter the commandant presented each prisoner with a sweet and wished him a happy Easter. Mail was arriving from Australia and some were receiving private parcels. A parade in commemoration of Anzac Day was held, to which the Italians sent a beautiful wreath. On the same day about 200 Australians moved out to various work-camps in the Vercelli district where they were engaged mainly in rice farming. Until April 1943 the prisoners at Gruppignano did no work other than the necessary camp chores, but they received one *lira* a day to supplement the rations. This was usually spent on vegetables. By October 1942 there were more than 1,200 Australians in the camp including two Australian medical officers, Major Binns<sup>1</sup> and Captain Levings,<sup>2</sup> 1,000 New Zealanders, a few Cypriots, Indians and one Chinese merchant seaman whom the Italians classed as an Australian.<sup>3</sup>

Benghazi prisoner-of-war camp was merely a transit camp from which prisoners captured in the German offensive of April 1941 or taken during the siege of Tobruk were staged en route to Tripoli. Up to September 1941, when the camp was suddenly emptied, conditions were comparatively

<sup>9</sup> Recounted by J. L. Brill, "It Happened in an Italian Prison Camp," *Stand-To*, April 1950.

<sup>1</sup> Lt-Col R. T. Binns, OBE, ED, SX9123. 2/8 Fd Amb 1940-41; MO Campo 57 (Italy) 1941-42; OC Med Div 101 AGH 1943-45. Medical practitioner; of Hazelwood Park, SA; b. Unley, SA, 12 Jun 1901.

<sup>2</sup> Capt E. W. Levings, OBE, NX70155. RMO 2/3 A-Tk Regt; MO Campo 57 (Italy). Medical practitioner; of Leeton, NSW; b. Wyalong, NSW, 16 Jan 1902. Died 17 May 1947.

<sup>3</sup> For the medical aspects of Campo 57 see A. S. Walker, *Middle East and Far East*, pp. 401-4.

good. The quarters provided in stone barracks with concrete floors were clean and not overcrowded. Rations consisted of two loaves of bread at 10 a.m., stew with fresh meat at noon, and rice or macaroni at 6 p.m., lemons twice weekly, olive oil three times a fortnight and 35 cigarettes each Monday. Having little to do but keep the camp clean the men spent the day playing chess, cards, studying or reading. Educational groups were formed to study a diversity of subjects, the philosophy lectures, given by an Australian clergyman serving in the ranks,<sup>4</sup> drawing audiences of up to 200.

This camp came into use again in November 1941 after the British offensive when thousands of prisoners fell into German hands. It was then woefully overcrowded and conditions were chaotic. Over 6,000 British troops were held there during December; as the British advance neared Benghazi they had high hopes of being freed, but a last-minute evacuation by sea prevented their liberation.

A party of 300, which included about 100 Australians, left Benghazi in June 1941 for Tripoli, being transported overland in motor trucks. These were mostly men who had been wounded and taken prisoner in the German offensive of April or in the counter-attacks at Tobruk or Salum and had recovered in Derna hospital. The party also included men of the 2/8th Field Ambulance who had conducted the hospital at Derna under Italian administration. At Tripoli they entered Campo 59, a stone barracks which had formerly served as a training centre for Italian naval cadets. A few days after arrival, control of the camp was taken over by the Germans from the Italians and its designation became *Feldpost 12545*. What had amounted almost to indifference by the Italians towards their captives now changed to brutality. Reveille varied from 2.30 to 4 a.m. according to the whim of the commandant. A cup of "coffee", slice of bread and a spoonful of jam comprised breakfast and then the men were hustled out in parties of 80 by the shouting guards to work 15 to 20 hours on the docks loading shells or bombs or unloading and stacking cases of supplies at a depot some 18 miles away, whither they were transported in trucks. Each had a small tin of sardines and bread for dinner, worked again till dark, sometimes till 11 p.m., and then went back to camp for a ladle of stew and bread and then bed. Pay was three *lire* a day, but was of little value. Razor blades, cigarettes and stationery could be bought at the canteen, but there was nothing to assuage hunger. Protected personnel were forced to work.

Sleep on most nights was interrupted by the crash of Allied bombs on Tripoli and the response of anti-aircraft batteries. On one occasion the camp kitchen was hit, but there were no casualties. For four months these continued, seven days a week, the only respite being one day on which all men remained in camp to de-bug their quarters. No man could have continued on the rations issued were it not for food stolen at Fatma, where the supply dump was situated. By numerous ruses and subterfuges

<sup>4</sup> Chaplain Rev E. N. Broomhead, SX5729. 2/8 Fd Amb, 2/5 AGH. Methodist minister; of Buckleboo, SA; b. Glenelg, SA, 31 Aug 1910. Author of *Barbed Wire in the Sunset* (1944).

the party working there fed themselves on chocolate, tinned milk, tinned meat and biscuits and every day returned to camp carrying food for those on other parties. Punishment of men who were caught was severe, but the thieving continued; their lives depended on it. The men on the docks and petrol dumps too were doing their part: hundreds of shells, bombs and cases of munitions "fell" into the harbour and petrol was allowed to pour out into the sand, and sugar (stolen from Fatma) was placed in full drums.

Eventually, of course, the wholesale depredation of the stock at Fatma was discovered and prisoners were no longer employed there. This caused a serious decline in health, but the consequent hardships were somewhat alleviated by the removal of the camp commandant, who, it was discovered, had been selling camp rations on the black market in Tripoli, and his replacement by a young German. This fanatical devotee of Hitler still retained a sense of human kindness. Although the seven-day working week still operated, hours were reduced to 10 or 12 daily and sometimes even to 8. Punishment of those undergoing detention was relaxed, camp concerts were encouraged and Divine Service, hitherto forbidden, was permitted. The working parties were now arriving back in camp early enough to have a swim in the sea from the beach adjoining the camp and this relieved the lice problem considerably. Working parties, too, were sometimes met on return to camp with a small gift of cigarettes, sweets or dried fruit.

This state of affairs, however, lasted but one month and the young man was replaced by a worse bully than the first commandant. He ordered that no prisoners were to sit down, except during the meal break, from the time they left camp till their return, nor were they to smoke while away from camp and then not after dark, which left little time in which one could smoke. He went from work-party to work-party to see if his orders were enforced, which they were not. The guards had acquired a grudging admiration for the prisoners for the way they had retained their morale during the regime of the first commandant and were now disposed to leniency; some even kept watch while their charges had a surreptitious smoke or rest.

Rations were progressively reduced, mainly on account of a general shortage; the Royal Navy and the R.A.F. were seriously hindering the enemy supply ships which had previously been arriving in weekly convoys of 10 to 15 ships. At one period 14 weeks elapsed without a single ship arriving at Tripoli. Christmas Day 1941 was spent working extra hours as punishment imposed because a complaint had been made to the commandant about a shooting incident on a working party. He ordered half rations and extra work for three days. This meant that the Christmas Day rations were: a bun for breakfast, two sardines for dinner, a ladle of soup at the day's end. In spite of this and despite the German ban on singing, the prisoners sang carols as they were driven through the streets of Tripoli to work on Christmas morning.

Ten days later, the British forces being once more in Benghazi and moving towards Tripoli, the whole camp was shipped away, first to Palermo in Sicily and eventually a few to Campo 52 at Chiavari near Genoa, but the majority to Gruppignano. The journey through Italy was in comfortable railway carriages.

The camp *Feldpost 12545*, Tripoli, was visited by a representative of the International Committee of the Red Cross on 15th August 1941, during the regime of the first commandant and the report submitted after the visit is a striking example of how prisoner-of-war camps under control of the Axis Powers were "window-dressed" for visits by representatives of the Protecting Power or the International Red Cross.<sup>5</sup> The report began with a flowery description of the location and surroundings of the camp, reminiscent of a brochure extolling the tourist attractions of any tropical country. It then went on to say, *inter alia*,

On the beach . . . two roofs mounted on high pillars of wood, permit the prisoners in their hours of leisure to enjoy the sea air and at the same time be sheltered from the rays of the sun. Thus they enjoy their siestas, lying on the soft sand . . . lavatories which are sprinkled several times a day with lime and creosote . . . here also the hygiene is perfect. . . . The cooks have at their disposal abundant supplies of excellent quality, they prepare the food according to the taste of the prisoners who are obviously quite satisfied. . . . The prisoners who wish to have a second helping may ask for it and are never refused. Also at breakfast they receive coffee, bread and jam without limitation. Fruit and vegetables play a great part in the feeding of prisoners and are checked thoroughly every day by the Commandant and the camp doctor. . . . The daily ration contains a quantity of 4,500 calories per man. The vitamins A, B, C, D and E are furnished in a quantity more than sufficient. Fruit and vegetables are abundant. Work is a distraction for the prisoners and procures for them a remuneration which considerably improves their condition. . . . I also visited the camp at Fatma . . . the men work from 7.30 a.m. to midday, the midday meal is followed by a rest and work is started again at 2 p.m. and then finished again at 6 p.m. and this second period is interrupted by another rest of about 1½ hours towards 4 p.m. The discipline at the camp is satisfactory; there has been no need to inflict punishment up to this time.

All the above statements were at variance with the facts, as attested by a former inmate<sup>6</sup> and corroborated by statements of other prisoners who were there.

On 16th August 1942, the Italians embarked a number of Allied prisoners of various nationalities at Benghazi for shipment to Italy. Probably about 2,000 prisoners were crammed into the five holds of the *Nino Bixio*, a freighter of 8,400 tons, on her maiden voyage; these included about 200 Australians captured at El Alamein three or four weeks previously. The Australians together with 300 New Zealand and English troops were crowded into No. 1 (front) hold, half on the top portion and half below. The hatch cover was closed until the vessel was under way and then only partially opened to allow access to the latrines. With half

<sup>5</sup> On the other hand it should be noted that in October 1944 when ICRC representatives requested permission to visit Stalag XVIII A, Wolfsberg, the day before the date arranged, the Germans agreed.

<sup>6</sup> A typescript of *Barbed Wire in the Sunset* by the Rev E. N. Broomhead was forwarded to the War Crimes Commission, London, as evidence in its investigations and an affidavit sworn by the author as to the truth of his statements.

of the men suffering from dysentery much misery was caused while the hatch was closed. At 3 p.m. on the second day out, the *Nino Bixio*, which was accompanied by another ship and two escorting Italian destroyers, was torpedoed by an Allied submarine. One torpedo hit the engine-room, another exploded in the crowded No. 1 hold, causing awful carnage. A survivor<sup>7</sup> from the bottom of the hold later described the scene:

The bottom portion of the hold immediately flooded to about twenty feet. Timber and metal came crashing down everywhere and quite a lot of men, who were not killed by the explosion, were trapped by this falling debris. The two steel ladders leading to the top part of the hold were blown to bits, which left us no way of getting out of the hold. Survivors from the top portion found ropes somewhere on the ship and eventually all survivors [from the bottom hold] were landed on to the deck. Some men from the bottom, naturally thinking the boat would sink, tried to get through the jagged hole where the torpedo had passed out the other side of the ship. Some of these were cut to bits as the swell washed them against the jagged edges of the steel plates.

There was some panic aft among the Italian guards and crew and most of these jumped overboard, being joined by some Free French and Indian prisoners. A number of these perished almost immediately, others scrambled on to rafts and met with varying fortunes. Some on rafts drifted helplessly without food and water for long periods before being picked up and returned to Benghazi. One Australian<sup>8</sup> died on a raft after drifting for nine days. On the *Nino Bixio* the wounded were brought up on deck and made as comfortable as possible. The unwounded survivors paid tribute to the fortitude of the wounded, some of whom were very badly injured. The stricken ship wallowed helplessly all night, the other vessels having dispersed at the time of the attack, but at first light one of the destroyers returned and took *Nino Bixio* in tow to Navarino in southern Greece where the wounded were taken off. Of the 504 originally in No. 1 hold, only 70 remained. The survivors were kept on the ship for four days to carry up as many dead as was practicable and to identify them if possible. During this period a few Italian army biscuits were their only food, but, as a survivor put it, "everyone was too dazed by the shock to worry about food". Of the 201 Australians on board at Benghazi 37 were killed or drowned. After a short stay at Corinth the uninjured were shipped to Bari in Italy, where they entered Campo 75, then being used as a main transit camp for British prisoners from North Africa.

Most Australian officers who were captured in North Africa sooner or later found themselves at Campo 78, Sulmona, a permanent camp for both officers and other ranks. As previously stated when the Australian other ranks were transferred to another camp in October 1941 the officers remained, later being joined by others taken prisoner in the El Alamein operations. The officers were quartered in two compounds, one known as Top Camp, the other as Lower Camp. The former was composed of 48

<sup>7</sup> Sgt G. O. Norton-Knight, NX53869; 2/3 A-Tk Regt. Stud overseer; of Bowral, NSW; b. Sydney, 4 Jan 1913. Another brother, Bdr M. O. Norton-Knight, was also a survivor of the bottom hold. A third brother, Gnr O. P. Norton-Knight, was wounded and captured at Ruin Ridge in July 1942 and died in an Italian hospital on 25 Aug 1942.

<sup>8</sup> L-Cpl J. L. Paterson, WX7016; 2/28 Bn. Clerk; of Perth, WA; b. Aberdeen, Scotland, 5 Apr 1916. Died while prisoner of war 26 Aug 1942.

rooms each containing two officers. In Lower Camp there were five dormitories of about 100 by 15 feet each occupied by 18 officers. Each officer was allotted a wire mattress, bed sheets, three blankets, dressing-table, small table and chair. Each room or dormitory contained a stove and was lit by electricity. Later, with the influx of more prisoners, accommodation inclined to become cramped. The Australian officers were quartered in Top Camp, although there were English officers of higher rank living in the Lower Camp and enjoying less privacy and comfort. The Italians paid captive officers at the same rate as the equivalent rank in the Italian Army,<sup>9</sup> but deducted a messing charge which in August 1941 was 420 *lire* per month but had in six months risen to 630 *lire* and continued to rise progressively, although the quantity and quality of the food supplied likewise continued to diminish. With the increased cost of supplementary food, hardship was caused to those of lower ranks, particularly when there was a breakdown in the delivery of Red Cross parcels; it was then agreed that messing charges be met by a contribution proportionate to rank. The officers also contributed, again according to rank, to a fund to assist other ranks who were receiving rations only. The Australian officers also sent all available funds at Christmas 1942 and 1943 to the Australians at Gruppignano.

Study groups covering a multitude of subjects were organised and excellent theatrical performances were staged; the officers' productions were shown also in the other ranks' camp and the other ranks reciprocated by bringing their shows into the officers' compound.

Tunnelling with a view to escape was a favourite pastime and seven different tunnels were dug, but all discovered by the Italians before actual escape was possible. A library was in existence and officers were allowed to order books once a month from Turin. Newspapers were permitted after December 1941.

In June 1943 the majority of the Australian officers captive with the Italians were at Sulmona, and, with a few isolated exceptions, all Australian other ranks at Campo 57, Gruppignano, or at a work-camp near Vercelli, 50 miles from Turin. In view of the impending invasion, camps in southern Italy were cleared and the occupants sent north out of possible operational areas. At Sulmona the prisoners' hopes of an early release, which had been mounting as rumours of landings spread, received a rude shock when they were paraded and those captured by the Germans ordered to fall out. Very few did, as it suggested a move to Germany. However, shortly afterwards they were informed that they were to be moved to a camp in northern Italy. With a few exceptions all the officers were sent to

<sup>9</sup> The amount received per month by British and French officers was:

Second-Lieutenant	. . .	750 <i>lire</i>
Lieutenant	. . .	950 "
Captain	. . .	1,100 "
Major	. . .	1,300 "
Lieut-Colonel	. . .	1,400 "
Colonel	. . .	1,600 "

The exchange rate of 72 *lire* to the £1 was incompatible with existing conditions.

Campo 19 at Bologna.<sup>1</sup> They were allowed to take with them all their possessions, including the vast library and their private and communal food stocks.<sup>2</sup> At Bologna conditions were not as good as the ones they had left, but excitement, conjecture and the hope of early freedom dissipated thoughts of discomfort. Some were irritated by a tightening of discipline (by the Senior British Officers—not the Italians) and, despite an order by the Senior British Officer that everyone was to remain in camp until relieved, many were preparing food supplies in haversacks in readiness for a break if necessary. Parties from other camps farther south continued to arrive until there were 900-odd officers and 300 other ranks in camp and these were organised into well-planned groups, supplied with the necessary food, maps and so on, and allotted certain areas for dispersal and rendezvous.

Article III of the armistice read:

All prisoners or internees of the United Nations to be immediately turned over to the Allied Commander-in-Chief, and none of these may now or at any time be evacuated to Germany.

Elaborate arrangements had been drawn up as early as March for the recovery and evacuation of prisoners in the event of an armistice with Italy and most camp leaders had received the War Office instruction that in such event all prisoners were to remain in camp until the arrival of Allied forces. This order was issued on the assumption that Allied forces would occupy Italy, or the major portion of it, almost immediately after the signing of an armistice and was intended to expedite the evacuation of the released prisoners, but the military situation pertaining on 8th September was entirely different to that assumed earlier. As late as one week before the signing of the armistice on 3rd September, detailed plans, based on the tentative arrangements of March, were drawn up at a conference at Allied Headquarters, and on 7th September, the day before promulgation of the armistice, the War Office informed the Mediterranean branch of the War Office Intelligence section that arrangements for dealing with prisoners of war in the event of an Italian collapse were under review.

It was a week later, however, before a B.B.C. broadcast informed prisoners that it was not their duty to remain in the camps but to escape. It was then too late; of those who had obeyed the War Office order to remain or had been prevented by the Italians from leaving their camps, 25,000 British prisoners had already been evacuated to Germany, including those at Gruppignano where the Germans, with the connivance of the notorious Calcaterra, had quietly rounded up the camp almost intact two days after the armistice announcement. The policy of the British authorities regarding the procedure to be adopted by prisoners at this period has

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<sup>1</sup> Maj M. I. Wheatley, 2/2 MG Bn, and Lt J. C. Guest, 2/3 Lt A-A Regt, were among the rear party left behind. Wheatley later escaped from the camp and reached Allied lines.

<sup>2</sup> In December 1941 the stock of Red Cross parcels was exhausted and none arrived for six months. It was then decided to build up a reserve of non-perishable foods. The wisdom of this paid excellent dividends during the transition to Germany.

been bitterly criticised by former prisoners of war. "It had been a ghastly blunder," wrote one. . . . "Thousands of men had been cheated of the freedom they had so anxiously awaited for so long."<sup>3</sup>

Two days after the Germans had taken over the camp at Gruppignano they began evacuating the prisoners to Germany, staging them in some instances in Austria. Strong guards accompanied every batch and dire threats were issued as to the consequences of any attempt to escape, including a demonstration of a flame-thrower. Of the Australians at Campo 57 the majority went to Stalag XVIII A/Z at Spittal or to Stalag VIII A, Gorlitz. Calca-terra, the commandant of Campo 57, it might be mentioned in passing, was killed by Italian partisans soon after the Italian collapse, thus being spared arraignment on charges before an Allied War Crimes Tribunal.

At Bologna when the news of the armistice arrived, the Italian guards were more demonstrative than their charges, smashing their rifles and donning civilian clothes preparatory to leaving for home. The atmosphere was electric, with everyone wondering what was to happen next. It was known that Germans were in the area. They had been seen by prisoners while on the controlled walking trips which were a feature of this camp, but most thought the Germans would be too occupied to worry about prisoners; moreover the Italian commandant had promised to give news of any hand-over. Whether he had been notified or whether he played false was not known, but at 4 a.m. next morning, 9th September, the Germans arrived in force, entered the camp, arrested the Italians, and took charge.

The prisoners had previously cut the perimeter-wire at the rear of the camp as an emergency exit and, on the arrival of the Germans at the main gate, the alarm was given and a mass exodus was made to the gap at the rear. Here the men were met by a burst of machine-gun fire and grenades. One was killed and several wounded, but most of the firing was aimed overhead. Several escaped, including Lieutenants Harrod and Ellis<sup>4</sup> who, befriended by Italians and Czechs, remained at large until reaching Allied lines on 29th July 1944. The great majority were herded back into the compound, packed tightly together, and surrounded by machine-gun detachments. Eventually they were allowed to return to their huts, and two days later were moved to Modena, 20 miles distant, being allowed to take with them only what they could carry. They loaded themselves from the reserve food stocks, destroying all surplus food and clothing. At Modena they were loaded into cattle-trucks, their first experience of the German method of transporting troops; then began a journey akin to those experienced by the 6th Division prisoners from Greece, described later, but in this instance there was no shortage of food although no rations or water were issued on the journey of three days. During the 12-hour wait in the trucks in Modena yards, attempts were made to escape through the cordon of S.S. guards patrolling the train. One of the

<sup>3</sup> Uys Krige, *The Way Out* (1946), p. 181.

<sup>4</sup> Capt C. C. Ellis, WX7519; 2/28 Bn. Regular soldier; of Melbourne; b. Melbourne, 3 Sep 1917.

successful ones<sup>5</sup> boldly walked across the yard in full view of everyone, vaulted the fence and walked with an Italian civilian down the street—to freedom. He succeeded in reaching Switzerland.

Once the train was on the move, each truckload became a potential escape party and holes were cut or forced in practically every truck. In all 102 prisoners were missing when the train arrived in Germany, of whom approximately 50, including 13 Australians,<sup>6</sup> reached Switzerland. Nine other Australians were known to have jumped from the train but were recaptured. One escaper wrote:

The truck's floor was coated by a few generations of cattle manure and on lifting this we discovered that some of the wooden planks had rotted. . . . It took until dark to prise out a plank, leaving an opening large enough for one man to get through. An officer crawled through under the truck and undid the sliding doors: unfortunately the train stopped and in the subsequent inspection the Germans discovered the unlocked door and were heard to remark: "The fools inside don't realise that the door is unlocked." They locked it again and when we were moving again the task had to be repeated. With the door open and no interruptions from our over-confident guards, we drew lots to jump—Dad and I were ninth on the list. There was some discord between those willing to attempt to get away and those unwilling to do so. Eventually while moving slowly up a hill Dad and I jumped, after dropping a pack of food. It was then about four o'clock in the morning and we found ourselves near Le Viss, just outside Trento.<sup>7</sup>

The two Sharps for the next seven days travelled over the mountains, reaching Switzerland safely through the Bernina Pass.

Those who remained on the train were first placed in Stalag VIIA, Moosburg, then Fort Bismarck, Strasbourg; their sojourn in these overcrowded camps varied from a few days to a few weeks before they were sent to permanent camps at Oflag VA, Weinsberg, or Oflag XIIIB, Hadamar.<sup>8</sup>

Those in the work-camps around Vercelli, whither several hundred Australians had been transferred from Gruppignano, were fortunate in that few Germans were in the area and their Italian guards, as gratified as their captives that the armistice had been signed, either deserted their posts or allowed their charges to leave. Moreover Vercelli was within reasonable distance of the Swiss border. In all, 400 Australians reached Switzerland safely from these work-camps in the Vercelli area, some arriving there by the middle of September; others preferred to stay with their new-found Italian friends in their homes or joined the so-called partisan bands, some of which were quite inactive.

<sup>5</sup> Lt E. A. Paul, NX27654; 2/3 Pnr Bn. Bridge carpenter; of Bondi, NSW; b. Sandgate, Qld, 12 Oct 1903. Died 22 Oct 1946.

<sup>6</sup> Capt H. J. Kroger, 9 Div HQ; Lt B. B. Grogan, 2/23 Bn; Lt R. S. Donnan, 2/15 Bn; Lt J. C. Morish, 2/3 Fd Regt; Lt D. A. MacDonald, 2/13 Bn; Lt H. A. Peterson, 2/13 Bn; Lt T. W. Elliot, 2/12 Bn; Lt J. L. Mair, 2/24 Bn; Lt R. H. Jones, 2/8 Bn; Lt F. Sharp, 2/3 A-Tk Regt; Gnr K. W. Sharp, 2/3 A-Tk Regt; F-Lt R. S. Jones, RAAF; F-Lt F. F. H. Eggleston, RAAF.

Gnr Sharp, the son of Lt Sharp, was permitted by the Senior British Officer to travel as an officer in order to be with his father in any escape plan.

<sup>7</sup> K. Sharp in *Stand-To*, January 1952. (Gnr K. W. Sharp, QX10358; 2/3 A-Tk Regt. Projectionist; of Toowoomba, Qld; b. Newcastle, NSW, 17 Oct 1920.)

<sup>8</sup> Oflag is an abbreviation of *offizierlager*—officers' camp; similarly stalag is an abbreviation of *mannschaft-stammlager*—a camp for men other than officers.

This was not so, however, in the case of Private Peck<sup>9</sup> and a few others of the A.I.F. whose deeds with the partisans in Italy were renowned both there and in Switzerland. Peck had a remarkable escape record. Between 1st June 1941, when he was taken prisoner at Sfakia, Crete, and 14th February 1942 he had escaped four times before being transferred to a prisoner-of-war camp on the island of Rhodes. He was there charged as a suspected spy. Before his trial in May, he with six others knocked out the guard, climbed the wall and set off for Turkey in a boat which was sunk in a storm. Picked up by an Italian destroyer, Peck was taken to Italy where for the next 12 months he was in four different prisoner-of-war camps. In June 1943 he escaped by climbing the wire at dusk but a month later was recaptured at the Swiss border, returned to Vercelli camp and sentenced to 30 days "camp discipline", but was placed in a prison. He was returned to camp on the day of the secret signing of the Italian armistice and on the day of promulgation, 8th September, he escaped as did many others. Peck then organised parties of Allied prisoners of war for movement to Switzerland and joined the partisans. In February 1944 he was arrested by the Gestapo in an act of sabotage and sentenced to death, but he appealed. Whilst awaiting hearing of the appeal in San Vittore gaol, Milan, he was detailed to an unexploded-bomb disposal squad. When performing this duty in Lambrate railway yards there was an air raid; the guards ran and so did Peck—in the opposite direction. Travelling by train to Laveno and by steamer across Lake Maggiore he contacted partisans at Intra and they assisted him to reach Switzerland on 22nd May. Six weeks later he returned to the partisans in Italy and remained with them for four months before re-entering Switzerland.

With the liberation of southern France, the Allied rescue organisation was able to operate in the area north and north-east of Turin, where numbers of prisoners were still living with civilians or fighting with the partisans. In October 1944 a party of 25, which included 9 Australians<sup>1</sup> who had been in Campo 106, Vercelli, was guided over the passes to Val-d'Isere, in France, where American forces were in occupation. They were later evacuated to Naples for repatriation. Approaching winter made similar evacuations impossible. One party perished in a blizzard in the Alps. There were still a few Australians at large in Italy at the end of hostilities. Eight were known to have been shot by Fascists during April and May 1945.

Before the Italian collapse very few escapers had succeeded in reaching Switzerland and these were accommodated with no difficulty until arrangements could be made for their repatriation. Under the Hague Convention of 1907, prisoners of war who escaped from custody into neutral territory were free men, but were expected to leave the neutral country as soon as

<sup>9</sup> Lt J. D. Peck, DCM, VX9534; 2/7 Bn. Farmer; of Crib Point, Vic; b. Sydney, 16 Feb 1918.

<sup>1</sup> Ptes C. W. Clarkson, J. C. Nelson, J. Fitzgerald, R. L. Vigar, H. G. L. Wainwright (all 2/28 Bn); Pte F. S. G. Hungerford (2/15 Bn); Pte I. H. St G. Sproule (2/32 Bn); Pte E. A. W. Morley (2/48 Bn) and Gnr R. Faton (2/3 A-Tk Regt).

possible. (They were in a different category to military personnel entering a neutral country to evade capture—these were liable to internment.) But the influx of escapers and Italian refugees<sup>2</sup> immediately after the Italian armistice became a serious problem to the Swiss authorities; there was not only the food question to be considered, but also the possibility of undesirables mixing with the genuine seekers of asylum, and the menace to Switzerland's neutrality with so many Allied troops free in the country. In consequence Britain agreed to let sufficient food and clothing pass through the European blockade to supply the escapers, and arranged to ensure the *bona fides* of all British escapers and to set up a military organisation for their concentration and control.

As the points of entry into Switzerland were scattered, nothing more than a preliminary medical examination was carried out until the escapers were sent to Wil in the north-east of Switzerland where the headquarters of British troops was situated. Here they were medically and dentally examined, issued with British uniforms and clothing and subjected to a thorough interrogation about their movements and every phase of their life from the time of their capture to their arrival at the Swiss frontier. They were then sent to detachment camps where the usual army issue of personal requirements was made. The detachments were each from 200 to 250 strong and were all within a radius of 10 to 20 miles of headquarters, generally in a small rural township, the billets usually being schools or factory buildings. Later the Senior British Officer arranged for the taking over of large hotels in the mountain tourist resorts of Adelboden, Arosa and Montreux, where, in addition to enjoying excellent accommodation, the men were able to participate in snow and ice sports, a number becoming quite proficient at these pastimes. The feeling of the Swiss population was definitely pro-Allied and the generosity and hospitality extended to the Australians were most marked.

Officers were allowed 15 Swiss francs a day and from this had to provide board and accommodation. Cost of living was high and most officers found it difficult to manage on the allowance. The troops were rationed on the same scale as Swiss troops which was a trifle better than that received by civilians. In addition they received an allowance of 60 *centimes* a day for the purchase of fruit or vegetables, these being the only unrationed food commodities. Escapers could not be forced to work but it was considered in the best interests of the men that they should engage in some form of civilian employment. A work-camp was opened and its occupants worked on a forest clearing scheme and a land draining project. Smaller contracts included farm work. Men working received 90 francs a month of which the worker was paid 2 francs a day, the balance being paid into an imprest account. Some men obtained employment in their own civilian type of work such as printing or watchmaking. In May 1944 a comprehensive trade training scheme was initiated, the subjects including all branches of the building and engineering trades, farming

<sup>2</sup> A Swiss source stated that about 20,000 escapers and refugees entered Switzerland between 8th and 24th September 1943.

and languages. Materials were supplied free by Swiss firms and stationery and text books by the Y.M.C.A. and International Red Cross. Language teachers were remunerated with funds supplied by the War Office. Ten days' leave was granted every three months to all ranks, with a rail warrant and, to other ranks, a subsistence allowance of seven francs a day. This leave could not always be taken by other ranks, however, because of the scarcity of invitations to private homes. Weekend and nightly leave was also available. The senior A.I.F. officer in Switzerland, Captain Kroger,<sup>3</sup> with others gave lectures on Australia to Anglo-Swiss clubs, universities and at villages in almost every canton with a view to stimulating migration, it being considered the Swiss would make excellent Australian citizens.

In addition to the A.I.F. officers mentioned previously there were also in Switzerland, Lieutenant Peterson, who escaped from Campo 5, Gavi, and Lieutenant A. Hunter,<sup>4</sup> a South African who was visiting Australia at the outbreak of war and enlisted as a private in the A.I.F. Taken prisoner in April 1941 in Greece he escaped in July and before recapture lived for four months in various Greek homes during which time he trained Greek officers in the use of the Bren gun and grenades. In addition to taking part in two unsuccessful tunnel schemes Hunter actually escaped seven times from various prisoner-of-war camps in Greece and Italy but in each case was recaptured soon afterwards. At the time of the Italian armistice he was transferred from Bologna in Italy to Fort Bismarck, Strasbourg, Germany. On arrival Hunter learned that they would be there for a short time only and he and another officer<sup>5</sup> prepared to hide in the fort. A month later when due to leave they hid for 15 hours in a small bricked-off part of a passage and eventually got clear of the fort. Three days later they reached France but, being warned of the presence of Germans, climbed into the mountains and, keeping parallel with the road, reached the village of Luvigny. Here arrangements were made for them to cross into Switzerland.

Articles 68 and 74 of the Geneva Convention provided for the setting up of mixed medical commissions to select candidates for repatriation by exchange of the maimed, incurable or other seriously ill prisoners. Very early in the war the I.C.R.C. drew the attention of belligerent nations to these provisions and, although negotiations with the Italians were slow, by March 1941 66 Germans and 1,153 British Commonwealth prisoners had been selected as eligible for repatriation. Arrangements went ahead for the exchange to take place at Dieppe, but, a few days before the fixed date, the Germans suddenly broadcast by radio that they would only agree to repatriation on terms of numerical equality. Britain would not agree, and so the arrangements fell through—a bitter disappointment to the men

<sup>3</sup> Maj H. J. Kroger, VX1580. 6 Div AASC, 9 Div HQ, I Corps. Schoolteacher; of Kew, Vic; b. Caulfield, Vic, 27 Jun 1906.

<sup>4</sup> See Long, *Greece, Crete and Syria*, p. 167.

<sup>5</sup> Sqn Ldr G. T. Chinchin, MBE, DFC, 250704; 3 Sqn. Clerk; of Geelong, Vic; b. Gardenvale, Vic, 31 Jul 1915.

concerned, who reached the French coast, only to be returned to the prison camps.

The first exchange of seriously sick and wounded between the British and the Italians was on 7th April 1942. Two hospital ships took the respective nationals to Smyrna, in Turkey, where the exchange of 340 Italian disabled and 579 protected personnel for 60 British sick and wounded and 69 protected personnel took place. The eleven Australians in the party were to go to Egypt, the English by train through Europe to England. One Australian had an intense desire to travel through Europe and visit England. He wrote:

The little Italian colonel saw me. "Ah, Pastore!" he said, "You go to Egypt! You are Australian." I gave him two packets of tea that had *not* been used before.<sup>6</sup> "No, Signore!" I said, "I go to England!" And it was so! I crossed Europe to England for four ounces of tea!<sup>7</sup>

The second and third repatriation exchanges between Britain and Italy included no Australians, but the fourth, carried out, also at Smyrna, on 2nd June 1943, provided an exchange of 2,676 Italians (447 disabled, 2,229 protected personnel) against 435 British (142 disabled, 293 protected personnel), which included 80 Australians (44 disabled, 36 protected personnel). A fifth exchange, a triangular one, involving Britain, Italy and Germany was arranged for September 1943 at Lisbon but was upset by the Italian armistice. The British prisoners were on the point of leaving Italy for Lisbon but instead were sent to Germany in the wholesale evacuation and languished many months more in prison camps before being repatriated. The Germans for exchange reached Lisbon and were disembarked there. The Italians, not enjoying conditions of reciprocity, were not allowed to land at Lisbon and were diverted to Algiers, from which port they eventually reached Italy.<sup>8</sup>

#### GREECE AND CRETE

When the German *40 Corps* marched into Greece through the Monastir Gap and met units of the I Australian Corps, no provision had been made by the Germans for the reception of prisoners of war; nor did they, when prisoners continued to fall into their hands, make much attempt to provide properly for those captured. Indeed, although it was 12 months after the withdrawal of the British forces from Greece before the last of the captives were evacuated from that country, any provision made for the accommodation of prisoners was of no more than a transitory nature. Consequently those unfortunate enough to be taken prisoner, were exposed to much hardship and consequent deterioration in health, which in many cases proved to be permanent.

<sup>6</sup> British prisoners after using the tea from their Red Cross parcels, dried the leaves and repacked them, to be used as bribes to guards or sold.

<sup>7</sup> Broomhead, pp. 146-7.

<sup>8</sup> Details of exchanges quoted from *Report of the International Committee of the Red Cross on its Activities during the Second World War (September 1, 1939 to June 30, 1947)*, (1948), Vol. I. This organisation arranged details of transfers at exchange ports and representatives travelled with prisoners from the detaining country until handed over to their own authorities.

The first Australians to fall into enemy hands in this campaign were captured on the night of 10th-11th April near Vevi.<sup>9</sup> These men, together with those captured during the next few days, were concentrated at Florina, where they were packed into cattle-trucks and taken north through Yugoslavia. They reached a prisoner-of-war camp at Marburg (Maribor) near the Austrian border, some 9 or 10 weeks later, having staged for varying periods at Skoplje, Nish and Belgrade. Throughout this period hunger was rampant and dysentery prevalent. No provision was made, even in the staging camps, for anything but the most primitive sanitation. Soon after arrival at Stalag XVIII D, as the camp at Marburg was designated, they were given a hot bath and their clothes were de-loused. They were photographed and fingerprinted, issued with prisoner-of-war numbers and identification discs, and for the first time registered as prisoners of war. It was some weeks, however, before they were given a postcard to send home. After a fortnight in this camp those who were fit were drafted out to work-camps. Of approximately 250 Australians who left Florina only 85 now remained fit for work; a number had been left behind at each stop in Yugoslavia suffering from dysentery, jaundice, beri beri or malaria.

At the *arbeitskommando*, or work-camp, each prisoner received a blanket, a Serbian or French uniform, strips of rags in place of socks, German underwear of *ersatz* material, a face towel, cake of soap and a weekly ration of 10 cigarettes. The prisoners worked from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. digging a canal, with an hour off for a midday meal. After 5 p.m. and after noon on Saturday they could volunteer for work on neighbouring farms, for which they would be paid with food supplies by the farmers. The weekly pay for the canal work was 4.70 *Reichmark*.<sup>1</sup> There were no medical facilities at the work-camps, but at the stalag there was a hospital, sadly lacking in medical supplies.

After the evacuation of prisoners from Florina, nearly all British<sup>2</sup> troops subsequently captured eventually passed through Salonika. Those becoming captive in northern Greece went there direct, probably after concentrating at Larisa or Lamia. Whilst awaiting removal to the concentration points they were held in a diverse assortment of places, maybe an open field, empty houses, schools or even a cemetery.

The majority of prisoners captured in the southern areas were first concentrated at Corinth, where, too, prisoners from Crete were later congregated. The centre at Corinth already held 4,000 Italians who had been taken prisoners by the Greeks and who the Germans decided would still remain under guard.

By 6th May nearly 8,000 British prisoners (including 350 officers) were packed into a sandy area of about 15 acres near an aerodrome on the outskirts of Corinth. Inside the perimeter were old stone buildings

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<sup>9</sup> See Long, *Greece, Crete and Syria*, Chapter 3.

<sup>1</sup> At the exchange rate agreed by Britain and Germany of 15*Rm* to £1 sterling.

<sup>2</sup> The term "British" throughout this appendix includes British Army troops, Empire troops, Cypriots and Palestinians.

and verminous wooden sheds lacking ventilation. The prisoners slept on stone floors; no beds or blankets were provided.<sup>3</sup> An open-trench latrine over 200 yards long was the only pretext to sanitation and dysentery was rife. Until the advent of older troops, unfit for front-line service, as guards, who proved more reasonable than their predecessors—paratroopers, Austrians and young S.S. guards in turn—the prisoners were subjected to the free use of rifle-butts on the person and there was unnecessary shooting in the compound resulting in some casualties.

A typical day's ration of about 800 calories<sup>4</sup> included a small quantity of dried fish, verminous lentils and a hard army biscuit, with a very little sugar or honey. It was possible to supplement this by gifts from, or purchases through, the Greek Red Cross; water was scarce, the daily ration being one quart obtained from primitive wells.

After the visit of an International Red Cross delegate, Dr Brunel, rations improved both in quality and quantity. Prisoners were allowed to go in parties to bathe, easing the personal hygiene problem. After the German attack on Crete, the camp commandant closed the camp market, reduced the already inadequate rations and imposed harsher discipline as a reprisal for alleged British atrocities to German paratroops in Crete, charges which later were admitted to be untrue.

On the arrival at Corinth of some of the prisoners of war from Crete early in June the transfer of those already there to Salonika was commenced. Batches of several hundreds went by train from Corinth to Gravia, then made a 25-mile march, which included the 4,000-foot Brallos Pass, to a siding near Lamia, where the captives were herded into cattle-trucks for the rail journey north to Salonika. Some parties went through Yugoslavia to Austria or Germany direct but the majority were staged at Salonika in a transit camp known as Frontstalag 183, their stay there varying from a few days to six months. This evacuation continued for a week, and by 11th June Corinth was cleared of most British prisoners. A number managed to evade the guards during the march between Gravia and Lamia and to escape into the hills where they were befriended by Greek peasants, but most escapers were gradually recaptured after varying periods and experiences. A few were able to get clear away and eventually rejoin their unit in Palestine via Turkey or islands of the Dodecanese group.

After the surrender in Crete those who did not succeed in evading capture were gradually concentrated near Canea where Australians, English, New Zealanders, Cypriots and Greeks straggled in, hungry, foot-sore and dispirited, until there was a mass of upwards of 15,000 Allied prisoners herded in a small sandy area, where they lay down in any available space. Water was scarce, shelter nil, except for a few small tents; there were no blankets, and food was at an absolute minimum, the main

<sup>3</sup> Prisoners taken at Tolos, however, had been equipped by the Germans with one blanket and a greatcoat before they left for Corinth.

<sup>4</sup> 2,250 calories were considered necessary to maintain normal health and 3,400 when engaged in manual work: *ICRC Report on its Activities during the Second World War*, Vol I, pp. 335-7.

source being what could be scrounged, by authorised parties, from former British dumps. Poultry, rabbits and in one instance a bullock, were also brought in and shared communally. Several narratives refer to a donkey that strayed into the camp area and was dispatched and devoured as food. The stench in the area surrounding the camp was overpowering, many bodies lay unburied and prisoners were set to work by the Germans as burial parties. Some were also forced to work on an adjacent aerodrome. Many escaped from this camp and some succeeded in reaching Egypt or Palestine, but as no records were made of the inhabitants of Dulag Kreta, as the camp was called by the Germans, it is impossible to tell who came under the categories of "escaped prisoners" or of "evaders".

The removal of Allied prisoners from Crete was partly by air and partly by sea. Most of the wounded and sick were flown by returning German troop-carrying aircraft to Athens where they were cared for at near-by Kokkinia in the 2/5th Australian General Hospital. Some uninjured prisoners, mostly officers, were also flown to the mainland of Greece, but the main body was shipped in parties of up to 1,000 on small coastal trading boats with primitive or no sanitary provision. Many were now suffering severely from dysentery which accentuated the misery of all. The first Australians to be shipped off left Suda Bay at the end of June, soon after Germany attacked Russia. Rations were issued on embarkation to last the period of the voyage. These were woefully inadequate and the men were ravenously hungry, with the result that few were able to make their rations last over the three to five days' voyage. Then they went on to Salonika by train. The first Australians from Crete arrived at Salonika towards the end of June when there were 7,000 Allied captives in the camp, including about 1,500 Yugoslavs and parties continued to arrive during the next few weeks, swelling the camp population to more than 12,000.

Bad as were conditions hitherto experienced those awaiting the captives at Salonika were infinitely worse. The accommodation—dilapidated barracks built during the Turko-Grecian wars and infested by fleas and bugs—was pitifully inadequate and many slept in the open; very few had any bedding and 50 per cent were without even one blanket. Indiscriminate firing by brutal and "trigger-happy" German guards caused casualties, kicking and use of rifle-butts and belts were common. Many were still suffering from dysentery, and now malaria added to the troops' misery. No one was allowed to the latrines after dark and several were shot for so doing, as also were two British officers discovered on the parade ground after nightfall, although they answered the guard's challenge and surrendered to the patrol. In one month seven British were shot; the bodies of two shot while scaling the wire were left hanging there for 24 hours as a warning. A camp hospital was established but, apart from drugs brought in by medical personnel who were prisoners, the only medical supplies available were a little quinine, the issue of which ceased after a few days, and some paper bandages. Charcoal, ground in the camp, was the only treatment available for dysentery cases. The Greek

Red Cross was unable to supply any drugs or medical supplies but did provide milk, eggs, fruit and special diet for the sick. The daily rations were: for breakfast a cup of mint tea and a slice, about four ounces, of black bread, always stale and sometimes mouldy; at midday, about a pint of thin watery lentil soup or alternatively two ounces of dried salty fish; and at night another cup of mint tea and half to three-quarters of a Greek army biscuit. This, without variation, was the ration for six weeks, and on this nearly all under the rank of sergeant, irrespective of fitness, were forced to work each day on the docks, railway sidings or timber yards of Salonika. Some guards were sympathetic towards those obviously too weak for heavy work, but in the main there was much bullying, kicking, and knocking with rifle-butts by the bellowing guards. There was some amelioration for the working parties, however, because by going out of camp they were able by devious and diverse means to obtain food and tobacco.

Many took the opportunity while on working parties to escape as also did some from the main camp, with varying fortunes. Some were recaptured and found themselves back in the same camp. Others got away to Turkey and freedom. For example, Gunner Brewer<sup>5</sup> escaped from the camp and after being befriended in Salonika by Greeks set off eastwards, where he contacted some monks who took him and others who had reached this point to Turkey by boat. Four months after escaping, he arrived back in Egypt where he volunteered to return to Greece to help in evacuating British soldiers still hiding in the Salonika area. For over six months he worked behind the enemy lines using the many useful contacts he had made in Salonika in helping others to escape. In another instance Sergeant Brown,<sup>6</sup> with two others, escaped by digging under the floorboards. They too were sheltered in Salonika by friendly Greeks and finally left for Turkey in a caique, but, chased by Germans, they were forced ashore. Brown spent the winter in the hills with other escapers, supported by the local villagers. When food became scarcer, the party split up and Brown with an Englishman and a Cypriot went in search of another boat; this they found and reached the Middle East via Turkey on 13th May 1942.

The only credit due to the Germans in their behaviour towards the prisoners of war at this period is for their treatment of the badly wounded. Not only were these spared the tortuous rail journey from Athens to Salonika, but also they were kept in the infamous camp for no more than a few days. The blinded, amputees and seriously sick were embarked at Athens for Salonika in the Italian hospital ship *Gradisca* and the treatment from Italian doctors and nurses on board was beyond reproach. These patients went north to Germany by hospital train. The less serious cases were shipped on small cargo boats on which food and treatment

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<sup>5</sup> Capt F. N. T. Brewer, MM, NX3461. 2/1 Fd Regt, 2/3 Indep Coy, 2/3 Bn. Mechanic; of Wauchope, NSW; b. Edendale, NZ, 19 Nov 1918.

<sup>6</sup> Lt C. S. Brown, MM, NX4120; 2/1 Bn. Salesman; of Mosman, NSW; b. Bristol, England, 27 Sep 1912.

were reasonable, although the accommodation was overcrowded. Regarding the treatment of the prisoners in the camps and in transit, it might be urged in extenuation that the Germans were embarrassed by the influx of 25,000 Commonwealth troops captured in Greece and Crete whom they had to control and feed at the end of a long supply line and in an occupied country the inhabitants of which were completely uncooperative, but no excuse can be found for the neglect of the authorities administering the camps or for the uncontrolled brutalities of the guards. Few of the prisoners realised that the camps they had so far experienced were no more than transit camps and that eventually things would improve, but as each successive move had produced a worsening of conditions they can be forgiven for seeing little hope for the future. Many had disposed of their personal effects to buy, at highly inflated prices, extra food which was in most cases, ironically, British army rations. The calorific value of the daily ration issued was as low as 850. At a later date it was stated in a report by representatives<sup>7</sup> of the Protecting Power that:

The Australian physician is Captain Playoust<sup>8</sup> who stated . . . the prisoners are beginning to come around. They were formerly badly undernourished in Crete and Greece. This conclusion was agreed with by chief German physician, Oberstabsarzt Dr Soebald.

As the move from Corinth to Salonika had conformed to a general pattern, so too did the transfer from Salonika north to Austria and Germany. From 10th June 1941 onwards parties of prisoners usually 1,000 strong were herded into cattle-trucks, designed to accommodate *40 hommes ou 8 chevaux*,<sup>9</sup> but into which were crowded an average of 35 officers or in the case of other ranks, 55, and in at least one case up to 66.

Rations for three or four days, according to the contemplated length of the journey, were issued, and consisted only of biscuits and tinned meat. Those in possession of water-bottles could fill them before leaving; replenishment was impossible for several days. Invariably the journey took seven days or longer owing to delays caused by the movement southward of German troops (the trip to Lubeck on the Baltic took nine nights and eight days). Sometimes the doors of the trucks were locked and the small apertures wired or barred; sometimes one door was left open. There was scarcely room for all to lie down, and sleep, on the hard floors and with the jolting of the primitive trucks, was difficult. The cold draughty nights after hot summer days, or in winter the freezing temperatures over the mountainous country, made the journey in itself a torture, but the most serious features were the scarcity of water and the absolute absence of sanitary facilities. Doors were not opened for periods of up to 24 hours. With many of the men still suffering from dysentery or like complaints, conditions may be better imagined than described. Some used eating utensils as sanitary receptacles, some had no eating utensils.

<sup>7</sup> Gordon Knox and Dr Howard Fishburn, Americans, in a report on Stalag XIIIIC, September 1941.

<sup>8</sup> Capt R. A. Playoust, NX185; 2/1 Fd Amb. Medical practitioner; of Mosman, NSW; b. Sydney, 14 Jan 1900. Died 24 Aug 1962.

<sup>9</sup> 40 men or 8 horses. French rolling-stock was so labelled.

At some stops Yugoslavs handed food to the prisoners—bread, eggs, bacon fat and so on—through the windows of the trucks. At Salzburg German Red Cross workers met one of the first trains at 1.30 a.m. with cups of hot *ersatz* coffee, and next day at Munich Red Cross workers provided soup and a slice of bread for lunch and coffee and a slice of bread in the evening. Prisoners on later trains were less fortunate.

Despite warnings of reprisals by shooting there were escapes from practically every train. For example in June 1941 four Australians, including Corporal Lesar<sup>1</sup> and Private Sayers,<sup>2</sup> by the use of their boots forced the steel bars from the ventilators and jumped from the train as it was travelling between Belgrade and Zemun in Yugoslavia. For eight weeks they were sheltered by peasants and later introduced to adherents of the partisan movement. Their several attempts to leave Yugoslavia for Turkey were frustrated by a Chetnik leader. Lesar and Sayers thereupon served with the Chetniks for six months when they were permitted to report to a British paratroop detachment, with which they were employed, Lesar for 14 months as an interpreter, Sayers for 10 months, before both were evacuated to Bari, Italy, reaching Australia in September 1944. Private Boon,<sup>3</sup> who had made a similar escape from a train, stayed with the Chetniks for several weeks until, believing their leader was preparing to collaborate with the Germans, he went to Prokuplje, later linking up with other escapers at Brus in October 1941. With another man he spent over a year moving from one partisan group to another endeavouring to obtain assistance in leaving Yugoslavia. Eventually in March 1943 they located the British paratroop detachment and until evacuated to Italy 14 months later, they also were employed by them.

A favourite method of escaping from these trucks en route to Germany was by cutting, with smuggled tools, a hole in or near the door and reaching outside to release or remove the bolt fittings. Two Australians who escaped in this manner were Sergeant Kilby,<sup>4</sup> with 14 others and Sergeant Dyer<sup>5</sup> with 12 others. Both reached the Middle East safely by way of Turkey. The quick thinking of Warrant-Officer Barrett<sup>6</sup> led him to freedom. He was among a party that left Salonika on 9th July and while alighted at a town in Austria to change to another train, Barrett jumped into the empty brake-van of a train moving in the opposite direction; 25 hours later he found himself at Belgrade where he left the train and approached some cottages. He was succoured by the inhabitants and after three weeks with sympathisers during which he wandered freely around Belgrade with them, he was smuggled into a truck under a tarpaulin

<sup>1</sup> S-Sgt H. Lesar, MM, VX11469; 6 Div HQ. Clerk; of Bonbeach, Vic; b. Merricks, Vic, 6 Dec 1922.

<sup>2</sup> Sgt W. F. R. Sayers, MM, VX35920; 2/6 Bn. Trainee diesel engineer; of Castlemaine, Vic; b. Castlemaine, 1 Feb 1920.

<sup>3</sup> Capt W. J. Boon, MM, NX3814; 6 Div Postal Unit. Catering manager; of Wiseman's Ferry, NSW; b. Kettering, England, 15 Oct 1908.

<sup>4</sup> WO2 H. E. Kilby, MM, NX8575; 2/1 Bn. Cook; of Balmain, NSW; b. Balaklava, SA, 10 Oct 1905.

<sup>5</sup> Lt J. Dyer, MM, NX2776; 2/1 Bn. Optician; of Albury, NSW; b. Woodlark I, TNG, 6 Sep 1911.

<sup>6</sup> Lt F. A. Barrett, DCM, NX18434. 2/1 Bn. "M" Special Unit. Clerk; of Croydon, NSW; b. Sydney, 3 Sep 1911. Killed in action 24 Oct 1943.

and so reached Greece. After numerous setbacks and adventures he reached Turkey on 12th September and safety a month later, bringing back interesting information about enemy activities. It would be impossible to estimate how many escaped from these trains. Few, however, managed to finally reach Allied territory. Of those who were not immediately recaptured, the majority were picked up when endeavouring to make their way back to southern Greece.

Some were shot while trying to escape from trains. For example, Signalman Avery<sup>7</sup> who had been at large on Crete for some weeks in June before being wounded and captured there was shot while trying to escape from a train travelling north from Salonika. However, despite threats by the Germans there were no shootings as reprisals for the continued escapes although almost invariably those left in the trucks from which escapers had made their way were subject to kickings and rifle-butt jabs from the infuriated guards.

The first parties to leave Salonika were composed mainly of officers and the first trainload, containing some Australians, reached Oflag VB at Biberach, Bavaria, on 16th June. The new arrivals, having more or less resigned themselves to accept the conditions they had experienced since capture, here received a shock, albeit a particularly pleasant one. They found a well-organised camp, hot showers, sufficient food to stave off hunger and such luxuries as clean bed linen, towels and eating utensils. Moreover, the friendly welcome and generosity of the officers of the three British armed Services already in the camp were a morale-booster which was badly needed. Quarters were modern concrete buildings, divided into rooms which were not over-crowded. These contained steel-framed two-decker beds with wooden slats—a type to become well known to many officers and N.C.O's in the next four years. For the first time since capture they were free of vermin. The German rations issued were the best yet experienced and were properly cooked in the camp kitchen, but for two or three months few Red Cross supplies were available. Pay in *Lagergeld* (camp money) was credited regularly and letter-cards issued for writing home. Educational classes were well organised and facilities were available for sport and exercise. To the newcomers all this seemed a pleasant dream but it must be stressed that such a state of affairs existed only through the hard work, organisation and tactful approach of the camp leaders to the German authorities.

On the arrival at Biberach of more officers from Salonika, some of the inhabitants of the camp were transferred to Tittmoning; amongst these were six Australians.

An escape committee was in operation at Biberach, the newcomers being permitted to assist but, as a rule, not to engage in the actual escape. During the next three months numerous breaks were made, mainly by men in disguise or concealed on vehicles leaving the camp, and on 14th September 26 escaped by means of a tunnel. In October the Germans,

<sup>7</sup> Sig J. L. Avery, NX14080; 6 Div Sigs, Shop boy; of Dawes Point, NSW; b. Sydney, 2 Mar 1921. Killed while prisoner of war 2 Oct 1941.

because of the number of escapes and the proximity of the camp to the Swiss border, transferred the officers to Oflag VIB at Warburg, where British officers from all parts of Germany were being concentrated. The majority of officers from Crete on leaving Salonika were destined for Oflag XC, near the Baltic port of Lubeck. Nearly 100 Australian officers arrived there during July and stayed until October when they too were transferred to Warburg. At Lubeck the accommodation and facilities generally were much like those at Biberach, but the excellent camp organisation was missing, as was Red Cross food. The German rations, consisting mainly of potatoes and bread, were so sparse that the loaves were carefully measured to ensure that each person got his full share. Patients in the camp hospital received a half-litre of turnip soup and four slices of black bread daily plus *ersatz* coffee, sugarless, twice daily. The effect of these rations, following the starvation diet of the past few months, was so severe that, on arrival at Warburg, the men from Lubeck were given double Red Cross issues for a period to enable them to regain some of their lost weight. The only medical supplies issued by the Germans at Oflag XC were "Karlsbad" salts, iodine and paper bandages.

Included in the trainloads of other ranks leaving Salonika during July were approximately 700 for Marburg, and about 900 for Wolfsberg, 50 miles to the north-west and over the border. Those arriving at Stalag XVIII D, Marburg, were less fortunate than those going to other camps, for it was merely another transit camp very little better than the one at Salonika. The few buildings were verminous and dirty. The new arrivals were quartered in tents and slept on the bare ground while new buildings were being erected. The Senior British Medical Officer considered the camp to be overcrowded beyond safety. Medical facilities provided by the Germans were crude. At this stage the menu was: 4.30 a.m., cup of *ersatz* coffee; 11.30 a.m., one pint of potato or cabbage soup; 5 p.m., half a pound of black bread and approximately half an ounce of margarine or jam. There were shootings by trigger-happy guards for breaches of discipline. Conditions improved somewhat after a visit by the Protecting Power representative, but by this time a large percentage of the occupants had been drafted out to various work-camps in the area. Those who went to the work-camps were employed on various projects—roads, railways, factories or odd jobs about the town—while many were hired out to farmers, with whom they worked long hours but usually fared better for food. Fraternisation between civilians and prisoners was punishable with dire penalties; nevertheless many friendships developed. Early in September a Red Cross consignment arrived which gave a great fillip to morale, and with continued regular supplies an ample diet was ensured.

There had also been an improvement in conditions in the stalag, more particularly in the camp hospital where British doctors had secured bedding and blankets for the sick. The seriously ill were transferred to the civilian hospital in Marburg, where they received excellent treatment from the Yugoslav doctors and nurses. Nevertheless, visitors from the American



(M. Lee Hill)

"Anzac Avenue", Stalag 383.



(W. Dryvynsyde)

The costumes and props, all made in the camp, used in the presentation of this play at Oflag VIIB, Eichstatt, demonstrate remarkable ingenuity in improvisation by the prisoners of war.



*(M. Lee Hill)*

Forced marches. Men from Stalag 383 halt for a meal at Etehausen during their journey south.



*(M. Lee Hill)*

Recovered prisoners of war at a transit centre at Brussels, Belgium, whence they were flown to the United Kingdom.

Embassy and the I.C.R.C. in October reported conditions as deplorable, with everything in disorder and badly organised, and said that the camp was a real danger to the health of the prisoners.<sup>8</sup> By the end of 1941, letters and parcels were arriving from home and concerts and theatrical shows were taking place, the Germans being particularly cooperative. Books were also coming into the camp in increasing numbers but physical recreation or exercise was limited owing to lack of space, there being room for one basket-ball court only. But it was still a bad camp and there was an outbreak of typhus early in 1942, the Russians being the worst sufferers. Several months later all British prisoners had been moved—those available for work to various work-camps, and non-working N.C.O's, medical personnel and unfit to Stalag XVIII B (later XVIII A/Z) at Spittal, Austria. It was not until the visit of the American Embassy officials in October that N.C.O's were aware that under the Geneva Convention they could not be forced to work and they were now asserting their rights. So far as British prisoners were concerned, the camp at Marburg had been "dissolved because it did not reach the standard of other main camps in the Salzburg district".

The Australians who were sent to Wolfsberg from Salonika were installed in Stalag XVIII A situated just outside the town, which was set in a broad green valley backed by slopes of fir-trees and snowcapped mountains. Here they found some sort of organisation. In order to keep the camp free of vermin the trainloads as they arrived were temporarily placed in eight large tents. Here they were searched and had a hot shower and their clothes were fumigated; they were also registered in camp records. As further trainloads arrived those who had been through the delousing process were transferred to work-camps to make room for the new arrivals. Those remaining were accommodated in brick stables converted into barracks with three-tier bunks complete with palliasses and blankets. The hygiene and sanitary provisions were improvised though primitive. The food here, supplemented by Red Cross parcels, was ample, although the German ration had been reduced when Red Cross consignments arrived. With sufficient food, a clean camp and a bracing climate there was a gradual improvement in health. The British prisoners, of whom about 850 were Australians, soon organised themselves into a strong community. A "man-of-confidence"<sup>9</sup> was elected whose duties included camp administration and control and liaison with the Germans on all matters affecting the prisoners' welfare. He also was a liaison agent of the International Committee of the Red Cross. This committee was most appreciative of the efforts of the camp leaders.

The most important work done by camp leaders was in the help given to prisoners. . . . The camp leader was responsible for ensuring the issue of supplies precisely according to the wishes of the donors, and for rendering an account to Geneva,

<sup>8</sup> W. Wynne Mason, *Prisoners of War* (1954), a volume in the series *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45*. This 546-page book is one of the main published sources for this appendix.

<sup>9</sup> The term "man-of-confidence" is a literal translation of the French "homme-de-confiance" which appears in the French text of the 1929 Geneva POW Convention, its equivalent in the English text being "representative". More often than not they were called "camp leaders".

supported by documents such as detailed receipts, issue vouchers etc. . . . Throughout the war years, the Committee was able to appreciate how hard these men must have worked and with what devotion and human understanding they applied themselves to the task of maintaining a regular flow and issue of relief supplies to PW. The duties of camp leaders were also useful in other important connections; for instance they gave valuable assistance to the Committee in making up lists of PW. . . . Thus in each camp the leader became a centre of information, always on hand to give help or counsel, to mediate where he thought some useful purpose would be served and to deal with the PWs' many and various worries. . . . When a PW died it was the camp leader who wrote to the bereaved family and expressed the sympathies of his comrades. And it was the camp leader who saw to the tending of the grave.<sup>1</sup>

The camp leader at Stalag XVIII A from December 1942 was an Australian, Warrant-Officer E. J. Stevenson.<sup>2</sup> Elected by his fellow prisoners of war, he retained the position as chief representative of 11,000 English, Australian, New Zealand, Canadian, South African and American prisoners until the end of the war.

The camp leader usually had an assistant who relieved him of responsibility for discipline, and in addition there were hut commanders who supervised the inmates of their hut and were responsible to the camp leaders. The working detachments were formed into companies, each detachment having a leader responsible to the company leader, who in turn was answerable to the camp leader, but communication between the camp leader and the working detachments outside the camp was difficult and often the cause of complaints to the representative of the Protecting Power. Amenities gradually were increased and improved. Books came into the camp in August 1941 and afforded a much-needed relief to the monotony. A small stage was erected and theatricals were undertaken.

During September mail arrived from England, but none for the Australians or New Zealanders. It was, however, a link with the outside world—and the Tommies shared their news. With the approaching winter, the lower temperatures were causing hardship to the majority, who were without underclothing and socks and had only worn-out boots (during the summer many had worked without boots in order to conserve them). The quarters were damp and comfortless with very little light. The washing and sanitary arrangements had not been improved although improvement had been promised. Conditions in the work-camps depended mainly on the type of the German N.C.O's in charge and of the civilians for whom the men worked. One labour detachment, including 52 Australians, working on the construction of a dam at Lavamund was housed on the site "in three wooden barracks, simple but sufficiently comfortable, well aired and lighted, easily warmed by stoves".<sup>3</sup> The tiered beds were of wood but a man's only bedding was a palliasse and one blanket. The men received a ration slightly heavier than in the stalag but not as much as that laid down for manual work. However, the Red Cross parcels, now arriving regularly, made up the deficiency. The I.C.R.C. representatives were not

<sup>1</sup> *ICRC Report on its Activities during the Second World War*, Vol I, pp. 344-5.

<sup>2</sup> See Long, *Greece, Crete and Syria*, p. 167.

<sup>3</sup> ICRC report, Drs Descoeurdes and Rubli, 25th October 1941.

satisfied with the condition of the clothing, lack of underclothing and socks and stated the boots were in a terrible state. When reporting on the infirmary attached to the work-camp they reported that many were sick because of lack of clothing. Supplies of British battledress had arrived at Stalag XVIII A in September 1941, but owing to a dispute between the Germans and the camp leaders over control of the issue it was withheld until January 1942, the prisoners finally having the last say. A British doctor was permanently at the camp, but in the majority of work-camps lack of treatment of injuries was a cause of serious complaint by the medical officers in the stalag who eventually had to treat them.

The prisoners worked day and night shifts; each man working an actual 10 hours and a half with a full day off each week. Pay was at the general rate for prisoners of 70 *pfennig*<sup>4</sup> a day. Certain specialists and good workmen received double pay. No overtime was paid. Two other work-parties visited at the same time by the I.C.R.C. representative were grouped in one camp. One party of 180 British, including 70 Australians, was employed on a housing project. They were placed in wooden barracks divided into rooms in which 16 were billeted. The employing firm issued them with four blankets each in addition to their own. This was one camp where the sanitary accommodation was reported as adequate. There were no complaints about the food. This camp was declared by the inspecting delegate to be "a model camp" and was replete with flower and vegetable gardens and ample space for sport.

Other work-camps in the area were not as good. Six hundred men, of whom 180 had been passed for light duty, were sent to two camps—Gruppenstein and Lassach. At Lassach they were employed on road-making over a steep mountain, working an actual 10 hours a day with half-an-hour's march to and from the camp. They were continually harassed to "Hurry, hurry", by the civilian gang-boss, each boss having an allotted quota to complete. Once weekly the sick were marched to Malnitze to a civilian doctor who refused to treat Australians or New Zealanders remarking "You volunteered to shoot my brother. Get out!" This problem was overcome by exchanging coats with Englishmen. The doctor wrote a prescription and the patients bought the medicine or supplies from the local chemist with their own funds. This was not an isolated instance of prisoners having to buy medical supplies. At one work-camp the men had to pay for the medicines and dental treatment they received.<sup>5</sup> At other work-camps connected with Stalag XVIII A, Wolfsberg, prisoners were employed in brickworks, paper mills, a glass factory and at farms and forestry camps.

On 10th August 1941 about 1,000 Australians left Salonika for Hammelburg, 50 miles east of Frankfurt-on-Main, arriving there seven days later after a train trip similar to those already described. On arrival at Hammelburg station a German medical officer refused to allow the guards

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<sup>4</sup> About 11d.

<sup>5</sup> ICRC report, 24th October 1941.

to start the four-mile march to the camp, Stalag XIIIIC, until the prisoners had been fed. They were thereupon issued with a large ladle of soup and a loaf of bread between five. At the camp they were deloused and allowed a hot shower. Their clothing and boots were taken from them and they were issued with a conglomeration of French, Belgian and Serbian uniforms, two pairs of cotton underpants, a pair of wooden clogs and, instead of socks, two sets of *Fusslappen*, strips of material to wrap around the feet, known in the vernacular as "toe-rags". The Australians were quartered in what had been a large storage barracks equipped with double-tier beds. Food was the standard prisoner-of-war ration but slightly more generous than in some camps. Those from Greece considered the food very satisfactory. The British man-of-confidence was Warrant-Officer Brown<sup>6</sup> and the British medical officer, Captain Playoust. Officials of the American Embassy in Berlin visited the camp in September and reported among other things, "that adequate treatment was available in the camp infirmary; the Australians find this camp a veritable paradise compared with Crete and Greece, but they are not in a position to make accurate criticisms from long experience" and "the Australian prisoners here should be visited again when they have time to find their feet". The visitors stressed, however, the lack of warm clothing, including uniforms and boots. Soon after arrival at Stalag XIIIIC 900 Australians were dispersed among various work-camps attached to the camp and their employment included road-making, farm work and the building of dikes along and near the Rhone River.

In February 1942 the I.C.R.C. representatives after a visit to the stalag reported<sup>7</sup> that, although the clothing position in the main camp had improved somewhat, it had deteriorated in the work-camps. Nearly all the prisoners had only one uniform in which they must work, the few exceptions receiving working clothes from their employers. In the wet winter this was a serious menace to health. Red Cross parcels were being received and the Australians were forwarding them individually to men in work-camps. In the main camp the leader in an unwitnessed interview with the delegates complained that "the camp was overcrowded, the sanitary installations insufficient and the general hygiene of the camp left much to be desired". In these matters the delegates concurred. On the other hand, the leader stated, "the food is good and the attitude of the Germans could not offend any critic". The I.C.R.C. delegates said in their report that heating, lighting and ventilation in the huts were insufficient and that the infirmary was too small. A French dentist was operating, but had had to suspend the supply and repair of dentures owing to lack of materials; this seemed to be the position in most camps throughout Germany. Mass was celebrated every Sunday at the camp. The library comprised 4,500 books (all languages) but card and indoor games were insufficient.

In one of the last batches of prisoners to leave Salonika in the summer

<sup>6</sup> WO1 W. R. Brown, MBE, WX270; 2/11 Bn. Dairyman; of Perth, WA; b. Perth, Scotland, 16 Oct 1900. Died 22 Sep 1961.

<sup>7</sup> ICRC report, Drs Schirmer and Masset, 3rd February 1942.

of 1941 was a party of approximately 1,000 Australians who arrived at Stalag VIIA, Moosburg, near Munich, on 20th August. Here they found conditions comparatively good. The camp already housed some thousands of French prisoners, who received the Australians with friendliness and sympathy, taking up a collection of food for them. One Australian<sup>8</sup> records that the Germans "did everything they could to relieve our condition on arrival. They gave us an easy time for the first few days." These men had been cooped up in cattle-trucks for six days during which the doors were only opened once, when they were let out for a quarter of an hour's exercise and a drink of tea. An incident on this journey could have led to a post-war friendship between a German and an Australian. At a stop in Yugoslavia Sergeant Roffey<sup>9</sup> was endeavouring surreptitiously to exchange a gold ring for food and water. He was observed by the N.C.O. in charge of the German guard, who, after explanations had been given, purchased food for the Australian, refusing to accept the ring in payment. On two subsequent stops the German gave his adopted friend food, coffee, beer and fruit. At the last stop before the destination the German *Feldwebel*<sup>1</sup> went to the truck and told the Australian he was going on ahead to make arrangements for their arrival and asked for the prisoner's home address so that he could write to him after the war. Roffey gave his address and offered the ring in repayment of the German's kindness. The German took the ring and stated he would return it after the war. On arrival at Moosburg, the *Feldwebel* slipped 10 *Reichmark* into the Australian's hand, remarking "These will be very useful to you in your camp. Do not say where you got them." Almost 12 months later the same German, on leave in the district from the Russian front, called at the camp to see Roffey and wanted to take him to his home, if the commandant would permit. Permission was refused, however, as Roffey had been found, some time previously, to be in possession of maps. The German N.C.O. again visited Roffey, stating he was on draft for Russia, but this was the last Roffey heard of him.

The quarters at Stalag VIIA consisted of groups of huts, each group containing two large dormitories, each with 200 beds in tiers of three. The palliasses were filled with wood-wool and two blankets a man were issued, although some were unlucky and only received two half-blankets. It was suspected that a French prisoner in charge of the blankets had sold many and made up his count by halving some of the remainder. A few days after arrival the men were issued with French uniforms in fairly good condition. The I.C.R.C. delegate complained during a visit in November that the British were wearing uniforms which were incongruous. "Many of them are dressed in uniforms from other units and that hurts their pride."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Gnr D. Lang, DCM, VX6693. 2/8 Bn, 2/4 Lt A-A Regt. Agricultural student; of Brighton Beach, Vic; b. Elsternwick, Vic, 21 Oct 1921.

<sup>9</sup> Lt G. C. de F. Roffey, EM, NX2646; 2/1 Bn. Clerk; of Maroubra, NSW; b. Balmain, NSW, 21 Mar 1914.

<sup>1</sup> German equivalent of sergeant-major.

<sup>2</sup> ICRC report, Dr Exchaquet, 25th November 1941.

The rations consisted of the standard cup of *ersatz* coffee for breakfast, cabbage and potato soup and a thick slice of bread for dinner, or sometimes instead *sauerkraut* and two potatoes in their skins and for tea cabbage and potato soup or carrot soup. Twice weekly a small amount of margarine was issued. On Sundays breakfast and dinner were combined. No one had seriously considered escape from the stalag as it was learned from the French that better prospects of escape existed in the work-camps.<sup>3</sup> After a month in the camp most of the new arrivals were drafted to work-camps in the Munich area, where they were employed in timber mills, railway yards, on railway permanent-way maintenance and in cleaning garbage from the streets of Munich.

Transfer to work detachments was favourably regarded by the prisoners for various reasons; escape was easier, food was better, and there were more opportunities to sell the contents of Red Cross food parcels to civilians, thereby accumulating an escape fund. Fifty cigarettes fetched 20 *Reichmark* or more, while four ounces of tea changed hands for anything from 10 to 20 *Reichmark*. Moreover bugs and fleas were less prevalent. The favourite occupation was cleaning garbage from the streets of Munich, which made it possible more or less to roam at will in the city; indeed prisoners stated that with a two-ounce tin of tea or a small cake of soap they received preferential treatment at the brothels of Munich.

Prospective escapers from these work-camps were afforded an excellent opportunity of reaching Swiss territory—if their luck held. A train left Munich nightly for Switzerland and those working in and around the marshalling yards were able to acquaint themselves of the layout and where the train was being made up. On 26th November Corporal Parker<sup>4</sup> with two others made their escape from a work-party in the area and went to the marshalling yards where they separated. Parker hid in some shrubs on the outskirts of the city until nightfall. When he returned to the yards and found the train bound for St Margrethen, the first station over the Swiss border, he strapped a ladder, which he found on the side of the train, underneath a carriage and travelled the entire journey, which lasted 25 hours, resting on the ladder. On reaching St Margrethen he gave himself up to the Swiss police and five days later was handed over to the British Military Attache at Berne, reaching England in mid-July 1942.

In March 1942 Gunner Lang had figured in a similar escapade. He had previously managed to accumulate maps stolen from the walls of stationary trains, and with escape in view he and a companion had been hoarding articles of civilian clothing, money and food. In the evening of 30th March they scrambled through the wire surrounding the work-camp and made their way to an old house where their stock of clothing was concealed. Hiding in the rafters until 2 a.m. they then made their way through the outskirts of the city, passing over a flood-lit bridge in the

<sup>3</sup> On 13 July 1942 it was recorded that "of the 41 British troops in the detention barracks at Stalag VIIA, 36 of them are Australians who have tried to escape from kommandos".

<sup>4</sup> Lt J. A. Parker, DCM, NX3653. 2/1 Fd Coy, 1 Base Store Coy. Turner and fitter; of Coff's Harbour, NSW; b. Coff's Harbour, 10 Jun 1918. Died of injuries accidentally received 3 Oct 1944.

process, to the marshalling yards. Other British prisoners at their work-camp who were awaiting removal to prison for their attempted escapes had previously told them of the exact location of the siding in which the Swiss train was made up. This they eventually found and they dived into the shadows beneath the coach directly behind the engine. Lang, by removing his overcoat, managed to squeeze himself on to a structure running parallel with one of the wheels. Throughout the journey the wheel at times rubbed against his shoe but did no damage. His companion succeeded in wriggling on to a section of the brake with his body lying parallel to the axle. A crouched position had to be maintained in order to keep his feet from the wheels. The weight of his body had a tendency partly to apply the brakes and at Munich station an engineer, fuming and cursing, worked for 15 minutes within five yards of him. At 7 a.m. the next morning the train pulled out of the station and, 12 hours later, after having at times reached a terrific speed, arrived at St Margrethen. Here a police official noticed a part of Lang's clothing alongside the wheel and ordered him out. He and his companion then emerged. After spending a week in prison at St Gall where they were well treated by the Swiss police, they were taken to Berne and handed over to the British Legation, who arranged for their repatriation via unoccupied France, the Pyrenees, Spain and Gibraltar to England where they arrived on 15th June.

A touch of humour surrounds the term "camp wives", an appellation in vogue in Stalag VIIA at this period. For convenience in apportioning rations, and economy in broaching tinned food from Red Cross parcels, small syndicates of a few men were formed and each syndicate would share everything that came its way. One member of each group would by devious and various means refrain from joining working parties, remain in camp and do the household chores of the group and have the evening meal ready for the remainder of the syndicate on their return. It was amusing to see these "wives" in the late afternoon returning to their barracks from a walk around the camp or from their shopping at the camp black market to prepare the evening meal for their "menfolk".

Two theatrical troupes gave performances in the Munich work-camps on Saturday and Sunday. More literature was needed and table games were particularly lacking. Discipline was applied to the camp in a rather severe fashion. At the time of the evening roll-call police dogs were unleashed in the camp so that the men were obliged to enter the huts. Many prisoners were treated at the infirmary after being bitten. Red Cross parcels arrived in sufficient numbers to permit the issue to each prisoner of one parcel a week.

On the occasion of a visit of the I.C.R.C. delegates to Stalag VIIA in November 1941 the Germans put on a cinema show for prisoners, showing propaganda films intended for civilian consumption, including supposed battle scenes on the Russian front and also a film of operations on Crete, where many of the audience were captured. The prisoners loudly cheered the German successes (which were many) and hissed whenever

Allied forces were shown. When Australian prisoners of war were shown being marched away on Crete, the audience hissed loudly and cried "barbarians", "uncivilised cannibals"—epithets which they knew were associated with the advertising of the film in Germany. This ridicule greatly incensed the camp authorities.

At the end of February 1942, the stalag was without hot showers for a fortnight because Russian women employed in the working parties came into the camp for de-lousing and bathing. There was a large compound in the camp entirely inhabited by Russians, desperately overcrowded with prisoners of war and civilians, among whom were women and children. The Russians were very badly treated, especially with regard to rations. In the diaries of British prisoners in Stalag VIIA, the entry "another Russian shot at the wire" is unhappily too prevalent. The Russians were so desperate for food that they took any risk to get into the British or French compounds to beg scraps of food, and if discovered near the wire separating the compounds were shot by the guards without warning or question. After the arrival of Red Cross parcels at this camp the Australians periodically took up collections of food and cigarettes and at great risk smuggled them into the Russian compound.

Back in Salonika conditions had slightly improved. By September 1941 the drafts northwards had reduced Frontstalag 183 to a few who were too seriously wounded to be moved and a small medical staff, plus a number of escapers who had been recaptured in the area. These escapers included men who had escaped in Greece and some who had got away from the trains in transit to Austria and Germany. Early in September a trainload consisting of 900 convalescents and 100 repatriation cases and including some Australians left Salonika for Stalag VIII B, Lamsdorf, in Silesia. The journey in closed goods vans, with slats removed for light and ventilation, took 9 days and 10 nights. No sanitation or water was available for the first 36 hours after which a stop of 10 minutes was made at dawn and dusk. At Belgrade 14 prisoners were removed to hospital in a deplorable condition. On arrival at the stalag, snow two feet deep was on the ground. Accommodation was in ancient wooden huts, dark, cold, and infested with bugs and fleas, erected for a prisoner-of-war camp in the first world war and now in bad condition.

The hospital, although equipped for almost any type of operation and fully staffed by British medical officers and orderlies, was hopelessly overcrowded and depended largely on the British Red Cross for medical supplies and dressings.

Bad as these conditions were they afforded the newcomers the same pleasant contrast as had been experienced by the officers who earlier had gone to Biberach, for here again was organisation—this time the result of the efforts of two British Army warrant-officers. A second trainload arrived from Salonika in October and one member of the draft recorded "on 20th October our arrival at Lamsdorf seemed to afford a glimpse of another world—a well-organised camp, food in plenty, prisoners smart

in new battledress and a high morale",<sup>5</sup> while another who was in the camp wrote that "the bearing of the British soldiers who were captured in France and their generosity and organisation was the biggest factor in improving morale". Organised recreation was well under way, implemented by equipment and materials supplied by the World Alliance of Y.M.C.A.'s. Gardening produced much needed vitamins as well as mental relaxation. Football, baseball and hockey were played, while table games, handicrafts, education classes, theatricals and music were all provided. An excellent orchestra had been performing for some months. After many representations the Germans had conceded half a hut for a church and similar space for a theatre and the educational classes.

Attempts to escape from Stalag VIII B were not considered worthwhile on account of its location, and escape activities were confined mainly to the work-camps of which there were 66 attached to the stalag. A number of men escaped from the most undesirable work-camps, more with a view to being returned to the stalag as punishment than of attaining freedom. One Australian<sup>6</sup> got under way from a working party in April 1942 and travelled in a coal-truck hidden by coal for three days before recapture and return to Lamsdorf. He escaped again in July from another working party and reached Vienna, some 200 miles away, only to be arrested and again returned to Lamsdorf.

Mention has been made of the 2/5th Australian General Hospital which set up a hospital at Kokkinia near Athens for the reception of sick and wounded prisoners of war. As the patients became sufficiently fit to travel they were evacuated to Salonika and thence to Germany.<sup>7</sup> In mid-November practically all the remaining patients were evacuated by the Italian hospital ship *Gradisca* to Salonika where they remained a few days before being sent by hospital train into Germany. There were also German wounded on the train which dropped off its occupants at various hospitals en route.

The 2/5th A.G.H. staff left Kokkinia on 4th December for Salonika and on 14th December the last party of this unit departed from there for Thorn, in Poland, reaching Stalag XXA after a 12 days' journey in horse-trucks. Fortunately for this party Red Cross parcels had reached Salonika early in November and each prisoner was issued with a parcel before entraining. This at least assuaged their hunger during the trip.

Stalag XXA was situated in an old fortress surrounded by a dry moat. The quarters were mostly underground, damp and depressing, the weather intensely cold. Conditions generally were much the same as at other stalags during the period, although here the guards were of a stricter type and several shooting fatalities occurred. There were about 7,000 British prisoners from all parts of the Commonwealth in the camp when the

<sup>5</sup> Mason, p. 88.

<sup>6</sup> Cpl H. Cooper, MM, VX9921; 2/1 CCS. Farmer; of Footscray, Vic; b. Richmond, Vic, 19 Mar 1905. Cooper in 1943 made two more escapes before finally reaching freedom. He then fought with the Maquis.

<sup>7</sup> See A. S. Walker, *Middle East and Far East*, pp. 409-10.

Australians arrived and they included some 700 non-commissioned officers who had insisted, in face of strong opposition by the Germans, on their rights under the Geneva Convention and had refused to work. They had been transferred here from various other stalags.

By the end of 1941 most Australians captured in Greece or Crete had reached base or permanent camps in Germany or Austria and were becoming more settled. Red Cross parcels were arriving, some camps certainly receiving a more regular supply, and perhaps some a more liberal supply, than others, but they were undoubtedly relieving the food shortage considerably. These parcels were packed in various countries—Britain, America, New Zealand, Canada, Argentine, and a few in Brazil and Turkey. The absence of Australia from the list led many of our prisoners to believe they were being neglected by their homeland. That was far from being so. Australia subscribed generously to the International Committee of the Red Cross for this purpose, but by arrangement with the United Kingdom Government refrained from actually supplying or packing the parcels.<sup>8</sup> The individual food parcels consisted of such items as: stew (meat-roll or Spam), vegetables, tea (coffee or cocoa), sugar, jam, margarine or butter, biscuits or rolled oats, cheese, chocolate (soap or sweets), tinned fruit, herrings or salmon, condensed milk or "Ovaltine", a pudding, salt and pepper, bacon and cigarettes. The Scottish parcels were the only ones to contain rolled oats, and were popular with intending escapers—it was a good escaping ration.

Even the containers of these commodities were put to good use, many men constructing from them their "blowers", or individual fireplaces. These blowers were an integral part of prisoner-of-war life, which during their evolution had emerged from the primitive two stones on which rested a billy, to an intricate contraption of continuous draught with high-pressure blower. Competitions were held, type against type and operator against operator, to boil water in the shortest time. It was possible to boil a quart in under two minutes. In one camp, the commandant used to proudly display his camp's blowers to visiting generals.

A diarist in Stalag VIIA records "a continuous stream of Germans [guards] coming and going from our barracks. They come to exchange bread and other foodstuffs for tea and cigarettes from the Red Cross parcels."<sup>9</sup>

By October 1941 most Australian army officers captive in Germany were at Oflag VIB, Warburg. This camp, situated on a high exposed

<sup>8</sup> Between 1941 and 1946 the Australian Government and the Australian Red Cross had contributed 4.16 per cent of the world total of 27,246,624 Swiss francs for ICRC war work. In addition Australia had made two direct shipments to Russia valued at £20,000. ICRC Report, Vol I, pp. 124-5.

<sup>9</sup> British NCO's in Stalag VIIA at this period who later were transferred to Stalag 383, Hohenfels, saw this barter between guards and prisoners grow to fantastic proportions at the latter camp. Almost every conceivable commodity was smuggled in by the guards for cigarettes—bread (particularly), flour, eggs, parts for wireless sets, even a girl for the night (1,200 cigarettes). For 120 cigarettes a guard would allow 4 or 5 prisoners to scale the wire at night to steal building material from a new camp for firewood. This was pushed through the wire to waiting confederates. On another occasion, sentries were bribed with cigarettes to negotiate with a shepherd for the purchase of six lambs; these were hoisted, one by one, by means of a long pole, over the great double stockade while the guard in the nearest watch-tower assisted with his searchlight.

area, had been vacated by civilian workers and the tumbledown huts were infested with rats and mice and the bedding flea-ridden. In a short time it was overcrowded with 2,500 officers and 450 orderlies—up to 16 officers were quartered in a space of 21 feet by 12 feet. Delegates of the I.C.R.C. described it as “the worst camp we have seen in Germany”, and together with representatives of the American Embassy recommended that 1,000 officers should immediately be moved elsewhere. The Germans then began the erection of 10 new brick buildings and promised that “some hundreds of officers would be moved shortly”. Rations were on the same sparse scale as in other camps but there was an ample supply of Red Cross parcels, there being a reserve stock of 18,000 in December. Outdoor recreation was available and there was plenty of space for football, netball and the like. With books brought in from various camps a library of 4,000 volumes was established and an orchestra was functioning. A pantomime, “Citronella”, produced at Christmas time, was a hilarious success. The advent of winter, considered by the Germans to be the most severe for 40 years, curtailed outdoor recreation with the exception of ice-hockey. Organised indoor recreation provided for symphony concerts, performances by three dance bands, educational courses on innumerable subjects, and theatricals. Officers of the 51st Highland Division taught Highland and Scottish Country Dancing and this did much to keep men fit and in good spirits.

A camp exchange market had been established, designated “Foodacco Ltd”, where a surplus of any commodity could be bartered for almost any requirement. By the New Year, vermin had been almost eradicated, extra fuel stoves had been provided and each man had an extra (Red Cross) blanket. In February 250 senior officers, of whom 14 were Australian, were moved to Oflag IXA/H, Spangenberg, where their existence continued in much the same tenor as at Warburg, but with improved accommodation.

As a result of alleged ill-treatment of German officer prisoners on board the *Pasteur*, en route from Suez to South Africa, the Germans in September 1942 carried out reprisals on all British officers at Oflag IXA/H, and ordered that “all personal and common luggage including sanitary and cosmetic articles such as soap, sponges, toothbrushes, towels, razors, etc., knives, forks, scissors of every description to be taken away; all badges of rank, all ribbons, decoration cockades and braids to be removed and all officers to be deprived of the services of their orderlies”. The orderlies were moved to another camp and the heavy baggage stored in the town; the officers were left with nothing more than what they were wearing, plus sheets and blankets. The Germans were nonplussed at the spirit in which the reprisal was taken. Outwardly the officers carried on as usual except that everyone sported a beard, and these were the subject of competitions and sweepstakes. Swiss delegates of the I.C.R.C. who visited the camp during this period reported: “The spirit is splendid. . . . The sight of nearly four hundred bearded officers in plain uniforms is of course shocking, but the air of manliness and dignity with which they bear themselves

makes a great impression." Notwithstanding letters of complaint and protests by the United Kingdom Government the reprisal order remained in force for two months after which the camp resumed its normal activities.

At Warburg, the new buildings were still unfinished in April 1942 and very little improvement had been made in the sanitary or washing arrangements; moreover, although the issue of Red Cross parcels had dwindled to one fortnightly, the German meat ration was reduced on the excuse that too many food parcels were being received. Warburg was finally cleared of prisoners in September 1942, almost 12 months after its condemnation by visiting delegates. During the occupation of Oflag VIB, numerous escape attempts were made; one source states that over 50 tunnels were found by the Germans; although two officers reached the Swiss border, no attempt was completely successful. A particularly daring mass escape was attempted about this time. Just at dusk about 100 officers, having succeeded in fusing the searchlights, rushed the wire with four ladders and got out of the camp. Most of them were recaptured almost at once but a few got away.

With the closing of Warburg camp, several Australians were in the party of 450 that went to Oflag IXA/Z<sup>1</sup> at Rotenburg near Spangenberg. This draft comprised those aged over 35, protected personnel and candidates for repatriation on medical grounds. Another party of 400 went to Oflag XXIB at Schubin in Poland while the remainder, approximately 1,800 and including the majority of the Australians, went to Oflag VIIIB at Eichstatt.

The camp at Rotenburg was a modern stone building, formerly a girls' school, equipped with central heating, although scarcity of fuel restricted the usefulness of this amenity. The food position here was better than at Warburg, but only because there were ample Red Cross parcels. The area available for exercise and physical recreation was somewhat cramped, but walks on parole into the picturesque surrounding country were a pleasant substitute. Later the school gymnasium was opened and cinema shows, theatricals and the excellent library provided ample indoor recreation. There was a surfeit of medical officers and padres here—33 of the former and 20 chaplains. Despite their applications to be moved to camps where they could be of service, no action was taken, the German view being that they caused too much trouble with complaints about conditions.

When Oflag VIB, Warburg, was closed the 1,800-odd officers transferred to Oflag VIIIB at Eichstatt comprised the younger and more junior officers, and no doubt this, together with their demeanour towards authority and the number of attempted escapes from Warburg, influenced the Germans in the precautions taken on the journey to Eichstatt and the subsequent tightening up of regulations and discipline at the new camp. During the train journey, the officers' boots were taken away each night, and on arrival at Oflag VIIIB they were subjected to a stringent search. The

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<sup>1</sup> The "Z" denotes *Zweigliar*, or branch camp.

Eichstatt camp was an old cavalry barracks set in beautiful surroundings, and had in its grounds two makeshift tennis courts, a playing field and vegetable gardens.<sup>2</sup>

Within a short time a strong theatrical group was in existence and the German authorities organised cinema shows.

In August 1942 British troops were obliged for operational reasons to bind the wrists of some of the Germans captured during the raid on Dieppe. A copy of the order authorising this procedure was captured by the Germans. Germany protested that Article 2 of the Geneva Convention had been violated. Unfortunately a similar incident occurred in a commando raid on Sark in the Channel Islands on 4th October, and the German High Command ordered that, as a reprisal, all British taken prisoners in the Dieppe raid should be handcuffed for a portion of each day. On 8th October 107 officers and 20 other ranks in Oflag VIIB, mostly Canadians, were fallen out and marched to the castle where their hands were tied with rope and remained so for 12 hours daily. The commandant stressed that the order came from the High Command, while others of the camp staff made it obvious that they were disgusted with the order. Britain retaliated by manacling a similar number of German prisoners, whereupon Germany replied by applying the order to three times the former number. This involved some Australians and New Zealanders, whose Governments made lively protests through the British authorities, Australia being concerned that the controversy might affect the treatment of Australians in Japanese hands. Protracted negotiations ensued, in which the Swiss Government and the I.C.R.C. both offered to help to find a solution. It was realised that Germany held the greater number of prisoners and therefore the advantage in competitive reprisals.

The shackling by rope had now been replaced by handcuffs and had spread to other camps. In addition to 380 of all ranks handcuffed at Eichstatt, 1,250 at Stalag 383, Hohenfels, 2,300 at Stalag VIII B, Lamsdorf, and a few at Stalag IX C, Badsulza, were similarly treated.

In December the Swiss Government and the International Red Cross, having heard that Germany intended to relax the shackling during the Christmas period, appealed to both sides to free their prisoners from handcuffs for Christmas and to continue the concession for an indefinite period. On 12th December both the British and Canadian Governments removed handcuffs from their prisoners and never again put them on. The Germans, however, freed the prisoners' bonds only on Christmas Day and New Year's Day, insisting, before revoking the order, that the British issue a general order forbidding the binding of prisoners and the possession of bonds for this purpose. Britain would not relent to the extent of completely withdrawing the order authorising the binding of hands, asserting that such measures would be taken only in a case of operational necessity.

<sup>2</sup> An inmate, Capt W. H. Travers, 2/1 Bn, recorded in his diary that in the summer months of 1943 the tonnage of vegetables grown in the gardens amounted to: Tomatoes 3.4, onions 2.45, beetroot 1.87, carrots 1.55, marrow .65, in addition to 30,000 lettuce and large numbers of cucumbers, radish and spinach. All were divided equally among the prisoners.

The suggestion that a similar order should be issued to the Australian Army was viewed with concern by General Blamey, Commander-in-Chief of the Australian Military Forces, who pointed out that, as all Australian military operational forces had been withdrawn from the European and Middle East theatres, orders issued to the British Army did not apply to Australian forces. He considered that an endeavour should be made to regard the matter as one affecting only the European theatre of war. He wrote:

I consider that the orders issued to the British Army, no matter how secretly promulgated, if repeated in the South-West Pacific theatre, would be immediately grasped by the Japanese to cover up their atrocities committed in the past and provide them with propaganda and excuses for any sort of inhuman action to our prisoners of war which we know from past experience they have no hesitation in carrying out.<sup>3</sup>

Reports received by the Protecting Power revealed that the manacling was being carried out in a humane manner and that strict policing was not enforced. Meanwhile prisoners had found it simple to make a key to unlock the handcuffs and were wearing them only when under observation. The guards had formed the habit of leaving the requisite number of handcuffs in each room each morning and collecting them at night. At Eichstatt the Germans provided chains 18 inches to 2 feet long with a handcuff at each end. The practice was for prisoners to tuck one end of the chain into each trouser pocket. If a German officer appeared the prisoner would put his hands into his pockets so that the officer would conclude that they were duly handcuffed.

The British War Office, in February 1943, issued an order forbidding the general tying-up of prisoners and from then on the numbers handcuffed in German camps gradually decreased until on 22nd November 1943 the procedure was discontinued. The German Foreign Office stated that the suppression of shackling had been based on communications by M. Pilet Golaz of the I.C.R.C., who "permitted the conclusion that the British authorities had taken measures to prevent a recurrence of the Dieppe incident although without formal declaration of guarantee".

Eichstatt, even before the shackling period, had not been a happy camp. In spite of reasonably good quarters and ample Red Cross parcels, the petty restrictions, imposed by a strict camp staff intent on ensuring security, tended to make conditions irksome. At first the contents of tins in Red Cross parcels were all opened and emptied into containers, but this did not last—it took too long. In November five prisoners escaped by posing as a German N.C.O. and a German sentry, with rifle, marching three "phoney" Frenchmen out of the camp to the dentist. Next day the whole camp was on a check parade in the snow lasting five hours, and this was followed by two night parades, each lasting for two hours. For several months there were regular night parades. The five-hour parade

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<sup>3</sup>Letter to the Minister for the Army, 8th April 1943.

was repeated in June 1943 when 65 prisoners<sup>4</sup> escaped through a tunnel. All were eventually recaptured and transferred to Oflag IVC at Colditz, considered by the Germans to be escape-proof.

At the end of 1941 the majority of Australian other ranks in German hands were settled in permanent camps in Germany or Austria or in work-camps attached to the stalags. Eighty-six per cent were contained in five camps—approximately 1,000 in each of Stalags VIIA, Moosburg, XIIIC, Hammelburg, and XVIIIA, Wolfsberg, while VIIIB, Lamsdorf, and XVIIIID, Marburg, each held between 600 and 700.

Conditions were much the same throughout, the degree of comfort or discomfort depending on the attitude of the particular German camp commandant towards his charges, or, in the work-camps, the treatment received from the German N.C.O.-in-charge or the employer. On large constructional jobs of a military nature where sabotage was possible full opportunity was taken to carry it out, and naturally the treatment of prisoners deteriorated. Private firms employing prisoners on large-scale building projects or in factories sometimes provided good quarters, working clothing and in isolated instances, a bonus, but in the main the chief causes of complaints in work-camps were inadequate protection against the cold in the quarters and lack of enough clothing to provide a dry change. In the mornings many men had sometimes to put on clothes still wet from the previous day. Those employed in road gangs seemed to be the worst sufferers from overwork and the "hurry-hurry" tactics of the supervisors. A certain amount of work had to be done, regardless of conditions or difficulties. Farm work probably provided the greatest variation of conditions experienced by prisoners; employers ranged from the tyrant who worked men excessively long hours and treated them little better than beasts of burden to the farm family who accepted the prisoner as one of themselves. Australians were well thought of by German and Austrian farmers. Men in the work-camps suffered other disabilities than those mentioned: their mail, both inward and outward, was spasmodic; Red Cross parcels were less regular owing to the lack of communication between them and the base camp; medical treatment was hard to obtain. Long working hours precluded recreation even had the facilities existed, but, in compensation, the men had a certain sense of freedom, saw fresh faces and had opportunities to "scrounge". Moreover their daily round was more normal than that of the men cooped up behind barbed wire—a psychological factor more beneficial than was probably realised.

Conditions in the stalags described previously in this chapter remained much the same up to the collapse of Italy in September 1943. There was, however, generally some improvement. After strong protests by the Australian Government and through the devoted efforts of delegates of the

<sup>4</sup> Seven were Australians: Capt R. R. Baxter, 2/5 Bn; Capt A. D. Crawford, 2/1 A-Tk Regt; Lt J. W. K. Champ, 2/6 Bn; Lt M. A. Howard, 2/7 Bn; Lt C. I. C. Dieppe, 2/1 Bn; Lt G. Bolding, Gd Bn, 1 Corps; Lt J. R. Millett, 2/11 Bn.

I.C.R.C., complaints regarding sanitation, overcrowding, lack of clothing and amenities, and the brutality of the guards had produced some improvement. Also the particularly bad camp at Marburg had been closed. The always inadequate German ration never improved and, with the advent of food parcels, even this was reduced—a practice adopted throughout Germany. More latitude was afforded prisoner-of-war medical officers in treating their own sick but they were dependent almost wholly on the Red Cross for medical supplies. Collective punishments, such as withholding mail for one or two weeks, or the withdrawal of amenities, were imposed, often on the slightest pretext. On occasions, usually after an escape scare, the Germans required all containers in a food parcel to be opened and the contents emptied into one receptacle, thus a man might walk away with a conglomerate mess of sardines, powdered coffee, sugar, jam, condensed milk, dried fruit, salmon, oatmeal, dried eggs, meat stew, butter and vegetables. This they would thoroughly mix and eat with a spoon. They called it “glop”. In other cases more reason was shown and the various foods were emptied into separate containers for communal cooking.

The prisoners' own organisations in the stalags had now had time to get under way and, with more cooperation from the Germans than hitherto, were able to arrange comprehensive educational courses and lectures, theatrical and concert groups, organised outdoor sport and, in most camps, a news-sheet or magazine. Much ingenuity was shown in the production of these literary efforts, also in the ruses to circumvent the censor. Individually, too, the men were able to add to their own comfort by improvising articles of furniture, shelves and the like. Tea and cigarettes became mediums of currency; large numbers of cigarettes changed hands at “the tables” on the spin of a coin or the roll of a dice.

In April 1942 a number of Australians and New Zealanders were sent from Lamsdorf to work in a coal-mine at Oehringen in Poland. The quarters were at the pit-top and were very primitive; as three shifts were worked, sleep was continuously interrupted. Underground the civilian overseers, aided and abetted by the civilian miners, tried to boost production by bullying methods and the free use of pickhandles, but, after a number of fights, the civilians realised that the Britishers were not to be trifled with and by the end had developed a friendly admiration for the prisoners.

In October 1942 the British N.C.O's who had gone from Warburg and Wolfsberg to Stalag XVIII B at Spittal (now re-numbered XVIII A/Z) were transferred to Stalag 383, Hohenfels in southern Bavaria, which was being formed as a new N.C.O's camp; Spittal became a medical and dental centre and convalescent camp for prisoners in Stalag XVIII A, Wolfsberg, and its attached work-camps. Wolfsberg at this stage had 26,000 prisoners of all nationalities under its control, including about 1,200 Australians.

By the end of 1942 there were nearly 4,000 N.C.O's at Hohenfels, of whom over 500 were Australians, some of whom had come from Stalag XXA at Thorn in Poland. The camp had been built for officers,

and instead of being crammed into large barracks the N.C.O's found themselves allotted small huts holding up to 12 each, with larger barracks for theatricals and indoor amusements. There were ample sports and exercise areas, and with Red Cross parcels arriving regularly to supplement the standard German ration there was little to complain of; for most it was the best camp they had been in. Although the winter was cold in the extreme, the coal ration could be supplemented by wood from a near-by forest. Later, when the coal ration was discontinued, the greatest hardship at this camp was the shortage of fuel, which was virtually restricted to what could be found in the camp itself. Fence-posts gradually disappeared until there were no fences between compounds; rafters and floor-joists in the huts were reduced to a bare minimum; but the classic "fuel-drive" concerns a sentry-box which stood outside the main gate of the stalag. A German-speaking prisoner lured the sentry along the wire to discuss an attractive barter proposition and eight men opened the gate and grabbed the box, which was nine feet high and weighed about three hundredweight. Under cover of darkness they took it to their hut and within a short time it was broken into small pieces and hidden in an underground room, where it remained undiscovered during an intensive search by the Germans the next day, when the floors of every hut were lifted.

Several orchestras were in existence and a choir of 500 voices performed on occasions. A stalag "university" was organised and its classes, in addition to the activities of a number of clubs and societies—there were over 50 of them—provided profitable occupation.

Writing of conditions at Stalag 383 in June 1943 an Australian N.C.O.<sup>a</sup> said:

It is the temporary home of 4,300 non-working NCO's and I think it must be the best camp in Germany. We have extensive playing fields, theatres, even dance rooms, educational classes on every subject under the sun, our own internal newspaper and many little conveniences I do not intend mentioning here. The Germans leave us pretty much to ourselves and but for searches which are caused through the activities of the "Moles" we would only see the enemy on morning check parade. We've even got a swimming pool 22 yards long with its Polo Club. We are free to do anything we like inside the barbed wire and there is plenty of room to do it in.

As previously mentioned, Hohenfels was one of the camps where shackling was introduced. But after the first week or two it did little to interfere with the normal routine of the camp. Shackling conditions were relaxed here perhaps earlier than at other camps, and later, with the acquiescence of the Germans, the men took the shackling by roster.

Hohenfels being a non-working camp, the N.C.O's incarcerated there found it hard to pass away the time once the more conventional means of recreation had palled. Thus, in amusing themselves, if they could ridicule or bewilder the Germans, so much the better. "Crazy Week" which

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<sup>a</sup> Sgt W. P. Skene, NX3649; 2/1 Fd Coy. Commercial traveller; of Greenacre, NSW; b. Sydney, 19 Feb 1901.

was staged at this camp was a good example of this kind of project. It started when a prisoner, flying his home-made kite, observed a guard agape with astonishment at a grown man engaged in so childish a pursuit. A fellow-prisoner then joined in and the two staged a squabble resulting in kicked shins and in one sitting down and bawling his head off. The guard hurried off to report and other prisoners joined the fun—playing ring-a-roses, making daisy chains and so on. The German reaction was so satisfactory that it was decided to put on a full-scale “Crazy Week”.

There were greatcoated Napoleons gazing darkly through the wire, cocked-hatted Nelsons peering up through telescopes, bands of painted Indians whooping through the roads, men riding invisible bikes, leading imaginary dogs, playing marbles, marching to a Chinese band, staring in bunches at the watch-towers—doing anything in fact, to get the Huns bewildered. In the sweltering heat, fellows would come on parade in coats and balaclavas and stand shivering next to others dressed in handkerchiefs.<sup>6</sup>

The “holiday train” was the crowning idiocy. This was a burlesque of a holiday excursion train leaving a London terminus for a seaside resort and left the Germans with every type of expression other than a laugh. The train was a row of huts.

It left for England twice a day at times announced throughout the camp, and passengers were warned to be on time and have their tickets ready. Whistles would blow in the Stalag, men would grasp suitcases and kitbags and rush from all parts of the camp, giving up their tickets at the barrier and crowding into compartments where they could get a seat at the window. Once inside, they would crane their necks out, smoke would belch from the funnel, late arrivals would dash desperately through the barrier, urged on by guard and porters, and, finally, the waving of a red flag would close the platform. As the train steamed out for Blighty, there would be wavings and counter-wavings from passengers and friends, last messages would be bawled out frantically and, as the guard announced the time of the next train, the crowd would disperse to their huts, leaving the extra Jerries in the watch-towers to work things out.<sup>7</sup>

After staff talks in Berlin, the commandant sought the views of the man-of-confidence, who rose swiftly to the occasion; undoubtedly there was madness in the camp, he declared, and it was becoming widespread. Was that surprising in view of the way in which thousands of prisoners were cooped up behind wire, with never a walk beyond it? How about walking-out parties while good weather held? Faced with the alternative of mass insanity the commandant was prompt to concede the request. Parole walks were instituted, and “Crazy Week” ceased, much to the relief of Germans and non-participating prisoners alike.

The theatre played a large part in the lives of prisoners in Stalag 383. Starting in a makeshift manner with revues and concert parties, the movement grew until there were two permanent theatres—one for vaudeville, the other for plays, comic opera and Shakespeare. The presence among the camp’s inmates of professional dressmakers, tailors, carpenters, scene-

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<sup>6</sup> M. N. McKibbin, *Barbed Wire Memories of Stalag 383* (1947), p. 76.

<sup>7</sup> McKibbin, p. 76.

painters and so on enabled shows to be produced with full and authentic costumes and stage properties; the house manager in an evening-dress suit (tailored in the camp), usherettes in neat little skirts and pill-box hats who collected thousands of cigarettes for the stage funds, and an orchestra of more than 20 pieces, all helped to transport the audience temporarily to other worlds.

Such plays as *Night Must Fall*, *Dinner at Eight*, *The Late Christopher Bean*, *I Killed The Count*, *The Cat and the Canary*, to name but a few; the Savoy operas, including *The Gondoliers*, *The Yeomen of the Guard*, *H.M.S. Pinafore*, and *The Mikado*, were faithfully produced, as was *The Merchant of Venice* for which the Germans lent the complete costumes from the State Theatre of Berlin—perhaps on account of its anti-Semitic theme. The commandant so enjoyed *The Mikado* that he waived roll-call for three days. The “female” characters in the various productions and their dresses were masterpieces of make-up and ingenuity and left the Germans simply agape. The commandant and his staff would leave just before the final curtain, after which the orchestra would strike up the National Anthem,

and never would it be sung more heartily than by those Stalag audiences, whose nostalgia for home had been quickened by the Theatre.<sup>8</sup>

Australians in Stalag 383, in common with compatriots in other stalags and oflags, complained bitterly at the sharp practice of some Australian booksellers who had been commissioned by relatives and friends of prisoners to send parcels of books to them. They were infuriated on opening these parcels to find that they sometimes contained children's books when they knew well that their friends had paid in good faith for vastly different kinds of books, and that the firms in question were using this means to unload unsaleable stock.

The mass transfer of prisoners from Italy to Germany after the Italian armistice had its repercussions in almost every stalag in Germany and Austria. Stalags XVIIIIC, Markt Pongau, and XVIIIIA/Z, Spittal and Stalag VIIA, Moosburg, became transit camps choked with prisoners who, however, stayed little longer than a week before being drafted on to one or other of the stalags in Germany. Practically all these received their quota from Italy and consequently became acutely overcrowded until provision was made for the setting up of further work-camps. Of the Australians transferred from Italy, about 250 went to Stalag VIIIA at Gorlitz in Silesia, some to Wolfsberg, but the majority to Stalag VIIIB, Lamsdorf. Conditions at Lamsdorf have already been described; they had, however, shown some improvement since the appointment of a new German commandant. The sudden influx had brought the number administered by the camp to more than 30,000, of whom 10,000 were in the stalag itself, with men sleeping on tables, forms or the floor. Consequently all camp services and amenities were likewise overtaxed. The increased demand

<sup>8</sup> McKibbin, p. 87.

on the German commissariat had caused a reduction of rations and the food parcels had necessarily to be shared among a larger number of prisoners. This, however, was only temporary.

In order to cope with the large number now at Stalag VIIIB and to simplify administration of the numerous work-camps under its control, the German authorities opened two new stalags, one at Sagan, to be known as Stalag VIIIC; the other at Teschen, on the Polish border, which was given the number by which Lamsdorf camp had hitherto been known, Stalag VIIIB, Lamsdorf being renumbered Stalag 344. Very soon a large percentage of prisoners from these three stalags were drafted out to work-camps, many going to the Silesian coal-mines. Very few were experienced coal-miners but within a short period they were working on the coal face for long hours. Accidents were numerous owing to inexperience. Fortunately for the prisoners the Swiss delegates viewed with concern the conditions of work in the mines and kept a close watch on them.

A feature of German prisoner-of-war camps wherever they held British troops was the celebration of anniversaries of notable events, and the national days and public holidays of the various Commonwealth countries. These events varied from a simple recognition of the day being celebrated to an elaborate affair lasting several days, depending on the personality of the German commandant. The Anzac Day marches at Hohenfels will be long remembered by those who participated, while the Whitsuntide carnival at Stalag 344, Lamsdorf, lasting three days was a milestone in the history of that camp. Saturday and Sunday were devoted to sports, an arts and crafts exhibition and a theatrical production. The culminating event was on Monday: a procession of tableaux of various subjects for which prizes were given. A special prize was awarded for the Cenotaph.

It was very simple—representing the Navy, Army, Air Force . . . but when the procession stopped, the Cenotaph was lifted and there sat Britannia! The band struck up *Rule Britannia* and everyone was spellbound at such a thing happening in a P.O.W. camp.<sup>9</sup>

Stalag VIIIA at Gorkitz was an old-established prisoner-of-war camp with conditions similar to those at Lamsdorf and, when Australians and others arrived there from Italy, it held French, Belgians, Yugoslavs and Russians. The portion of the camp occupied by the new arrivals was in bad shape, many doors and windows being missing, and there was a shortage of beds and palliasses. The water-supply was poor and, as usual, sanitation inadequate. The French and Belgians were generous with gifts of tobacco and food from their parcels and this tided the newcomers over the difficult first few weeks until Red Cross supplies arrived. Under good leadership it was not long before the camp had shown vast improvement and possessed the amenities usual in other British camps. Within the next three months many prisoners had been drafted out to work-camps, supplying labour for coal-mines, stone-quarries, sugar, glass or paper factories,

<sup>9</sup> From the diary of Cpl F. E. Anderson, NX46224; 2/3 Fd Coy. Builder; of Mayfield, NSW; b. Wallsend, NSW, 23 Sep 1910.

or for railway and building-construction jobs. Quarters outside the base camp were better and, in addition to the larger workers' ration, they could obtain by barter eggs, vegetables and other food. New arrivals were agreeably surprised to find they could attend a cinema on a free Sunday morning and swim or play football in the afternoon. One party of 200 Australians and New Zealanders were sent to a railway-construction job at Oderberg, near Raciborz on the Polish-Czechoslovakian border too far from Gorlitz camp to remain under its control, but the Germans ensured that ample Red Cross parcels reached this party, otherwise they could not have stood up to the work. The private construction firm required them to work for 11 hours and a half daily, but they had Saturday mornings and Sundays free, which was most unusual for German *arbeitskommandos*.

The first repatriation exchange of prisoners between Britain and Germany took place in October 1943 at the ports of Gothenburg (Sweden), Barcelona (Spain) and Oran (Algeria) simultaneously. In all 5,195 British and American prisoners and 5,265 Germans were involved. The British included 539 Australians (191 disabled or sick and 348 protected personnel). Of these 28 were exchanged at Gothenburg and went to the United Kingdom whence they embarked for Australia via America. The remainder travelled from Germany by hospital train to Marseilles and thence to Barcelona by ship. After the exchange, the sick and wounded embarked on a hospital ship and the protected personnel on a troopship for Alexandria. From the Middle East they travelled by the hospital ships *Oranje* and *Wanganella* to Australia.

News of the Allied landing in Normandy on 6th June 1944 brought great joy to the prisoners in Germany. Each oflag and stalag had its secret wireless-receiver and prisoners had the news within an hour or so of the landing, and the two-hourly bulletins broadcast by the B.B.C., were avidly awaited.<sup>1</sup> In Stalag 383 a special underground news-sheet was issued and read in all huts. A diarist<sup>2</sup> in that camp wrote: "The Germans who patrol inside the camp are just as eager as we are for news of the Second Front so a temporary peace is more or less arranged between us and them if we will give them the news! It is humorous to see a German ducking into a hut to hear what news has just been broadcast from the B.B.C."

Despite advances on both fronts, the failure of the plot against Hitler, the reverse at Arnhem, and the determination of Germany to fight on boded ill for an early cessation of hostilities and, with the arrival of autumn, prisoners resigned themselves to another dreaded winter in captivity.

Physically conditions were much the same as in the previous year: the oflags were overcrowded, causing a strain on sanitary facilities and a shortage of water in most camps, but the lack of accommodation for

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<sup>1</sup> The smaller work-camps which had no wireless-receivers were kept informed through an organisation in their parent stalag.

<sup>2</sup> Lt Roffey.

indoor recreation and study, particularly in officers' camps, was the worst feature. At Eichstatt there was a library of over 15,000 volumes and in the spring of 1944 parole walks became a regular feature; there were occasional cinema shows and in one instance a visit to a travelling circus. At Oflag VA, Weinsberg, to which about 40 Australian officers went after the evacuation from Italy, a big improvement had been made since the early part of 1944. The water-supply and bathing facilities had been increased, sanitation and lighting improved and more facilities for sports provided. Thanks to generous supplies of sports materials, books and stationery from the World Alliance of Y.M.C.A.'s there was ample scope for recreation and pastimes. By June over 200 had applied to sit for recognised examinations. The appointment of a new German commandant had, too, in the opinion of the delegate of the Protecting Power, helped to improve matters considerably. The inmates of this camp felt some concern regarding the lack of adequate protection from air raids. The few slit-trenches at first available were insufficient for the size of the camp and of a design that provided little protection. Near the camp were factories for the manufacture of aircraft wings and machine-gun parts and consequently it was felt that cover in the event of air raids was essential. During 1944 the trenches were improved and extended and during a raid the prisoners could either use them or stay in their barracks. The Protecting Power had been asked to press for the removal of Oflag 79, Querum (near Brunswick), to a safer location.

The wholesale transfer of prisoners from the stalags to the various work-camps eased to some extent the acute overcrowding experienced in the previous three months. Lamsdorf (now Stalag 344) was an exception, however, and accommodation and all facilities were still inadequate for the 10,000 prisoners still in the British section of the base camp although over 9,000 had been dispersed among the 235 work-camps administered by the stalag. The Germans intended moving 4,000 air force, Canadian and American prisoners to other camps but only 500 actually left. This, however, was sufficient to obviate the use of beds on or near the floor. The Germans at this camp were now showing more cooperation in the provision of outdoor recreation and theatrical entertainments, maybe to ingratiate themselves with the prisoners, but more probably with a view to distracting the prisoners' minds from the discomfort and deficiencies of the camp.

The new Stalag VIIIB at Teschen had on its strength about 12,000 British of whom about 600 were Australians. About 11,500 of the prisoners were spread among the 66 work-camps attached to the stalag. In the base camp itself the barracks and conveniences were old and primitive, but lighting, heating, cooking and bathing facilities were satisfactory, although there was lack of space for recreation. The Swiss delegate did not hide from the German authorities the deplorable impression made on him by the stalag. He received the answer that the new camp would

soon be finished. He noted there were two British doctors in the camp and also two chaplains but that in their visits to the hospital the chaplains encountered difficulties and that they were no longer permitted to visit the work-camps. He also noted that in recent months the British had lost by theft the equivalent of 367 parcels and 201,000 cigarettes. The delegate's report concluded: "However, considering present conditions of accommodation, Stalag VIIIB must be considered insufficient. Moreover conditions of work in the detachments in this area are often hard."<sup>3</sup> Since few toothbrushes, combs, razor blades and so on were arriving at the camp, pro rata distribution to the work-camps was impracticable, and the camp leader therefore made up some special packages of these items for prisoners who had not for some time received private parcels from their relatives or friends. As the majority of work-camps in this area provided labour for coal-mines, soap was an essential commodity but of this there was an acute shortage. Parcels from the Argentine did not contain soap and nearly 13,000 Argentinian parcels had been received in the camp during August.

The second offshoot from Lamsdorf, Stalag VIIIC at Sagan, was much smaller than either Lamsdorf or Teschen, with only about 70 Australians there in a total of two or three thousand Britishers. About 500 remained in the stalag, the balance being spread over 20 or so industrial work-camps.

In addition to the Silesian coal-mines there were in this district many factories and industrial concerns, as well as forestry camps and railway and construction works. The prisoners working in the factories found the wide range of jobs at first interesting and novel. They usually were working alongside civilians of both sexes and of various tongues—mostly forced labour. The prisoners lived either at the factory or close by, the midday meal being cooked on the job. A medical orderly and an interpreter were always included in any British party of over 50 strong. Factory work was comparatively easy and the men were not too tired to enjoy the free evenings, with swimming or sports in the summer and, in the winter, cards, darts or reading. Some, too, spent the evenings with women met at work during the day.

Early in 1943 the Red Cross Society informed prisoners that arrangements had been made whereby they could remit a portion of the amount in credit in their paybook to next-of-kin through the paymaster in London. A number of Australians took advantage of this and the money was being paid in Australia within 10 weeks of the prisoner signing the application form in the stalag. Later a similar scheme was operated by which prisoners could order monthly supplies of tobacco from London, the price being debited in the prisoners' paybooks. By similar remittances every man in Stalag 383, Hohenfels, was able to subscribe to a "special fund" amounting to over £5,000 which, by means of ingenious code

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\* ICRC report, Dr Rossel, 26th August 1944.

letters between a sergeant in the stalag and Mr Duncan Sandys,<sup>4</sup> was used to purchase a Spitfire fighter plane. The prisoners' joy was unbounded when they were informed that their fighter had been christened "Unshackled Spirit" and that it had been in action. A similar Spitfire fund was raised in Oflag VIB.

With the advent of summer, coupled with the possible approach of Allied forces, more prisoners planned escapes. Many attempts to escape from the work-camps were made, and quite a few were successful. The escapers found that the demeanour of civilians towards prisoners of war at large had changed considerably and not a little help was given them, especially once they had succeeded in reaching Yugoslavia. The civilians around the work-camps, too, were more friendly to the prisoners who now had no difficulty in bartering tea, coffee, chocolate or cigarettes from their parcels for fresh food and vegetables. It was generally conceded, also, that at this stage the German guards were showing more consideration to their prisoners although the Gestapo, as the year wore on, became more active and aggressive with security searches.

One successful escape story concerns two Australians, Privates Brudenell-Woods<sup>5</sup> and Irvine<sup>6</sup> who had been transferred by the Germans to Lamsdorf from Italy. With the idea of escape in mind they volunteered for work and were sent to a work-camp at Kunau. With two other prisoners they spent a fortnight perfecting plans. On 28th June they gained access to the Red Cross store by removing a panel from one door, securing a key to another and climbing over a third. Previously they had removed bricks from the outer wall, merely leaving a thick layer of plaster; breaking through this they reached the outside of the camp. For eight days they walked towards Hungary. Then a farmer gave them civilian clothes and promised a guide to Yugoslavia. When, several weeks later, the guide had not appeared and the other two escapers had already departed, Brudenell-Woods and Irvine crossed the border into Czechoslovakia, where they wandered about to avoid recapture. Eventually they were directed by partisans to Handlova, where their evacuation to Italy on 18th September, was arranged.

Two other Australians, Sergeants Brough<sup>7</sup> and Berry,<sup>8</sup> and a New Zealander<sup>9</sup> while at Stalag XVIII A/Z, Spittal, planned a similar escape. In March 1944 the three succeeded in being sent to a small work-camp at Spitzendorf near Graz. A month later they had no trouble in unlocking the door of their farmhouse billet while the guards were asleep. As they had been unable to obtain civilian clothes they travelled at night only.

<sup>4</sup> Rt Hon Duncan Sandys, MP. RA 1939-41. Financial Secty to War Office 1941-43; Chairman of Intergovernmental Council for Empire POW's 1942-43; Parliamentary Secty, Ministry of Supply 1943-44; Chairman War Cabinet Cttee for defence against V-weapons 1943-45; Minister of Works 1944-45. B. 24 Jan 1908.

<sup>5</sup> Pte B. Brudenell-Woods, MM, NX13848; 2/13 Bn. Horticulturist; of Mona Vale, NSW; b. Inverell, NSW, 16 Feb 1914.

<sup>6</sup> Pte W. R. Irvine, MM, NX5322; 2/4 Bn. Carpenter's labourer; of Orbost, Vic; b. Orbost, 22 Jul 1901.

<sup>7</sup> Sgt E. J. Brough, MM, VX17575; 2/32 Bn. Butcher; of Drouin, Vic; b. Drouin, 16 Feb 1920.

<sup>8</sup> Sgt A. Berry, MM, WX2075; 2/32 Bn. Farm hand; of Leederville, WA; b. Perth, 4 Mar 1917.

<sup>9</sup> Pte E. L. Baty, DCM; 4 NZ Fd Amb.

The River Drau was crossed on an improvised raft and after eight days of severe winter weather they reached Yugoslavia where they met partisan soldiers who guided them to the British Military Mission. A month later they were evacuated by air to Italy reaching Bari on 9th June 1944.

One inveterate escaper was less fortunate. Sapper Steilberg<sup>1</sup> between May 1941 and October 1943, had escaped from stalags and camps no fewer than four times, remaining at liberty for up to 14 days. In February 1944 he and two companions cut the wire at a work-camp at Brux and crawled through unobserved but were recaptured four days later whilst sleeping in a barn. In the next seven months Steilberg made two similar attempts from work-camps. After the last attempt he was placed in a concentration camp at Fort Terezin until April 1945. On 21st April he escaped from the evacuation march, reaching the American lines four days later.

In the spring of 1944 the British Military Mission in Yugoslavia reported that there was "a steady slow trickle" of escapers from the camps in southern Austria. They were being assisted by friendly Austrians around Graz and Marburg and on reaching the River Drau were able, with the aid of Yugoslav partisans, to reach the mission's headquarters.

In March 1944 the Germans opened another camp for British non-working N.C.O's at Thorn in Poland—Stalag 357. British N.C.O's went there from camps all over Germany and Austria. The Germans intended that there should be no escapes from the trains that took the N.C.O's to their new camp. Australians who went there from Stalags XIIIIC, Hammelburg, and XVIIIIA/Z, Spittal, described how one-third of a truck was well wired off in the form of a small compound in which 14 prisoners travelled, the remaining two-thirds of the truck being occupied by seven guards. The prisoners had their boots, belts, braces and ties removed and all were handcuffed throughout the journey, which lasted four to five days. No man was allowed out of the compound during the whole time. The new arrivals were agreeably impressed with the conditions; although the well-spaced barracks were overcrowded, pending completion of the camp, there was ample bedding, lighting and other facilities, also a large sports field. For four months the camp held only 1,000, but in July, when 3,000 air force N.C.O's arrived from Heydekrug, the facilities became inadequate. In August before accommodation for the latest arrivals had been completed the whole camp was moved to Fallingbostal near Bremen, retaining the number Stalag 357.

A second exchange of prisoners between the Allies and Germany was arranged for 17th May 1944 at Barcelona. Four trainloads left Germany for Marseilles and went on to Barcelona by ship. The *Gripsholm* bringing 450 Germans from the United States picked up a similar number at Algiers and reached Barcelona on the appointed day. Two days later she left carrying 1,043 British and American repatriates, including 61 Australians

<sup>1</sup> Spr W. H. C. Steilberg, BEM, NX1164; 2/1 Fd Coy. Labourer; of Harbord, NSW; b. Port Macquarie, NSW, 7 Oct 1919.

(42 medically unfit, 19 protected personnel). The Australians were disembarked at Algiers, going from there by hospital ship to Alexandria, and returning home as berths on ships became available.

In the middle of 1943 it had become apparent that the Germans could no longer employ British defeats as propaganda material among British prisoners and a new approach was necessary. They turned from the abortive effort to convince British prisoners of Britain's error in fighting Germany to an attempt to gain sympathy (and eventual assistance, of course) for Germany's fight against Russian communism. *The Camp*, a small four-page weekly newspaper for general distribution to camps, printed in English, edited and published in Berlin, found it hard to provide convincing news for its readers. From the early days of its publication the paper had run a weekly article entitled "The German Point of View" in which it tried to prove how superior the German race was to the British and their Allies, but the article under that heading for August 1944 merely claimed for America a victory over Britain's ideas at the Bretton Woods conference. The paper had its usual padding of crossword puzzle, English sporting items and results, a weekly military survey and home news in brief. It also contained a list of awards for gallant services in Italy, culled from the *London Gazette* of a month before, a long report of a speech by Goebbels, and an announcement that Lord Gowrie was retiring from the office of Governor-General of Australia.

In January 1945 appeared a description of how a mayor in England had shaken hands with a German prisoner and in February a statement by repatriated German prisoners "that the attitude of British P.O.W. camp officers and guards left nothing to be desired". This of course fooled no one, and even more futile was the attempt, in May and later, to form a "British Free Corps" to fight against the Russians. A circular<sup>2</sup> was sent to all prisoner-of-war camps but there was only one known instance of an Australian volunteering. At Stalag 344, fights occurred between Australians and 72 British prisoners who had accepted the German propaganda.

A much more ingenious scheme was the setting up of "holiday camps" in 1943. One for other ranks was at Genshagen, near Berlin, and one for officers in Berlin. The Germans insisted that each stalag should send a quota to them, the Germans themselves detailing the officers who were to go. The objects of the camps were "to promote a better feeling between

<sup>2</sup> The circular said:

"As a result of repeated applications from British subjects from all parts of the world wishing to take part in the common European struggle against Bolshevism, authorisation has recently been given for the creation of a British Volunteer unit. The British Free Corps publishes herewith the following short statement of the aims and principles of the unit.

"(1) The British Free Corps is a thoroughly British volunteer unit conceived and created by British subjects from all parts of the Empire who have taken up arms and pledged their lives in the common European struggle against Soviet Russia.

"(2) The British Free Corps condemns the war with Germany and the sacrifice of British blood in the interests of Jewry and International Finance, and regards this conflict as a fundamental betrayal of the British people and British Imperial interests.

"(3) The British Free Corps desires the establishment of peace in Europe, the development of close friendly relations between England and Germany, and the encouragement of mutual understanding and collaboration between the two great Germanic peoples.

"(4) The British Free Corps will neither make war against Britain or the British Crown, nor support any action or policy detrimental to the interests of the British.

Published by the British Free Corps."

the opposing nations when the war is over", to give men "a better outlook and relaxation from the tragedies of war" by educational, physical and social activities, and to form "a spiritual centre where the men could be brought closer to Him who alone can bring peace to this suffering world".<sup>3</sup> The prisoners went to the camp in drafts of 200, their stay lasting four weeks. It may well be imagined how pleasant a respite it was to men from coal-mining or other arduous work to be entertained by German musicians and opera singers and with films and lectures. There were outings to Potsdam and facilities for outdoor and indoor sports. Naturally there was ample food—from Red Cross sources! The irony of this was not lost on the prisoners. In 1944 the officers' holiday camp was moved to a castle at Steinburg, an old-world town near the Danube in Bavaria. The Senior British Officer in each oflag was now able to choose who should go, but it was incumbent on each oflag to send its quota. The castle was situated in country ideally suited for pleasant walks, which were taken in small parties accompanied by guides rather than by guards. The interpreters were university men; there was a good library, with, of course, a few propaganda volumes thrown in for good measure. A subtle touch was the employment of first-class photographers from whom photographs were readily obtainable for sending home, and the issue of plenty of letter forms.

The strategic bombing of Germany had reached its zenith by the autumn of 1944 and the sight or sound of the armadas of aircraft overhead passing to or from their targets was a source of joy to most prisoners—but not to those in work-camps around the industrial centres where their sleep was continually interrupted by the crash of bombs near by or the thunder of the anti-aircraft batteries, not to mention the accompanying danger. There were many complaints to delegates of the Protecting Power about the inadequacy of air-raid shelters available for prisoners and the refusal, in some instances, of guards to allow prisoners on working parties to take shelter during day raids. In December 1944 Allied aircraft bombed the main camp at Stalag XVIII A, Wolfsberg, destroying several barracks and killing about 50 prisoners.

A further exchange of prisoners, the third with Germany, took place at Gothenburg in September 1944. From the collecting centres the Allied prisoners for repatriation went by hospital trains to Sassnitz on the Baltic, where they embarked on Swedish ferries for the 60-mile trip across the Baltic to Trelleborg. After two pleasant days in transit camps at Gothenburg, where they were shown every consideration by the British Consul and the Swedish Red Cross, they embarked for Liverpool; 107 Australians (10 protected personnel) were in the total of 2,560 Allied repatriates exchanged for 2,136 German nationals brought from England, Canada and the United States. The Australians were met at Liverpool by officers of the A.I.F. Reception Group, U.K., some going to hospitals and the

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<sup>3</sup> The quotations are from *The Camp* of 20th February 1944.

remainder to the newly established transit camp of the group at Eastbourne whence they proceeded on 28 days' leave. The next, and what proved to be the last, exchange of prisoners took place in January 1945 at Kreuzlingen in Switzerland and involved 5,000 Germans and 2,500 Allied prisoners of whom 102 were men of the A.I.F. In all, a total of 427 maimed or medically unfit and 811 protected personnel of the A.I.F. were repatriated from German camps and a total of 91 from Italian camps.<sup>4</sup>

At the end of January 1945 there were approximately 5,300 members of the A.I.F. in German prison camps or in work-camps attached to them. Some 240 A.I.F. officers were spread among eight different oflags, with about 100 at Oflag VIIIB, Eichstatt. The approximate distribution of other ranks was: Stalag XVIII A, Wolfsberg, 1,500; Stalag 344, Lamsdorf, 1,000; Stalag XIII C, Hammelburg, 700; Stalag VIII B, Teschen, 600; Stalag 383, Hohenfels, 500; Stalag 357, Fallingbostel, 300; Stalag VIII A, Gorlitz, 200. The remainder were dispersed among other stalags in groups varying from 5 to 60. At Stalag 357, Fallingbostel, and at Oflag VIIIB, Eichstatt, the Germans in January staged a reprisal for alleged ill-treatment of German prisoners at a camp in Egypt. All palliasses, all but two blankets and 90 per cent of all stools and tables were taken away. All common and recreation rooms, except the Roman Catholic chapel at Eichstatt were closed. After a visit to Eichstatt the I.C.R.C. inspector stated:

It is useless to expatiate at length on the present conditions of the British prisoners at this Oflag. They are very severe, the prisoners being forced almost always to remain on their feet all day and possessing only the frames of their former wooden beds, with a few cross pieces as base. . . . With the present cold weather, the rooms are very damp and the conditions of accommodation are so much worse.<sup>5</sup>

From about November 1944 onwards the supply of food parcels dwindled to nothing because of the disruption of the German railway system by Allied bombing. Consequently in January 1945 the I.C.R.C. sent weekly from Geneva a fleet of motor trucks, painted white with a large Red Cross on sides and top, carrying consignments of parcels direct to prison camps or to the columns of prisoners trudging across Germany in the long marches forced on them by the Germans. The men in the camps were overjoyed at the sight of "the white angels", the prisoners' name for the food trucks; so were the men on the march, but because of lack of knowledge of the location of the marchers or of their destination from day to day it was seldom that the trucks found the columns.

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<sup>4</sup> Two protected personnel, Dvr C. W. Croucher and Dvr K. H. Griffin of the 2/1 Fd Amb, were among about 2,000 British prisoners assembled at Rouen in 1941 for repatriation. However, due to a breakdown in negotiations between the British and German Governments, the proposed exchange of prisoners was cancelled. With the help of French sympathisers they were among a group who escaped from a woodcutting party at Rouen in January 1942 and, after many adventures in unoccupied France, were recaptured when they were attempting to reach Spain by way of the Pyrenees and imprisoned at St Hippolyte du Fort. The two Australians spent a month there before being transferred to Fort de la Revere whence they finally escaped in September, reaching Gibraltar by fishing boat the next month.

A detailed account of their experiences, written by Griffin, was published in instalments in *Stand-To*, commencing in the Sept-Oct 1962 issue.

<sup>5</sup> ICRC report, Mr Mayer, 29th January 1945.



move almost to the end, except for a 10-day halt when approaching Nuremberg, where they were billeted in a disused pottery factory and forced to work cleaning up bomb damage. They reached Regensburg on the Danube only to be bombed by Allied aircraft when crossing the bridge; 25 prisoners were killed. The whole party, about 1,400 strong, scattered, some making off on their own and others later returning to the column. On 27th March, after having travelled about 800 miles, they were put into a canvas camp near Landshut and more or less left to fend for themselves until an American armoured division arrived a fortnight later.

The stories of the marches of the various columns are much of the same pattern. The men invariably started off loaded with as much warm clothing, Red Cross food and personal possessions as they could carry. Some obtained or improvised sleds on which to drag their belongings. But many found the loads too heavy for long marches through snow feet deep or rain and slush, in their low physical condition. Sleds collapsed or became bogged, and at each succeeding stop there were many who made a re-appraisal of their carrying capacity and dumped everything but food and the barest necessities. All groups suffered the same forced pace in the early stages to get clear of the approaching Russians, the same struggle through snow feet deep on the back roads and country lanes, the crowding into leaking barns at night with no heating or lighting or means of drying clothes, the blistered and frost-bitten feet, the chills and digestive disorders caused by eating raw vegetables and the eventual weakness from lack of food. Fortunate were those who could at night get into a stable or barn containing horses or cattle to obtain comfort from the warmth of the farm animals' bodies, which also helped to melt the ice formed on the prisoners' clothes. The columns were kept for the most part away from the main roads which were choked with fleeing refugees and military traffic. The marches were begun in the dead of winter and wintry conditions were experienced through almost their whole extent. One party had a terrible night march through a blizzard. Exhausted men had to be helped along by their comrades and some were drawn on the sledges. An occasional rifle or revolver shot in the darkness meant that another poor Russian prisoner had been mercilessly killed because of his inability to keep going.

Fortunately most camps were able to issue a reserve of Red Cross parcels at the beginning of a march, for the rations issued by the Germans en route were totally insufficient. At first, in Poland and later in Czechoslovakia, civilians in the villages and smaller towns gave the prisoners bread and in some instances hot food, but the German people were too embittered by the incessant Allied bombing to have any sympathy for the marchers, wretched as their condition was. When their stock of Red Cross food had been consumed, the men were forced to steal what and where they could in order to supplement the irregular issues of about four ounces of bread, a few potatoes and a helping of soup, with an occasional addition of tinned meat or sausage. It was the custom in this part of the world for farmers to store potatoes and turnips in earth-covered mounds

in the fields and it was from these heaps that the marchers, at great risk of reprisals from the guards, stole the main part of their food, eating the potatoes or turnips raw on the march. Some were able to obtain scraps of oil-cake, a compressed cattle-food, from farms.

It was noticeable that the men who had been employed on heavy work in the work-camps were in a better physical condition to stand up to the rigours of the marches. Many of the guards, of whom there were 50 to each 1,000 prisoners, were in no better condition than the prisoners; although their gear was carried in vehicles and they had better rations and billets each night, a number had to fall out and were left behind. The guards carried rifles and grenades and in some columns had brought with them police dogs from the camps. As the weary weeks wore on the marches produced in some guards a sense of apathy that boded well for prisoners on "scrounging" forays or making attempts to escape, while the more sadistic types became more brutal, causing many casualties by shooting or by the free use of rifle-butts. One guard who was known to have shot four prisoners later received retribution at the hands of American troops.

The first of the large camps in eastern Germany to be evacuated was Stalag 344, Lamsdorf, the prisoners receiving two hours' notice to leave on 22nd January. They marched out in eight columns, each of about 1,000 strong, and by nightfall the camp contained only the convalescent and lightly sick. A delegate of the I.C.R.C. who witnessed the departure reported that the prisoners "were in high spirits, full of expectation to be overtaken by the Russians", whose gunfire could be heard rumbling in the distance. Not all of them were in this frame of mind, however; at least some were glad to be moving away from the Russians. Gornitz was the destination of the men from Lamsdorf and the 150-mile tramp was completed in about a fortnight. A week after arriving at Gornitz they were moved on again, travelling westwards through Saxony and Thuringia to reach Meiningen, 60 miles north-east of Frankfurt, early in March, many sick from stomach disorders and fatigue. One column of 1,000 prisoners which left Lamsdorf arrived at Gornitz only 600 strong; the remainder had been left behind sick, exhausted or suffering from severe frost-bite. Of these many reached Gornitz days later in vehicles.

The 2,000-odd prisoners who had been left behind at Lamsdorf remained there for a further three weeks, with the Russian advance gradually moving towards them. The camp followed its usual routine except that there was no interference by the Germans, the prisoners' administration taking over the stores. On 21st February they were packed in parties of 40 to 50 in cattle-trucks and began a 10-day railway journey across Czechoslovakia into Bavaria. They were able to take plenty of Red Cross food with them, their worst hazard being attacks by Allied aircraft. Reaching Hammelburg safely, they stayed in the overcrowded Stalag XIIIIC for three weeks before setting off on foot for Nuremberg or Moosburg. The more seriously sick or injured left Lamsdorf by train (as usual, 40 to

a cattle-truck) for Stalag XVIIIB at Krems in Austria which they reached after a week's journey under extremely bad conditions.

It was the original intention of the Germans to clear Stalag 344 at Lamsdorf in order to use it as a transit camp for prisoners evacuating Stalag VIIIIB, Teschen, and the many work-camps in Upper Silesia but the momentum of the Russian drive precluded this, and the columns from Teschen and the southern *arbeitskommandos*, instead of travelling north, were forced to move westward.

The general direction of these columns, and also of some that had left Lamsdorf, was over the mountains of eastern Sudetenland, bypassing Prague, to Koniggratz and Karlsbad. The extremely cold weather experienced by these columns when in the mountain ranges caused many cases of frost-bite, necessitating amputations in 25 cases in one hospital alone—at Oberlangendorf. The intention had been to form these columns into two groups, one to remain in north-western Czechoslovakia, the other to be dispersed in areas around Munich, Nuremberg and Stuttgart. The Allied threat from the west, however, eliminated the two latter centres. Some columns stayed in Czechoslovakia and were put to work, but the majority eventually arrived in the Moosburg area to become part of a huge throng of prisoners of all nationalities estimated by some sources to number up to 100,000.

The next camp to get under way was Stalag VIIIC at Sagan. Leaving on 12th February the men marched to Spremberg, a distance of about 50 miles, expecting to be entrained there. Instead they had to walk 300 miles to Duderstadt, spending nights in the open in rain and snow.

By the middle of February the overcrowding at Gorlitz had become acute as a result of the influx from Lamsdorf and other camps to the east. Men were sleeping on floors, tables or wherever they could find space to lie. The camp hospital was filled with patients suffering from frost-bite, pneumonia and other complaints contracted on the march—patients whose condition would have been less serious had they been allowed to receive treatment when and where they became sick instead of being forced to complete the journey in a slower column. Doubtless the condition of these men had influenced the British camp leader at Gorlitz to protest to the Germans against a plan to move the whole camp on foot in the existing weather, but despite protests, the scarcity of food (the reserve of Red Cross food at Gorlitz had been issued to the men from Lamsdorf on their arrival) and the lack of transport for the sick, the march from Gorlitz began on 17th February. The first column to leave, after being issued with two days' rations, moved off in a heavy snowstorm and covered 20 miles on the first day. The distance covered was later reduced to a daily average of 12 miles, which distance became general in most columns. One of the marchers in this column, referring to the second morning, later wrote:

I am awake before dawn, stirred by a cold that penetrates even the stupor of exhaustion. Others are moving about, stamping feet and rubbing hands in an attempt to restore circulation to frigid limbs. The guards have given no thought to

sanitation, and we stamp impatiently by the door awaiting their pleasure. Dawn finds us a sorry lot. Many are crippled by blisters and are unable to march any farther, while others suffer from cramps, torn tendons and muscles. Those fit to continue the march move up to the front; the remainder, about a hundred strong . . . are again quartered in the barn to await the orders of the authorities controlling the march. It transpired that, after resting for a day, they were marched at a slower rate. Only in cases of extreme illness were casualties loaded on to carts.<sup>6</sup>

The absence of hot meals on the march called for improvisation and the "travelling-cooker" was evolved with which to cook stolen vegetables. A bucket with holes punched in its base and having a long wire handle was the receptacle for the fire. A billy containing the food was placed over the flames and both bucket and billy suspended from a long pole which was carried by two men. There were several days on which the first column from Gorlitz received no rations at all; these were the days when the "cookers" were appreciated.

On arrival at Duderstadt on 8th March the prisoners were accommodated in Stalag XIC, long-disused brickworks of three stories, cold, draughty and full of brick dust. There was one water pump and one primitive latrine for the 1,000 men then there, but more were still to come. In the next three days two additional columns arrived. Dysentery broke out. Fires and light were forbidden and no one was allowed out after dark. The whole building was infested with lice and fouled by previous columns. There was no provision for the treatment of the seriously ill and 50 died of dysentery or pneumonia. "Cases of dysentery are mounting: the pile of the dead at the gate, most of them unidentified, grows larger."<sup>7</sup> The task of the medical officers was alleviated towards the end of March by the sending of a train of cattle-trucks containing the less seriously sick to Fallingbommel, where the reprisal order depriving British prisoners of their palliasses and furniture was still in force.

The march was continued from Duderstadt at the end of March, the columns heading in a north-easterly direction towards Magdeburg. The prisoners soon saw evidence that the end was approaching. Large formations of Allied planes were continually flying over them, and they witnessed from a hill-top near Halberstadt a mass air raid. They also saw, from a distance of less than a mile, the launching of a German A-4 rocket bomb, but neither prisoners nor guards realised what it was. One column from Duderstadt wandered for a week in the direction of Brunswick, being able to obtain almost no food on the way. The food shortage in Brunswick was so acute that the column leader was allowed to try to arrange for Red Cross food from the I.C.R.C. depot there; fortunately it was obtained, for soon afterwards the prisoners were ordered to move again, this time away from American forces who had reached Duderstadt on 9th April and were advancing towards Magdeburg. Another column on its way to Brunswick had reached Dittfurt where it halted. A long column of trucks pulled up ahead of the prisoners causing great excitement and hopes. The

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<sup>6</sup> J. L. Brill, "Forced March to Freedom", *Stand-To*, March 1950.

<sup>7</sup> J. L. Brill.

hopes were short-lived however; the trucks were loaded with fully-armed S.S. troops, halted for an hourly rest!

The mass evacuation of prisoners from camps in eastern Germany and Poland had begun early in the New Year, and by February about 250,000 Allied prisoners of war were straggling westwards in columns and groups of varying sizes across Germany and Czechoslovakia. About 100,000 were in the north, travelling in a general direction towards Hamburg and Bremen; another 60,000 were trekking across central Germany towards an area bounded by Berlin, Leipzig and Brunswick; and more than 80,000 were moving through northern Czechoslovakia headed for Bavaria. By March, Stalags IIIA, Luckenwalde; 357, Fallingbostal; XIIIC, Hammelburg; VIIA, Moosburg, and to a lesser extent, XIID, Nuremberg, and XIA, Altengrabow, had become large reception camps for wandering columns. Conditions in all these camps were bad: food and Red Cross supplies were short, camp facilities were overtaxed to the utmost degree, and every available inch of space had to be used for accommodation. At Hammelburg the last 2,000 prisoners to leave Lamsdorf were crowded into a group of small huts that was normally the camp infirmary. None was as bad, however, as the temporary transit camp at Duderstadt, previously described.

When on 7th March the First American Army forced the bridgehead at Remagen on the Rhine, it was only 35 miles from Oflag XIIB, Hadamar, and, as the Allied forces built up on the west bank of the Rhine for the final onslaught into Germany, the German High Command, adhering to its policy of moving prisoners away from the advancing Allies, ordered that some camps near the Rhine be evacuated eastwards. In addition to the prisoners static in oflags and stalags, there were some columns in the area which had marched from eastern Germany. These were now forced to march in an easterly direction.

The first camp to move was Oflag XIIB. The prisoners were transported by motor lorries on 21st and 22nd March to a transit camp at Lollar, some 40 miles distant, to await rail transport. The train awaiting them was bombed, so they stayed at Lollar and were still there when the 7th American Division overran the village on 29th March. The former prisoners were billeted in houses in the village and were well fed and amply supplied with French wines—German loot from France. They were in England on 4th April having been flown via Le Havre.

Stalag XIIIC, Hammelburg, was hurriedly evacuated as an armoured column from General Patton's Third American Army was rapidly approaching the area. This turned out to be a flying column sent forward for the purpose of releasing some 200 American officers at the camp, including the general's son-in-law. The armoured column took aboard some Americans from the camp on the night of 27th March but was ambushed while returning to their main force and lost several tanks and suffered severe casualties. The wounded were the next morning taken to

the stalag hospital. It was nine days later before the prisoners of war remaining at the stalag were released.

Columns left the stalag in the early afternoon of 27th March and continued marching nearly all night, covering more than 25 miles. They continued the march in a south-easterly direction towards Moosburg, were billeted each night in reasonably comfortable accommodation, and fared quite well on food collected in the country they passed through. A variety of hand-drawn vehicles were improvised or "acquired" to carry their belongings and, averaging about 10 miles a day, they experienced no great hardships. Red Cross food was sent out to them from Stalag XIIIID when they were near Nuremberg and loaded "white angel" trucks were awaiting when they reached the end of their march at Guttersberg on 22nd April after travelling about 230 miles. Five days later an American armoured column reached them. For the next few days the former prisoners wandered around the countryside eventually reporting to an American Army headquarters at Mainburg, where arrangements were made for their evacuation by air from Regensburg.

Towards the end of March the right arm of the pincer-movement encircling the Ruhr was approaching Kassel and nearing Oflag IXA/H and IXA/Z at Spangenburg and Rotenburg respectively. On 28th March the prisoners at Rotenburg were ordered to march east. Bed sheets sewn to form the letters "PW" were carried and laid out whenever Allied aircraft approached the column. They obtained plenty of good, fresh food by bartering cigarettes and soap as they went along. Averaging about 10 miles a day they just kept clear of American forces until 12th April when, near Halle, the Americans made a quick thrust and the prisoners found themselves in the middle of an artillery duel. The German guards deserted the column and next day the prisoners were liberated by the Americans and almost immediately flown to England.

Oflag IXA/H was evacuated on 29th March, the prisoners marching out at 5 p.m. and continuing throughout the night. The columns from this camp adhered to the practice of night marching until their liberation seven days later. They moved in much the same direction as the Rotenburg columns but took a more northerly road. On 3rd April they were camped at Legenfeld adjacent to a German artillery battery, still in action. A German parachute battalion was bivouacked in a wood near by and German wounded and stragglers were streaming through. Next day a pitched battle was going on around them and for a while the military position was obscure. The officers from Spangenburg disarmed their guards and in turn made them prisoners. Some also assisted the Americans to man road-blocks. Later in the day they were moved by American trucks back through a breach in the German lines to the headquarters of an American regiment that had contacted them. But they were not out of the wood yet. The Americans had had to evacuate Legenfeld and the regimental commander was apprehensive that Germans retreating from Kassel might threaten from the rear, so the former prisoners were formed into companies and armed with German rifles. Fighting was still going

on in the next village. Eventually German resistance was overcome and the former prisoners guarded the German prisoners. On 9th April they were flown out from a near-by airfield and ferried by air to England.

It would appear that the delay in evacuating prisoners from the most westward of German prisoner-of-war camps was due, to some extent, to the German commandants' desire to remain and fall into American hands. This might have been the reason why prisoners at Oflag VA, Weinsberg, were not transferred eastward until 31st March, although the Americans were sitting on the west bank of the Rhine only 40 miles away. The evacuation from Oflag VA was to be by train and the German authorities agreed to move by night only, to mark the roofs of the trucks of the train with the Red Cross, Union Jack and letters "PW", and to allow the prisoners to disperse during the daytime. They left on the night of 31st March with Stalag VIIA, Moosburg, as the destination; the journey of 150 miles took four nights, the intervening three days being spent picnicking in fields beside the railway track. Owing to the slowness of the Allied advance in this sector these prisoners had to wait another month for liberation.

At Stalag 357, Fallingbostal, an effort was made to move the occupants to Lubeck, and on 6th April they set off on foot for that place, short of food but happy, being satisfied that the end could not be far away. By "scrounging" and bartering they fed better than they had done for some time. The German guards took little interest in their duties and many men wandered off. Those who did not were liberated by a British spearhead in that area on 18th April. At Stalag XIB, Fallingbostal, which held 20,000 prisoners of all nationalities, the German commandant handed over the camp to the prisoners' administration leaving only a token guard. Senior prisoner N.C.O's then took complete control, even to the issuing of leave passes for the German guards. On the morning of 16th April tanks of the 8th Hussars, a British armoured regiment, arrived at the camp gates. This regiment also liberated prisoners in the adjacent Stalag 357; these comprised the sick who had been left behind and others who had hidden when the columns were marched out on 6th April.

In mid-April the Americans were moving on Colditz, where Oflag IVC was situated. The Germans were offering considerable resistance here and the prisoners could hear the noise of battle for several days before the Germans ordered them all out into the woods. The Senior British Officer refused to obey. Later in the day the village was shelled. The American guns had been trained on the castle containing the oflag when a French flag and the Union Jack were noticed waving from windows and the order to fire was cancelled in the nick of time. The prisoners were liberated next day, 15th April. On 17th April 5,500 N.C.O's in Stalag 383 at Hohenfels set out on foot for Moosburg. A thousand or so sick remained to be transported by road and these with several hundreds who hid in the camp, remained there till the American forces arrived on 22nd April. The marchers did not get far; after three days forced marching they had

three days' rest at Kosching, near Ingolstadt, where their guards deserted and where the prisoners remained until taken over by the Americans.

The day after the marchers left Hohenfels three Australians, Sergeants Roffey and Murphy<sup>8</sup> and Corporal Walker,<sup>9</sup> who had hidden, left the camp on a foraging expedition and saw how German organisation had completely broken down. Small bands of civilians, prisoners of war, German soldiers (including officers) and foreign workers were raiding and looting what foodstuffs they could find. A chance remark brought the Australians into conversation with two English-speaking German officers, who eventually procured a car and drove the prisoners to a near-by ration store. After loading the car with foodstuffs they repaired to the officers' mess. Here the Germans proposed that if the Australians would promise to get them through the American lines before handing them over as prisoners of war, they, the Germans, would drive them there and give them every assistance. The Germans had a dread of being sent to work in the salt-mines, which they had been assured by their propaganda would happen if they were captured by the Russians. Details of a plan were worked out in readiness for the time when the exact position of the American forces could be ascertained. Eventually, the Australians, now joined by a fourth,<sup>1</sup> took up residence in the officers' mess and awaited events. About midnight the prearranged signal was heard, but the Australians were astounded to find one of the officers hysterically waving a pistol. He explained that his fellow conspirator had suddenly exclaimed "God! What am I doing. I must do my duty," and had dashed out to the car and driven away to Regensburg where they had been ordered to report some days before. The Australians tried to calm him, explaining the Americans would be there in two days, but they were unsuccessful and, still waving his pistol, he rushed out into the night. The Australians then returned to the stalag and awaited the arrival of the American troops.

The Germans were endeavouring to get all prisoners in northern Bavaria to Stalag VIIA, Moosburg, and some were already there or in surrounding villages, while from other camps columns were heading towards Moosburg. The last camp to set out for Moosburg was Oflag VIIB, Eichstatt. They left on 14th April loaded with food and belongings but had not gone farther than a few hundred yards when they were attacked by Allied aircraft and suffered serious casualties.<sup>2</sup> The attack was precipitated by a German sentry in a watch-tower opening fire on an American plane. The column returned to camp and did not make another start until the next night; thereafter all movement was by night. The men arrived at Stalag VIIA in good condition after spending nine days on the road.

Moosburg was now very crowded and all facilities were hopelessly overtaxed. The German rations were infinitesimal but the I.C.R.C. had

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<sup>8</sup> Sgt J. T. Murphy, VX4744; 2/7 Bn. Labourer; of Merbein, Vic; b. Mildura, Vic, 13 Aug 1919.

<sup>9</sup> Cpl A. M. Walker, VX5500; 2/7 Bn. Golf club maker; of Lower Plenty, Vic; b. Wonthaggi, Vic, 21 Nov 1913.

<sup>1</sup> Cpl A. E. Matthews, VX5175; 2/7 Bn. Clerk; of Geelong, Vic; b. Geelong, 9 Nov 1920.

<sup>2</sup> Twelve killed, 42 wounded including 4 seriously.

established a depot for Red Cross food parcels at the camp, so there was ample food except for bread and fresh vegetables. The officer prisoners at the camp, among whom were nearly 3,000 British, feared a move to the "Redoubt" area around Salzburg, but news of an agreement between the Allies and the Germans that there should be no further moves of prisoners allayed their fears. On 26th April the German commandant handed over the administration of the camp to the senior officer prisoner and most of the guards left. Next morning there were skirmishes near the camp between the retreating Germans and American advanced columns and on the 29th American tanks entered the camp. Unsuitable flying conditions hindered the air evacuation of the prisoners, but within the next fortnight several thousand a day were leaving the near-by airfield at Landshut.

In Austria the prisoners in German camps had experienced the same privations in the early months of 1945 as had those in Germany proper, but a Red Cross relief train from Switzerland had established a depot at Landeck and thence, from late March onwards, food parcels were distributed to the Austrian camps. At this time there were 36,000 prisoners of all nationalities in Stalag XVIII A at Wolfsberg or the attached work-camps; some 10,000 were British, including about 1,500 A.I.F. These men did not experience the forced winter marches endured by their compatriots in eastern German camps; in fact, when they did move, it was in pleasant spring weather, there was no acute food shortage, and the march was an agreeable change from the monotony of prison-camp life.

The Germans planned to move as many British prisoners as possible from eastern Austria westwards to the Salzburg area. By the middle of April some columns were already on the move and by the end of the month, when a train-load of sick left Wolfsberg for Markt Pongau, practically all other British prisoners had left on foot. Those in the work-camps east and south of Wolfsberg were also on the march; all columns headed for Markt Pongau, where the first arrived on 23rd April. In the next few days hundreds arrived at Stalag XVIII C, the camp at Markt Pongau, which the Germans estimated as having a capacity of 4,000 to 5,000. With the camp population swollen to 13,000 the overcrowding was similar to that in other camps. Some columns did not get as far as Markt Pongau; this was fortunate as the food problem would have become serious with a bigger influx. Although fighting was still continuing in adjacent areas the German guards left Markt Pongau on 2nd May and control of such a huge mass of men became difficult. On 6th May several hundreds broke out of camp and looted a goods train. A Swiss Red Cross representative stationed at the camp reported that order had been restored by the camp leaders without any serious clash with civilians, but it was considered advisable to send a medical officer to Salzburg to contact American forces, and a party of American troops arrived next

day. A British recovery team, which included representatives of all Commonwealth forces, arrived on 17th May. Three days later the evacuation began—by lorry to Salzburg where the air-lift to France and on to England began.

The speed of the Russian advance in January 1945 prevented the Germans from moving all prisoners from the camps in Poland and eastern Germany. The outlying work-camps were overrun and in some main camps the sick were left with medical personnel to tend them. Consequently a number of British prisoners found themselves in Russian hands. In addition there were some who had escaped from the marching columns and had made their way back to the Russian lines. The British Military Mission to Moscow arranged with the Soviet authorities for the early repatriation of released British prisoners through Odessa. The Russians, however, wanted to work the former prisoners in the same way that released Russian prisoners were being worked by SHAEF.<sup>3</sup> Some Commonwealth Governments strongly opposed this and it was not until after agreement had been reached at Yalta in February between the Soviet and Commonwealth Governments for the "care and repatriation" of their respective former prisoners of war that British liaison officers were allowed on Soviet territory.

Arrangements, however, did not work smoothly; the movements of British liaison officers were considerably restricted, and although the Russians had established collecting points there was little organisation, probably due more to the chaotic conditions then prevailing in Poland than to any intentional Russian neglect. From the collecting points the ex-prisoners were directed back to Lvov in the Ukraine or Volkovysk farther north, from where they were sent on to Odessa. It was only at the two points mentioned that the British contact teams were allowed. Conditions were poor on the long train journey to Odessa, but no worse than for Russian soldiers or civilians travelling at the time. By February 1945 over 2,600 British released prisoners including about 50 Australians were on their way to Odessa, where a transit camp was being set up in a school building.<sup>4</sup> Here conditions were good; there was ample Red Cross food and medical attention was good. The men were allowed to go out under escort ("for their own protection"). The first ships carrying repatriates left Odessa in March.

When it was apparent in April 1945 that the collapse of Germany was imminent, an organisation, conceived as early as September 1942, began operations under SHAEF for the recovery of Allied prisoners of war in German hands. A branch of SHAEF known as P.W.X. was set up to control these operations.

It was considered advisable, in the interest of discipline and of the troops themselves, that contact officers should take charge of the former

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<sup>3</sup> Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force.

<sup>4</sup> In all 4,300 British released prisoners passed through Odessa, including 150 AIF.

prisoners in the camps as soon as practicable after liberation. These officers were to instruct the troops to remain in the camps or, if not in a camp, to report to the nearest transit centre; to explain to them the arrangements for their repatriation; to provide their immediate requirements and amenities, and generally assist in keeping them contented while awaiting evacuation to the United Kingdom. At the request of the War Office, Australia, in common with other Dominions, appointed her own liaison officers to assist with the repatriation scheme in general and her own nationals in particular.

Australia appointed 18 officers for this work—thirteen from the A.I.F. and five from the R.A.A.F. The senior Australian liaison officer<sup>5</sup> and one R.A.A.F. officer were attached to P.W.X. at Versailles, the others being attached to the headquarters of the various formations in the field. A unit, designated A.I.F. Reception Group (United Kingdom) formed in Melbourne in June 1944, commanded by Brigadier E. Gorman, sailed for England via the United States in July and established its headquarters first at Haslemere camp near High Wycombe in Buckinghamshire and later at Eastbourne, a seaside resort on the Sussex coast, where there were comfortable billets and all the amenities associated with a prosperous watering place. One transit camp and four reception camps were also established in the same area. Similar organisations were set up in England by the R.A.N. and R.A.A.F.

As the Allied advance from the west continued, the liaison officers in the field moved forward with the formations to which they were attached and, as prisoner-of-war camps were liberated, Australian prisoners were contacted and assisted in their evacuation by motor transport to airfields whence they were flown to England. In view of the bad physical condition of many of the men it was decided to expedite the air evacuation of the prisoners with all possible speed. Drafts were sent from the assembly centres to the airfield and were emplaned in groups irrespective of nationality. This method prevented the various liaison officers from contacting a number of their own nationals; but instead they assisted ably in the movement of all prisoners. After the German capitulation a large number of aircraft was made available for the air-lift of prisoners and the operation was stepped up considerably; more than 20,000 were evacuated by air in one day and most Allied prisoners were flown out of Europe within the next few weeks. After the main evacuation had been completed the liaison officers searched for stragglers in their areas. Some were recovered in this way and information was obtained about the fate of some who had died or had been killed by the Germans.<sup>6</sup>

Only the former prisoners from the few camps in north-western Europe were flown direct to England; the large majority staged for a few hours or overnight in Belgium or France, usually Brussels or Reims. The fol-

<sup>5</sup> Lt-Col J. S. Smith, VX138754. (1st AIF: Capt 4 FA Bde.) Staff appts LHQ; and SLO SHAEF, 1945. Club secretary; of Melbourne; b. Elsternwick, Vic, 5 Apr 1886.

<sup>6</sup> At 15th June 1945 about 120 men of the AIF were unaccounted for. This number was reduced to 9 and later the deaths of the 9 were presumed.

lowing description of the procedure at a Recovered Allied Military Personnel Reception Centre at Namur (Belgium) is typical. The centre was in an American L. of C. area and staffed by Americans with Allied liaison officers attached. The repatriates arrived at Namur either by plane, by train, by hitch-hiking or in stolen German cars. On arrival at the centre they were provided with coffee, cigarettes or chewing gum, and while waiting for particulars to be taken could read magazines and listen to music. After the documentation all clothes were removed and fumigated. A hot shower was followed by spraying with a special disinfectant powder, then the men were medically examined and completely outfitted with new clothing. A Red Cross parcel was issued containing cigarettes, confectionery, writing materials, toilet requisites, socks and handkerchiefs. Interrogation by Military Intelligence followed. An advance of pay of £5 was made before men were transported by truck to a billet which accommodated 2,500 and had a canteen and Red Cross centre. All meals were eaten at the billet. Next day the repatriates were entrained for Brussels, usually leaving that city by air for England on the following day. At the end of April this centre was processing repatriates at the rate of 200 in the hour and this number could have been increased with the addition of more medical officers.<sup>7</sup>

By 4th April the A.I.F. Reception Group had already handled the men of the A.I.F. involved in the last two exchanges of prisoners with Germany as well as repatriates from Italy and Switzerland and a few from Russia, and was prepared for an influx from German camps when, on that date, the first solitary repatriate from Germany arrived. From then onwards there were almost daily arrivals of up to 30 in number until about 20th April when the daily arrivals numbered about 100. The tempo gradually increased until the week ending 15th May when just over 1,000 arrived during the week, the peak being on 11th May when 55 officers and 603 other ranks were received by the group. Thereafter the rate of arrivals decreased until, at the end of June, there was only a dribble.

When the repatriates reached the airfields in England, usually in the Home Counties, those needing urgent medical treatment were sent to hospital. They reported to the reception group headquarters on discharge from hospital. The fit were drafted according to nationality and branch of the service to the appropriate transit camp, the A.I.F. Transit Camp, as mentioned, being at Eastbourne. Attached to A.I.F. Reception Group was a dental unit, cash office, provost platoon, postal unit and detachments of the Australian Canteen Services and the Australian Red Cross, the latter also representing other Australian philanthropic organisations.

On arrival at the transit camp repatriates were immediately provided with a meal and accommodation and later were allowed to send a free cable home and were presented with a Red Cross "welcome" parcel. They were then subjected to very thorough medical and dental examinations, given advances of pay and issued with Australian uniforms. Double rations

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<sup>7</sup> From a report by Capt C. F. W. Baylis, Australian liaison officer.

were issued, with very substantial additions from the Australian Red Cross. Double ration cards were also issued when the repatriates went on the first 14 days of their repatriation leave, the balance of 46 days usually being withheld until arrival in Australia. For this leave, free rail passes were issued to any part of England, Scotland or Wales. Unbounded hospitality was showered on the men whether in hamlet, town or city. When leave was over the repatriates reported back to the transit camp, and were allotted to one of the reception camps; as far as practicable all men from one Australian State were in the same reception camp. Here everything was done to interest, entertain and keep the men fit by means of films, physical training, sports, instruction in the newest weapons, and by dances, lectures and so on. Many took the opportunity of continuing university and other courses interrupted by their enlistment. Embarkation for Australia was arranged as speedily as possible. Large-scale embarkation began in May 1945, when two batches of approximately 800 each left Liverpool. Similar numbers followed during June, and in July nearly 2,000 left. A draft of about 600 on 22nd August followed by a small one on the 30th completed the transfer of repatriates from Germany to Australia, except for a few who had been allowed to attend special courses in the United Kingdom and those who had requested discharge there.