

Great Escapers? Experiences of captivity and escape among Australian prisoners of war in Europe during the Second World War

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Abstract

Historians have given little attention to the experiences of Australian prisoners of war in Europe during the Second World War, which has allowed representations in popular culture to stand as *de facto* histories. This paper examines the experiences of prisoners based on their branch of service and rank. It argues that in the phases of capture, transit and interrogation, a distinctive service experience existed; and in the phase of permanent camps, a distinctive rank experience. The paper also examines the motivation, rank and destination of escapers.

Introduction

On 29 March 1944, three officers drove through the countryside north of Kiel, Germany. They discussed Royal Air Force (RAF) attempts to bomb bridges in the area, and one of the men, *Gestapo Sturmbannführer* Johannes Post, stopped off to give theatre tickets to a female friend. Their destination was a field between Kiel and Flensburg, and upon arrival Post ordered the second officer, Hans Kaehler, to shoot the third: Squadron Leader James Catanach, a pilot of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) and an escaped prisoner of war. Post later recalled that Kaehler was nervous and excited, and his pistol jammed: "I feared [he] might miss, so I shot Catanach through the heart as ordered." As Catanach's body lay in the field, a second vehicle carrying three more escapers arrived. Flight Lieutenant Arnold Christensen of the Royal New Zealand Air Force, and Lieutenant Nils Fugelsang and Sergeant Halldor Espelid, both of the Royal Norwegian Air Force, were similarly murdered by Post. They were four of The Fifty: the 50 Allied prisoners of war shot on Hitler's orders in retaliation for their mass escape from the *Stalag Luft III* prisoner of war camp at Sagan on 24–25 March 1944.¹

The escape from *Stalag Luft III* is best known as the basis for John Sturges's 1963 film *The great escape*, a classic example of the "prisoner of war genre".² This genre of books, films and television series contributes to what S.P. Mackenzie has termed the Colditz Myth. In the genre there is "an enduring set of popular assumptions in which life behind the wire [is] interpreted, both figuratively and literally, in sporting terms.

¹ Australian Associated Press, "Australian Airman Died Bravely", *The Mercury*, 7 August 1947, p. 7. For a discussion of the trial of Post, Kaehler and other murderers, see Jones, Priscilla Dale, "Nazi atrocities against Allied airmen: Stalag Luft III and the end of British war crimes trials", *The historical journal*, 41:2, June 1998, pp. 543–65.

² Sturges, John, *The great escape*, 1963; Cull, Nicholas J., "'Great Escapes': 'Englishness' and the prisoner of war genre", *Film history*, 14:3/4, 2002, pp. 282–295. Like many films and television series in the prisoner of war genre, Sturges' film is based on a memoir: Brickhill, Paul, *The great escape*, London, Faber and Faber Limited, 1951.

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Escape was the name of the game.” This myth not only applies to the *Oflag IVC* camp at Colditz, but other prisoner of war camps as well, and “drastically oversimplifies and distorts the general experience in Germany ... [into] one in which prisoners bore the burden of captivity with a light heart while helping one another with schemes to outwit and ultimately evade their captors.”³ In the genre and myth, the experience of captivity in Europe during the Second World War is presented as one of escape, not of captivity itself, yet of the approximately 8,800 Australian prisoners of war in the theatre, only about 600, or less than seven per cent, made successful escapes.⁴

While there is no requirement for creative works set in the past to accurately represent their subject matter, problems arise when those creative works are allowed to stand as *de facto* histories. Historians have virtually ignored the experiences of Australian prisoners of war in Europe during the Second World War, focusing instead on the experiences of those in the Pacific.⁵ The fullest accounts of prisoners in Europe

³ Mackenzie, S.P., *The Colditz myth: British and Commonwealth prisoners of war in Nazi Germany*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 1-2.

⁴ Determining the exact number of Australian prisoners of war in Europe during the Second World War is a difficult task. The main text of the official history suggests a figure of 8,613, of whom 7,116 were soldiers, 1,476 airmen and 21 sailors. However, the 2nd AIF figure, compiled from 1,941 soldiers captured in North Africa, 2,065 captured in Greece and 3,109 captured in Crete, includes only one of the 175 soldiers captured by the Vichy French in Syria. Meanwhile, the Air Force figure conflicts with that given in the appendix of the relevant Air Force volume, in which only 795 members of the RAAF are said to have been prisoners in Europe. Even if other figures given in the appendix are added, that is, 33 internees in Europe, and 206 prisoners and internees in the Middle East, only 1,034 of the airmen referred to in the text are accounted for. 1,034 is the same figure as given in the tri-service statistics in the final Army volume. 442 Air Force prisoners, then, are “missing” between the text and the appendices. The discrepancy is possibly the result of the main text including Australians who served in RAAF as well as RAF units, although any such distinction is *not* explicit. Hank Nelson dismisses this possibility but offers no alternative explanation. In contrast to the possibly overstated Air Force figure, the RAN figure is understated. Thirty sailors of the RAN were prisoners in Europe, as well as a small, unknown number of sailors of the merchant navy. I have chosen to include 2nd AIF prisoners captured in North Africa, Greece, Crete and Syria; the higher number of Air Force prisoners; and the whole number of RAN prisoners. For 2nd AIF statistics, see Field, A.E., “Prisoners of the Germans and Italians”, in Maughan, Barton, *Tobruk and El Alamein*, Australia in the war of 1939–1945, Canberra, AWM, 1966, p. 755. For an account of captivity in Syria, see AWM, 54, 781/6/4. For Air Force statistics, see Herington, John, *Air power over Europe, 1944-45*, Australia in the War of 1939–1945, Canberra, AWM, 1963, p. 473; Nelson, Hank, *Chased by the sun: the Australians in Bomber Command in World War II*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 2002; p. 290. For the general approach of the Official History to Australians in RAAF and RAF units, see Herington, John, *Air war against Germany and Italy 1939–1943*, Australia in the War of 1939–1945, pp. xiii–xiv, 523–59. For Royal Australian Navy statistics, see Gill, Hermon G., *Royal Australian Navy 1939–1942*, Australia in the War of 1939–1945, Canberra, AWM, 1968, p. 707; AWM, 69, 23/18. For a list of Merchant Navy prisoners in both the European and Pacific theatres, see AWM, PR03023. For tri-service statistics, see Long, Gavin, *The final campaigns*, Australia in the War of 1939–1945, Canberra, AWM, 1963, p. 633. Determining the exact number of Australian escapers is similarly difficult. This figure is taken from Beaumont, Joan, *Australian defence: sources and statistics*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 345.

⁵ This is probably because of the extreme hardship experienced by prisoners of war in the Pacific, which led to a very high mortality rate. See Beaumont, Joan, “Prisoners of war”, in Dennis, Peter, et al, *The*

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remain three chapters in the Official History, *Australia in the War 1939–1945*, two in the bicentennial coffee table book *Prisoners of war*, and five in Patsy Adam-Smith's readable but anecdotal *Prisoners of war: from Gallipoli to Korea*, as well as Joan Beaumont's overview in *The Oxford companion to Australian military history*.⁶ As this overview observes, there is a "persistent neglect of prisoners of the Germans and Italians in the Australian historiography of the [Second World War]." In the absence of sustained scholarship about Australian experiences of captivity, "Such mythology as there is about the prisoner-of-war camps in Europe ignores the considerable privations of captivity... and focuses instead on escape and activities designed to outwit or bewilder the Germans and Italians";⁷ or in other words, on a "history" of captivity-as-escape that is derived from the prisoner of war genre and Colditz Myth.

The experiences of captivity *and* escape of Australian prisoners of war in Europe during the Second World War deserve to be studied in their own right. This paper, based primarily on archival material held by the Australian War Memorial, will compare prisoners' experiences of capture, transit, interrogation and permanent camps. This comparison will be based on their service and rank – that is, 2nd Australian Imperial Force (AIF) or RAF/RAAF (henceforth "air forces"); and commissioned officer ("officer"), non-commissioned officer (NCO) or other ranks (OR). The paper will also examine the motivation, rank and destination of escapers.

Capture

Experiences of capture, transit and interrogation varied considerably between men serving in the 2nd AIF and those serving with the air forces. Soldiers of the 2nd AIF were captured in groups of varying sizes over short periods of time: 1,941 in North Africa in individual actions; 2,065 in Greece in April 1941; 3,109 in Crete in April–May 1941, and 175 in Syria in June–July 1941.⁸ Significantly, some of these soldiers had contact with enemy prisoners of war before being captured themselves. In a letter to his mother from Libya in March 1941, Private Lawrence (Larry) Saywell described his interaction with one of a dozen Italian prisoners; Saywell referred to him as a "friend" and observed, "Anyway he's glad to get out of it. Not because he's afraid, because he

Oxford companion to Australian military history, second edition, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 2008; Monteath, Peter, "Australian POW in German captivity in the Second World War", *Australian journal of politics and history*, 54:3, September 2008, pp. 421–33.

⁶ Field, "Prisoners of the Germans and Italians", pp. 755–822; Herington, *Air power over Europe, 1944–45*, pp. 464–98; Walker, Allan S., *Middle East and Far East, Australia in the War of 1939–1945*, Canberra, AWM, 1962, pp. 400–18; Clarke, Hugh, et. al., *Prisoners of war*, Sydney, Time-Life Books (Australia), 1988; Adam-Smith, Patsy, *Prisoners of war: from Gallipoli to Korea*, Melbourne, Penguin Books, 1992; Beaumont, "Prisoners of war". Note that during the writing of this paper, a full-length study of Australian prisoners of war held by Germany was published: Peter Monteath, *P.O.W.: Australian prisoners of war in Hitler's Reich*, Sydney, Macmillan, 2011.

⁷ Beaumont, "Prisoners of war", p. 431.

⁸ Field, "Prisoners of the Germans and Italians", p. 755.

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isn't, but simply, as he remarks... ['I have no fight with Britain but I have one with Germans, they are cutting Italy's throat.']"⁹ As Mark Johnston has shown, Private Saywell's respectful attitude towards the Italian prisoner of war was atypical.¹⁰ More common was the attitude expressed in a newsletter of the 2/23 Battalion, which described a unit flea-catching competition. "The competition is not confined solely to fleas, but to vermin of all kinds, and a table of comparative values is given hereunder: One bug equals 3 fleas... One I-ti [Italian] prisoner equals 200 fleas (plus all 'catch' found on him)."¹¹ However soldiers viewed enemy prisoners of war, they were certainly aware of the possibility of being captured, even if they applied this to an often disparaged and even dehumanised enemy and not to themselves.

In contrast to soldiers of the 2nd AIF, airmen were captured in small numbers, often individually, during single operations of less than twelve hours' duration. The majority of air forces prisoners of war were captured after being shot down from night sorties with Bomber Command, and for them especially, capture was an abrupt dislocation from their lives on air stations in the United Kingdom. Moreover, the experience of being shot down was itself terrifying. In an uncensored letter to his wife Isabel from *Stalag VIII B*, Warrant Officer Alister Currie vividly related his final operation over St Nazaire, France, on 25–26 March 1942. "As soon as the bomb-doors closed we all smelt something burning [and then] ... We burst into flames." The pilot gave the order to bail out, but Currie was trapped in his rear gun turret: "I opened the free door and somehow forced my way out." When his parachute opened, he found he was a few miles out to sea. "The wind [was] taking me further out but though it seemed obvious I was going to drown in spite of my Mae West [life jacket], strangely enough I was not worried – perhaps the thought of cold water seemed so much more preferable to the type of death I'd just left." A change in the wind carried Currie back to land, where he was captured, and in the prisoner of war camp he was haunted by his last sight of a friend: "Eric [was] trying to make his way to the rear escape hatch but even if I'd had the guts to do so I was unable to get back into the fuselage [sic] to help him."¹²

Transit

Experiences of transit were also very difficult for soldiers and airmen. Air forces prisoners of war captured in Germany and occupied Europe were quickly transported to the *Durchgangslager der Luftwaffe* (*Dulag Luft*) interrogation centre near Frankfurt-am-Main, and then to permanent camps. Modes of transport varied from separate compartments in trains to crowded cattle trucks, but journeys were reasonably comfortable.

⁹ Letter, Pte Lawrence Saywell to Mrs Gertrude Saywell, 1 March 1941, AWM, PR00815.

¹⁰ Johnston, Mark, *Fighting the enemy: Australian soldiers and their adversaries in World War II*, Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 9–25.

¹¹ Quoted in Johnston, *Fighting the enemy*, p. 16.

¹² Letter, WO Alister Currie to Mrs Isabel Currie, 2 October 1943, AWM, PR00973.

On the other hand, 2nd AIF prisoners of war, whether they were captured in North Africa, Greece or Crete, spent periods varying between weeks and months in transit camps in appalling conditions. These were largely the result of Italian and German logistics being overwhelmed by the high numbers of prisoners taken – not only Australians, but other British and dominion forces as well. In the transit camps, a combination of poor rations and overcrowding resulted in severe weight loss and diseases such as beriberi, malaria and dysentery, better known as features of Japanese prisoner of war camps.¹³ Private Percy Cusack diarised a day's rations in a transit camp in Salonika, Greece, as a loaf of bread between nine men, a biscuit and a cup of coffee for breakfast; a cup of rice, barley or peas for lunch; and a cup of "very weak thin stew no meat" for dinner. He also recorded, "Every body is getting very thin."¹⁴ Soldiers captured in North Africa also faced perilous journeys across the Mediterranean Sea. Despite attempted mediation by the International Committee of the Red Cross, no agreement was ever reached regarding the protection of vessels carrying prisoners of war. In August 1942 an Allied submarine torpedoed the Italian freighter *Nino Bixio*, killing more than 200 of the British and dominion prisoners aboard, including 37 of the 201 Australians.¹⁵

Interrogation

Interrogation was another point of difference between 2nd AIF and air forces experiences of captivity. Soldiers were interrogated only occasionally,¹⁶ but virtually all air forces prisoners of war underwent interrogation at *Dulag Luft*, or at individual interrogation detachments in North Africa or Italy. Typically, an airman captured in the Reich was immediately transported to *Dulag Luft* by truck or train, where he underwent a reception procedure. He was grouped according to his rank (officer or NCO); searched for military and personal items to be confiscated; photographed and physically described for German records; and asked to fill in a questionnaire. This document, sometimes presented as a casualty notification form for the International Committee of the Red Cross, went far beyond the particulars of name and rank, or number, that prisoners of war were required to disclose under the Geneva Convention of 1929, and also beyond the name, rank and number Allied servicemen were trained to disclose.¹⁷ It asked not only for the airman's personal details, but also for information about his unit, crew and crash, its purpose being (in the words of a contemporary German document) "to determine whether the incoming aircrew would talk or not".¹⁸

¹³ Beaumont, "Prisoners of war", p. 430.

¹⁴ Pte Percy Cusack, AWM, PR01535.

¹⁵ Beaumont, "Prisoners of war", p. 429; Beaumont, Joan, "Victims of war: the Allies and the transport of prisoners of war by sea, 1939–45", *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, 2, April 1983, pp. 1–7.

¹⁶ See for example, Interview, Capt Alexander Douglas Crawford, 8 May 1989, AWM, S00579.

¹⁷ Article 5, *Convention relative to the treatment of prisoners of war*, Geneva, 27 July 1929.

¹⁸ "Prisoner interrogation and documents evaluation and their intelligence value to the higher command", AWM, 54, 779/3/2.

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The airman was then placed in solitary confinement for approximately a week. Both his isolation and discomfort were deliberately exacerbated during this period. He was placed in a sound-proof cell away from those of any fellow crew members and guarded by ageing sentries who spoke no English. He was also subjected to minimal rations and alternating under- and overheating of his spartan cell, which contained only a bed, table and chair. Flying Officer John Wherry, shot down in September 1944, describes his week in solitary confinement as “demoralising”.¹⁹

After his solitary confinement, the airman was interrogated for the first time. This was characterised in military terms as “an engagement ... the last battle which the P/W has to go through before he is withdrawn from active service forever” but was generally made to seem non-confrontational. A common approach of interrogating officers was to attempt to develop a rapport with the airman – for example, through apparent concern for his welfare and that of his family and friend, or humour, or flattery – and then present him with intelligence already possessed by *Dulag Luft*. Pilot Officer Eric Stephenson, then a British RAF officer, who was shot down in December 1943, gives an insight into the experience :

My interrogator ... spoke perfect English and tried to get more information [than name, rank and number] by being friendly and sympathetic.

Immediately he saw my plasters and head bandage, he said, “Oh, what jolly bad luck. Well, how are things at Spilsby [air force station]?” That was a bit shattering.²⁰

In the case of Stephenson and others, the revelation of existing intelligence was calculated to make the airman think there was no harm in sharing further information, because so much was already known. It also had the effect of eroding *esprit de corps* among prisoners in general and crews in particular: if the interrogating officer knew so much, who had spoken? Another approach, experienced by Flying Officer Wherry, was for interrogating officers to feign disbelief of the airman’s status as an enemy combatant – and therefore of his right to protection under the Geneva Convention – and threaten to hand him over to the Gestapo as a spy. An interrogating officer using this approach hoped that the airman would contribute intelligence about his operation, crew and squadron in the course of “proving” his identity.²¹ Wherry believed someone in his crew had done just this, but reflected in older age, “You can’t really blame anybody [in those circumstances].”²² For airmen, who possessed such specialist intelligence about their operations, interrogation was a core experience of captivity in a way it was not for soldiers.

¹⁹ Interview, Flg Off John Wherry, 20 March 2010, AWM, S04852.

²⁰ Stephenson, Eric, *Three Passions and a Lucky Penny*, Canberra, Air Power Development Centre, 2008, p. 42; Interview, AVM Eric Stephenson with author, 12 February 2011. Stephenson was at the time an Englishman serving with the RAF, though post-war he became an Australian serving in the RAAF.

²¹ AWM, 54, 779/3/2.

²² Interview, Flg Off John Wherry.

Permanent camps

During capture, transit and interrogation, then, distinctive service experiences existed. A 2nd AIF officer experienced these phases in more or less the same manner as his men, and this was very different from an air force officer and *his* men. However, when prisoners of war reached permanent camps, distinctive *rank* experiences emerged. Officers of both services came to have more in common with one another than with their NCOs, and vice versa. 2nd AIF ORs had a different experience again.²³ In large part, distinctive rank experiences in permanent camps developed because there was a general observance of Article 27 of the Geneva Convention, which allowed officers to request work, required NCOs to perform supervisory work, and required ORs to perform work “according to their rank and ability” if physically fit.²⁴ In both Italy and Germany, observance of this article was assisted by there being separate camps for the various ranks. Most Australian officers in Italy were held at *Campo 78* at Sulmona, and most NCOs at *Campo 57* at Gruppignano and *Campo 106* at Vercelli. In Germany, officers were held in *Offizierlager* (*Oflag*) camps, NCOs and ORs in *Stammlager* (*Stalag*) camps, and airmen in *Stalag Luft* camps. As Joan Beaumont has shown, the freedom from work enjoyed by officers, and the partial freedom enjoyed by NCOs, “was not always an unmixed blessing”.²⁵ ORs who worked in agricultural working parties, in particular, often benefited from the rations and food that accompanied mostly “tolerable work conditions”.²⁶ Regardless, work was a key difference between the experiences of captivity of prisoners of war of various ranks.

Many similarities existed as well. The most striking of these in prisoners’ diaries, letters and recollections is a fascination with mail from home and parcels from the International Red Cross, the contents of which formed an essential part of prisoners’ diets. Prisoners in permanent camps also received parcels from family members through the Red Cross; one was allowed to be sent every three months. These parcels provided valuable supplements to prisoners’ supplies of clothing, toiletries and food. For example, a parcel sent by Nancy (Nan) MacDougall to her brother, Private Ian MacDougall, in February 1942 contained a shirt, a pullover, two woollen singlets, two pairs of woollen underpants, two pairs of socks, one pair of garters, two handkerchiefs, a woollen cap, a balaclava, a scarf, a pair of mittens, a small towel, a “housewife” (a small case for needles and threads), a “hold-all” containing bathing, shaving and washing toiletries, a one-pound tin of chocolate and four packets of chewing gum. The winter clothing in this parcel was unseasonable for the approaching European spring

²³ Air forces prisoners of war were almost exclusively aircrew and therefore held ranks of NCO or above. There were virtually no air force OR prisoners of war.

²⁴ Convention.

²⁵ Beaumont, Joan, “Rank, Privilege and Prisoners of War”, *War & Society*, 1:1, 1983, p. 77.

²⁶ Monteath, Peter, “Australian POW in German Captivity in the Second World War”, *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 54:3, 2008, p. 425.

and summer when it was sent, but appropriate for the time when it was received, some six months later.²⁷ Winter clothing was particularly sought after in these parcels by Australian prisoners, who were unaccustomed to the European climate. In May 1941 Private Hilton Giddins, a Queenslander, wrote to his mother that “some woollens would be very acceptable” in her next parcel, and reported in November from *Campo 57* at Gruppignano, “We are at the foot of some snow clad mountains. And is it cold? We had our first fall of snow here the other day and I’ve seen all I want to of it.”²⁸ For Giddins and other prisoners of war, goods received in parcels from their families were essential.

Of course, the significance of parcels from family members went beyond the items they contained. Parcels were also a physical link between prisoners and their families and, perhaps just as importantly, a useful topic of conversation in letters and postcards that were otherwise constrained by the time that passed between writing and delivery (a problem that was particularly acute for Australians, as was common during the world wars) and by censorship. Private Giddins believed his mother would be “getting sick of reading these useless letters as I am of writing them”. As he noted, “It is a hard job to compile a letter when there is nothing to write about” – a product of the monotony of camp life as well as not receiving timely replies.²⁹ When replies were received, they could be almost unreadable due to the work of censors, both Australian and Italian or German; Giddins colourfully described one censored letter as resembling “a cigarette paper which had had a fight with a chaff-cutter”.³⁰ Self-censorship was also at work. The upbeat tone of Private Larry Saywell’s letters to his mother contrasts sharply with his darker (and arguably more honest) words to his brother, George, to whom he admitted, “I wish I had just a quarter of your luck at the moment. I suppose its [sic] Sunday & raining and nothing to do, and being here for damn near three years, that I’m so ‘browned off.’ I think the medical profession calls them ‘fits of mental depression’.”³¹ It is reasonable to assume that letters from families to prisoners were similarly self-censored regarding hardships at home. In these circumstances, the ability of prisoners and families to write about parcels sent and received – things that were genuine and tangible – were invaluable. They assisted Giddins, for example, to “often ... just think of home. (I don’t know what it’s like but I have my own dreams about it).”³² On the home front, something of the significance of this link to family members is suggested by a Chinese proverb transcribed by Nan MacDougall into the notebook in which she catalogued the contents, sending and receipt of her parcels to Ian: “We

²⁷ AWM, PR00172.

²⁸ Letters, Pte Hilton Giddins to Mrs E. Giddins, 18 May 1941 and 2 November 1941, AWM, 3DRL/7966.

²⁹ Letters, Pte Hilton Giddins to Mrs E. Giddins, 30 August 1941 and undated, AWM, 3DRL/7966.

³⁰ Letter, Pte Hilton Giddins to Mrs E. Giddins, 14 December 1942, AWM, 3DRL/7966.

³¹ Letter, Pte Lawrence Saywell to Mr George Saywell, 20 January 1943, AWM, PR00815.

³² Letter, Pte Hilton Giddins to Mrs E. Giddins, 18 April 1942, AWM, 3DRL/7966.

cannot help the birds of sorrow flying over our heads, but we need not let them build nests in our hair."³³

Escape

Overall, the experiences of captivity of Australian prisoners of war in Europe during the Second World War were more varied and complex than is suggested by the focus on escape embodied in the prisoner of war genre and the Colditz Myth. Yet experiences of escape itself were also more varied and complex than is suggested by the genre and myth, or by existing historiography. Joan Beaumont's entry on prisoners of war in *The Oxford companion to Australian military history* observes that "Such mythology as there is about the prisoner-of-war camps in Europe ... focuses ... on escape and activities designed to outwit and bewilder the Germans and Italians." She also argues, "These were, however, essentially the preoccupation of officers, NCOs and airmen as these prisoners had the leisure in which to plan and execute escapes."³⁴ The implication is that the majority of escapes were planned ones, carried out by officers and NCOs. As has been discussed, officers and NCOs were often granted privileges in permanent camps, specifically with regards to work, but as will be shown, this did *not* make them more likely to escape.

References to officers and NCOs as likely escapers are possibly related to the frequently heard refrain that it was "an officer's duty to escape".³⁵ Yet the existence of such a duty was by no means well established in the early years of the Second World War. As S.P. Mackenzie has shown, no formal duty to escape had existed in British and dominion forces during the previous world war. "In the absence of official guidance, British officers taken prisoner in the First World War had to decide for themselves whether or not attempts at escape were justified."³⁶ Official guidance was not given until after the establishment of MI9, a British secret service promoting escape and "evasion", in December 1939. One of its early aims was to develop "escape-mindedness" among members of the armed forces. M.R.D. Foot and J.M. Langley write that MI9 lecturers "preached escape-mindedness ... [to] anyone who would hear, and preached it with success. To such an extent ... that the phrase 'It is an officer's duty to escape', has now become more or less proverbial."³⁷ But importantly, "the duty to escape applied to all ranks, not only to commissioned officers", and 2nd AIF ORs were among the most successful Australian escapers.

³³ AWM, PR00172.

³⁴ Beaumont, "Prisoners of war", p. 431.

³⁵ Foot, MRD, *MI9: The British secret service that fostered escape and evasion 1939-1945 and its American counterpart*, London, The Bodley Head, 1979, p. 53.

³⁶ Mackenzie, S.P., "The ethics of escape: British officer POWs in the First World War", *War in history*, 15:1, 2008, p. 1.

³⁷ Foot, *MI9*, p. 53.

Nevertheless, the significance of duty as a motivation for escape should not be overstated, for two reasons. First, the concept of a duty to escape was still in development. It was not formalised in the 2nd AIF until October 1941, with the publication of a pamphlet rather clumsily titled *Instructions and guide to all officers and men regarding the duties to perform and precautions to be taken by prisoners of war*. This set out that: “In the very undesirable event of capture by the enemy a Prisoner of War has still very definite duties to perform: (a) Not to give away information. (b) To obtain and transmit information home. (c) TO ESCAPE. This is the most important duty of all.”³⁸

This instruction was never communicated to the majority of 2nd AIF prisoners of war in Europe, who were captured before its publication. Their knowledge of the required conduct after capture was generally limited to “Name, rank and number” and did not include MI9’s “escape-mindedness”.³⁹ This was possibly the result of an unwillingness to train soldiers in what to do if captured, for fear this would encourage them to surrender – a view that was certainly present in some formations in the British and American armies.⁴⁰ Any such unwillingness did not extend to airmen, large numbers of whom were expected to be shot down in enemy territory. They consequently received extensive instruction in “Escape and Evasion” or “E&E”, but the emphasis was primarily on evading capture and not becoming a prisoner of war in the first place.⁴¹

The second reason that duty as a motivation for escape should not be overstated is that it rarely appears in contemporary sources. This is not wholly surprising; prospective escapers were highly unlikely to create written records of their intentions, whatever their motivation, and the few post-escape debriefs carried out understandably focused more on military intelligence than on the escapers’ states of mind. However, the contemporary sources that *do* address motivation for escape emphasise it as a relief from the monotony and tedium of camp life. For example, Warrant Officer Alister Currie characterised his five-day escape from *Stalag VIII B* at Lamsdorf in July 1942 as “a nice change & I had enough thrills to last me the next six months. God, how I used to laugh to myself when some patrol would be looking for me and standing sometimes as close as 20 ft away!” Currie recognised that a varied and interesting camp life discouraged him from attempting another escape. He judged of himself, “Since the job I got a couple of months ago appeared I have given up all ideas of escape ... I have felt much better since I acquired my job [as Man of Confidence] – much more alert mentally

³⁸ *Instructions and guide to all officers and men of the army regarding the duties to perform and precautions to be taken by prisoners of war*, Canberra, Commonwealth Government Printer, 1941, p. 1.

³⁹ See for example, Interview, Capt Alexander Douglas Crawford, 8 May 1989, AWM, S00579.

⁴⁰ Foot, MI9, p. 53.

⁴¹ Interview, Air Vice Marshal Eric Stephenson with author, 12 February 2011.

& quite energetic.”⁴² For Currie and other escapers, then, took second place to more mundane motivations.

In any case, the vast majority of Australian escapers acted opportunistically rather than on any specific motivation, and gained their freedom in late 1943 following the surrender of Italy. Roger Absalom estimates that before prisoner-of-war camps in Italy were taken over by German authorities, and the prisoners they contained transported to camps in the Reich, one third of large camps and almost all small camps were “open to escape for a substantial period of time”.⁴³ He further estimates that nearly 50,000 of the 80,000 Allied prisoners of war then in camps in Italy escaped, and either remained in rural Italy with the assistance of peasant families, or travelled to the developing Allied front line in Italy or to neutral Switzerland. Five thousand to 6,000 “British” escapers were reported to have entered Switzerland in 1943–44, a large number of whom were in a “comparatively good, or normal, state of health” apart from “minor complaints” such as exhaustion, infected foot blisters and frostbite suffered during the journey from Italy. Approximately 1,000 Australians remained in rural Italy or escaped to the Allied front line in Italy or Switzerland; Absalom characterises 561 as “known to have made good their escape”.⁴⁴ Unfortunately, they are officially nameless; a consolidated list of Australian escapers from camps in Italy was never created.⁴⁵

A smaller and more specific sample of Australian escapers, perhaps more representative of experiences of escape than the opportunist escapers from Italy, are the 2nd AIF escapers who were decorated for their escapes.⁴⁶ Most of them were NCOs (48 per cent), closely followed by ORs (40 per cent), and, at a distant third, officers (12 per

⁴² Letter, WO Alister Currie to Mrs Isabel Currie, 2 October 1943, AWM, PR00973. In some *Stalags*, a Man of Confidence was elected by prisoners of war to be their representative in dealings with the German guards.

⁴³ Absalom, Roger, “Hiding history: the Allies, the Resistance and the others in occupied Italy 1943–1945”, *Historical journal*, 38: 1, March 1995, p. 116.

⁴⁴ Absalom, Roger, “Another crack at Jerry’? Australian prisoners of war in Italy 1941–45, *Journal of the AWM*, 14, April 1989, p. 24.

⁴⁵ For a partial list of these escapers, see Bill Rudd, ANZAC Free Men in Europe, accessed 1 February 2011, <<http://www.aifpow.com/>>.

⁴⁶ Table D, AWM, 54, 781/6/6. The decorated Second AIF escapers are NX18434 WO2 Francis Alfred Barrett, DCM; VX12521 Pte William Maynard Bazeley, MM; WX2075 Sgt Arnold Berry, MM; NX3814 Capt Walter Jeffrey Boon, MM; VX13678 WO2 Thomas Alfred Milton Boulter, MM; NX3461 Gnr Francis Neil Tudor Brewer, MM; VX17575 Sgt Ernest James Brough, MM; NX4120 Sgt Charles Stuart Brown, MM; NX13848 Pte Basil Brudenell-Woods, MM; VX4712 Pte Henry Ronald Buchecker, MM; SX5286 Pte Ralph Frederick Churches, BEM; VX9921 Cpl Henry Cooper, MM; NX12177 Lt Maxwell Derbyshire, MC, VX3719 Pte Frederick Walter Stewart Fidler, MM; VX4632 Sgt Robert George Gordon, MM; VX3439 Lt Athol Hunter, MC; NX5322 Pte William Ross Irvine, MM; NX8575 Sgt Harry Edward Kilby, MM; VX6693 Pte David Lang, DCM; VX11469 SSgt Harry Lesar, MM; NX3653 Cpl John Arthur Parker, DCM; VX 9534 Pte Desmond John Peck, DCM; VX35920 Sgt William Frederick Ross Sayers, MM; NX1164 Spr Walter Henry Chrestense Steilberg, BEM; and NX3048 Sgt Richard Sydney Turner, MM. Note that Table D includes four soldiers who were evaders, not escapers, as well as three escapers who were decorated for actions other than their escapes.

cent). As these figures suggest, being required to work did not necessarily disadvantage escapers, and in many cases advantaged them. Private David Lang, who was awarded a Distinguished Conduct Medal for his escape from *Stalag VIIA* at Moosburg in March 1942, reported that, "Escape from [the permanent camp] was not seriously considered by PW [prisoners of war], as it was generally agreed better prospects of escape would exist when PW were transferred to outlying working detachments." The better prospects were due to a number of factors, including better living conditions ("Bugs and fleas were less prevalent"), better food, and better contact with German guards and civilians with whom to establish a black market. By selling luxuries from Red Cross parcels, such as cigarettes and tea, prisoners were able to accumulate cash to use during escapes.⁴⁷ Two other decorated 2nd AIF escapers, Sergeants Arnold Berry and Ernest Brough, waived their Geneva Convention right to perform only supervisory work in order to be assigned to a working party, for the explicit purpose of effecting an escape.⁴⁸ Although they are outside the scope of this sample, it should be noted that Pilot Officer Allan McSweyn and Sergeant William Reed even gave up their identity as (respectively) officer and NCO and assumed that of ORs – again, in order to be assigned to a working party, with all of the consequent advantages for escape.⁴⁹

Also interesting are the escape destinations of the decorated 2nd AIF escapers. The highest proportion of successful escapers, 28 per cent, arrived in Turkey (all of these men were captured in either Greece or Crete). Yugoslavia, Switzerland and the Allied front line in Italy were each reached by 16 per cent of escapers, North Africa and the Allied front line in France/Germany each by 8 per cent; and the Middle East and Greece each by 4 per cent. Having made a previous escape attempt was not necessarily an indication of success in reaching these destinations; only 32 per cent of the decorated 2nd AIF escapers made multiple attempts. The more influential indicators were being accompanied by at least one other escaper (72 per cent) and receiving assistance from civilians (76 per cent).⁵⁰

Escape and resistance

Some of the decorated 2nd AIF escapers were also assisted by armed resistance groups, and in turn assisted them. Captain Walter Boon and Sergeant William Sayers both served with Draža Mihailović's Chetniks in Yugoslavia; Private Ralph Churches with Josip Tito's Partisans, also in Yugoslavia; Corporal Henry Cooper with the Maquis in France; Private Desmond Peck with partisans in Italy; and Sergeant Richard Turner with partisans in Greece.⁵¹ Non-decorated escapers also served with these groups. They

⁴⁷ Pte David Lang in AWM, 54, 781/6/6.

⁴⁸ Brough, Ernest, *Dangerous Days: A Digger's Great Escape*, Sydney, HarperCollinsPublishers, 2009, pp. 156-159.

⁴⁹ Herington, *Air Power Over Europe 1944-45*, pp. 491-493.

⁵⁰ AWM, 54, 781/6/6.

⁵¹ AWM, 54, 781/6/6.

joined for a variety of reasons that ranged from wanting to secure help for eventual “home runs” to alleviating loneliness and purposelessness.⁵² Private Daniel Black joined partisans in Italy after being forced to leave the home of a family who had been sheltering him. He remembers, “I sat down on a log and started to cry, that’s fair dinkum. Exhaustion and I thought, ‘Well now that I’ve lost the only people in the world I know... I’m on my bloody own’... [So] I decided to throw in my lot” with the partisans.⁵³ The political motivations of the resistance groups appear not to have been a decisive factor in escapers’ decisions to join them, despite the great differences between, for example, Mihailović’s Chetniks and Tito’s Partisans, who fought one another as well as fighting (and in the case of the Chetniks, sometimes collaborating with) the Germans.

Australian escapers were highly valued by the resistance groups they joined, and in many cases were promoted to command positions. They also began to assimilate into the groups. The history of the 2/24th Battalion relates the story of Corporal Keith Jones and Lance Corporal Stan Peebles, who escaped after the surrender of Italy, making their first contact with the resistance leader Gemista in March 1944. Their escort to the meeting was a junior resistance commander with dark hair and olive skin, who spoke the local Piedmontese dialect. Not until he tripped while covering rough ground and exclaimed “What a blasted clumsy –” did Jones and Peebles discover he was Jim Burns of the British 7th Armoured Division and also an escaper. Burns, likewise, had not known from Jones’s and Peebles’s appearance and dialect that they were escapers. As the battalion history concluded, “This was the pattern which existed for escapees ... equipped with a desperately necessary command of the language, and, more important, the regional dialect ... they were able to conceal their true identity even from one another.”⁵⁴

Despite this level of assimilation, Australian escapers in resistance groups faced great dangers. Private Desmond Peck, for one, was well aware of the danger; he wrote to his family after his escape, “Just remember that at present I am a free man and though if I’m caught it means the wall I hope to go on outwitting these Huns and Fascists for many a day yet.”⁵⁵ Another 2nd AIF escaper, Private Larry Saywell, became the last Australian killed in action in Europe when fighting with a resistance group in Czechoslovakia; he was shot by retreating German forces on 8 May 1945 (Victory in Europe Day) near the village of Miretin. The people of the village erected a memorial inscribed, “Near this spot the Germans murdered the brave English partisan Lawrence Saywell”, which was later changed – as requested in a letter by his mother, Gertrude –

⁵² See for example, Interview, Pte Daniel Black, 10 February 1989, AWM, S00550.

⁵³ Interview, Pte Daniel Black.

⁵⁴ Serle, R.P., *The Second Twenty-Fourth Australian Infantry Battalion of the 9th Australian Division: a history*, Sydney, Jacaranda Press, 1963, pp. 137–39.

⁵⁵ Letter, Pte Desmond Peck to family, 21 November 1943.

to “the brave *Australian* partisan”.⁵⁶ After Private Saywell’s death, his brother George wrote to Gertrude, “There is dear, much you may find consolation in, he was lost for something which had to be smashed so that others like him may not be forced to fight ... Don’t take it too deeply to heart – he always told you to sing, not cry, if anything happened.”⁵⁷ George’s words did indeed echo Private Saywell’s frequent sentiments, as on Mother’s Day 1943: “I’m sorry not to be with you but you know you are always in my thoughts [and] I can’t say anything to you but ‘chin up, tears dry [and] don’t worry’”.⁵⁸

The sentiments about Private Saywell’s – and other escapers’ – ongoing contribution to the war effort are certainly heartfelt, but in reality this contribution was limited. The significance of their escapes to resistance groups, Allied manpower and military intelligence was made miniscule simply by the very small number of escapers.

This is not to say that escape was wholly insignificant. A truly invaluable contribution of escape was to morale in the prisoner-of-war camps themselves. While less than seven per cent of Australian prisoners made a successful escape, their efforts, as well as the efforts of prisoners who made unsuccessful escape attempts, were supported by escape committees and organisations involving significant numbers of prisoners. Wing Commander Harry Day, a British RAF leader of the Great Escape from *Stalag Luft III*, suggested that only five per cent of prisoners were fully committed to attempting to escape, but that a further 50 to 70 per cent would actively support the escape attempts of others.⁵⁹ In most camps, escape committees supervised escape attempts. The leader of the escape committee at *Stalag Luft VI* at Heydekrug, Warrant Officer Frederick Seamer, explained that in his camp a vetting process existed. Any prisoner with a plan for escape presented it to the committee, which decided whether or not to support it. The vetting process aimed “to discourage the prisoners from making desperate bids for freedom as an escape from the monotony and boredom of camp life.”⁶⁰ In the experience of Captain Doug Crawford, a member of the escape committee at both *Oflag XIB* at Warburg and *Oflag VIIIB* at Eischstatt, escape committees became more conservative as the war progressed. “We’d taught the Germans so much in Warburg [with] so many unsuccessful schemes that got [through] half-baked that [we] tightened up the whole thing in Eischstatt”; plans for escape that were unlikely to succeed were “just educating your German guard” in how to prevent escape.⁶¹

If a plan for escape was approved, the escape committee mobilised escape organisations to provide materials. Warrant Officer Seamer’s committee oversaw staffs

⁵⁶ “The Story of Lawrence Saywell”, *The Guild Gazette*, November 1945, p. 4; Letter, Mrs Gertrude Peck to Military Attaché, British Embassy, Czechoslovakia, 3 October 1945.

⁵⁷ Letter, Mr George Saywell to Mrs Gertrude Saywell, 11 July 1945.

⁵⁸ Letter, Pte Lawrence Saywell to Mrs Gertrude Saywell, 3 May 1943.

⁵⁹ Wg Cdr Harry Day, paraphrased in Potter, Kate, “For you the war is over! Australian prisoners of the Germans in World War II”, AWM, SVSS paper, 2001, p. 21.

⁶⁰ WO Frederick Seamer in AWM, 54, 779/3/126 Part 1.

⁶¹ Interview, Capt Alexander Douglas Crawford.

for the forging of papers (including passports, leave passes, rail warrants and travel permissions) and the creation of maps, enemy military uniforms and civilian clothing. Escapes with initial success were made by prisoners disguised as *Luftwaffe* airmen, who were equipped with fake rifles made by a team led by Warrant Officer William Redding, a cabinet maker and joiner in civilian life.⁶² Redding's procedure was to closely examine the rifles of guards: "[I] would stand as close to an armed guard as possible ... and observe the construction of his rifle ... carefully checking the various components, and measuring lengths and positions with our eyes. One needed a retentive memory." The rifles were then constructed from "any piece of timber I could scrounge around the compound", and "stained brown [with] ... stains [that were] either acquired or manufactured by another section of our escape committee."⁶³

Some escape materials were sent by MI9 in parcels, though never parcels disguised as coming from the Red Cross. A parcels officer in several camps, Flight Lieutenant Frank Thompson, reported that parcels could be recognised as containing escape materials "by special markings, bogus firm names, etc." Once identified by prisoners, such parcels were left unlisted and taken into the camp covertly, so as to avoid routine searches of listed parcels by guards.⁶⁴ Other escape materials were obtained from German guards who assisted the prisoners, or on the black market. Seamer's escape committee controlled the black market so that trade advantaged the committee: "Speaking or trading with the guards was forbidden to all, apart from our official contacts. This worked very well and we got the maximum out of each guard without giving anything away ourselves."⁶⁵ In these ways, *planning* escapes was an activity in its own right, regardless of whether they succeeded or were even implemented. Seamer went so far as to admit that in his camp, "We built many tunnels but did not favour them as a means of escape. But it kept some of the more impatient of the prisoners occupied."⁶⁶ Escape, then, was partly a means of enduring captivity.

Conclusion

The prospective historian of Australian prisoners of war in Europe during the Second World War confronts two difficulties. The first is the variance in prisoners' experiences. Soldiers of the 2nd AIF and airmen of the Royal Australian Air Force were captured by two different powers during four different campaigns over five years and held within nearly 40 different camps. It is therefore challenging to create a single historical narrative for the 8,800 Australian prisoners of war in Europe.

The second difficulty is the pervasiveness of the Colditz Myth, in which the experience of captivity is presented as one of escape, not of captivity itself.

⁶² WO William Redding in AWM, 54, 779/3/126 Part 1.

⁶³ WO William Redding in AWM, 54, 779/3/126 Part 1.

⁶⁴ Flt Lt Frank Thompson in AWM, 54, 779/3/126 Part 1.

⁶⁵ WO Frederick Seamer in AWM, 54, 779/3/126 Part 1.

⁶⁶ WO Frederick Seamer in AWM, 54, 779/3/126 Part 1.

Australian War Memorial, SVSS paper, 2011

Ashleigh Gilbertson, Great Escapers? Experiences of captivity and escape among Australian prisoners of war in Europe during the Second World War © Australian War Memorial

This paper has suggested two approaches to overcoming these difficulties. Firstly, it has examined the experiences of prisoners based on their service and rank. It has shown that in the phases of capture, transit and interrogation, a distinctive service experience existed (for those in the 2nd AIF and the air forces), and in the phase of permanent camps, a distinctive rank experience (for officers, NCOs and ORs). Secondly, it has contextualised the exceptional experience of escape within the “ordinary” experience of captivity. Most Australian prisoners of war in Europe during the Second World War were not Great Escapers, but perhaps their great *endurance* was the more valuable achievement.