1996

The 'stunned' and the 'stymied': The P.O.W. experience in the history of the 2/11th Infantry Battalion, 1939-1945

Mary R. Watt

*Edith Cowan University*

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THE 'STUNNED' AND THE 'STYMIED', THE P.O.W. EXPERIENCE
IN THE HISTORY OF THE 2/11TH INFANTRY BATTALION, 1939-1945;
A COGENT ARGUMENT FOR THE INCLUSION OF NON-OPERATIONAL
STRANDS OF WARFARE IN OFFICIAL MILITARY HISTORY

BY

M.R. Watt B.A.

A Thesis Submitted in Fulfilment of the
Requirements for the Award of

Master of Arts (History)

at the Faculty of Arts, School of Social
and Cultural Studies, Edith Cowan University

Date of Submission: 29th June, 1996
USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.
Abstract

Stimulated by a pronouncement of Joan Beaumont that prisoners of war are a neglected subject of historical inquiry this thesis undertakes an empirical and analytical study concerning this topic. Within the context of the prisoner of war experience in the history of the 2/11th Infantry Battalion during the Second World War, it puts a case for including non-operational strands of warfare in the body of Australian official military history. To facilitate this contention the study attempts to show the reasons for which historians might study the scope and range of the prisoner of war experience. Apart from describing the context and aims of the study, the paper utilizes Abraham Maslow’s theory of a hierarchy of needs to highlight the plight of prisoners of war. Amongst the issues explored are themes of capture, incarceration and recovery. Suggestions are made to extend the base of volunteer soldiers curriculum in favour of a greater understanding of the prisoner of war and an awareness that rank has its privileges. In addition to the Official Records from the Australian War Memorial, evidence for the study has been drawn mainly from the archive of the 2/11th Infantry Battalion, Army Museum of Western Australia, catalogued by the writer as a graduate student, December 1992, and military literature that were readily available in Perth. At every opportunity the men are allowed to speak for themselves thus numerous and often lengthy quotations are included.
I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signature.

Date 9 July 1986.
Acknowledgement

Thanks are due to the staff of the School of Social and Cultural Studies, in particular Dino Gaya and Geoffrey Bolton; the Faculty of Arts Librarians, and the Post Graduate Research Scholarship Committee of Edith Cowan University. To the Australian War Memorial, the Army Museum of Western Australia, the 11th and 2/11th A.I.F. Battalions Association, the veterans of the 2/11th Infantry Battalion and their relatives and my colleagues for their assistance and support in the preparation of this thesis.
Source: Australian Red Cross Society Bulletin, 11 August 1944.
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<td>Account</td>
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<tr>
<td>AIF</td>
<td>Australian Imperial Force</td>
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<td>Am'bce</td>
<td>Ambulance</td>
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<tr>
<td>&amp;</td>
<td>and</td>
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<td>Arty</td>
<td>Artillery</td>
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<td>Aust</td>
<td>Australia</td>
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<td>AWOL</td>
<td>Absent without leave</td>
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<td>BBC</td>
<td>British Broadcasting Corporation</td>
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<td>Brigade</td>
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<td>Bn</td>
<td>Battalion</td>
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<td>Ca'nt [sic]</td>
<td>Cannot</td>
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<td>Comdr</td>
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<td>DCM</td>
<td>Distinguished Conduct Medal</td>
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<td>DSO</td>
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<td>ED</td>
<td>Efficiency Decoration</td>
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<td>Etc</td>
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<td>Fld</td>
<td>Field</td>
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<td>GOC</td>
<td>General Officer Commanding</td>
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<td>HMS</td>
<td>His Majesty Service</td>
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<td>Inf</td>
<td>Infantry</td>
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<td>Lt Col</td>
<td>Lieutenant Colonel</td>
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<td>MC</td>
<td>Military Cross</td>
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<td>MI5 [9]</td>
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<td>MLC</td>
<td>Motor Landing Craft</td>
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<td>Positions</td>
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<td>recce</td>
<td>reconnaissance</td>
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<td>RMO</td>
<td>Regimental Medical Officer</td>
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<td>RSM</td>
<td>Regimental Sergeant Major</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rt Hon</td>
<td>Right Honourable</td>
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<td>RTR</td>
<td>Royal Tank Regiment</td>
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<tr>
<td>ss</td>
<td>steam ship</td>
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<td>sub</td>
<td>submarine</td>
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<td>tprs</td>
<td>Troopers</td>
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<td>TSS</td>
<td>Troop Steam Ship</td>
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<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>United States of America</td>
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<tr>
<td>VE-Day</td>
<td>Victory in Europe Day</td>
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<td>WAM</td>
<td>Western Australian Army Museum</td>
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Introduction

In the *War and Society* Journal of May 1983, Social Science Lecturer and author Joan Beaumont wrote:

*Prisoners of war are among the forgotten victims of war. Although while any particular conflict in the past has been raging they have been the source of fierce emotions, when the history of war has come to be written, they have been comparatively neglected. The British official history of World War II, for example, devotes none of its volumes to prisoners of war - either its own or those it captures - and the number of English language monographs on the subject of prisoners of war has likewise been small in comparison with the deluge of material that has been published on strategy, diplomacy and military technology.*

This pronouncement of Beaumont's is opportune. It coincides with the opinion this writer has on the subject of prisoners of war and incorporates the prevailing attitude some contemporary historians and many Westralian ex-prisoners have about the experiences of prisoners in Nazi Germany towards shaping modern Australian military history. As part of this contention it is also considered that the act of becoming a prisoner of a detaining power is an historical event, and that this phenomenon is therefore history - although a neglected area - as Beaumont states. What is more, the exclusion of the prisoner of war component in military history suggests that no serious work has been done on this subject. This thesis is an attempt to rectify the situation.

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Central to the study is an incident in May 1941 when more than half of the men of the 2/11th Infantry Battalion\(^3\) were taken prisoner by the Germans. Under the euphemism of "The Stunned and the Stymied", it will illustrate the experience of the prisoner of war in Nazi Germany, and it will put the case for including this phase of warfare in Australian Military history.\(^4\)

In response to Gavin Long's statement that he considered adding 'summaries of other large scale activities of the army ... for example prisoners of war ...'\(^5\) in an appendix, this researcher argues that essentially, the problems associated with becoming a prisoner - social dislocation, physical deprivation and economic hardship - were all part of the experience of an army that had passed through a disastrous military operation, and for survival had abandoned some of its force to the enemy.\(^6\). This phase of warfare in Australian military history has, in fact, so stirred the conscience of some military historians that it is now referred to as non-operational, - meaning "thing that is not" (strategically prescribed by the army) rather than "failure to do".\(^7\) It is in this sense that the term "non-operational" is used in this thesis.

Also relevant to the study of prisoners of war and history are works of some contemporary historians which reflect the main thrust of this thesis. Peter Stanley, for example, examines such issues as the effect on Australian Military History of the "differences" in the approach of historians to their topic, the "imbalance" in accounts of some aspects of war, and the distinction implicit in the term

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\(^3\) Hereafter to be known as the 2/11th Battalion.


\(^6\) For the number of casualties see Gavin Long, *Greece, Crete and Syria*, Canberra: AWM, 1953, 315n.

\(^7\) COD, 1954 ed., 688.
“amateurs” and “academic” for the writing of history since the 1960s and 1970s. In keeping with Beaumont’s finding on the state of military history, Stanley also found that in comparison with “works dealing with military ... operations; that may be described as ‘operational’ history ... [o]ne unfortunate aspect of this neglect of ‘non-operational’ history ... was the relatively slight interest which prisoners of war received until recently.”

Two other examples that show the concern historians have about the place of prisoners of war in Australian history are Hank Nelson’s book *P.O.W. Prisoners of War Under Nippon* and Syd Tregellis-Smith’s article entitled “Writing the history of the 2/5th Battalion”.

In the former Nelson says, “[b]y any quantitative measure the imprisonment of so many Australians is a major event in Australian history”; and “prisoners have received no permanent place in Australian history”. Finally, “ex-prisoners are aware of the gap between their own memories and popular knowledge”, whereas in the latter work, Tregellis-Smith states simply that he found “that those who were prisoners felt that they were part of this unit [2/5th Battalion] right through the years of incarceration and therefore deserve their place in history.”

While recognising that these two works represent the findings on the prisoner of war experience in different spheres of war and by different detaining powers, this writer attempts to complement these conclusions - both from the point of view of the concerns of the historians and the ‘prisoners’ they represent.

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6 Stanley, 24.  
7 Stanley, 24-25.  
8 Nelson, 4-5.  
9 Syd Tregellis-Smith, “Writing the history of the 2/5th Battalion”, *Sabretooth* XXIX (1988), 11.
Claims for a place in history for prisoners of war emerged primarily from a view widely held in the 1970s and 1980s that a "difference" or a "shift" in emphasis existed in the approach of historians to the writing of history. As Geoffrey Bolton and Peter Burke point out, this development came from a movement in these decades away from the traditional model of "'history from above' ..." that focused mainly on politics of the "successful and powerful ..." elements of society, to a concern with "history from below, in other words, with the views of ordinary people and with their experiences of social change." This "massive shift of interest on the part of historians ... away from traditional political history ... and towards social history", as demonstrated in Bolton and Burke's previous examples, is an important one in this thesis. It establishes a theoretical basis for the study of prisoner of war and history and confirms the view this writer has on the significance of the experience of prisoners for official military history.

In the study of prisoners of war and history in Nazi Germany during the Second World War the use of the word "story" is taken to be synonymous with "history" as defined by Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff in their work on research and writing. In this they say, "the essence of a story or history is palpable continuity and a rich contexture, an unbroken chain of actions and manifold results". It is in the sense of this definition - that the fabric of a story or history is an action that ends in many and varied ways - that this writer argues to include the

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14 Peter Burke, History and Social Theory (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), 19.
experiences of prisoners of war in the body of a nation's history, rather than as the appendix considered by Gavin Long.

In the study the term 'prisoner of war' refers to the 423 officers and ranks from the strength of 2/11th (City of Perth) Battalion in Greece and Crete in 1941. It is from the source material collected originally for a history of this battalion and catalogued by this writer,\textsuperscript{16} that the story of their camps and the range of their experiences is told in some detail. Both elements of the story (the camps and the experiences) will be told in relation to the Geneva Convention and the relief work of the International Red Cross; the decline in the structure of the army unit, and the rise in the function of the camp group. Related changes to the social state of prisoners and its effects on their mental and physical well-being are also considered.

From the source material of the 2/11th Battalion history it was possible to include some poems and prose that reflect, as Bill Gammage put it, "what some Australian [Western in this case] thought and felt during the war ...".\textsuperscript{17} One such example is the poem entitled \textit{The Isle of Doom} by "L.D. Ryan 2/11th Battalion, written at Georgiopolis, Crete on May 10th, 1941."\textsuperscript{18} Another is Alf Traub's report of the prisoner of war incident in which he says: "I simply cannot forget the incident because of the average rank and file's sorry looks."\textsuperscript{19} Other items of note are the many representative photos of prisoners in camp, at work, playing sport or displaying their dramatic talents. In addition to the above items this thesis has

\textsuperscript{17} Bill Gammage, \textit{The Broken Years: Australian Soldiers in the Great War}, Victoria: Ringwood, 1987, XIII.
\textsuperscript{19} J. F. Traub "Letter", WAM 6.4, 44.
drawn on information from five other sources - interviews, correspondence, journal articles and general and military histories. In the use of these sources the researcher has attempted to take from the writer or the interviewee those items or instances in which they claim or seem to have described actual happenings.

Finally, whenever the need arose for the use of a psychological theory to highlight the plight of prisoners of war, Abraham Maslow’s theory of a hierarchy of needs has been adopted.\textsuperscript{20} His theory, with its presumptions that there are five basic human needs and that the first level of need - the physiological (survival need) - must be satisfied before the others are considered, is particularly relevant to this study. It is so because the survival needs “for water, for food, for air, for elimination, for temperature maintenance and for the avoidance of pain” were so consistently withheld from the men by the detaining power that to aspire to any level other than the satisfaction of survival was not often sought after. This is not to imply that all forms of self-expression were lost: many prisoners found satisfaction from the intervention of the Red Cross, by attempting to escape, in ingenious inventions, and by ‘standing one’s ground’ in the face of insurmountable odds such as guards, dogs and the barbed wire.

The aims of the chapters that follow are thus threefold. Firstly, they intend to show the principal reasons for which an historian might study the POW experience: that it is a way of calling attention to all aspects of warfare; that it is society’s means of accounting for soldiers who are victims of a belligerent regime; and that within its confines broad social and tactical roles are acted out. Secondly, to put paid to the claim that the most useful analysis of the POW experience is one that

sees it as a non-operational component of military history. The third general intention is to demonstrate that the health and welfare of the POW fraternity was held together by mateship, escape and camp committees and the parcel service of the British and Dominions Red Cross Societies.

Within the context of these aims this study will therefore argue cogently for the inclusion of 'non-operational' strands of warfare in official military history. Accordingly, themes of capture, incarceration and recovery are explored. In conclusion, in order to set this topic in a historical perspective, an attempt has been made to assess the extent to which the experience of the prisoners of war as a whole can be viewed as part of Australia's contribution to "the overthrow of the system which [had in 1939] plunged the world into this Armageddon." 21

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Chapter 2

A Battalion on the Move

*Esprit de corps.* E. MacLeod

A nostalgic pilgrimage to Greece and Crete in 1991 brought back a flood of memories to survivors of the 2/11th Battalion. Places like Athens, Larisa, Brallos, Megara, Crete and Salonika kept surfacing as names and events flooded back and story after story of epic proportions was retold. Some were about the unfortunate bombing of the Commanding Officer, T.S. Louch's car; some of the terrifying delay occasioned by the crossing of the Pinios river in a punt; others of their final stand on Crete and the miraculous escape from there of a few of their fortunate mates. These much treasured accounts were not enough for the veterans. The question that kept resurfacing from the company was: How can we tell the world of it?

It was then this writer decided that the non-operational experience of the soldiers who became prisoners of the Germans in the Second World War was worth telling. Not just a story but an academic account that would make some impact, in the belief that these victims have as much right to a place in military history as those who saw action for the duration of the war. From then on the compilation of the history of the 2/11th Battalion from official sources and the recall of people's personal experiences (veterans, wives and widows alike) became the aim.
For those captured on the Mediterranean seaboard and who spent most of the duration as prisoners of the Germans, details of the formation of their battalion and their training in Australia; their passage overseas with further training in Palestine and Egypt, and their meritorious action in the Libyan campaign became the whole litany of their captivity and thus played an integral part in their survival. These events will be recounted at length. They will also serve to tell the full story of the 2/11th Battalion's involvement in the Second World War.

The saga began in Northam military camp on 8 November 1939 following the call up on 15 September 1939 for the 6th Division of the 2nd Australian Imperial Force. Lieutenant-Colonel T.S. Louch and his newly appointed officers had taken command of the post and the main body of volunteers for the 2/11th Infantry Battalion had arrived from Perth, Kalgoorlie and Albany.

Thomas S. Louch was a West Australian, with a quiet sense of humour and a soldier of very considerable experience. He had served first as a non-commissioned officer in the 11th Battalion AIF in Gallipoli and later in France as a Regimental Officer acting Brigade Major for the latter part of the First World War. This baptism of war, together with his civilian occupation as a lawyer, and his service as commanding officer of the 16th Battalion Militia prior to 1939, equipped Louch admirably for the job ahead. It gave him a wide knowledge of men, a spirit of tolerance and a brilliant organising ability. These attributes sat comfortably with the men who had grown up between the wars and thought of themselves as the inheritors of the tradition of the original 11th Battalion. Although essentially a fighting man, Louch was a stern disciplinarian. He had no time for inefficiency and
was untiring in his efforts to fit the battalion for the grim realities of war. Louch’s manner was usually quiet and affable, but when he was displeased the subject of his displeasure was rapidly made aware of it, though no words were spoken. During the Libyan campaign Louch or the ‘Old Man’ (as he was fondly called by his men), brilliant leadership won for him the whole-hearted respect and liking of the battalion.

Fig. 1: Lieutenant-Colonel T.S. Louch, MC, ED. CO 2/11th Battalion AIF, 13 October 1939 - 10 August 1941
Following the injury to his arm in the withdrawal from Greece, Louch was amongst the wounded from Athens Hospital evacuated to Crete with his men. Amongst the senior personnel and the wounded returned to Cairo, he had the unenviable task of waiting while the battle for Crete raged, eventually seeing few of his own battalion return. He carried out administrative business at the base, including the reorganisation of the 2/11th Battalion before he left for Perth on 25 July 1941. Perhaps the hardest task of all for Louch came not on the battle field but at home, after Crete, when he had to face up to the fact that most of the men of his battalion were prisoner of war, and to talk about this with their relatives.

While almost all of the men were strangers to one another, the mood of the draft did not show this. Most had imbibed deeply during the trip and any doubt they had about fighting for king and country was gone. Small absurd things like being asked to “bring two cooked meals” with them and the sight of the assorted militia dress worn by the welcoming party at Northam station set at once the tone and the tenor of the battalion. From then their accounts of army life tended to report the aspect they found most typical of the event - whether it was amusing, dramatic, tragic or interesting, or about volunteer troops attempting to uphold the tradition of the original 11th Battalion, as espoused by Louch.

According to Louch, Northam was a good camp but short-lived. The battalion was there only three weeks before it was ordered to join the other

1 “Early Comments on the Synopsis”, WAM, 7.2, 75-81 passim. See also “Talk by the Commanding Officer”, WAM 1.0, 52.
2 See Appendix A for instruction on the ‘cooked meals’; Ralph Hamer, Notes, WAM, 6.2, 2.2; Ray Sandover Letter, WAM 6.2, 75.
battalions of the 18th Brigade in New South Wales. Notwithstanding this rush, the men who asked were posted to the same companies and Louch saw that the men had service uniforms to wear on leave before they left the state. However, the pleasure the men felt in the move to join their brigade was overshadowed by the thought of Christmas away from home. Slowly and surely the realization that they were about to embark on an entirely different life dawned. But most took great pride in belonging to the second edition of such a well-known unit.

The 'motley crowd', as the 2/11th Battalion men liked to call themselves, spent the first few days in NSW in unmentionable conditions in an old military camp at Rutherford before they marched to Greta camp. Marching, foot drill and guard drill were all part of army discipline and Louch was determined they should have it. But the men were slow to appreciate this ideal. Some believe it was only made possible by some 'good ladies' giving them tea and scones during a 'stand easy' before they reached their camp.4

Greta, the men soon found out, was a ghost town without any amenities and only one hotel. In addition the licensee of the hotel wanted his 'pub' to be put out of bounds to the troops. Louch would have none of this and took immediate steps to set things right. The place was picqueted each night and, aware of the money that would be spent at the bar, Louch gave the publican instructions to "clean the place up, install a piano and issue free cheese and biscuits for the patrons of the bar." Improved bar facilities were a help.

Apart from these minor irritations the business of the camp at Greta ran smoothly until just before Christmas when half of the men developed German

5 Louch, 10.
measles and were in quarantine till Christmas Day. It was the first of many Christmases that the troops were to spend away from home. Not that this probability would have occurred to them in 1939. Instead all ranks shared a dinner in the mess, received numerous Christmas parcels and enjoyed the beer provided by the Sportsmen Club in Perth. It was a happy evening and next day those well enough went on leave to private homes in the Newcastle district or to have dinner at the various hotels there. For some the social contacts made on these occasions were timeless. One ex-soldier, for example, recalled with pride that this town had blessed him with a pen-friend throughout his prisoner-of-war years and, on his return home in 1945, with a wonderful wife.

On 13 January 1940, Ingleburn camp became home to the 2/11th Battalion when all units of the 18th Brigade began training there. The camp, they reckoned, was good enough in itself, but there were drawbacks. It was dusty, hot and infested with flies and mosquitoes and there was a five mile walk to the nearest hotel at Liverpool. To compensate for these woes the soldiers took full advantage of the chance to take leave in Sydney, but it had to be applied for. Not that this deterred the men. Sydney was a Mecca to be explored or exploited as the chance arose. Thus one soldier had no problem in stating his reason for wanting leave. He was “chasing a widow and prospects look golden”.

Of greater importance to the men than such chance encounters with the opposite sex might bring, was the reception they got from the people in Sydney. Many, for example, were welcomed back to the same homes for weekend leave.

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6 Fred Whitsides, Interview, 26 May 1945.
7 Louch, 11.
8 R. Sandover, WAM 7.2, 75.
time and time again; while others less socially motivated were not so welcome. They experienced that peculiar form of humiliation that 'rank' holds for ordinary soldiers and were not only excluded from some cafes and certain parts of hotels, but were also forced to sit in the back of trams or the last carriages of the trains. The latter were labelled ironically Blamey Tourists. Whether the GOC of the 6th Australian Infantry Division, Lieutenant-General Blamey was aware of this public discrimination between ranks is not known, he did, however, make himself known to the 2/11th on 6 January 1940 at Greta.

Fig. 2: The 2/11th Battalion march through Perth, 17 April 1940

The return of the 2/11th from Sydney to Perth in March 1941 for pre-embarkation leave before leaving for the Middle East⁹ was a memorable event. Sydney had given it a rousing farewell and Perth was no less enthusiastic in the welcome it gave to its own 'City of Perth Battalion'. Invitations for the men from

⁹ Louch, 12.
social clubs and private homes poured into Army headquarters, and *The West Australian* gave extensive coverage to its prospects overseas and praised the demeanour of troops as they marched through Perth.

As they were not due to embark until 20 April, this final leave period for the men was one of intense anticipation or disquiet depending on their personal circumstances. Each took his own memories with him into war and eventually, for most, into the prisoner of war camps and, for the lucky ones, back home again.

While the constant movement of the men of the 2/11th Battalion in this formative period may have interrupted their training in the business of soldiering it had not been wasted: something special was being forged within the ranks of the units of the 6th Division of this volunteer army. It is known as *esprit de corps* based on pride, responsibility and unquenchable spirit that binds men together and prepares them to accept whatever the future holds for them. It was for this that the 2/11th Battalion had within five months of enlistment completed their induction to army life at Northam Camp, had learned about ‘drill’ and ‘discipline’ at the various camps in New South Wales, and found out that a bivouac (following a lengthy march) was considered a diversion.

Equipped thus on 20 April 1940 these troops, accompanied by details from the 2nd Australian General hospital and other units, sailed from Fremantle harbour on the British Naval troopship *Nevasa* for the Middle East.

Anecdotes about the trip on the *Nevasa* (or the ‘Never-Wasser’ as the troops called it) give details of the lack of space, foul air, inadequate food, little water, poor hygiene facilities and shortage of supplies - particularly beer. A fair example

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of this was Louch's report of 10 May when the Captain came to him with the important news that Germany had invaded Holland and Belgium and he recorded: "I was quite worried at first. I thought he was going to say the ship had run out of jam for breakfast". The possibility that Germany and the world had continued on its own way had, it would seem, quite escaped these men or, perhaps the voyage had become a rest from reality while they came to terms with the war and their life.

Notwithstanding numerous difficulties encountered during the voyage and the fear that Italy could enter the war at any time, the Master and Louch managed to bring the passengers safely through the Suez Canal to El Kantara where, two days later, on 17 May 1940, they landed and entrained for Camp Kilo 89 in Palestine to

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11 [T.S. Louch], 2/11 Bn... CO's War Diary, 10 May 1940. WAM, 11.1, 26. (Hereafter CO's Diary).
begin their desert training. Once this period of training was completed the 2/11th Battalion faced up to the war ahead.

From 3 January 1941 to 30 May 1941 the 2/11th Battalion saw action in Libya, Greece and Crete. It was in Greece and Crete that almost all of the strength of the battalion became prisoners of war in Germany. The remainder, the wounded and the staff officers evacuated earlier to Alexandria and the few 'escapees' from Crete, regrouped in Palestine. Here from June onwards the 2/11th was reinforced and retrained before returning home to Western Australia early in 1942 to prepare to take part in the Pacific War. This new unit of the AIF saw action in New Guinea where they completed their tour of duty in 1945. Thus the survivors from the Mediterranean sphere of war, the prison camps in Germany and their counterparts from the battles in the Pacific returned home almost simultaneously, in 1945. Their duty to war ended, and their duty to home and to their families was to begin.
Chapter 3

Middle East: Prelude to Capture 1940-1941

Our War Began, B.A. Skitten

To gain a clearer insight into the capitulation of the 2/11th Infantry Battalion on Crete in May 1941, it is important to look outside this incident to the war in Western Europe, for it was there that the destiny of these troops was decreed. When the Australian force was sent to Camp Kilo 89, Palestine in the early months of 1940, the Maginot Line was believed secure and France was still an ally of Britain. Italy was not in the war, and Japan was still maintaining an independent attitude to the war in Europe prior to occupying Indo-China. At that time, it was the plan that the Australian Expeditionary Force, after "a period of advanced training and hardening in Palestine ..." would move to France, as the first AIF had done.

By September 1940 the idea that the 6th Division would follow in the footsteps of the original AIF was largely overshadowed by the fear of the Axis' intentions in the Middle East and the Mediterranean. Germany's overwhelming victory in France in June 1940, and Italy's subsequent entry into the war meant the stability of the local situation in North Africa could no longer be taken for granted. Instead the Allies had to take seriously the prospect of Italy invading Egypt,

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1 Military History and Information Section A.I.F. Middle East, Active Service with Australia In the Middle East [Hereafter Active Service] Canberra: AWM, 1941, 2.
providing a shorter route across North Africa for the Axis to gain control of Iraq’s oil supply.

By mid-summer of 1940 the 6th Division had been brought up to strength and the operational role of its units revised. The 2/11th Battalion replaced the 2/12th, which remained with the 18th Brigade, and became a unit of the 19th Brigade commanded by Brigadier Horace Robertson. The 6th Division therefore became part of General Wavell’s Desert Force whose “first big task” was to chase the Italians out of Egypt, although the Australians did not take part in the offensive until 3 January 1941.

In this reshuffle, the 2/11th Battalion as a fighting unit did not appear to suffer. Rather, the astute training by Lieutenant-Colonel Louch enabled the companies to respond admirably to the hard-driving tactics employed by Robertson. Their success in the Middle East, as part of the 6th Division, bears witness to this. A report from a special correspondent of the AIF in the Middle East begins:

_Cairo, Sept. 17. It was midnight when I stood at a little Egyptian railway siding and saw the Australians, on the move at last, leaving their training camp for their first big war task “somewhere in Egypt”... It is not permitted to reveal the precise nature of their job, but it can be said that it is extremely important. They certainly can be depended on to carry it out successfully for they are well trained and their morale is high._

Orders received in Cairo for the 6th Division to relieve the Indian Fourth Division in the operations in North Africa meant that, as one diarist, Private Bertram A. Skillen noted, “our war began”.

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1 Long, (1961), 70.
2 For the composition of the brigades of the 6th Division and for Robinson’s appointment see Long (1952), 51 and 83 respectively.
3 “Australia’s Move: Midnight scene in Egypt”, WAM 1.0, 50.
4 Bertram, A. Skillen, _Diary of Bert Skillen 1940-1945_, n.p., n.d. [Hereafter Skillen].
The move on 10 November 1940 by the 2/11th Battalion to Burg-el-Arab was made in time for a divisional exercise before the 16th and 17th Brigades left for Bardia taking with them the 2/11th transport. Christmas 1940 for the 2/11th was, therefore, spent waiting for battle orders and worrying about their transport.

It was an uncertain time for the men, the second Christmas they were to be away from home without knowing what was in store for them.

To avoid the prospects of the troops missing a Christmas dinner, Colonel Louch decided it could be served on 21 December and, if necessary, again on the actual day. Louch, it must be said, understood full well that the idea of Christmas Day at a campsite 40 miles from Alexandria, with the New Zealand transport section for company, was no substitute for Sydney or Newcastle and friends (old and new), and acted accordingly. To pass the time before dinner a cross-country run, won by Private 'Popeye' Hull, was held and in the evening a carol party of New Zealanders visited. While their singing did not particularly please Louch, an

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anecdote of Private Rex Clegg says: "Xmas at Burg-el-Arab was made successful by Lieutenant Peter Webster's choir rendering of carols."\(^7\)

When Louch received orders on New Year's Eve 1940 for the 2/11th Battalion to move to the front at Bardia the business of having to accept New Zealand transport for the 2/11th troops showed, and Louch wrote: "Many of our men had to travel uncomfortably hanging on in twos and threes to the small platoon trucks ..."\(^1\) with only an overnight break at Mersa Matruh. Admittedly, his irritation was not directed personally at the good-natured 'Kiwis' but at the army: at having to give up the 2/11th transport to the 16th; at the delay over Christmas and at being the last of the Australian battalions into battle.

From Mersa Matruh the convoy moved on past Sidi Barrani and climbed the escarpment at Halfaya Pass near Salum where the 2/11th Battalion took up a position in the desert near Fort Capuzzo just as the attack began on 3 January 1941. Louch lost no time in finding out what was required of his troops. They were going into battle next day.

Unlike the sudden assault made on Sidi Barrani by the 4th Indian Division, the fort at Bardia was under siege for two weeks while sufficient ammunition for the artillery and the 2/11th Battalion was brought up from Egypt. The soldiers found this period of preparation a bleak and exacting experience. Most of the troops slept as they were with little shelter from the biting desert winds. Food was 'hard tack', and the little water available could only be used for drinking.\(^9\) Yet all ranks

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\(^7\) Rex Clegg, "Xmas at Burg-el-Arab", WAM 6.3, 63.
\(^1\) CO's Notebook, 3.
\(^9\) Active Service, 7.
were aware of their responsibility as the first Australians into battle in the Second World War.

![Map of Bardia](image)

Fig. 5: The 2/11th Battalion in Bardia, 5 January 1941

Captain Ralph Honner explained the plan for the attack on Bardia, “that Bardia was to be taken by the 16th and 17th Brigades while our brigade, the 19th was to be kept fresh for Tobruk”. Next morning, however, when two divisions of Italians were still stubbornly resisting, the men of the 2/11th were called on to carry out a ‘mopping up’ exercise. Honner’s ‘C’ Company, supported by the 17th Royal Tanks, led the assault which in effect ended the battle for Bardia. It was a great victory and the men were justifiably proud; each in his own way had measured up to the responsibility in the tradition of the first AIF and was not found wanting. Skillen saw it in terms of action and wrote: “The pace [of attack] was a

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cracker."\(^{11}\) In the estimation of Honner he felt the men had undergone a great transformation.

"Victory in the three day battle for Bardia transformed the trained but untried troops of the 6th Division into veterans with an already high morale immeasurably strengthened by success in their first blooding.\(^{12}\)

The battalion's commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Louch's assessment of the achievement of his troops was somewhat constrained; his instinct told him to be cautious and thus he said: "I was just a little afraid lest it should be thought that everything in future was going to be just too easy."\(^{13}\) A practical-minded soldier, writing from memory and unsure of the exact date in January 1941, with a view to helping with the transport situation then and in the future, recorded after:

"Bardia had fallen the rest of the day was spent in collecting equipment which was everywhere - trucks, motor bikes, cars, machine guns, light tanks and in some Wadis there was stocks of office equipment...\(^{14}\)"

Despite the success of the forays against the Italians in the Western Desert, unresolved difficulties associated with 'what next' for Wavell's force still existed between London and Cairo. Wavell wanted to continue to advance across Cyrenaica to Benghazi and Churchill was keen to send an army to Greece. As there was neither sufficient men nor material for both a compromise was reached: when the advance across the Western desert was completed and Benghazi captured, then an armed expedition including the 6th Australian Division would go to Greece\(^{15}\). Time was to show that Louch's fear was not unfounded.

\(^{11}\) Skillen, 2.
\(^{12}\) Honner, 33.
\(^{13}\) CO's Notebook, 5.
\(^{14}\) Diary of a Mug, WAM.6.3. 5.
Once the future of the Western Desert force was decided there was no rest for the Western Desert Force’s units. The immediate task of the 19th Brigade was to keep the garrison of Tobruk occupied while a thorough reconnaissance of the area was carried out and the day after Bardia was taken the 2/11th was ordered there. Part of this operation was for the patrols to probe right up to the wire, testing for booby-traps and gathering information, knowing that if they were spotted a deadly shot from the enemy might find its mark. A signaller explained his part in the exercise:

13th Jan. 1941. Quite a lot has happened during the last 4 days. Under cover of night the bn has advanced 6,000 yds (3,000 each night for 2 nights) until our forward company’s [sic] are in touch with the enemy. This moving entailed a lot of cable laying, which was done in a truck. We had drums of cable on a geared reeling device with the cable running out over the back of the truck. The officer sits on the engine cowling with a compass in his hand. One tap on the cowling meant left a little, two taps meant right a little and so on. 16

The plan of attack at Tobruk followed similar lines to that at Bardia, except that the second phase - the movement on the town itself - was made by Brigadier Robertson’s 19th Brigade from well inside the main fortification. In effect, once the 16th Brigade had broken through the defence line, the 2/4th, 2/8th and the 2/11th Battalions, backed by the 17th Brigade, were to fan out and advance in unison until the town was taken. The attack was fixed for 21st January, and everything went according to plan. The 2/11th had one scare when a shell landed nearby, but "the men" Louch was proud to say, “after shaking off the dirt went forward as if nothing had happened. Good battle disciplines". 17

16 Diary of a Mug. 5.
17 For a narrative of these events see Long (1952), 227-228; CJ’s Notebook, "Tobruk", 1.
Still sceptical about the effect sorties of this nature had on his troops Louch felt the victory to be ineffective as the Italians offered little resistance. But for the honour of the brigade and the battalion there were compensations. The following morning (22 January 1941) Brigadier Robertson received the surrender of the town from the Italian Admiral commanding the naval personnel and to mark the triumphant occasion an “exuberant Australian ran up a Digger’s hat on the flagpole outside the Admiral’s headquarters”18. Apart from the renown associated with a successful campaign, the victory over the Italians was of immense value to the Allies. It had not only provided immediate use of a vast store of army goods, weapons and ammunition; it had also made possible communication by sea with Egypt for the future maintenance of the Western Desert Force in Libya. Furthermore, it had convinced the British Military Command of the worth of the Australian contingent as an independent fighting unit. Hence the headquarters of

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18 For these extracts see CO’s Notebook, “Tobruk”, 1; for the quote Long (1952), 237.
the British Army in Cyrenaica was replaced by the headquarters of the 1st Australian Corps. Although this arrangement was of vital importance for morale and for Australia’s peace of mind it did not change the overall plan of British operations. The 6th Australian Infantry Division was destined to go to Greece.

In a rush to complete this assignment and get to Greece, the offensive across Cyrenaica continued westward and by 22 January 1941 the forward units of the Western Desert Force were within ten miles of Derna. From there the 19th Brigade moved forward by truck where the 2/11th Battalion took control of the Tobruk to Derna road and swiftly overran Fort Rudero. Once there it was just a matter of time before a concentrated offensive allowed the 2/11th Battalion to gain ground, capture the aerodrome and enter Derna on 30 January.

The satisfaction and pleasure the 2/11th men felt after yet another successful battle are demonstrated admirably in Honner’s comments: “[T]he men of ‘C’ company, leading the westward drive of the 19th Brigade, fresh from the capture of Tobruk, were fighting fit and as happy as campaigning soldiers will ever be ...”. Damien Parer, the war correspondent, was also impressed seeing the company’s feat of arms as a triumph: “I wouldn’t have believed it possible for an infantry to advance through such fire if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes.” Flushed with pride from the outcome it did not enter their minds that today’s victors could be tomorrow’s vanquished.

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19 Long, 282.
20 For these two extracts see article by Honner, “The Capture of the Drome at Derna”, WAM 6.3, 24.
The battle for Derna was not to be the end of this action. Hardly pausing, Wavell's force pursued the Italians one stage further to Benghazi. Here, the 2/11th Battalion again took a prominent part.

More comfortable now with his battalion's part in the Western Desert campaign and at last grateful for the New Zealand transport, Louch's entry for 31 January 1941 on the move from Derna to Benghazi says: "It rained today but we were lucky to be under cover." Progress by the convoy was not easy. Roads needed repairing and the Italian rearguard troops had to be dealt with, but Cirene and Barce were entered by the Australians without any opposition. Apart from the wet conditions that made it difficult for the trucks to keep in line, Benghazi was entered without mishap.

Once the place was secured, the commander of the 19th Brigade, Brigadier Robertson, accepted its surrender on 7 February 1941 and informed the people that General Mackay would take command of the city.

In keeping with the mood produced by this final event one of the 2/11th men left at Derna on guard duty summed up in a few words the sheer pleasure that a few home comforts can give a soldier after a successful encounter with the enemy.

His diary entry reads:

_Sunday 2nd February, 1941. The Bn had moved out in the direction of Bengazi but this company was left behind as town picquet much to our joy. A motor cycle orderly was attached to us and we 3 sgs are in a room to ourselves. The hot water system was put in order and for the first time since I was in Palestine I had a hot bath._

Conditions were bad but the men felt good.

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21 CO's Notebook, "Derna to Benghazi", 1.
22 Sir Iven Mackay was GOC, 6th Division. See Long (1952), 43 n4. and 274 for reception of Australians in Benghazi.
23 Diary of a Mug, 16.
Bearing in mind Churchill's wish that "all operations in the Middle East were to be subordinate to sending forces to the Balkans"\textsuperscript{24}, once the Western Desert Force had secured North Africa against immediate attack, the 2/11th Battalion was moved to Tocra on 8 February for rest and relaxation before returning to Egypt. While Tocra may not have been an ideal spot it served its purpose, as the 'Mug' diarist pointed out:

\textit{Monday 10th February, 1941. The victorious army is still resting and we are here indefinitely; but our rest is more or less over. To-day we were shown how to fold our blankets, set our gear etc. We had a company parade, rifle inspection as well as squad drill. It's a great life.}\textsuperscript{23}

This parade was the occasion when Australia's prime minister, Mr Robert Menzies, inspected the troops before they left for Cyrenaica and Greece on 26 February 1941.

Visits of this nature, most times, have little impact on the life of a soldier. Still, some of the 2/11th men admired Menzies for making a trip into the desert when the 'Ities' (as the enemy was called) airforce might appear at any moment,

\textsuperscript{24} Long (1952), 275.
\textsuperscript{25} Diary of a Mug, 20.
while others thought it useful for a PM to gain an on-the-spot impression of what was going on. Perhaps there is some truth in both opinions but Louch was in no doubt on this score and recorded his view thus:

In two months the Western Desert Force, of which we were a part, had advanced 700 miles, captured the whole of Libya and Cyrenaica, taken 130,000 prisoners and much material, and accounted for the whole of the Italian army opposed to it. We, for our part, had done everything which we had been called to do, and I wrote at the time... 'the way in which everyone stood up to the hardships and discomfort was magnificent'.

The men of the 2/11th Battalion found the four weeks return journey from Tocra to El Amriya before departure for Greece something of an anticlimax. Apart from the time the return journey took and the general bad state of the staging camps, just before they left Ain El Gazala for Bardia on 13 March a Khamsin started to blow. This reduced the speed of the convoy to about five miles an hour and caused untold misery to the men who sweated and choked in the dust for days on end. Clegg, a private, who made this trip, explained it thus:

When the Bn returned from the first desert-push and was waiting to embark for Greece, it was bivouacked [sic] at Ald-ei-Kadir near Alexandria a place that will be remembered by all for the Sand Storm which blew up every night and blotted out everything...

In addition to these problems some change to the 19th Brigade's personnel had been made. Louch's second in command, Major R.K. Anderson, left to command a battalion in the 9th Division and was replaced by Major R.L. Sandover, and Major-General V.A. Vasey (the senior administration officer of the 6th Division)

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26 See Long (1952), 284, n1.
27 CO's Notebook, "Tocra", 1; "700 Mile Push in Six Weeks", WAM 1.0, 50.
28 See CO's Notebook, "Ain-el-Gazala to Amiriya" [sic] 1
29 Meaning an oppressive hot S. or SE. Egyptian wind that blows on and off for about 50 days in the early months of a year. The word Khamsin is Arab for fifty.
30 Clegg, "Ald-ei-Kadir", WAM 6.3, 54. (The camp mentioned here is the one referred to by Louch in the above named notebook on page 3.)
31 See Long (1952), 265, n2 for Anderson, for Vasey, 50, n2.
replaced Brigadier Robertson ("Red Robbie") as Brigade CO. 'Red Robbie’s' message to the troops of 9 February 1941, began and ended thus:

_I wish to congratulate all ranks on their achievements in the Libyan Campaign and to thank them for their loyal co-operation, hard work, and endurance under extremely adverse conditions ... I am proud of commanding a force which has amassed such a record and in doing so, has moved 700 miles by road in less than six weeks._  

Laudable comments of this nature have a place in history and for a soldier in the field Robertson’s actual words had a certain appeal. Louch and the men of the 2/11th Battalion genuinely admired ‘Red Robbie’s’ vanity and his unashamed ambition. These attributes and his hard-driving tactics in the Western Desert campaigns were to become part of his legendary history.  

Louch fairly assessed that the move of the Allies Expeditionary Force from Alexandria to Greece on 27 March 1941 was “without regard for anything except filling available space” and wrote:

_Our transport vehicles were sent off, some on one ship and the rest on another. ... In the meantime we were bereft of all our equipment except portable weapons and a minimum of cooking gear. 18th Brigade HQ and the 2/4th and 2/8th Battalions went in an early convoy ... In the meantime we were attached to the 17th Brigade._

As the battalion was on short notice to leave the men found the time tedious and boring. There was no leave, no beer and no sporting equipment and, due to the shortage of cooking gear, the food rations could not be properly cooked. Furthermore the news that the Germans were advancing on Tobruk and into Greece made the men extremely uneasy.

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35 CO’s Notebook, “Ain El Gazala” to Amiya [sic], 3.
It was not until early in April a ship, the *Pennland*, was found to move the battalion to Greece. A last minute decision on 10 April to send the staff and the effects of the Australian General Hospital with them added to Louch's anxieties. Once more he was responsible for an ancillary force in an overcrowded ship. This and the possibility of an attack on the convoy from the *Luftwaffe* at any time were the thoughts that concerned him most as they approached the Piraeus Harbour on 12 April 1941. The story of the movements of the 2/11th Battalion in Greece and the situation in Crete as the 2/11th found it is next to be told.
Chapter 4

The Debacle in Greece and Crete

Greece was not a convenient country for fighting a war. T.S. Louch

The sudden collapse of the Allied forces in Greece and Crete which led to the destruction of the original 2/11th Battalion as a fighting unit began when Greece asked the Allies for aid following Italy's attack on her territory in October 1940.

Although Britain stood alone in the fight against the Axis and the Dominion forces were fully occupied in the Mediterranean, Churchill's desire to honour a promise was met despite the fact that the resources available to the Allies could not effectively cover both theatres of warfare.

Regardless of this prospect the decision to send a force to Greece stood. Thus, from 6 March to 10 April 1941 convoys of troops embarked from Alexandria for the front in Greece.

The decision to send a fighting force to Greece in principle was never in doubt, but in practice it was to become a disastrous expedition for the Allies. By the time the expedition, code-named 'Lustre' by Churchill, had gone into position along the Aliakmon-Olympus line the Axis forces had by 9 April advanced through Yugoslavia and overrun Salonika, and the campaign for control of Greece had begun.

\[1\] For the nature of the complement of this force, see Long (1953), 33, n6.
\[2\] Churchill (1950), 152.
Due to the involvement of the Greek forces in the campaign a brief mention of it is now made. Greece's endeavour to counter Hitler's ambitions in the Balkans was vindicated when her forces in December 1940 halted the Italian invasion and pushed Mussolini's army back across the border into Albania. In April 1941, however, when Germany entered Greece through Bulgaria the Greek army was spent and ill-equipped for the coming battle. Defeated and harried by an invincible
German force the lucky ones in one final effort converged in Larisa in the hope of reaching their families ahead of the Germans or finding anonymity in the south.

It was then that, on 12 April 1941, the 2/11th Battalion arrived at Piraeus. The main port and harbour was still burning from a raid by the Luftwaffe, making landing a most difficult and time-consuming task. The caiques (Greek fishing vessels) commandeered for the job, could not get close enough to the shore so everything - men and material - was ferried across by dinghy. "That was the first taste of the sort of muck-up we had in Greece and Crete", is how one private put it. But essentially it wasn't a bungle; it was the war catching up with the 2/11th Battalion men. Not that the idea would have occurred to these soldiers who had just received Louch's message telling the battalion "to get ashore as quickly as possible as it was urgently needed at the front". They did not know what this might mean, but were confident that they could give as good a show against the Germans as they had against the Italians.

The initial difficulties experienced by the 2/11th Battalion at Piraeus alerted the troops as to what to expect 'at the front' in northern Greece. While Louch says that "Greece was not a convenient country for fighting a war", his desert-trained men found confronting the German machine, surrounded by snow-covered mountainous terrain, a nightmare.

With no news available in Athens beyond that they - the 2/11th Battalion - were needed, Louch decided to act. Next morning he sent his liaison officer Lieutenant G.J. Greenway and his driver Private K.T. Hockridge ahead by car to

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1 W.A. Ford. From the writer's personal notes.
2 CO's Notebook, "Greece", 3.
3 CO's Notebook, "Greece", 1.
Larisa while he followed by train with the rest of the battalion. It was a stop and start journey as the Luftwaffe was busy, but they arrived safely on 14 April and were met by Greenway and Hockridge. The message to Louch was clear:

*The troops were to detrain and get into the waiting trucks, and I was to report to Brigadier Savage [sic] forthwith. I found him and he told me that the main force was withdrawing through Larisa, and our job was to take up a position on the road west of Kalabaka to cover the withdrawal of the British Armoured Division from the Aliakmon line, and block the road against any advance by the enemy on Larisa from the West.*

While Louch’s account of the action of his battalion at this juncture differs from that given in Long, the misunderstanding that occurred over the position of Savige’s force has indicated that the 2/11th did play a significant part.

Fig. 9: Kalabaka defile when the 2/11th Battalion covered the retreating of the British Armoured Division.

Bert Skillen was in the action that followed. He wrote that after “digging in...” their job was to check each tank as it came through to find out how far back the Germans were. But this was not all. In order to lessen the ‘bottleneck’ caused by the fleeing Greek soldiers in need of food and boots they gave them as much

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7 See Long (1953), 125 for the former and 104 for the latter. Also CO’s Notebook “Kalabaka to Brallos” 1, on the business of conflicting orders.
help as they could for, as he put it: "The Germans had broken through their lines, so they had very little sleep or food and looked terrible. I am very sorry for them, poor devils." Faced with the need to see that the Greeks (soldiers and civilians alike) were clear of the road, and fully aware of the problems associated with a withdrawal, it is not surprising that Louch became uncomfortable when on 16 April Savidge told him to hold his position. "Things" he recorded, "did not seem to be running for us". He wrote that the only thing they had to laugh about that evening was a radio announcement that "the full weight of the German war machine is being relentlessly hurled at the Kalabaka front where our troops are resisting stubbornly". Such factors distorted the true picture of events.

Despite these concerns, late next morning Louch was relieved to see the Armoured Division coming through without serious mishap. With this part of the job behind them the companies of the 2/11th began their return journey south.

No military operation requires the degree of exacting physical endurance, organisation and moral courage as a withdrawal, or causes quite as many problems: details of what to do with casualties, what is happening on the flanks, what area is flagging, as well as what is behind or in front (men, machines, or both) now had to be faced. The troops of the 2/11th had learned how to forge ahead in their triumphant battles in the Western Desert, but now they were to learn that falling back was harder. But fall back they did - they withdrew from one position to the next through lines held first by them and then by their mates in the Anzac Corp10 for as long as required - and successfully.

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8 Skillen, 8 (Digging in or trenching, more often than not, was the only means of protection for the infantry soldier neither of which they had time to do.)
9 CO's Notebook, "Kalabaka to Brallos", I; for dates on this episode see CO Diary, WAM 11.0, 103-104.
10 Designated as such by General Wavell, 12 April 1941. Long (1953), 70.
By dawn of the 18th these soldiers were safely through Trikkala, only to find the road cratered, the Pinios bridge down, the Stukas very active, and the New Zealanders hard-pressed. The race to keep ahead of the Germans had begun: the 2/11th were kept busy helping the 'Kiwis' to stop the enemy from breaking through across the river towards Larisa, and in ferrying men over the river in a punt (towed by a donkey) while their trucks were detouring by way of Tournavos. It was a test for both and the Anzacs won.

Fig. 10: The withdrawal of the 2/11th Battalion, 17 April 1941 - 25 April 1941.

The delay in gaining access to the road south was an uneasy period for the men, but as they were across and the Germans had still to cross, time was on their side, but little else. From Larisa onwards the troops of each holding force were incessantly attacked from the air. The Luftwaffe "bombing and machine gunning us", Skillen wrote, "it was a wonder anyone of us lived"\(^\text{11}\) A company commander captured the mood in his report:

\(^{11}\) Skillen, 9.
This was really a terrible day. From dawn to dusk we took it from the German aircraft. The convoys became scattered as truck after truck was knocked, and at one stretch of the road the problem was getting around the burning vehicles.  

Captain Ralph Honner and his company were left guarding the Pinos river crossing, while the 2/11th Battalion moved off in the early hours of the morning of 19 April towards Brallos. By daybreak the trucks had further negotiated a detour of Parsala and halted for a spell near Domokos on the plains of Lamia when a stray enemy plane scored a direct hit on Louch's car. One of the 2/11th officers summed up the situation:

It was a glorious relief when the trucks cleared the Plains of Lamia and climbed into the Thermopylae pass in the early dusk. But then it was a difficult job to get the mixed up companies sorted out again. The CO had been wounded, and his driver killed that day, but I remember his conference that night was conducted with calm and confidence.

Aged forty-five when he took command of the 2/11th Battalion in November 1939, Colonel Louch, was held in the highest regard by his men. They admired his unfailing regard for their welfare above his own and were shocked to hear he was wounded and needed hospital care. The 'old hands' of the battalion felt he had been given a blow 'beneath the belt' and bitterly regretted his loss. They would have liked it better had he been with them for the rest of the withdrawal. His replacement was Major (later Brigadier) R.L. Sandover.
The news of Louch being invalided out and his replacement on 20 April by Major Sandover had little time to sink in before the men were on their way to Brallos. According to Long the 2/11th rejoined Vasey’s 19th Brigade at Brallos and became his main reserve unit for the defence of this line road. In this position the battalion was used mercilessly. Required at first to relieve the 2/5th in the rugged terrain some six miles to right of the 19th Brigade position they were called back before they had reached their former position astride the road. That Vasey decided to withdraw his force a half an hour before the appointed time on the 24th because he was afraid of a “break-through on the 2/11th front” appears groundless.\textsuperscript{17} Louch’s report on Sanderson’s account of this says that as it was getting dark Vasey wanted to avoid further casualties\textsuperscript{18} which seems reasonable.

\textsuperscript{17} Long (1953) 138-141; for the quotation 157.
\textsuperscript{18} CO’s Diary. “2/11th Bn. Campaign in Greece” WAM 11.1, 119, for Sandover account by Louch of this on his return to Cairo from Crete. Also Long (1953) 143 for Vasey’s response to the idea of withdrawing his force.
The 2/11th had come under heavy fire from the Germans. Apart from what had happened to other units, Captain S.E. Wood (later killed in Crete), all section leaders, and eight men from the one platoon had been wounded.\textsuperscript{19}

Sandover moreover found the final battle against the Axis forces before the embarkation a difficult assignment. Up to the 21 April, the commanding officers of the withdrawing unit knew nothing of the evacuation plans. They still believed that, at a strategically possible stage, a final stand would be made against the Germans and to this end he was reported to say: “The Bn was in excellent spirits, very keen to have an opportunity of meeting the GERMANS on the ground ...”\textsuperscript{20}

Accordingly, till 23 April when details of the evacuation plans were received, companies of the 2/11th stoutly defended the main road to Megara as the convoy of trucks came through. In this operation every unit of the battalion worked in unison up to the last moment. It was a near thing, Skillen explained:

“We were all covering one another, when my turn came, I’m on my own so I run up the hill ... I was one of the last ones, and was lucky to get away ... Thank you who ever was looking after me, Thank you!”\textsuperscript{21}

Skillen was not alone in believing in a divine being; though not always prompt at church parade the 2/11th soldiers had sufficient faith to “call in a god” for help when the need arose.

On the morning of 24 April the column of the 2/11th Battalion was well on its way. Apart from “one truck being ditched, the move was uneventful”, and an ambulance was sent to Athens hospital to get as many as possible of the wounded\textsuperscript{22}. Louch’s diary of the 24th recalled how miserable and cold he and

\textsuperscript{19} Long (1953), 156.
\textsuperscript{20} CO’s Diary, WAM 11.0, 117.
\textsuperscript{21} Skillen, 10.
\textsuperscript{22} CO’s Diary, WAM 11.0, 119.
Majors Hegney and Lee were on that day and how glad they were to be embarking with the men on the Thurland Castle for Crete; noting that he saw Vasey, and that eighty nurses were added to the compliment of 3600 that left from Megara.  

Louch’s concerns after Bardia that the 2/11th men might think that “everything in the future was going to be just too easy” were not unfounded. The Allies’ campaign in Greece was less successful. Here instead of the Italians they had to contend with the superbly trained troops and military air-power of the German army. Here too, instead of guarding their gains in North Africa they, in a mood of chivalry, had entered into a war that became a debacle of such magnitude that it followed the Allies’ forces into Crete.

While many stories abound of the 2/11th Battalion experiences in the withdrawal from Greece and the embarkation to Crete on 25 April 1945, Shanahan’s version of the embarkation bears repeating for its accuracy and as an impression of the action the men were to take into captivity:

*We were taken out to the Thurland Castle in caiques. We were able to take only those things that could be carried on the back, and were warned that we would have to clamber up the side of the ship, on rope ladders. The evacuation was, at the time, a thing greeted with mixed feelings. Brallos had given the battalion a mighty shake up and the spirits were low. The rapid German victory in Greece, coupled with the fact that we knew the new German general, Rommel, had reached the Egyptian border, made a bad dent in morale. On the other hand, of course, we were damned grateful that we were being taken off Greece.*

Anxious about the direction the war was taking and not knowing what to expect next, Shanahan also commented:

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22 CO’s Diary, WAM 11.0, 108-109.
The quality of the Germans had forcibly been brought home to us. But 2/11 Bn met the German ground troops under extremely unfortunate circumstances, and never really had a chance to show what they could do. A withdrawal is recognised as the most difficult operation of war, and the thing most to be feared is being struck by an attacking enemy just at the time of withdrawal. And that is just what happened to the 2/11th... \(^25\)

Shanahan's concern for the morale of the 2/11th men was not without foundation. Unbeknown to those who were withdrawing the whole thrust of the movement had changed. In place of getting the troops off Greece and into temporary safety on Crete, the need to defend Crete against a German invasion, while Rommel's offensive in Africa was taken care of, had become necessary. Yet the island remained unprepared.

This was not intended to be the case. Eight days before the first batch of soldiers from Greece had arrived on Anzac Day, the Garrison staff (General Weston did not arrive till 27th)\(^26\) had ordered from Cairo tents, clothing, blankets and food for a further 300,000, but at this late stage, little of this order had arrived. The demands on the base at Cairo from two theatres of war and the ever active Luftwaffe had prevented the British navy from delivering these much needed supplies.

Not that the 2/11th men complained too much when they disembarked at Suda Bay late in the afternoon of the 27th. They were grateful to reach Crete unharmed and thankful that the attacking Luftwaffe had not seriously damaged the Thurland Castle during the voyage. Weary, hungry and in need of sleep all they could think of was a good square meal. While Weston's good-natured 'Tommy' soldiers were

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\(^25\) Shanahan, 23.

\(^26\) E.C. Weston was the last of the six appointees to this post since December, 1940 to become CO of the garrison. See Long, 204.
sympathetic to the men’s needs, the influx of this number of troops in two days had made steady inroads on everything especially the food stock. After a lengthy wait, all that was offered to the men was the standard fare of hot tea, bully beef and a biscuit. The meal was not as substantial or satisfying as they had hoped but they were glad to settle down in safety and wait. Most slept amongst the olive trees around Suda Bay. They had no greatcoats or blankets and few had any mess-gear. Some had kept their rifles and others had Bren guns. But the service troops, the cooks, clerks, storemen and drivers had little between them. Crete they understood was to be a staging post on the way to Alexandria, all heavy weapons, trucks and anti-tank gear had therefore been destroyed. As a result the 2/11th troops believed they were just “waiting”, as Skillen put it, “for the navy to get the rest of the boys off out of Greece”27, then they fully expected to be on their way to Egypt and a chance to put Rommel in his place.28

With no assistance forthcoming from the Crete garrison the 2/11th soldiers were forever besieging the 19th Brigade headquarters at 42nd Street29 for replacement to their kit: for boots and clothing, for blankets and weapons, and any sort of information they could gather. Beyond Brigadier Robertson’s message to them at Alexandria they had had no news, no mail, and no pay since 10 April when they had sailed for Greece. Resourceful as the British Navy and merchant ships had been throughout the affair, they could do little else than drop off each boat load of troops or supplies and be away back for the next lot. Also it was becoming abundantly clear to everyone that when shipping space became available it was

27 Skillen, 11. See Long (1951), 113 for Churchill’s idea that Crete was to be only a place of refuge.
28 Rommel’s advance in North Africa had put in jeopardy Britain’s position there and Crete was needed as a base.
needed to shift to Egypt the sick and the wounded first, the non-combatant soldiers second, before the real business of defending the island could begin.

The men may have been uncertain about what to expect if this did or did not happen but rumours on the state of the army and a possible invasion kept their minds active. The optimists saw themselves back in Cairo as a certainty. Even bets were taken at 10 to 1 to be paid at 'Alexs'. The pessimists, like Skillen, were not so sure and noted: "April 30, 1941: Still on the island. We hear plenty of rumours around." In consequence it became harder for the men to take the prospect of another battle seriously.

These early days were not however devoid of achievement. The officers were keen not to be caught unprepared. Each day one or two of the men were detailed to listen to the BBC news at the nearest village. Unless Lord Haw-Haw had something to say there was often little to report, but that little rumour, speculation or fact, gave the waiting troops something to think about. In addition 'running' patrols were extended from their base to a range of hills parallel to Suda Bay. From there the men would take note of the aerial dog-fights that took place as their much needed supplies were being unloaded. The tally in the first five days of this onslaught (28 April - 3 May 1941) was variable. Skillen's diary notes give an account of 11 planes 'downed'; while another source stated 11 ships and 19 planes, neither side being an immediate winner except that the Allies' planes were limited and the Axis force was limitless.

30 Skillen, 11.  
31 From a group of 211th ex POW's Interview, April 1991. For ships lost or damaged, see Long 317-318.
Fig. 12: Roads and Airstrips, Crete, 1941.

The growing attention that the airfields and harbour of Crete received from the Luftwaffe in the weeks leading up to the eventual invasion did not hinder the defence preparation. Brigadier ‘Bloody’ Vasey\textsuperscript{32} was given command of the Australian forces and the New Zealander Commander, General Freyberg, who had not arrived until the 29th (following the withdrawal of his force from the Peloponnese) was in charge overall. It was an unexpected job and one, as he said, “I could do nothing but accept”.\textsuperscript{33}

Freyberg, having learned on the day of his appointment (30th) that an enemy attack, by 5,000 to 6,000 air-borne troops, could take place on 20 May, lost no time in organising the polyglot of nationalities into composite fighting units. These units under their respected commanders were to defend and protect their allotted sectors at Maleme, Kestilli, Suda, Retimo and Heraklion, the Kestelli. And, in the

\textsuperscript{32} So called for his celebrated comment on the withdrawal in Greece; see Long, 143.
\textsuperscript{33} Long (1953), 208.
process, to prevent the airborne troops from landing on and penetrating into the surrounding area.\(^{34}\)

By the end of April apart from the British and Greek forces assembled on Crete the Australian 19th Brigade was the closest to a complete unit. The 2/11th and 2/4th Battalions were almost at full strength; the 2/8th Battalion had lost about half of its men. The 16th Brigade was better off than the 17th, having, like the 19th, lost only about half the 2/7th Battalion in the evacuation. Other Australians pressed into service were remnants of the ancillary forces: Field Ambulance and Field Companies; an artillery group; the Australian Army Service Corps and a Machine Gun battalion. In all Vasey had organised some 6,500 armed Australians who, with the British and New Zealand contingents, were to face the composite army of air, land and sea forces of the Axis on the 20th May, as predicted. In the course of the reorganisation of this force for example, General Vasey's 19th Brigade headquarters moved to Georgioupolis, and Colonel Sandover's 2/11th joined the 2/1st, 2/7th and the 2/8th Battalions, three Greek regiments and a battery of the 2/3rd Regiment under the command of Colonel Ian Campbell in the defence of the airstrip at Retimo. Thus Creforce, as Freyberg called his army, was made ready to defend Crete's airfields and port with as much skill and enterprise as could be mustered.

The troops of the 2/11th Battalion were relieved to be part of these decisive activities. They felt that whatever happened they would get a chance to avenge the terrific blitzing the 'buns' had given them on Greece. Skillen, now reconciled to the forthcoming battle, wrote: "We are digging in again. Some Italians are light on":

\(^{34}\) For strength and dispositions of these forces, see Long (1953), 218-219.
\(^{35}\) Long (1953), 315.
meaning that the detail of Italian POW who were to help with their trench preparations had become aware of the pending invasion and had not turned up.36

Fig. 13: Keeping busy, Crete, 4 May 1941.

In the three weeks before the invasion of Crete when the island was ominously quiet and peaceful, the 2/11th Battalion moved on 4 May to a position in the hills near Neo Khorian. Here the men were kept busy running; ostensibly to build up their reserves of strength, in reality to get to know every hill, valley and tussock around the area. Longer and longer distances were devised for this purpose until the boot position became perilous: only English-made boots up to a size 9 were available. It was not often that the 2/11th men felt angry about their lot in the war. The business of the boots really disturbed them. Next to their rifles, proper sized boots, most reckoned, were the infantry man's best friend. Genuine, polite Gordon

36 Skillen; Long (1953), 316. The Italians mentioned were some of the 14,000 POWs captured by the Greeks in the Albanian Campaign and soon to be released by the Germans.
Williams recalled with some feeling that it was "a heck of a position to be in", particularly when they didn’t know what they might be asked to do next\textsuperscript{37}. The men were determined to maintain an outward appearance of calm when they got together at night: Most, like Lieutenant Arthur McRobbie, made use of the opportunity to write home, although, he had his doubts "whether the mail would get away"\textsuperscript{38}. Others would put on an impromptu concert, or recite a piece from a poem or a ditty made up while playing the waiting game. One such example was Laurie Ryan’s much quoted poem entitled \textit{The Isle of Doom}\textsuperscript{39}.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Waiting and writing, Georgioupolis, Crete, 10 May 1941.}
\end{figure}

By 10 May most of the troops had been paid. The fresh goats’ milk, oranges and a fair measure of Cretan wines helped to relieve the tension and made sleeping amongst the olive trees more comfortable. Otherwise there were no amenities apart

\textsuperscript{37} Gordon Williams, \textit{Interview} 29.6.94.
\textsuperscript{38} Arthur McRobbie, \textit{Letter} 1941 (copy in possession of the researcher) 4.
\textsuperscript{39} In Imelda Ryan, \textit{POW}s \textit{Fraternal}, Perth: Hawthorn, 1990, 152-153 and Appendix B.
from the much prized issue of cigarettes and chocolates that became for the 2/11th troops a valued medium for barter amongst the locals. For the poverty stricken Cretan civilians such items were luxuries.

The 2/11th Battalion involvement in the battle for Greece and their hurried withdrawal in the face of a superior German force had to be reconciled against what was in store for them in Crete. "Greece may not have been a convenient place to fight a war" but Crete was equally uninviting. Nevertheless the leaders between them possessed a store of experience. This, Freyberg's Creforce had in its favour but not much else. Yet, despite that Freyberg understood from the outset there were few resources available to repel the enemy and no air support, he still had faith. He cabled Churchill on 4 May (with some reservation) that his force could "cope provided the navy can help ..." But events were to show that this was not to be.

The fighting that followed between these two unequal protagonists lasted for 10 days, from 20 May to 30 May 1941.

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40 CO's Notebook, "Greece", 1.
41 See Long (1953), 220.
Chapter 5

Crete: 20 May - 30 May 1941

*We turned all our weapons on them but we could not bring them down.*
Ralph Honner.

A feature of the debacle of Greece and Crete was the experiences of Colonel Campbell's force in the defence of Retimo airfield during the ten days from 20 May to 30 May 1941. The work of the Allied forces at Maleme and Heraklion as an integral part of the ten day battle for Crete and both will be alluded to, but the story centres around the action taken by the 2/1st and 2/11th Battalions at Retimo and their part up to the final events when these brave men were forced into captivity.

To fully comprehend the operation it is necessary to consider the nature of the terrain, the use made by Campbell of the topographical features at Retimo and, the problems encountered by his force in the course of the German invasion.

Louch's comment that "Greece was not a convenient country for fighting a war," could equally be applied to Crete. Apart from a narrow coastal strip to the north where the harbour and airfields were situated, much of Crete was undeveloped. Some 170 miles long by 35 miles broad, the island is divided lengthwise from east to west by an almost continuous steep mountain range that rises in places to about 8,000 feet and falls sharply to the sea from steep cliffs on

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1 For more details of these factors in this chapter see Long (1953), 256-278, passim.
2 CO's Notebook, "Greece", 1.
the Southern shore. Only one main road crossed these mountains, beginning in the north at the capital Canea and ending at the village of Sfarkia in the south. Furthermore, most of the road ran parallel to the sea coast between Suda Bay and Retimo. Such elements played a deciding part in the battle to come.

At Retimo the mountain slopes were split by deep gullies that levelled to form a coastal strip to the beach, but fell short of the airfield. In the vicinity of the airfield the mountain range was separated from the sea by slopes of olive groves; a valley of vineyards (which supported the villages of Pigi and Adhele), and a rocky ridge rising to 100 to 200 feet in parts. The ridge emerged gradually from the mountain side near Stravromenos to the east and ended abruptly at the village of Plantanes near the western end of the landing field, thus providing Campbell with a much needed rampart as the focus of his plan for the defence of the airfield.

![Diagram of Crete](image)

**Fig. 15**: The 2/11th and 2/1st positions, 20 May 1941.

Having established a likely base Campbell then took full advantage of the coverage the olive groves and vineyards gave the troops and he placed a battalion at strategic places (or hills as he called the prominences) along the ridge. By 20

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3 See Chapter 4, Fig. 12 for location of the mountain roads and hills in Crete, 1941.
May, while the Cretan Gendarmes guarded the towns of Stravromenos and Retimo at Hill “A” and Hill “B” at either end of the airfield, Hill “C” to the west and at Hill “D” to the south near Adhele, Campbell’s own 2/1st, Major Sandover’s 2/11th and the Greek battalions watched and waited for the paratroopers to arrive.

Fig. 16: They came in over the sea, 20 May 1941.

The tedium associated with waiting for something to happen ended abruptly for the 2/11th men at 10 o’clock on the morning of 20th when the troops were called to ‘battle stations’ following the sighting of the first of the two groups of German troop carriers. Both groups flew low to their intended destinations and could easily be seen by the watchers in the olive groves. The first group of 14 turned right in the direction of Canea and the second of 20 turned left. At 4 p.m. the bombing and strafing of the Retimo airfield began. The “game was on.”

In this softening-up attack by the Germans little damage was done other than to thoroughly alarm the Greek troops and alert the Cretan police to what to expect. The appearance of the German paratroopers in the first hour of the battle was another matter. The unloading from the troop carriers of wave after wave of

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4 Skillen, 12.
heavily armed men at three to four hundred feet above the hidden troops was a chaotic affair for the Germans who became easy targets for the Australians:

*For about 20 minutes men were strafed from the air by bombers and fighter aircraft. The next thing ... the air was filled with descending paratroopers ... and all hell broke loose ... we had plenty of captured weapons - nine planes had crashed and the enemy had obviously suffered severely ... and we were able to prevent the paratroopers from finding any containers [their supply packs].* 

Colonel Kroh's group comprising 150 carriers came in first and landed amongst Campbell's troops in the Hill "A" area, followed swiftly by Captain Wiederman's and Colonel Sturm's groups. The first wave of the latter two descended near Retimo town and the other in the midst of the 2/11th troops in Hill "B".

![Unsuccessful descent](image)

The immediate impact of the invasion by the German paratroopers on the Retimo force had all the hall-marks of a horror film. Some planes were shot down before the troopers had a chance to jump, others who had jumped drifted out to sea and drowned, weighted down by their survival equipment and silk parachutes.

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Captain Pat Shanahan thought the whole episode "demoralising for troops moving into a front line position", and summed it up as follows:

The battalion really collected a lot of scalps that day. There were bodies everywhere, on the ground, hanging out of trees, hooked into vine rows. I spoke to sailor Brown of A Coy, ... He said he reckoned the ghosts would be haunting him that night.6

The desire of the Australians to survive in the face of the ruthless invader was strong and to this end they gathered in the spoils of war. Shanahan described in detail the benefits:

The tobacco drought has somewhat eased, the food situation was a lot better for the paratroopers were well loaded with personal supplies. Brown bread and sausage and small black cigars were very much in evidence. Quite a few lads armed themselves with machine pistols and many a Luger and Mauser was stuck in webbing belts.7

It was all too evident, however, that the initial loss of men and material was not to stop the German invasion for, despite the hectic reception the paratroopers had received at the hands of Campbell’s troops, by the evening of the 20th Kroh’s group had reformed, chased the Cretan guards away from the olive oil factory at Stavromenos and were engaged in attacking the 2/1st defence position of Hill "A". Campbell’s first attempt at countering the German initiative with the Matildas (Retimo force had two only) and his reserve unit met with little success. Both tanks were immediately put out of action and only the swift deployment of a further infantry unit held up the enemy’s determined advance for the night. The reprieve gave Campbell the breathing space he needed to reorganise his force.

Thinking to take advantage of the uncoordinated movement of the paratroopers which prevented the German bombers continuing to strafe the airfield,

6 Shanahan, 25. The Brown mentioned in this quotation was Private F. Mac. G. Brown.
7 Shanahan, "Greece and Crete", WAM 6.5, Adenda file, 13.
he wirelessed General Freyberg for reinforcements. Not knowing that the Germans had gained a foothold on Maleme, he accepted Freyberg’s ‘regrets’ in good faith, and ordered the 2/1st and the 2/11th Battalions to attack at first light next morning.8

In the meantime Wiederman’s small force of paratroopers had been driven by the Cretan police to take refuge in the nearby seaside village at Perivolia, but Sturm’s group was not so fortunate. His larger force had dropped in front of the men of Sandover’s 2/11th Battalion around Hill “B” and were given the same treatment as those landing near Campbell’s 2/1st. Private Skillen explained the reaction in his platoon:

We were waiting for the red ones, [parachutes] they were the ones carrying rifles and ammunition, and that was what we wanted, we did not have much ammunition. We got the signal to fire. They were sitting ducks. It was the same old story, it got dark and a lot got away, then the game was looking up [sic] for them, but their losses had been terrible, planes and men.9

Fig. 18: Perhaps amongst these was one of Skillen’s ‘red one’s’, 20 May 1941.

8 Long (1953), 260 for the order, 226 for the reason.
9 Skillen, 12.
Although Skillen's account was true for many of the invaders, those who escaped from the carnage were not idle. To deter pursuit, during the night of the 20th the paratroopers made discarded rifles into booby traps, captured the crews from the defunct tanks on Hill "A" and forced the staff of the Australian First Aid post at Adhele to surrender until they, in a spirited encounter with the 2/11th, were in turn captured and forced to give up the first aid team. At this stage it was a game of 'give and take' and both sides were more or less even. Amongst those captured in the early hours of the 21st by the 2/11th was the Operational Commander of the German force, General Sturm. His capture proved to be a lucky break for the Australians. The plans he carried were invaluable. From them the German speaking Sanderson found out how the invasion would be executed, and no further paratroopers would be landed. This helped to create a climate of optimism.

In the fighting that followed, Campbell's all-out attack on Hill "A" continued throughout the 21st. Luck was again on the side of the Australians when a German bomber pilot missed his target and killed sixteen of their own 'troopers'. It spurred the 2/11th men and the Greeks to greater effort. They attacked with ferocious tenacity until Kroh's remaining paratroopers withdrew from the field to their base at the olive oil factory, enabling Campbell and his officers to take stock.

While the encouraging results of the first 18 hours at Retimo had prompted Campbell to send word to Freyberg that 'all was well', things were not running in favour of the Allies. Freyberg's forces in the Maleme and Heraklion sectors were likewise engaged in battle with paratroopers, but there were other, more serious
factors. The Germans had gained control of both the main roads out of Retimo to Maleme and Heraklion, and had demolished the Allies' communication system that depended on wire run loosely along existing telephone poles. In addition the loss of the telegraph system prevented the signal lamps from operating off the main electricity supply. Thus the 2/1st and the 2/11th Command post could no longer speak by field telephone to Brigade Headquarters or signal effectively amongst themselves. Instead Campbell and Sandover had to rely on wireless messages or runners, which made control of the units difficult, particularly as the officers of the poorly armed and inexperienced Greek regiments were needing constant supervision, direction and support from the Australians.

Despite the odds being in favour of the Germans, Campbell continued to deny the airfield to the enemy, but with diminishing success and increasing loss of life each day. On the 22nd his orders to drive the Germans out of their base at the olive oil factory began and ended disastrously. Before the first attempt had begun two officers were shot carrying out a reconnoitre of the area. The 2/1st gallant Captain Moriarty died instantly and the other was seriously wounded. On the next attempt, at 6 p.m., the fatalities were less, but many Australians were wounded or cut off and taken prisoner when the Greeks failed to advance as ordered. This left the few remaining Australians pinned down by the Germans and unable to withdraw until next day.

At the same time as Campbell's 2/1st was attempting to dislodge the Germans from the olive oil factory, Sandover's 2/11th was trying to remove the Germans from the village of Perivolia with no better results. In the ensuing battle Captain Honner's company, now less than a hundred strong, had managed on the
morning of the 22nd (with the use of a code taken from a prisoner) to direct the
German bombers to attack their own position. This diversion was not enough to
hold the enemy's determined advance; it made the Germans more resolute. By late
afternoon, or Black Friday as Captain "Archie" Jackson called it, both his and
Honner's companies were under constant attack from the paratroopers and subject
to a sustained barrage from the bombers overhead. Honner's later account of the
foray says:

At the houses, from which the enemy screen had vanished, we looked
over a dreaded thousand yards of open ground between us and the
Perivolia redoubt, where half-a-thousand well-armed troops, with all
the artillery of the Retimo invasion force, waited for us behind stone
walls and in deep-dug lines of trenches. Heavier fire broke out along
the enemy front and we had two more casualties, one of them killed,
then the marauding planes came over, pinning us to the shelter of the
houses. We needed the cover of darkness to carry us over that
forbidding field.¹¹

In the evening a leap-frogging attack (used so successfully in Greece) by the two
companies was attempted. On this occasion Skillen had good reason to be grateful
to his tin hat. "We were going well ..." he says:

but the Greek army are attacking so we don't want to clash with them.
Then suddenly we stop, ... I was hit in the head by a bullet. It threw
me backwards. I was laying face down in the sand. I was lucky the tin
hat took the brunt of it.¹²

Next morning (23rd) Sandover's orders to remain in position and dig-in till
nightfall was more well received. Not that digging-in was an easy exercise. The
men had few spades and little time to do anything properly. The constant strafing
of the area by the enemy's bombers and the machine gun fire from the endless

¹¹ Ralph Honner, Paratroops in Crete, in Norman Bartless, Australia at Arms, WAM, Canberra,
1955, 161.
¹² Skillen, 13. (Skillen wounded and a prisoner has that hat to this day. It is a proud relic of his
war effort.)
procession of low-sweeping planes caused heavy casualties and made life a misery for the rest. Jackson's company had nine men wounded and Honner had three men killed and twenty seven wounded. "We turned all our weapons on them", Honner said, "but we could not bring them down."\textsuperscript{13} It appears that Sandover had gone on the defensive to allow the Greek battalions to clear out the Germans hiding in St Georges Church. That night they, according to Long advanced, captured some prisoners and withdrew.

At this junction Campbell had no reason to doubt that his force would hold Retimo while the Germans were cleared out of Maleme and Heraklion. Not knowing at the time that the Germans had control of Maleme airfield, he was reassured by Freyberg's belated wireless message of the 23rd that: "'You have done magnificently;'\textsuperscript{14} and operating in the belief that an infantry battalion of the British 1/Rangers was to clear the road of the enemy into Perivolia, he made full use of the three hour truce made by the Australian Medical Officers with the enemy.

\textbf{Fig. 19:} Caring for the wounded, 23 May 1941.

\textsuperscript{12} Honner, 163.  
\textsuperscript{14} Long (1953), 265.
The truce allowed food and water to be distributed, the dead to be buried and the wounded to be cared for at the site of the Australian First Aid Post at Suda Bay. It was a humane gesture by both sides but the Germans were to benefit most. They had the use of the Australian's medical staff and services and at the end of the battle were able to swiftly airlift the casualties to Athens.

Despite these happenings, as far as Sandover knew the battle was to be a fight to the finish:

*German Comdr conferred with Lt-Col Campbell under a white flag, suggested we should "surrender now and save loss of life". He was told to hurry back to cover before the next shell overtook him.*

It was a sweeping statement and the intent possible but Campbell’s 2/1st men found taking the German base at the olive oil factory a tougher task than had been anticipated. It fell to the Germans on the morning of the 25th and many prisoners were taken, together with the two *Matilda* tanks. On their recovery the crews told a horrific story: both tank commanders had been killed and all the men showed signs of shell-shock. For the volunteer Australians, killing and maiming at close hand was becoming less horrifying and they were to become more hardened to death. After the encounter at the German base, Private C.B. Coyle made a mockery of the German soldiers rushing out of the factory to surrender “all slimed over with olive oil”, rather than counting the dead.

The loss of the *Matildas* to the Germans and their recovery by the 2/1st some time during the 26th was a fiasco. It indicated the futility of Campbell’s brave attempt to rout an enemy with few resources and dwindling manpower. Yet the

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15 C.O.’s Diary, 11.0, 125.
16 Private C.B. Coyle, in a note to this effect. WAM, 6.4, 15.
plan of attack at Perivolia depended on the use of the tanks. As a result the drivers
had to run the gauntlet of the marauding Germans between Hill “A” and Hill “B”
where the 2/11th were about to go into action. Honner, Sandover’s second in
command, described the arrival: “At first ... light,” he wrote:

the tanks came. Either because there was not yet light enough for them
to see where they were, or because the scratch crew of infantrymen
had been inadequately briefed on where they would find us, the right-
hand tank, commanded by Lieutenant Jack Bedells, opened fire and
inflicted casualties on the Transport Platoon. To prevent further
damage the platoon waved their steel helmets on their rifles to identify
themselves to the tank - and to the Germans who had been flinging
every type of fire at the tanks ...

We were preparing to charge when the tank struck a land mine
... swerved ... and bogged down in the sands. Mortar rained on it ...
and away on the left flank the other tank was destroyed by a shell
which had set it on fire.17

This loss left the 2/11th in a precarious position. Hoping to drive the
Germans out of Perivolia, Honner with his and Jackson’s depleted companies made
a surprise attack on the enemy’s position. Meeting no resistance in the attempt, the
soldiers moved right through the enemy’s lines drawing fire from their hiding
places in the houses beyond. At the mercy of the Luftwaffe and the German
paratroopers they took cover. With no place to withdraw to, both sides were
pinned down waiting for the other to make the first move. Both knew that whoever
got the first reinforcements would win and it was not to be Campbell. By then he
knew the 1/Rangers had been ambushed.

Following the failure of the attack on the 27th and the 28th, the remainder
of Honner’s and Jackson’s companies fought their way back to the 2/11th base
camp while Honner escorted by Privates Dave Anderson and Alex Donaldson
raced ahead to confer with Sandover. The two volunteers were both wounded.

17 Honner, 163-164.
During the action the 2/11th ever-resourceful RMO Captain 'Jim' (Killer) Ryan saved many men when he defiantly moved forward under cover of a Red Cross Flag, and halted the German fire. In this lull he sorted the living from the dead, and had the wounded, including Dave Anderson, taken back out of the line of fire. Ryan was a cool man under pressure and a lucky one for many German rifles were pointed at him as he went about his work.

That same night (28th) practically all the battalion joined in a final stand against the enemy that was to be the most costly failure of all. Among those injured were Captain Wood (mortally wounded he died that day), Lieutenant Arthur Stoneham and four of his men. Three of these had been wounded previously at Bardia: Corporal Bernie Rodgers and his brother Private Dave Rodgers and Private C.T. McDonald who died two days later. The idea of capturing Perivolia was now abandoned, but the need to hang on was not. As Campbell had no orders from Freyberg to abandon his post and hoping the navy would arrive to evacuate his force, his signallers patrolled the beach all night flashing the letter "A" for assistance every 20 minutes. There was no response.

The next day (29th) Honner's company, now only 40 strong, took over the observation role previously held by the Greeks (who had quietly withdrawn) at Perivolia. All day there was no lull in the German action. News kept coming of the numbers of the enemy's motor cycle outfits, of artillery and mountain reconnaissance detachments and of tanks that were massing for the final attack. The German assault came that evening at 6 p.m. Sandover's men stubbornly resisted and tried to regroup in the face of heavy gunfire, smoke and dust. It ended
when news was received that Campbell had surrendered and that Sandover should do the same.

Faced with surrender the quick thinking volunteer soldier Sandover, unlike the regular soldier Campbell (a stickler for protocol) who surrendered his battalion intact, thought to give his men a chance. He suggested that anyone who wished to go should leave immediately and make for the hills. In principle this was an admirable idea and some escaped, but for most of the men 'in the field' it was an impossible proposition. To begin with, the sick and wounded never had a chance, and by the time the message was passed down the ranks from their commanding officers most of the soldiers were surrounded by the grinning, triumphant Germans telling them: ‘‘The Games up! Aussie’’.18

20: The war has finished for me. (Anon)

The unexpected end to the war in Crete came as a tremendous shock to the 2/11th soldiers. The sheer significance of what they were ordered to do took some time to sink in, as one of these men later said: ‘‘We were ‘stunned’ at first to think that this was the end for us, and ‘stymied’ from not having been given the chance to

18 Long (1953), 274.
withdraw."19 Skillen's observation of 30 May 1941 that: "It looks like we are prisoners of war at present"20 had sadly become a fact. The story now turns to the two immediate non-operational aspects in the life of a soldier: the experiences of the escapees and the plight of the prisoners.

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20 Skillen, 14.
Chapter 6

The 'stunned' and the 'stymied'

But 'surrender' was not part of the curriculum. Pat Shanahan

In an ironic way, the word 'surrender' played an important role in the history of the 2/11th Battalion soldiers. From 30th May 1941 when this demoralising word was first heard, the horror and consternation it aroused in the minds of the men had no boundaries. It is in this context that Major Sandover's decision to give his men the option to go and take their chance in the hills or to stay and surrender to the hated 'Jerry' can best be understood. While it was to be a calculated risk, it was one that Sandover was prepared to acknowledge and to share with his men. "I am going myself," he said, "we'll think about it when we get out of this'.

Most of the men were surprised by the unexpected twist to their war. They did not take kindly to capitulation and to the German gunners shouting: "'The game's up, Aussie!'" in place of carrying out the Company Commander's orders.

Some like Private C. Anderson and his carrier crew had:

worked all night from until seven o'clock the following morning shifting all our arty from the top of the hill behind our lines to new positions.

We had just completed the job and were resting when to our astonishment a runner came down to us and told us we were ordered to capitulate - the seven of us were stunned by this news as we thought the fight was well in hand.

When the runner finally convinced us that he was not fooling - we received orders to wreck our carriers - I will always remember the last hour which started from this point ...

1 Sandover in Long (1953), 274.
2 Long (1953), 274.
We ran the carriers off the road, salvaged our three precious tins of food [they were on half rations] smashed the motor by throwing in several grenades and retired under a tree ... and so we became POWs.\(^3\)

From a muster of 35 officers and 610 men, the total loss suffered by the 2/11th Battalion in these 10 days was 53 killed, 126 wounded and 423 taken prisoner.\(^4\) The remainder had been evacuated or had escaped to Egypt.

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Many of the West Australians had seen some of their mates killed or wounded and had thought that they could be next, but few had expected to be rounded up and made prisoners. The event remained in their minds long after the war was over. In 1962 Pat Shanahan recalled that on the morning of the 30th while Sandover was getting a condition report from the company commanders in their headquarters:

> the telephone rang and Ray was called to it. We heard him exclaim incredulously 'Surrender' ... The text book says nothing on the subject; 2/11th Bn had simply no training for it. Most of the company commanders had spent years of peace preparing to fight ... but 'surrender' was not part of the curriculum.

> Ray Sandover ... gave us an option of getting away if we could - but with an enormous range of mountains behind us where would we go?

> I immediately went back to B Coy and told them ... if they were going to surrender, get up to the RAP where the medical pennant might slow down any trigger happy Germans ... I remember a group of

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\(^3\) [D.] C. Anderson, WAM 6.5, 81-82.

\(^4\) Long (1953), 315, n2.
them asking me what I was going to do, I said I couldn't see what else we could do but surrender - ..., and that a number decided to do the same.

At Bn HQ there was some debating on what to do ...
Anyway, the Germans continued to fire artillery around Bn HQ ... so, with others, I decided to move further away - and once I moved the impulse to keep going was too strong. I met Colin Bayly later in the day, together with a number of other men....

If anyone was being taken off from the South coast we wanted to be on it. Well we were taken off - some months later.5

Escape, however, for most of the 2/11th Battalion was never an option. Apart from the soldiers who were forced to capitulate, the seriously wounded were immediately transferred by the Germans from the Field Hospitals and dressing stations to a large building at Retimo, before being flown to Greece. Officers like the wounded Lieutenant K.T. Johnson who could not walk just had no choice. Sandover's second-in-command Major Ben Heagney, (who had recently rejoined the battalions from the hospital in Athens), was still suffering the effect of dysentery and was too weak to make the effort, whereas the Battalion's chaplain, Major D.K. McConchie, for ethical reasons, decided to stay.6

Fig. 22: Flying the seriously wounded out.

5 Pat Shanahan, WAM 6.4, 28-29.
6 See K.T. Johnson, Oral History Programme, The Army Museum of Western Australia, 10 (Hereafter OHP). Shanahan, 28 (In that order).
According to Shanahan, "[t]here were two main groups of "escapees" from the 2/11th Battalion on the South Coast and they have two entirely different stories" to tell. There were those who got to the coast of Egypt in landing craft in commandeered Greek fishing boats and, there were those who were taken from the south coast of Crete by submarine.

One of the men from the first group was Private H. 'Harry' Richards, a farmer from Kojonup, W.A. who had, by 1 June, unearthed a landing craft from a cave, loaded it with a few provisions and with 50 others set sail for Egypt some 300 miles further south.

It was not an easy passage; by dawn next morning the boat was grounded on nearby Gardhos Island. There was little petrol or food left and if they were to go on the load had to be lightened. Ten brave men elected to stay while the remainder, with little more than full water bottles and some hope, set out again on the same night. Three days later and still with approximately 100 miles to go, the resourceful Richards improvised a sail from four blankets as soon as the petrol gave out and sailed or drifted towards their goal. By the 5th, however, the men had become very weak and were keeping themselves alive with hot drinks of margarine and cocoa and a large dose of faith.

On Sunday the 8th, extracts from Richards' log states that at 10 a.m. "church service was held ... Then at 1030 hrs ... I have sighted land but am afraid for the time being to announce this as it might be a trick of imagination, but no - as I creep nearer I distinguish land clearly." For his efforts on this voyage Richards received the DCM.\(^7\)

\(^7\) Shanahan, "Greece and Crete", WAM 6.5, Adenda File, 19.
\(^8\) For this information and quotation see Long (1953), 309 and n6.
Other men of the 2/11th Battalion who made their escape to Egypt in similar vessels were Corporal W.A. 'Bill' Mortimer, a Subiaco truck driver on his enlistment, and Sergeant S.L. 'Tich' Carroll. Mortimer's part in getting provisions for the journey on 2 June is particularly memorable. He (and Captain J.B. Fitzharding of the 2/3 Field Regiment), while under fire from a German motor-cycle patrol, swam and towed the boat-load of supplies away from the shore at Timbakion to safety at Ayia Galini.

It was no small feat, and, buoyed by this success, the landing craft left during the same night, but lost the officers in the party to a marauding Italian submarine. Included amongst those taken was 2/11th Battalion's RMO, Major 'Killer' Ryan. Private A.P. 'Bert' Skinner, who was there explained that:

> After working for about 48 hrs to shift an invasion barge off the beach, with the help of enemy gunfire, we finally succeeded with a complement of about 67 men comprised of Black Watch, Argyles, Air Force and thirteen of the 2/11th Bn we set out for Egypt. We weren't at sea very long, when we discovered a stowaway on board, a Palestinian soldier, who said he would prefer us to have thrown him overboard than to be left on the Island for the Germans... After a few more hours we were finally discovered by an Italian sub who took all our officers and ordered us back to CRETE.

> Naturally we ignored the order, and after another two days and nights landed at MERSA MATRUH where we were met by the South Africans who treated us like kings. Our rations for the voyage consisted of a handful of jelly beans for breakfast, and a tin of bully beef between three for tea.

> A word of praise for Pte J. McDermott, who hung over the stern of the barge and fixed the rudder whilst we were in transit - also BILL MORTIMER for the wonderful work he did.9

Neither the shots nor the rudder stopped these determined escapees.

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9 See Long (1953), 310 for details of the escape. Bert Skinner, WAM 6.5, Adenda File, 70, for the lengthy quotation.
them asking me what I was going to do, I said I couldn’t see what else we could do but surrender - ... and that a number decided to do the same.

At Bn HQ there was some debating on what to do ...

Anyway, the Germans continued to fire artillery around Bn HQ ... so, with others, I decided to move further away - and once I moved the impulse to keep going was too strong. I met Colin Bayly later in the day, together with a number of other men....

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Fig. 22: Flying the seriously wounded out.

5 Pat Shanahan, WAM 6.4, 28-29.
6 See K.T. Johnson, Oral History Programme, The Army Museum of Western Australia, 10 (Hereafter OHP). Shanahan, 28 (In that order).
quickly plugged the inch hole with a piece of the handle of a fishing spear and some bug.

I had made good progress under cover of darkness and the breeze from the north-east was freshening. For the first time in a fortnight I felt reasonably safe. This sense of security, however, was soon dashed as a rescue plane appeared and circled me. I draped myself in old bags, planted the tin hat and made as if I was heading for land. Evidently the gunner was not convinced or thought he'd make the old Greek move faster - for suddenly bullets hit the water, heading straight for me. I promptly dived overboard and broke all under water endurance records.

When I surfaced the plane had continued on its way and was nearly out of sight. This gave me several hours before he would return. I thought I might make the monastery, hide the boat and dig up a crew somewhere thereabouts. After making several attempts to land at what appeared to be quiet peaceful spots, only to be greeted with rifle shots - I gave them thumbs up and headed for the open sea in my jerry rigged fifteen footer.

After nine long, monotonous days and nights, punctuated with seasickness, extremes of temperature, hunger, fear, despair and lack of sleep, I made it. When I finally managed to convince myself that I really was somewhere in Egypt I sat down on my knees and actually kissed the much despised land of the Wags.

(WX953 Sgt S.L. CARROLL MM, discharged to RAN in May 1953.)

In contrast to the successful endeavour of some 2/11th soldiers to get away from Crete in landing-craft and fishing-boats, the organization for the rescue of the 'escapees' by submarine was conducted in a very different manner. As a result of Carroll's information the War Ministry had, by late in July, landed Lieutenant Commander Poole in an area near Ayia Galini from HMS Thresher. Among those rescued were Lieutenant George Greenway, formerly a station owner from the Murchison River, W.A., who was in Louch's advance party to Greece and had commandeered one of the Matilda Turks on Crete; Captain D.A.C. 'Archie' Jackson, a school teacher from Perth, W.A.; Corporal E.G. 'Geoff' Edwards, and

This extract is from S.L. "Tich" Carroll, "Escape from Crete" WAM 6.5, Adenda File, 1. See also Long (1953), 311-312 and n6.
his mate Private W. 'Bill' McCarrey of the 2/11th who with many British and other Australians were taken off from Limni Bay by this submarine. Sandover's rescue did not come till 20 August when the submarine Torbay took off 100 troops. In all "13 officers and 39 other ranks of the 2/11th ..." were rescued as a consequence of Carroll's initiative. His award of the MM was not misplaced.

Geoff Edwards' (a milk truck driver in Kalgoorlie before Hitler changed his job) recollections of this event are clear. In his book entitled The Road to Preveli he recalled that, just before 20 May, he and a few from the Carrier Platoon had been sent from Retimo to Suda Bay to collect some Bren Carriers and he was there when the storm broke. Not able to get back to the 2/11th Edwards and his mates formed part of Major-General Weston's composite company and at the time of the withdrawal fell back with it over the mountains to the evacuation point at Sfarkia. Not amongst those evacuated, but a survivor, he and the rest of his column were marched back to the prison camp at Skines, near Maleme, by the Germans.

Like many others with him all Edwards could think about was how to escape. Plans were made and remade until finally at dark on the night of the 11th he and McCarrey dug under the wire and got away into the hills. It was not easy to leave their mates, nor was it simple to save a few biscuits. But they did it and were sheltered and fed by the Cretan people until they reached a suitable hiding place in the area around Preveli Monastery. They stayed hidden for eight weeks, sleeping by day and moving by night until 28 July when, Edwards recalled:

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"Thresher" wound its way into LMINI Bay coming to within one hundred yards of the beach. A thick strong rope was soon connected to the sub to a large rock on the beach and the Captain sent word that he would pack us all in. We all took off our boots and most of our clothes. The strong swimmers swam out direct to the sub whilst the rest of us put on life jackets that had been sent ashore.12

Geoff Edwards left Crete a grateful man, richer from his experiences and with unforgettable memories. Years after his discharge from the army in 1946, he and his Sydney-born wife, Beryl, bought and named a piece of land in the shire of Margaret River, Prevelly Park, and on 4 June 1979, thirty years after the battle for Crete began, a little chapel was opened there. It has grown into a favourite holiday and revered spot for many West Australians and the Greek community from Perth, the South West and Albany districts. They meet and attend a church service in the Chapel each May (or thereabouts) to honour its origins.

During the pilgrimage to Greece and Crete made by survivors of the 2/11th Battalion in 1991 for the 50th anniversary of this battle, 'Geoff' again paid homage to the brave people of Crete. In a dedication ceremony at Prevali Monastery he turned on the tap of a water fountain he had donated so that passing travellers like the prisoners of war would not ever be in need of a drink again.13

Geoff Edwards has not been back since the dedication but his mate Bill McCarrey visited the site in 1994 and again in 1995. He reported back to his mate that the fountain was in good working order and that the Cretan people were, in his opinion, quite unchanged.

12 For the full story see Geoffrey Edwards, *The Road to Prevelly* (Armadale, W.A., 1989), 35-49. For the quotation, 49.
13 See Edwards, Chapter 4, 119-140. Also Appendix D for photos of the chapels.
Private Charles Hosking's account of the events following Sandoover's decision to surrender show that he was still in the line of fire and became a prisoner, but only for a matter of days. According to Long: "On 3rd July Captain Embrey of the 2/1st with Private Hosking, 2/11th and Gunner Cole, 2/3rd Field Regiment, escaped from Maleme camp and walked into the hills." In the following weeks many plans were made by the men to escape from the island and equally as many failed, until finally they parted. Hosking and Cole managed to keep one step ahead of the German patrols until they managed to capture a caique. "In this vessel," Long continued, "they sailed from Greece on 10th October and landed west of Mersa Matruh on the 17th, having been bombed by both German and British aircraft on the way." While both bombing parties, perhaps unsure of their prey, wanted to make a point just in case, Hosking was equally determined that they should not.

Crete might have been lost to the Allies but the war was not. Many ingenious, brave and determined men like Hoskins made spectacular escapes by crossing the 280 odd miles that lay between them and freedom in the Western Desert. Escaping is part of the regime of a daring, imaginative soldier and the 2/11th men were not backward in attempting this from then on, in Hitler's prisoner of war camps.

In the meantime some 400 of Richards, Mortimer, Carroll, Edwards, McCarrey and Hoskins' mates had become prisoners. Extracts from anecdotes of the men revealed the horror and consternation this situation roused in their minds.

14 Long (1953), 312-318; CO's Diary, WAM 11.0, 168-172, has a full account of Charles A. Hoskins voyage.
15 Long (1953), 313.
Amongst the 423 prisoners were Staff-Sergeant R.E. Ryan, his brother Private L.D. ‘Laurie’ Ryan, and Private A. ‘Alf’ Traub. Laurie Ryan’s section, which had as its saying “things were never so tough that we couldn’t raise a laugh”, had no cause to laugh on the morning of 30 May, when a stream of enemy bullets followed them into the hills. His story explained why:

There was practically no food and it took us three days to cross the island to Massara Bay east of Sfarkia. There we struck a large number of Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders in the same plight. Weak, battle weary and starving the majority of us were captured a few days later... For as every English speaking German was at pains to tell us - the war was over.17

The Germans marched the prisoners back from this bay to Heraklion and then to Suda Bay where most finished in a pitiful condition. The Germans had given them little food on the journey, and had stopped the Cretans from giving them anything to eat or drink: “they”, [the Cretans] he wrote, “will always have a foremost place in my memories of Crete.”18

To keep them from making any further attempts at escaping the Germans kept them on a starvation diet until they could get them out of Crete to the staging camp at Salonika. The memories Ryan and his mates had of this frightful time were of the utter misery they endured from body lice, and from boredom: they might be starving, their status as a soldier finished, their freedom lost, but their will to live was not. It was to be four years before Ryan was liberated by General Paton’s Americans on 1 May 1945.19

16 See Laurie Ryan’s account of this in WAM 6.5, 90.
17 L. Ryan, 91.
18 L. Ryan, 91.
19 L. Ryan, 91.
Ryan's brother, Ray Ryan from the 6th Division Pay Corp, fared no better. His diary records details of the trip he made across the mountains to Sfarkia during the withdrawal of General Vasey's force on 28 May. It was an unforgettable experience. Amongst the problems encountered was the hindering of their progress by frequent road-blocks when the MPs searched the convoy for hidden weapons. The Luftwaffe pursued them relentlessly, and in the total confusion of the journey some trucks ran off the road, men were killed and wounded, and the instructions on the position of their camp were lost.

Later, in a POW camp in Germany, Ray wrote (with a touch of wry humour) that when the order was received at the Pay Office "to evacuate and to make for Cape Sfarkia about 50 miles away where we would be taken off by
destroyers. I was undecided whether to carry shaving gear or not and finally decided not to", 20 because he expected to be back in Alexandria in the next few days. Soon he learned this was not to be. “Next morning, June 1st 1941”, he wrote:

I awoke to find white clothes and rage fluttering everywhere ... On inquiring as to what was up, I was set right back to be told H.Q. had gone during the night leaving orders to surrender & that the Germans would arrive in a few hours. 21

The importance of this is that they were left to fend for themselves. Private A. ‘Alf’ Traub later revealed his personal distress at the action of the Officer Corps at Sfarkia and the lack of interest shown after the war for the victims of their decision. “My addition,” he wrote, “will be hard to absorb or even imagine that such a thing [the POW incident] could have taken place and why with-held [sic] for so many years.” 22 This useful addition to the story of the 2/11th Battalion and the examples that follow will provide an appreciation of the prisoner of war in Germany for Australian military history.

Fig. 25: In the hands of the Germans, 1 June 1945.

20 Extract from a diary entitled: S/Sgt R.E. Ryan No24413 Stalag 383, 1941, 19 July 1941. (hereafter, Ryan, ‘Diary’). Note: The dates given for this period in 1941 are only for reference. They are not the dates on which the actual events occurred.
21 Ryan ‘Diary’, 12-13 August 1941.
22 Whiteaker, Interview, 26 May 1945.
The German-speaking Traub was amongst those of Sandover's force who found the attempt to slip away into the hills useless. There were just too many of them and in a sense, they were in the situation Shanahan had predicted: with only mountains behind where could they go? Instead of the hills and possible safety as Sandover had offered they were swiftly surrounded by German motor-cycle patrols and given another option. It was surrender or be shot. One English-speaking German then told them that they were prisoners of the Reich and ordered them to put their hands up and follow him. Minutes later they were herded into the aerodrome, where their pockets were unceremoniously emptied by the jubilant Germans. Left leaderless and not wanting to acknowledge what had happened to them the 2/11th men just stood, avoided looking at one another and wondered what to expect next: the outlook was bleak.

It was at this stage that Traub was called upon to negotiate on behalf of the prisoners. He told it as follows:

*I hope you understand that then, Major Sanderson and I were the only German speaking persons in the area with an unspecified number of officers and ranks which were leaving their positions before we were all captured. This made me the only interpreter over all the forces which were left in my immediate sector ... For myself (because of my religion) I was not concerned to what happened to me one way or another, however I simply cannot forget the incident because of the average rank and file's sorry looks.*

It was a bitter moment for the Australians to see their wounded mates taken away in trucks and the German prisoners they had fought so hard to gain, released. But there was to be no chance of any collaboration amongst the men. They were mustered into columns and rapidly marched in the direction of Retimo.

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23 See Alf Traub's Letter, WAM 6.4, 44.
Few were fit to be force-marched. Those who could not stand the pace just dropped by the roadside, but the stronger men doggedly kept their eyes down, and took a chance on picking up something to eat or being able to grab a drink. At noon they stopped at a creek for a drink and a rest, otherwise they just kept shuffling forward. It was dusk before they passed through Georgioupolis and 11.00 p.m. before they stopped for the night. There was no food or blankets and they slept, exhausted, huddled together on the ground under heavy guard of the Alpine troops (flown in as the airfields were overrun) instead of the paratroopers.

Such factors added to the responsibility faced by Traub. "All of these movements" (the muster and the marching) he explained, "had to be interpreted by myself to our men and they were most obedient in order to minimise any antagonism ...", as "things looked very grim for us." Under the circumstances the word 'grim' was too mild a term to describe the problems faced by the prisoners: for not only were they without food and water, but they were suspected of having mutilated the 'corpses of German paratroopers' during the invasion: a suspicion which Traub was required to sort out.

Traub's concern for the welfare of the men in this matter was helped by some luck. He called it a "miracle". It came in the form of a paratrooper, an ex-prisoner of the 2/11th, to whom Traub had previously given first-aid. During the interrogation the grateful trooper successfully interceded on Traub's behalf, assuring the officer of the integrity of the Australians and arranging for the men to be given some drinking water. In the light of the occasion it was no mean gesture and Traub was understandably grateful.24

24 For the quotations and information on this and the above paragraph, see Traub, 45.
Still suffering the effects of the last 24 hours, the men were roused at 3 a.m. next morning. Their stomachs were empty, their nerves were on edge, and the sight of the well-fed, grinning German troopers did nothing to ease their burden as they drew near to Suda Bay at 2 p.m. of 31 May. Suda Bay was a grim sight: the harbour was filled with wrecked and burning ships; the town was reduced to rubble, and lying where they had been shot were bodies of the Allied troops.

The sight of their fallen comrades sickened the men, and they were incensed to think that the Germans had buried only their own dead. The German guards seemed indifferent to the effect this had on the Australians and talked and laughed as they herded them into a compound, divided them into groups, and set them to work unloading food supplies on the wharf. How they managed to carry this out no man has ever wanted to remember. They do remember, however, that at dusk they were marched back to their 'pen' for the night, and fed on bully-beef, biscuits and tea. The ration was one tin (12 ozs) of bully to eight men, and many missed out. But the tea was a saviour. Their cook, it was said, (perhaps with some exaggeration) made half-a-pound of tea do one thousand men.\(^{25}\)

Dawn of 1 June saw them on the march again to a temporary camp at Maleme. Here they worked. Some repaired the aerodrome and the damaged aeroplanes, while others exhumed and reinterred the war dead "to their present resting place at the site of the Maleme War Memorial."\(^{26}\) The guards drove the men to a stand-still. Anyone who lagged or objected was shouted at and kicked into submission. Each day was to be a repetition of the one before. Conditions in the camp were unmentionable.

\(^{25}\) Writer's 'Notes' from an informal group discussion of ex-2/11th men, October 1994.
\(^{26}\) Trumb, 46-47.
There were few blankets and only one drinking well for some three thousand men. For washing the men used the filthy, stagnant water from a narrow waste-water drain.

In addition to the unhealthy state of habitation, food became scarce to a point where parties of prisoners were sent out with orders to ransack the countryside. For some, this broke the monotony of the days, and for others the thought of a possible break from the hard work boosted their morale. All listened avidly to accounts of what the lucky ‘tourists’ had seen, and where they had gone. In turn it helped the less physically spent fellows like Edwards and McCarrey (who had not fought at Retimo) to plan for their escape into the hills as mentioned earlier.

By the second week of their captivity the men were sick of the sight and the smell of burying the war dead. Ryan noted that the German graves were marked by
a "tin hat with the name on a board on each"\textsuperscript{27} to distinguish them from the Australian.

![Image](image_url)

\textbf{Fig. 27: The Australians put them to rest, June 1941.}

In addition the men had lost a lot of weight and were in a debilitated condition. Many had dysentery or malaria, and most had developed ulcerated sores. Others suffered from the harsh treatment they received at the hands of the guards following the camp break-outs, the successful escapes of some prisoners, and the sabotage of the German planes by the 2/11th repair gangs. They were still fighting the war even though not in the front line.

\begin{quote}
\textit{We there-after [wrote Traub in his characteristic idiom] were no longer trusted to assist in any repairs taking place at the aerodrome. A few days later we noticed the Para-tprs were being replaced by ordinary inf men who meted out some very harsh treatment, but before the Commandant departed, ... he ... told me we would be evacuating the Island of Crete within the next few days.}\textsuperscript{28}
\end{quote}

According to Ray Ryan: "About the end of June, we marched to Suda Bay & boarded the prison ship for Greece."\textsuperscript{29} The ship, an old Greek schooner, was so heavily escorted by destroyers, motor torpedo-boats and sea planes, that any

\begin{footnotes}
\item[27] Ryan, 'Diary', 11 September, 1941.
\item[28] Traub, 48.
\item[29] Ryan, 'Diary', 13 September, 1941.
\end{footnotes}
thought the men had of being rescued by the navy was lost. Instead of being outwardly active, plotting and planning to get away, the men resorted to other less likely eventualities: “We promptly substituted a new hope” wrote Ryan:

> that of Turkey entering the war & releasing us. Some chaps used to rise early to see if the Turks had arrived. These futile hopes seemed ridiculous... but at the time they were the only straws that enabled us to keep going from day to day.  

The need to grasp at straws in order to deny reality was necessary in the conditions. The ship was dirty and so overcrowded that it was difficult for the men to find room to sleep. It was very hot during the day and extremely cold at night. The effects of starvation, deliberately applied with malicious intent, caused not only lowered feeling of well-being amongst the prisoners, but it also prevented them from thinking rationally. The state of the once-fit young AIF soldiers at the end of the voyage was pitiful, but there was more to come - the battle for survival in “the hell camps of Salonika”.  

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31 See Traub, 49: (The rations for this 3-4 day voyage was half a loaf of bread and some sausage.) See also Ryan, ‘Diary’, 13 September, 1941.
32 L. Ryan, WAM 6.5, 90.
Chapter 7

The Hell Camps of Salonika

... but no one who was there will ever forget it. Ray Ryan

Apart from the Allied soldiers who were taken prisoner in northern Greece and moved through Yugoslavia to the prison camps in Germany’s occupied territories, all the prisoners from southern Greece and Crete went through the transit camps in Salonika. By the time the men from the 2/11th Battalion had arrived there late in June 1941, the camp held some 7,000 prisoners. In the following weeks this number had risen to over 12,000, and more were to come. Amongst the later-comers were the Australian Medical Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Leslie Le Souef, and the wounded Lieutenant Kenneth Tebbett Johnson, commonly referred to as ‘Katie’ by his army mates.

In his memoirs on his move from Pireaus to Salonika Johnson explained that during the march he and the other prisoners made to the transit camp he could see that things were not going to be easy. Some prisoners from his own platoon, for example, were working on the road wearing only underpants and without boots. What is more, he found the conditions of the camp, situated in the original Army Barracks on the outskirts of Salonika, were shocking: “Sewers”, he explained:

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1 Field, in Maughan (1987), 775.
were of the squat hole type, rations of poor quality and quantity and the buildings were riddled with bugs. Several Cypriot soldiers were shot dead while attempting to escape and were left draped over the perimeter wire for 24 hours as a deterrent to others.²

Weakened from his injury and still suffering the shock of his imprisonment, Johnson was led to further comment: “Fortunately we only remained in Salonika for 24 hours ...”³.

This is not to say that what might be in store for the prisoner of war in Germany must be better than at Salonika. It is to say that in exposing the prisoners to public view maximised the power of the Germans over the officers and minimised the ability of other ranks to think of themselves as a fighting unit.

Fig. 28: Lieutenant ‘Katie’ Johnson as the men knew him, June 1941.

² Johnson, OHP, 11. The Cypriot soldiers mentioned were also prisoners from Crete. Long (1953), 183.
³ Johnson, 11.
Failure by the Germans to provide for the most basic of human needs incited the prisoners from other ranks to also condemn the camp. Skillen had not a good word to say about it, while Corporal Reg King was reported as saying:

*We were hungry. And everyone grew weaker by the day. Everyone in this camp was infested with lice. They were that bad when an English soldier died, the coat he had been using as a pillow had that many lice in it that it actually moved on the floor.*

The problem was not that the prisoners were habitually dirty but that there were too many bodies, too few taps and no possibility of a change of clothes.

The conditions of the camps and the inhuman treatment the prisoners received was noticed by Le Souef who reported that: “The Camp, DULAG 183 had an unenviable reputation for the treatment of prisoners waiting transfer to Germany.”

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*Fig. 29: Lieutenant-Colonel Leslie Le Souef, Crete, May 1941.*

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4 Skillen, 17.
Born in January 1900, Dr Le Souef graduated in Medicine from the University of Melbourne in 1922. By 1939 Dr Le Souef was an established surgeon in Western Australia and in command of the 13th Field Ambulance, Western Command. A Fellow of both the British and Australasian Royal College of Surgeons he was commissioned to raise and train the 2/7th Field Ambulance for service with the 6th Division in the Middle East. His medical unit saw service in the Western Desert and in Greece and Crete and, like the 2/11th at Retimo, his command and the wounded in his care were amongst those left behind at Sfarkia and he therefore did not arrive at the Front Stalag until 3 October 1941.

Drawing on his experience of the “German Overlordship” on Crete, Le Souef concluded that the German authority only took notice of the Geneva Convention when it suited them. This was a serious indictment: these rights “that prisoners be treated with humanity and that they are within the power of the government not the individual that captures them. ... [and] that prisoners might be required to work for the benefit of the detaining government “according to their rank and condition” were central to the conduct of modern warfare.

Yet despite that Germany’s violation of these rights roused the ire of the Western World and became ultimately the basis for the Nuremberg trials, the experiences of the prisoners of war at the hands of Hitler’s Nazi Regime was not to become an integral part of Australian military history. Such discrimination within the content of Australian historiography was something the ex-prisoners of war were aware of but had kept silent about.

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7 Le Souef, 159.
It is not surprising therefore that when the ex-prisoners of war amongst the 50 West Australian veterans returned to Greece and Crete in 1991 for the 50th Anniversary of the battles fought against the Germans, those who had been prisoner approached this camp with some trepidation. This state of mind showed, with comments from the men that: "She hasn't changed a bit"\(^\text{10}\) did nothing to hide. After so long the effects of their incarceration in these old barracks and the inhumane treatment they received at the hands of the guards seemed remote and unreal. Even if they had thought of turning back the men's partners, the widows of their former mates and others, anxious to see over the camp they knew so little about, urged the veterans to tell them all about it. The men, with characteristic good humour, acted accordingly; each one prompted the other; details were sorted out and gradually the story of 'the hell camps of Salonika'\(^\text{11}\) were told as they slowly walked in and out of the buildings and around the compound. These stories made excellent sense of the happenings there and will thus be included with other sources (see Introduction) to complete the saga.

The barracks of No. 1 Transit Camp, which is normally the base for units of Greece's standing army, everyone saw consisted of two, two-storey rectangular wooden buildings, two out-buildings, the cook-house and the hospital, and the remnants of a once large stable. All these were covered in corrugated iron. Between the main buildings the sewer, carrying the drainage from the latrines and wash-house, ran into a large pit covered by a two-foot concrete slab before it discharged into a creek outside the fence.


\(^{11}\) Ryan, 91.
It was a feature the men had viewed eagerly in captivity as a potential escape route, but one as Gordon Williams was to explain later that they were to rue. As a general precaution the barracks compound of some two acres was enclosed by a six-foot fence, interlaced throughout its length and breadth with barbed wire.

'Bert' Skillen, who had been wounded on Crete and did not reach Salonika until August, listened and added a word or two to confirm what he had written in his diary for August 11, 1941:

*We arrived at Salonika last night, they marched us through the streets. Then the guards pulled all the dirty tricks they could think of this morning. It looks like it's going to be a rotten life.*

Skillen recalled that what had started off as a march the guards soon turned into a mock military parade. Shouting and gesturing in a show of power, they kicked and prodded the prisoners into line and attacked the Greeks if they interfered. This was in no way exceptional. Ray Ryan's description of the German's reaction to any show of concern by the local population was swift and brutal:

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12 Skillen, 17.
Some of the Greeks tried to sneak to us small articles of food, as apples & tomatoes. If detected the guards threw the fruit away & beat the Greeks with their rifles. Women were not exempt. One old woman was kicked over & a girl was dragged up to the Stalag with us, the guard locking her arms behind her while she cried in pain and fear all the way.¹⁴

Many examples of what Skillen meant by “dirty tricks” came to light. Of these the most galling to the men were the actions taken by the German guards to get personal details of their family. The rules of war were clear: the men need only give their name, army number and rank, yet as soon as they arrived they were paraded and given their ‘dog-tag’ (a disc with their prisoner of war number). Then the questions began, and while the men were not sophisticated enough all the time at inventing suitable answers, they did believe they made a fairly good job of it.

Fig. 31: A number explained it all.

¹⁴ Ray Ryan, 'Diary', 19 September 1941.
They were powerless to do anything about these parades and questioning became part of their daily routine. The men stood to attention for hours at a time. The Germans wanted the same information as that required by the International Red Cross to locate missing soldiers, but for an altogether different and more sinister reason. The men knew that any further information, such as a soldier's mother's maiden name, could be used by the Gestapo to apprehend or torture relatives, or even worse, death could happen if a Jewish connection was found.¹⁵

Few of the men knew much about other prisoners, but all knew that a chance remark might betray or put someone's life in jeopardy. As a result there was no friendly name-calling to denote nationality. They also knew that if their occupation became known they could be detailed into production work that would aid the enemy, indirectly helping to destroy the Allies' defences.

Cut off from contact with the outside world and deprived of the necessities to live with some dignity, the men agreed without exception that their existence in the camp was a 'rotten life'. "Food was at starvation level", according to Le Souef's personal narrative, due to the 1200 calorie rations instead of the 2400 calories prescribed by the Geneva Convention. "At one time" Le Souef added, "there were over 300 prisoners suffering from famine oedema or the effects of starvation".¹⁶ Little else could be expected when a day's ration could be:

A mug of tea at 5 or 6 o'clock in the morning, at eleven a mug of soup and an eighth of a loaf of bread, and at 5 o'clock three quarters of a biscuit and a mug of soup...¹⁷

¹² For the information in the last two paragraphs see Le Souef, 171 and Writer's Notes, 1991.
¹⁶ Le Souef, 172.
¹⁷ Skillen, 17.
Not all of the prisoners from the 2/11th Battalion in the camp managed to get even these rations. Some were just too weak to move. Each day they and thousands of others rose early in the hope of being amongst the lucky ones to get a mug of tea. "The cookhouse", according to Le Souef, "had earlier become a centre of racketeering," but it was short-lived. The sheer number of men made it impossible for a cook to show favouritism to individuals or groups. Nor did the German policy of starving the men to a point when the will to resist was lost, succeed. In their army training they had learned to live from day to day and when necessary from hour to hour and that is how it would remain.

It became clear from the veteran's reminiscences that a man's comfort within the camp depended largely upon his own ingenuity and resourcefulness. The men who found a spot indoors to sleep and who had a blanket were better off than those who 'bunked down' outside. Often a man and his mate would take turns in sharing the one blanket. But the misery of over-crowding, the unrelenting cold, the lack of water and the torment of lice was something they all suffered. After weeks of living under such conditions the soldiers were weak and often racked with dysentery. Fear took hold sometimes and fright became a night-time companion of many.

A typical day in the camp began routinely with delousing: before dressing each ragged garment was turned inside out and every seam and thread inspected. After this most of the men would 'scrounge around for a smoke' and try to get a wash before joining their working parties. While the jobs inside the compound

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18 Le Souef, 172.
usually meant cleaning or filling in the latrines there was always a chance that they might be detailed to work in the stables. This was a ‘plum’ job. It meant ‘mucking out’ but if the horses were given hay they had the straw to suck and, on some occasions, bran mash or grain to eat. In the matter of where or how they worked they had no choice, but they were always trying to avoid it. Conditions on the road gangs, as Johnson pointed out, were horrific.

From the beginning the Germans broke the Geneva Convention. No notice was taken of rank: non-commissioned officers were ordered out to work with the ranks thus removing any hope the men had of reforming into sections under an NCO. In addition no concern was shown by the guards for the welfare of any of their captives: little was thought about shooting or injuring a prisoner. In one particular incident two British soldiers were seriously wounded when a prowler guard tossed a hand grenade through an open window of a washroom because the men were there after curfew. Despite the seriousness of the offence, nothing was done to stop this barbaric behaviour or to punish the offender. Rather, when the Camp Commandant was told, he congratulated the German sergeant on his actions, adding “Heil Hitler!”

In July or August (the men were unsure of the month), some change for the better occurred. Three Greek Red Cross personnel appeared at the camp and spent some time in conference with the commandant on the welfare of the prisoners. No recognition was given to the visit but soon some green vegetables and the occasional carcass of a beast was added to the soup and parcels from the International Red Cross were distributed. Although there often was never enough to go round, for those in hospital suffering the effects of starvation the food parcels

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19 For the items cited in the last two paragraphs see Le Souef, 172-173.
were a life-saver. For the rest they were, in Skinner's words, "what we needed".

One of the 2/11th men in hospital who benefited from the contents of the Red Cross parcels was Ray Ryan. His diary entry has shown the extent of his relief when "[he] managed to get into hospital (such as it was) a/c of his sore throat ..." and how "[he] wished [he] was wounded so [he] could stay there indefinitely." Needless to say such an idea was aimless as three days later Ryan was moved to No. 2 Camp on the other side of Salonika, only to find the situation there was no better. In this move, Ryan again marched through Salonika. This time he wrote more than details of the guards' behaviour: he contrasted the things he noticed with the situation of the prisoners:

*It was strange to walk through the streets, where the people [were] shopping & sitting in cafes, the bright posters advertising American films (one was of Randolph Scott) & the trams made a strong contrast with our condition ... We passed the last war cemetery with thousands of crosses extending for miles. We wondered if we would increase the number; many chaps (about 2 a day) did die & were buried there in the next few months.*

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20 For the contents of British and Canadian parcels compared to the German ration see Appendix E.
21 Skinner, 17.
22 R. Ryan 'Diary', 18 September, 1941.
In retrospect, the veterans agreed that by mid July the shock of their captivity and the state of being prisoners of war appeared to have been absorbed. In place of the feeling of abject misery they were beginning to assess the position in which rumour again played a part. Ryan's diary account puts this feeling into perspective:

_We sent home our first POW cards from here. The rumours which daily flew about were fantastic. The Turks were marching on Salonika - the British had landed in Greece again - Canadians had landed in force at Corinth - Berlin bombèd to the ground - Hitler asked for peace & so on._

This hearsay unfortunately was unfounded. What was thought to be happening to the Allied force was in fact almost the opposite. On the day the paratroopers landed on Crete (20 May 1941), H.M.S. _Hood_ and other British capital ships had been sunk by the German battleship _Bismarck_ before the British navy found and destroyed her on the 27th. No further accounts of the Canadians (Kent Corps Troops) were given by Long after their destruction of the oil stocks in Salonika on 8 April 1941. Furthermore by 18 June Turkey had signed a friendship pact with Germany, and the Allies' new offensive against Rommel's army in the western Desert had been in operation for three days. Far from seeking peace, Germany had invaded Russia, on 22 June.²⁵

The men agreed that being a prisoner was a useless occupation for a soldier, but it had to be endured. "Men", Gordon Williams said as they clustered around the sewer manhole during the pilgrimage, "would do anything to get out of here by any means." He explained that on the day after he found out about the escape route mentioned earlier by Johnson:

²⁴ R. Ryan, "Diary", 22 September 1941.
²⁵ For the first two facts in the paragraph see Long (1953), 318 and 48 in that order; for dates see Long (1953) XIV.
I saw a huge crowd of Australians around this hole ... [where] some sort of two-up was in progress, no doubt to create a diversion. I enquired ... and they told me that people had been escaping down this sewer hole all the afternoon ...

Apparently one man, a Cypriot died in the narrower sewer and so a lot of people behind could not go forward and those behind had to back pedal .... Quite a lot did escape but when the German guards saw them coming out they started shooting up the pipeline and then hitting those with rifle butts as they came out from the starting end.26

![Fig.33](image)

Fig.33: Looking and recalling, Gordon Williams and a mate.

It was not clear to what extent the efforts of the Cypriots to escape the ‘Hell camps of Salonika’27 or the increased interest by the Australians in this way of escaping influenced the Germans’ next move, but Williams recorded:

*It was not long after this that the Germans decided to move all the prisoners in 1000 lot batches to different Stalags [soldiers’ camp] which necessitated at least a week long trip in cattle trucks to Germany.*28

Historically the Salonika episode at Dulag 183 or Transit Camp 1 is important for two major reasons. The first of these is that being deprived of basic human needs is an extremely effective weapon when applied by the enemy. The

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26 Williams, 23-24.
27 L. Ryan, WAM 6.5, 91.
28 Williams, 24.
impact of these on the body of the soldier is perhaps one of the most considerable of any non operational aspect of warfare. Before Salonika prisoners had lived from day to day hoping for a 'Dunkirk' style rescue, but once there they were unable to envisage how this could be achieved. The protracted starvation, beatings and other ill-treatments since Crete had proved that they could expect little else from now on. The second reason is that the resilience of the prisoners and the action of the International Red Cross had demonstrated an awareness of the intent of the German authorities. The refusal of the men to succumb to threats or excessive brutality and the readiness of the Greek Red Cross personnel to force their way into the camp showed the beginning of a sense of solidarity against the nature of the Nazi regime. By the time the prisoners left Salonika it seemed that they had reached a point where, while they were in no way adequately prepared to decide how to cope with being a prisoner, they could at least understand its implications. Subsequent events were to prove that this was indeed so.
Chapter 8

Salonika to Germany, August 1941

I wonder what is in front of us, and we have got no say. Ben Skillen

Germany's approach to prisoners of war is well illustrated by the stories of the 2/11th Battalion men's journey from the transit camps in Salonika to the Stalags in Hitler's Germany in August 1941. The attitude of the soldiers to their future prospect as they marched out of their camps contrasted sharply with that felt in April 1941. The urge to confront the enemy which had characterised the move from Egypt to Greece was gone, and there was no replaced optimism. Equally, no prisoner believed the war would be over by Christmas. Any hope that the soldiers had entertained from the rumours circulating that Hitler was seeking peace was dashed when Germany's eastward thrust into the Soviet Union became known. His aim to subdue Russia as quickly as possible so that the full weight of Germany’s armed forces could be turned against the British and their allies had become all too evident.

Whatever misgiving the prisoners had about their position as the rail trucks bore them to Hitler's domain, the thought that in the early days of the battle for Crete they had inflicted considerable damage on the enemy's elite troops and had delayed Hitler's plan of campaign was of some consolation but little else.
Still perplexed by being incarcerated, but confronting it head-on since their active war had ended, Skillen’s account of 25 August, 1941 epitomised the extent of their captivity:

*I have to go on parade before the big guys this morning. I am on the list to move out by train to Germany or somewhere. So I’m searched what for? They must be joking. We are given two loaves of bread and a tin of meat which is to last us to our destination, whatever that may be. They said Red Cross will supply soup on the way.*

![Fig. 34: Private B.A. Skillen: A Goldfields volunteer.](image)

Placed thus, and having no say in the matter, Skillen continued:

*So we leave Salonika at 10 o’clock at night. 33 men in an enclosed cattle truck, no toilet facilities or anything else. ... I wonder what is in front of us, and we have got no say.*

It was expedient for the German authorities to move as many prisoners as quickly as possible. The reason was that the sooner the men reached the stalags, the sooner they would be available to be drafted into working parties. In the manner described by Skillen, therefore, parties of approximately 1,000 prisoners at a time were

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1 Skillen, 17.
moved into exile from the transit camps in Salonika to the permanent camps in Germany's occupied territory.

Despite the feeling of some prisoners that it was a relief to be leaving Salonika, it soon became apparent that they could expect no respite from the horrendous treatment they had suffered since their capitulation some ten to twelve weeks previously. Apart from the paucity of food provided for the journey, only those on each truck possessing water bottles were able to share a drink with the others. Every mouthful had to be carefully measured and accounted for as their only hope of getting the bottles refilled was to hang them over the side at each stop in the hope the local people would be brave enough to take the bottles and fill them. Some were lucky and some missed out.

In addition to these torments there was hardly room to lie down. Attempts at taking turns to ease their aching bodies were useless as the hard floor and the jolting trucks made any rest impossible during the day, and the nights were a torture. Since the trip took many days the misery of the men was intense. Add to this the fact that their thread-bare clothes were no buffer against the bitterly cold winds or the freezing temperature as their trucks moved northwards over the mountains and it may be appreciated the state they were in. Even worse was the scarcity of water, the absence of sanitary buckets and the refusal of the guards to let the men out despite the train making frequent stops at small sidings so the south-bound German troop trains could pass through. Finally, the guards did not hesitate to point out to the prisoners that having to cope with dysentry was a sure way of stopping them from escaping. This was a matter the men could not ignore.
Determined not to give way in the face of such a predicament the men ignored the guards, used their tin helmets or their mess tins for disposing of the waste. But this too had its hazards. Apart from the constant need to empty the containers overboard, if the wind blew the contents back into the guards van they would come into the offending truck at the next stop and drag the suspect out. Roy (Blue) Heron's account of such an incident showed the feelings of the men when one of their mates was taken away. "We thought he was gone, but no, they took him into the guards' carriage and he stayed there for the rest of the journey cleaning up the guard." In this case 'cleaning up' not only entailed washing the guard's person, his clothes and cleaning his boots, but it also included being subjected to personal insults and intimidation. Others were not so lucky. They were thoroughly beaten with rifle butts before being returned to their trucks as an example to the others.

Fig. 35: An old Digger remembers, R.D. (Blue) Heron, 1991.

According to Skillen's diary entry on 28 August (his birthday), the prisoners reached Belgrade in Yugoslavia where: "the Red Cross saved us again, that soup was wonderful." However there were tensions. Roley Hoffman reported that the

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2 See Adam-Smith, 146.
3 Skillen, 18.
"International Red Cross officials almost had to force the Germans to let us out [and] [w]e were let out one truck at a time.\" The stay was so short for some that they had to decide between grabbing a bit to eat or cleaning themselves. Others, particularly the older men and the sick, were so disorientated that the Red Cross personnel had to coach them to take their meagre offering, repeating to them over and over again, \"Courage it won't be long.\" The remainder, the more healthy ones, driven by starvation and desperation, looked for a chance to escape, or looked out for their mates who couldn't stand without help. Ray Ryan was one of the latter.

![Staff Sergeant R.E. Ryan, before Salonika.](image)

A review of the information about this notorious train trip illustrates notably the treatment by the Germans and the compassion of the populace. From the time Ryan reached Salonika from Crete he had been sick. How sick he was is difficult to decide now, but the failure on the part of the Germans to provide drinking-water had not helped. When all this is realised, and also the fact that he kept dreaming of

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4 For the quotations in this paragraph see Roley Hoffman, \"Cruelty, Starvation in P.O.W. Camps,\" London Sat: n.d., WAM 1.0, 30.
the "different taps at home running with cold fresh water", the significance that at Belgrade the "M.O. with the German doctor" took him (and two others) off the train can be understood: "I don't think", he wrote later:

I was ever more thankful in my life to leave that crowded, hot miserable truck... in 10 minutes the ambulance brought me to a large military hospital where there were about 50 Aussies, Kiwis & English.

This summary indicates the extent of Ryan's gratitude at being so unexpectedly taken care of. He was to spend the next eight weeks of his imprisonment in this hospital. Conditions for both prisoners and civilians were so bad and German atrocities so commonplace, that Ryan couldn't believe that he was in a "real bed complete with sheets - even nurses." There he ate, walked and sat in the sun under the benevolent care of a Serbian doctor who persistently told the German medical officer that after such a winter they (the three of them) were too ill to travel. "Add to this that the Serbs, especially the women, were very good to us & would have done more for us if the Germans had let them" and you have a much healthier and happier Ryan. Many others besides Ryan were to be rescued in this fashion.

A second episode is told by Frank Peck. It concerned A.S. (Bluey) Dufall, who after they left Belgrade made his escape on the spur of the moment. It happened in this way. Once they reached the outskirts of Belgrade he exclaimed: "If a bloke escaped here these people would look after him", and promptly bashed the wire off the wall opening and squeezed through. This impromptu act gave Dufall the break he needed and urged by the others he clung to the window ledge until spotted by the guards as the train slowed at the next station. There, amidst a

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6 R. Ryan, 'Diary', 4-5 October, 1941.
6 R. Ryan, 'Diary', 5-7 October, 1941, Passim.
screech of brakes, and the firing of shots, 'Bluey' jumped. His freedom was short-lived - just two days, Peek learned when he met him later in Germany. Nevertheless Dufall thought it a worthwhile experience but at the railway station from where he had left so hurriedly, it was another matter. Peek and his company were lined up and questioned by a very angry commandant. He demanded to know who had helped in the escape, and he received, as Peek said, the standard reply from the prisoners of 'no one did.' This enraged him to a point where he threatened 'to shoot every fifth one of us,' wrote Peek:

_I was No 10 in the line, then he changed his mind and said he would shoot every 10th man. So I said to myself I am still dead meat. Anyway he changed his mind ... and the guards lined up each at the door and belted us into the truck and were like roaring maniacs while they bashed us for quite a while then the rest of the trip to Germany without anything to eat or drink..._'

Although Dufall's escape was an important morale-boosting event, the thought of the punishment one's mates might receive was considered by most prisoners before taking this vital step. No such doubts were expressed by the men in this case, and later in Stalag 383 the poet Laurie Ryan was inspired by such acts to write:

_We do not envy them their luck,_
_Escape was won by grit and pluck_
_And glad we are they missed the draft_
_And a thousand days of "Gefangemenschaft._

This verse is notable as evidence of the empathy generating amongst the prisoners at its best.

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1 For the information in the last two paragraphs see Frank Peek, _Letter_, WAM 5.2, 24; and confirmation of the treatment given as reprisals see Field in Maughan, 779.
2 For a copy of Ryan's poem entitled _A Thousand Days_, see Imelda Ryan, 154. _Gefangemenschaft_ is defined as 'to be in captivity.'
However generous in spirit the prisoners were toward Dufall and *The Escape Artist*, as Alfred Passfield called his published account of the eight attempts he made during his internment, the matter of their starvation and the cruelty of the guards during the train ride cannot be glossed over. It is important historically to take notice of what prisoners of war have to say like the diarist Roley Roffinan, who died on 3 August 1945 in England barely three months after his release from Stalag 383 in Germany have to say. In his opinion, “The 8-day journey from Salonika to a prison in Bavaria was the blackest thing the Germans did to us.” Nor did the Germans’ idea of “mass punishment” impress him.

Sergeant Roland L. Hoffman was born in Perth, Western Australia, on 26 January 1907. He was a Sydney journalist when he enlisted and became the diarist of the 16th Brigade. In the Middle East he edited the first army newspaper in any theatre of war during 1939-1945. Roley, as he was called by his mates at

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10 Hoffman, 30, for this quotation.
Hohenfels, was liberated on 22 April 1945 by the American army, transferred from Stalag 383 in Czechoslovakia by truck to Nuremberg and thence to England. No details are known of the event of his death, at the age of 36 years.

Fig. 38: Sergeant Roland L. Hoffman, the diarist, London 1945.

In a passage on “this talented journalist and ardent soldier”, Gavin Long had this to say:

*With a clarity rare amongst diarists [he] saw the men of whom he was one playing a part in a great drama, and he wrote for and sometimes addressed himself to “the historian” who would later read his words, and whose task he was consciously trying to make easier.*

It remains evident, however, that while Long respected and admired Hoffman’s account of the non-operational aspects of warfare, he still did not feel empowered to include this facet of warfare in the body of his histories, 1939-1945.

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11 Long (1952), 69, n4; 75, n5.
A scrutiny of Hoffman's assessment of the Salonika episode leads to the conclusion that in the use of the epithet 'blackest', he had selected a word to express the deadly and the sinister side of Nazism. The painful memory of being part of a period in history when the basic needs of man were persistently ignored was for him a symbol of the social injustice of the Nazi regime with its racial arrogance, and its tyrannization of the weak and the dispossessed. While a full discussion of A.H. Maslow's 'basic needs' concept, especially the order of priority for human satisfaction\textsuperscript{12} is impossible here, it is significant that the physiological needs, for adequate food, air, water, temperature control, elimination, rest and pain avoidance, as well as shelter and the protection from harm, were the needs the prisoners recalled most often as being inadequately met. In this respect, for the soldiers left behind at the evacuation point, this ordeal began on 1 June 1941 with a 60 mile return march from Sfarkia to the transit camp at Skines. For the men of the 2/1st and most of the 2/11th Battalions it was the ignominious trek from Retimo to the Maleme camp without food and little water. The Germans' forced-march technique signalled the beginning of the challenge for the prisoners to counter the dominance inherent in that which the Germans called their 'kultur'.\textsuperscript{13} This challenge was to occupy the attention of the 2/11th Battalion prisoners of war for the next four years.

\textsuperscript{12}For a practical approach to the use of Maslow's theory entitled Motivation and Personality, see Beverly Witter du Gas, Introduction to Patient Care, Philadelphia: Saunders, 1977, 14-16.

\textsuperscript{13}See Hoffman, 30, for his explanation of this term. Generally defined as: civilization as conceived by the Germans (with implications of racial arrogance and militarism).
Between July and September 1941 the 423 2/11th Battalion prisoners moved from the transit camps in Salonika to the Stalags in Nazi Germany. The route to these camps was by railroad through Yugoslavia before entering the countries occupied by Hitler's Nazi Regime. Apart from the action of the numerous escapees and the few who were repatriated home the remainder spent the next four years "[s]hivering", as the opening line of Laurie Ryan's poem entitled *A Thousand Days* says "in the Deutschland clime". In this context the act of shivering ranged from slight, quick movements of the whole body brought on by extreme cold and starvation to uncontrolled attacks generated by feelings of fear and horror. The reality was that prisoners shivered because their purpose as soldiers was lost. In addition, whether they attempted to escape, were employed in labouring or refused to work, their resolve to get the best of the enemy remained strong. The problem was not that the prisoners were individually vindictive or collectively motivated to retaliate, but that they were driven by starvation and desperation.

Their internment was spent in camps such as Stalag VIIA, Stalag XlIIC and Stalag VIIIB in the provinces of Germany.

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1 See front piece for layout of the Prisoner of War Camps in Germany, 1944.
Alfred Passfield was one of the prisoners from the 2/11th Battalion who arrived in August 1941 at Stalag VIIA, Moosburg, 25 miles north of Munich so desperate from the effects of starvation and the treatment received in Salonika that he could think of little else but escaping. Born and raised in the country in Western Australia, Passfield, aged 24, enlisted in the Australian Imperial Forces, on 11 November, 1939. The reasons he gave for becoming a soldier were firstly, "for adventure; secondly, to get away from a love affair that was becoming complicated; and thirdly, because I thought it was the right thing to do". In his own estimation he was a ‘bushy’ and frightened of girls so perhaps his affair was not as complicated as his explanation inferred. Despite the predicament he now found himself in, he had neither lost his taste for adventure nor his belief in making a “war effort” - albeit as a prisoner of war.  

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2 Passfield, Preface.
Stalag VIIA was established on a site in Moosburg 14 days after an order from the German high command of 22 September 1939 to build the camp. As a result, by 19 October, regardless of the fact that it had only a delousing station and 25 tents, it was occupied by approximately 1,000 Polish and Ukrainian prisoners. However, by March 1940 it was fully operational, huts having been added and a section reserved for hospital treatment. Hitler meant to be ready for every eventuality.

By June 1940, following the fall of France, the action in Greece and Crete and the invasion of Russia by Germany, the daily intake was 2,000. Soon more than 98,000 prisoners had gone through this Stammlager. The number was made up from 72 national groups and included 2,000 doctors and stretcher bearers as well as 170 military chaplains.³ These numbers epitomised the impact of the war more than any other.

³ The information in this paragraph is from Herbert Franz, Geschicte de Stadt Moosburg a.d.
"The main camp was spread out over an area of 3,500,000m², and was separated from the outer camp where the prisoners were registered." Apart from the information required by the International Red Cross, the routine was directed at determining the prisoners' work potential. Numbered discs, known as 'dog tags' were issued, and before the prisoners were allowed into a hut in the prison compound they were deloused and issued with fresh clothing. Those in need of hospital attention were admitted to the sick-bays where French and Polish doctors and medical assistants cared for them under the supervision of German doctors. It was the aim of the Germans to get the prisoners fit to work and to move them out into the Arbeiskommandos (work-camps), as soon as possible.

Apart from the need to recover from the debilitating effects of months of malnutrition and brutality since their enforced capitulation on Crete in June 1941, the most pressing problem facing the prisoners was the state of their clothes. At this stage no Australian uniforms were available from the Red Cross and the lack of identity, in a multi-national camp, was an added burden for the men to bear. The history of Stalag VIIA makes no reference to the part of the Red Cross in this regard. Instead it preferred to record that workshops were set up and Polish and French prisoners worked to repair clothes and shoes. This form of industry within the confines of the camp compound was not the only one. There were numerous carpentry shops, a smithy, a watchmaker, a repair shop for bicycles and electrical apparatus. In fact, aside from supplying the prisoners' food, stamlagers such as

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4 Nepf's report. Also see Appendix F for Lager plan.

5 See Nepf's report. According to this report the daily supply of food to Stalag VIIA was: 800kg bread, 2000kg meat, 30,000kg potatoes, 300kg salt and sugar, 4600kg assorted food-stuffs (soup
Stalag VIIA, were self-supporting, self-regulatory communities providing for the Germans an auxiliary labour-force and for the prisoners a 'man of confidence' to deal with their welfare, a non-commissioned officer in charge of discipline and administration and a democratically elected hut commander. The blatant disregard by the Nazi Regime to recognise and treat these soldiers with the respect their rank deserved was later to be the main factor that brought these men together in the NCO Camp, Stalag 383.

A further aspect of camp life affecting the prisoners was being drafted into work-camps. While the housing and the rations supplemented by food from the Red Cross parcels in most Arbeitskommandos were usually adequate, other conditions often were not. The 'stand-over' tactics of the guards and the longer hours the prisoners were expected to work were not only debilitating but were also resented. In addition, the medical orderly had few first-aid supplies and the seriously sick or wounded workers had to wait until a local doctor arrived, or they could be returned to their Stalags. Despite the less than satisfactory conditions most of the 2/11th Battalion prisoners of war endured them as Hitler’s labourers for the duration of the war, but on their own terms. By tacit agreement the prisoners ‘went slow’ on the job, sabotaged construction works, lost tools and planted rootless forest trees.

While the administration for the benefits of the prisoners within the British compound worked reasonably well there were other factors outside this control

additives, cabbage and other kinds of vegetables).

6 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 Prisoners of War Convention; its equivalent in the English text being 'representative'. See W. Wynne Mason, Prisoners of War, New Zealand: War History Branch, 1954, 87 NI for this and the accompanying information.


8 A term applied to the British and Commonwealth Compound inclusively.
which affected the prisoners. These included the misery of waiting for mail from home to arrive. It was not a new experience for the 2/11th Battalion men. In Egypt they had been dismayed to find their letters consigned to surface transport. On Greece and Crete and in Salonika communication of any sort had been non-existent, but to wait for a letter until 1942, as for example Alf Traub did, was socially intolerable. In a prisoner of war camp the need of the prisoner to be seen to be loved and to belong to someone was no less essential than in everyday life. In addition to the problem of the mail there was also the question of the rights of non-commissioned officers who, in contravention of the Geneva Convention, were often drafted into work camps. This practice was considered a slight and the men did not forget it.

Because of the lack of attention paid to prisoners of war historically, and this writer's contention that the experiences of prisoners during their captivity is military history, accounts of internment are presented deliberately from the point of view of the prisoners themselves from the 2/11th Battalion. The adjustment these men made from being combat soldiers to prisoners of the enemy determined the way each took in responding to their predicament. Three discernible categories emerge.

There were those like Gordon Williams who tolerated life as a replacement farm-labourer, but remained hostile to the labour system. There were the official and non-official NCO's who, like the Ryan brothers, chose to exercise their rights, not to be exploited by the Germans. Their value was that they rebelled against the bleak prospect of years of helpless captivity in an enemy country and set out to

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9 See Appendix G.
10 See Beaumont, 67.
withstand the pressure to submit to the tyranny of the Nazi system and to undermine that order. Finally there were the escapers. Passfield was one of these. He became so dedicated to continuing the fight behind the enemy's lines that in July 1942, during his second detention in Barrack 40, he began to tattoo the legend of his escapes onto his body. Such factors substantiate the need for a total history of Australians' part in the Second World War. The decision by Passfield to show his disregard for the Nazi authority in this manner not only gave his mates great satisfaction, but it also provided him with a means of "resting his mind" as he came to terms with the conditions of his sentence.

Without taking into account the standard prison fare of bread and water, Detention Barrack 40 in Stalag VIIA was the source of the greatest misery for the internee. The thorough search and intensive questioning the prisoners received from the camp Commandant and his cohorts was a shattering experience. All the personal items they possessed were removed, inspected and commented on to a point where any vestige of self-respect they had acquired was diminished. The prison cells were mostly crowded and there were no bunks and few blankets and the daily exercise of one hour did little to restore the increasing lassitude and despair that accompanied this form of deprivation. Yet after each escape Passfield returned to the main compound ready to plan for a future escape. Passfield had no intention of giving up.

It is impossible to deal with the full history of Passfield's exploits during his eight attempted escapes within the scope of this thesis. After some general

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11 Passfield, 32.
12 See Appendix H for Passfield's Map showing the routes taken on a number of these escapes.
observations about the fraternity of escapers in Germany, the extent of Passfield’s initiative as a sample of this group will be reviewed for, as he explained:

*Our aim was to create as much nuisance as possible by escaping, thus keeping Germans awake searching for us and guards occupied travelling around to escort us back when captured - with, of course, always the chance that we might clear the country and rejoin our units to fight again.*

While Passfield never managed to rejoin the 2/11th Battalion in action he was however awarded the Military Medal for his undoubted initiative. In the parlance of the army this would be described as being able to make the enemy conform to one’s movement.

The method of effecting this conformity not only produced amongst the prisoners their own ways of coping with escaping in a hostile country, but it is a good example of how the escape committee (headed by the ‘man of confidence’) was dedicated to planning escapes. The criteria for these would be escapees were based on the risks involved, the strength of the prisoners’ intent, and the need to be in action against the Nazi Regime. In this respect Passfield’s escapes were typical, but there were some differences. These arose from the constraints imposed by the character of the land and the nature of the people. Thus, in a heavily populated area such as Munich where 80,000 prisoners of war were working, it might be expected that some would be sympathetic to their plight. Or, in a border country where the people were mobile it was likely that an escapee in the crowd could take advantage of his anonymity to avoid detection. In short, escaping was a matter for the brave and the resourceful soldier.

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13 Passfield, Preface.
The process involved in becoming an escaper was thus a mixture of intent, land structure, people and day to day happening. The implications were clear. It was a reminder that escaping from the enemy was a duty of a soldier; a point not lost on Passfield who, in Salonika, had observed the attempted escapes of the Cypriots and was prepared to take a chance.

It also helps to understand how soldiers coped with being prisoners of war, as planning an escape was such a time-consuming, detailed exercise that it directed the minds of the prisoner from thinking about food and the comfort of home. Thus instead of becoming an aberrant, outward manifestation of some lawless activity, escaping for the prisoner of war became an accepted part of non-operational warfare.

Although the severe winter of 1941-1942 had prevented Passfield from making any attempt to escape before the onset of spring in March 1942\(^{15}\) it had not stopped him from benefiting from this period. Not only was he able to build up his strength from the ready supply of Red Cross parcels but he also was able to grow a beard and, in preparation for making a break, to gradually assume the guise of an older man. This ploy and the good-natured banter from the men gave him the courage he needed to try out the ruse on the local population. The opportunity for him to do this came during Christmas 1941 when a snow shovelling exercise in the streets of Moosburg attracted public attention.

Passfield was surprised to find the ordinary German acting favourably to his plight as a seemingly older prisoner doing the same work as his younger mates. On two occasions he was singled out for special attention. One woman openly helped

\(^{15}\) Passfield, 12-13 passim. Note the range and amount of food hoarded for the escape.
to adjust his work-load, and then in defiance of the guard proceeded to leave him biscuits each day, while another woman took off her gloves as she passed and shoved them into his hands. Neither said a word, but these simple acts by members of a common adversary was the spur Passfield needed. He could now take another step towards escaping.

In the next two months he did a number of things, each of which when examined would have required a certain degree of pluck and foresight. These included saving three weeks' supply of food from his Red Cross parcels, and swapping his cigarette supply for a rucksack, map and compass with a civilian worker who agreed to hide them under the seat of his truck. In addition, Passfield procured a set of old, extremely dirty workman's clothes at the plant for use when he decided to escape. Finding a suitable route from Munich to Lake Constance in Switzerland, and getting away unseen from the camp were problems that were unexpectedly solved when, as he explained:

*Everything played into my hands nicely. A few weeks before I reckoned on going, about two hundred and fifty of us were taken to a new camp, much nearer our work. In fact, we walked to our employment instead of going by tram, as before. As it was about two miles, I got into good walking condition. It also gave me a chance to pick out a route to go by when I got away.*

Furthermore:

*We were then going to work in daylight, so I did not like my chances of getting clear of the works without being seen... But once again things turned up trumps. We were told to do extra working time, which would necessitate starting earlier; and that meant going to work in the dark. I could have cheered, while others could have wept.*

While circumstances provided the conditions favourable to Passfield's aim he still had to take the final steps towards achieving his goal. In this he was

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16 Passfield, 13-14.  
17 Passfield, 14.
methodical. Firstly, in contravention of the established routine that the men in the work-party stayed together with the guard until they were inside the factory building, Passfield broke away as soon as they were inside the gate and went alone to the lavatory. Next he took his workmates into his confidence, explaining in detail what he planned to do, and asked for their support. The men agreed that Passfield’s idea of telling the foreman on the day before he intended to escape that he expected to see the dentist next day was a good one, and that one of his mates would tell the guard the same story. This was a clear indication that the men supported him whole-heartedly.

Fig. 41: Arriving for work.

As a result Passfield had good reason to be satisfied with his preparation for this escape. Everything seemed to be running in his favour. “The guard had got used to my habit”, he wrote

so that gave me about five minutes to make my way to where my food was hidden, undress, put on the old civilian clothes on top of my khaki (I had put them underneath in the morning), gather up my rucksack of food, and my broom-handle walking stick, slip across the rear of the yard, where the drums were piled against the fence, clamber over, and so away.¹⁸

¹⁸ Passfield, 14.
Passfield's elation at making his getaway so effortlessly was soon dispelled as the need to get clear of the camp through Moosburg and on his way to Lake Constance on the border of Switzerland now occupied his mind. But in this he had to be cautious, because within the first ten minutes of making his break he came face to face with the second batch of the “boys” coming in to the factory.

The initiative he took on this occasion was noteworthy. He put to the test his ‘old man’ image by deciding:

_It was useless trying to get off the road. So, with head down and a very pronounced stoop, I shuffled along with my walking stick, an old Bavarian pipe stuck into my mouth, and hoped for the best. My luck held: they went past without the least sign of recognition._

During the remainder of the 29th Passfield walked, without mishap, some 30 miles in a south-westerly direction toward the Swiss border, passing through the town of Sternberg and on into the countryside. In the process he met French prisoners of war farm-workers who, to his surprise, were unguarded and on parole. At this stage he had learned two valuable lessons.

One was that he had started too early in the spring as the countryside, unlike Munich (where the heat of the factories caused a much earlier thaw), was still covered in heavy snow. The other was that at the beginning of a ‘break’ an escaper is so keyed up that eating becomes secondary to getting away. The rations he had so diligently saved were not however wasted. He gave about a third of them to one of the French workers and in the process marvelled that two Allied soldiers from different nations were talking in the language of the enemy.

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19 Passfield, 15.

20 Under the Geneva Convention this was an officer’s privilege: based on the honour system. See Everyman’s Encyclopaedia, 4th Ed., 233.
The following day for Passfield was not without incidents. Apart from being stiff and sore from spending a miserably cold night in a small hayshed, his feet were so sore that he could barely walk. Passfield solved his dilemma by acquiring a pushbike. This act provided Passfield with the freedom he believed was his right, but in the end was to be his downfall. In fact he gained so much pleasure from the speed he travelled at that he overlooked the turn-off to Lake Constance at Skongau and passed through Wellheim before he noticed it. But that was not the end of it. In his haste to make up for lost time Passfield forgot not only to put his pipe in his mouth, but he also pedalled far too swiftly for an old man and was soon halted by a policeman. Being a realist, Passfield surrendered - again.

It was a discouraging end to something that had begun so well, yet Passfield was not downhearted. In his view certain things caused his downfall. ‘Forgetting his pipe’ and ‘pedalling too fast’ for an old man were his first mistakes. The other,
the need to say 'Heil Hitler', or at least to raise an arm in salute as was customary when encountering officials in public was probably that which made him conspicuous. Whether or not Passfield's action of grinning and pushing on when the policeman called to him to halt, rather than responding with the 'Heil Hitler' salutation, caused his downfall, Passfield couldn't say, but having been apprehended he had no intention of denying his identity. His main purpose of keeping the German guards "travelling around to escort us back when captured" had been achieved. And predictably, when questioned he didn't 'beat about the bush', but came straight to the point. In reply, for example, to questions of:

"Why did you escape?" they always got the answer "Because it is my duty". Then they would ask "And you would fight us again?" Here I would use one of their favourite sayings: "Dienst ist dient" - "Duty is duty". Nearly always they would just nod, possibly more in admiration than anything else. To a true German, duty was indeed duty; it was impressed upon them from their school days onwards.

A survey of Passfield's escape has confirmed his contention that the numerous attempts he made were more significant than the desire for recognition. If considered from the miles covered, the places involved and the time needed for the German authorities to seek out, apprehend and return a prisoner to his Stalag, escaping may fairly be judged as a studied, well-organised form of 'war effort' by the captive soldier, thus ensuring that German camp administrators never lost sight of the fact that they were dealing with British military personnel. In 1942, 1943 and 1944 Passfield the Escape Artist made eight attempts at escaping, all were unsuccessful, but in his view every one was worth the risk.

21 Passfield, Preface.
22 Passfield, 19.
If the incident of becoming a prisoner of war on Crete brought the men of the 2/11th Battalion to the brink of starvation and despair, their response to internment in Germany was of a different order. In a sense the desire to rid themselves of the idea of being a prisoner by taking action against the Nazi Regime was their first thought. Aided in this by the support the administrative system within the British compound gave they were able to act according to their needs. The options that evolved were to make a life of escaping as Passfield did; to decide to work in a desultory fashion in Hitler's labour camp; or, if NCO's to exercise their rights not to work. The chapters to come cover the prisoners of war operating out of work camps and others in non-working camps according to their needs.
Chapter 10

Incarceration, German Style

"Come on you Australian--s, get into sevens. We'll teach you". W.G. Ryan

"Come on you Australian--s, get into sevens. We'll teach you".¹ was the welcome 
Private W.G. Ryan's party received on their arrival at Stalag VIIA, Moosburg from 
Salonika. On the strength of what they had learned from the behaviour of the 
Germans since Crete, such an attitude meant little. It was sufficient to be 
exchanging their train-truck accommodation for a permanent camp. The manner of 
their induction to Stalag VIIA was no less unwelcoming. Not surprising: 
"Searching interrogation and allotment of quarters occupied the first days", says 
Ryan. But the second day's treatment was not so rigorous. After the regulation 
head shave and delousing they were welcomed by their contemporaries from the 
battle in France. The news of the war from the front given to them by the British 
may not have been encouraging, but being able to exchange commonplace talk 
was.

The French, unable to make themselves immediately understood and wanting 
desperately to help, pressed biscuits and cigarettes into their hands, both of which 
were like manna to the starving men. But it was the cigarettes that cheered them 
most. After being so long without mercy or consideration from the enemy the give

¹ WX. 1647 (W.G. Ryan), "Rambling with the P.B.I.'s," WAM 8.0, 45. (Hereafter W.G. Ryan). 
This Ryan is not to be confused with the 'poet' Laurie Ryan and his brother Ray Ryan, H.Q. 
Company, 6th Division.
and take involved in being offered a cigarette made them feel human again. In Ryan’s view “no one can tell an ex-POW that tobacco is not a necessity in moments of dire need.” It was the spirit in which it was done rather than the act that counted.

Fig. 43: The sharing and caring French.

As to the living quarters, Ryan commented:

Each barrack quartered two hundred and twelve men and three tiered bunks put the top occupants within touch of the roof. Windows were closed at night and the air was foul. Men suffered from all types of stomach complaints due to the rations, cabbage soup and boiled potatoes. All [of us] were in a low physical condition, probably having lost on the average, four stone in weight since capitulation. Our clothing was in a sad state of disrepair and the worst cases were issued with remnants of French uniforms.

The lack of concern by the Germans for the physical and mental welfare of the prisoners was important to the relationship between the two. When Ryan was told that they would be “in the country for years, that the Russians... [were] being crushed and our Australian spirit of independence would not serve us in any way under our new masters,” he could not help but cynically comment that this was: “A

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2 W.G. Ryan, 45.
3 W.G. Ryan, 45.
pleasant outlook indeed". Knowing there was nothing to be gained from resisting the Nazi Regime the prisoners adapted their experience of army communal life to the circumstances of stalag life and most never lost their resolve to be free of the German yoke. Many found having an address and being able to write home a relief, even the idea of working for the hated ‘Hun’ became easier to bear.

The men were drafted into work parties corresponding to their normal occupation. R.D. (Blue) Heron, a red-head and a carpenter, was a typical 2/11th Battalion soldier. Tough and direct in his opinions with an ability to adjust himself to the job in hand, Heron was sent to Munich and Pensberg. There he worked at pulling “all the bells out of the churches because”, as he explained, “Hitler wanted the metal. Heron made no actual judgement on the act of debasing God’s house, simply commenting on the work in hand: “The smallest was about 2 inches high and the biggest weighed twenty tons”, thus distancing himself from the deed and making the most of his internment arrangements. In these Heron and his party, were lucky. In place of barrack accommodation they stayed in a Pensberg hotel and were on their honour not to escape. This style of living suited Heron. For the time being he was satisfied, the town was beautiful and they were being well-treated.

Fig. 44: Munich as Heron knew it.

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4 W.G. Ryan, 45.
5 See Adam-Smith, 145-146; Writer’s Notes on ‘Blue’ Heron.
After Salonika, to be free and treated as a human being were luxuries to Heron and ones he did not want to lose. He stayed there coping in his own way with captivity until the Allied bombing of Munich late in 1943 forced the German authorities to move the prisoners out of this area to Stalag VIIIB, in Lamsdorf. This move brought Heron into contact with other 2/11th men who had gone directly into this camp from Salonika.

Lamsdorf base camp, Stalag VIIIB, Heron was soon to learn, had little to recommend it. Skillen’s graphic day-by-day summary of the first week his mates spent there puts the whole episode into perspective. “September 2, 1941”, he wrote:

Arrived at our destination. All in a bad state of health. This camp is called Stalag VIIIB Lamsdorf. We are in isolation barracks. The boys who were here already made us a big stew. Our fellows off the train, who had not had any food for several days, would not stop eating, so they became very ill. 

And while Skillen, himself, did not become immediately ill, he had his worries. By the second day he was both extremely cold yet humbly grateful to have a Red Cross parcel to himself and to know that there would be one each week that he had decided that: “Life will be good after all”. Which it was eventually but from the 3rd to Sunday the 7th he too was feeling sick. On Monday the 8th, however, his health had improved and he reported.

We are being deloused. It was good to have a hot shower. I’ve been registered so now I am P.O.W. 22938. We have lots of doubts, but nothing we can do yet. 

Acknowledging to himself that he and his mates were subject to the needs of the German authorities made Skillen aware that he had no option but to work for

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6 Skillen, 18-19.
7 For the information and quotes see Skillen, 19.
them. The prospect of this brought him little joy, but he wasn’t alone and he was
going to make the most of it.

By 16 September 1941 Skillen was at work and ill-equipped physically to do
the job. In the first week he worked as a factory hand, and at digging drains. “They
keep us moving”, he says:

and we’re all soft and tuckered out. Be glad when this job is finished.
Draining got to be 15 foot at the deep end, they are rushing to get the
job done. They stand over us ready to bash us with the rifle butt. Nice
mob.\(^8\)

The ‘stand-over’ tactics of the German guards were a constant issue. Not satisfied
at treating the prisoners brutally, they wanted to destroy them mentally.
Consequently, they thought nothing of demeaning the efforts of the Allies while
handing out the Nazi propaganda paper called The Camp\(^9\) filled with stories of the
German victories. Such behaviour was cowardly and uncalled for.

The men had cause to feel resentful towards a regimen that dealt with them
so impersonally and contributed to their ill-health. Some of Skillen’s responses
reflect the general attitude of the men to the guards that perpetuated this system.

On 3 October 1941, he recorded:

Well the boys are in trouble with the guards, and they are sticking the
dirt in. They certainly make us work. We are hoping the planes are
giving them hell. Glad when news comes that this stink is over.

The misery Skillen experienced working for Hitler continued. By the 6th he had
worked at a back-breaking job on the railway and at picking potatoes. Even worse
was the fact that he and his party hadn’t had a bath for a month. As a result they

\(^8\) Skillen, 19-20.

\(^9\) Mason, 102, 271. Under Goebbels’ propaganda ministry, this four page newspaper, printed in
English, was used to extol Germany’s superiority over the Western world and to denigrate in the
first instance the influence of Jewry on the Western world, and in the second the Russians in the
eyes of their own people.
had, what he called "a go in with them this morning, and now" he continued, "we
know why everyone hates them." Sharing one's hate with others, probably helped
them to put up with the wretchedness, but the shortcoming in their situation still
continued to distress them. "We", explained Skillen:

are feeling the shortness of food. We are working fairly hard. Rainy
weather has started and we have only the clothes we stand up in. I
don't think I can stand the winter. This is Sunday and the first snow
storm of the year.

Aside from always feeling cold, other complaints of Skillen's included being short
of tucker and being deprived of their Red Cross parcels. "They're rotten B's", he
wrote. "A man knows what trouble is since he has been a P.O.W".10

The awareness of the power the guards had over their physical and mental
well-being made the prisoners all the more determined to withstand the impact of
Goebbels' propaganda ministry. But until the northern winter of 1941-1942 had
shown that the Germans were no match for the Russians in winter campaigning the
men could do little else but listen. The "British and Russian reverses", W.G. Ryan
noted, "always gave them [the German civilian or guard] intense satisfaction and
they did not forget to remind us of the might of their armed forces".11 Skillen was
so incensed by this form of psychological warfare, or "sticking the dirt in", as he
called it that he wrote: "There is not a man amongst us who doesn't hate them and
would like to murder them".12 Any attempt the prisoners might have to counter the
depression this sort of harassment caused was dashed when Japan attacked in the
Pacific. Ryan wrote gloomily: "The German papers were full of it and we heard

10 The three quotations in this paragraph are in Skillen, 20-21.
11 W.G. Ryan, 51.
12 Skillen, 20-21.
Haw-Haw's broadcast each morning reiterated [sic] the approaching doom of
Australia". Thus, cut off from the world, and subjected to censorship, it is not
surprising that elements derived from the prisoner of war environment found poetic
expression in Ryan's *A Thousand Days*:

*But they shall never know the curse*
*Of hunger, thirst, despair and worse,*
*We did it tough in many ways,*
*The prelude to our thousand days.*

*Japan had deemed the moment ripe*
*At Southern shores her blow to strike,*
*While helpless, mute, we watched the fight,*
*Our thousand days dropped out of sight.*

*It was to us a bitter gall*
*To hear our homeland clarion call,*
*Our thoughts were free, our bodies chained*
*That thousand days it yet remained.*

Apart from the shortage of food, the coldness of the weather and the state of
the prisoners' clothes, other problems encountered in the first twelve months
concerned the activities of daily living. The presence of lice and the absence of
washing facilities, the irregular supply of cigarettes, no boots and little mail all
served to create a sense of social dislocation. One consequence of the latter was
that while Skillen, working out of the camp at Moosburg, felt a "load had been
lifted off his mind" when a letter arrived for him on 5 December 1941. Ray Ryan
at Lamsdorf was not so optimistic. Not only did he not receive his first letter from
home until March 1942 but it also contained the shattering news that his father had
died in July 1941 shortly after the 2/11th men had been captured on Crete. His

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13 R. Ryan's 'Diary', 26 October, 1941; Haw-Haw refers to the British subject working for the
enemy under the radio name of 'Lord Haw-Haw'.
14 For these verses, see transcript in R. Ryan's 'Diary', 6, 7-8 April 1942; Imelda Ryan, 154.
15 Skillen, 22.
premonition that the two events may have been connected, prompted him to write: “We” (he had only just found out his brother Laurie was in the same camp) “were in the worst place for such news, & it seemed doubly unfortunate that both occurrences should come together”.

Another consequence was the effect of being without boots. On Crete to be less than adequately ‘shod’ was one thing the men most feared. Footwear was an indispensable part of a soldier’s armour. It protected him from the harmful factor in the environment and secured him against real and imagined dangers. The Germans’ persistence in keeping control over the Red Cross relief consignments of British battle dress and boots as part of their issue, effectively kept from the prisoners the vital symbol of identity they needed to retain their well-being and their self-esteem. Passfield’s comment on this matter was explicit. It concerned the return journey he made under guard to Stalag VIIA with RAF Sergeant Jock, from his second attempt to escape in July 1942. “The journey back was not a happy one”, he explained:

16 Ryan ‘Diary’, 28-29 March 1941.
Not that I worried about being caught - there would always be another time - but I felt very self-conscious in my bare feet... Most could not understand the complete differences between Jock and me. He was quite well dressed... with a new pair of English military boots; and then there was me, ... [in] queer looking clothes and bare feet. Some spectators, ... questioned the guard, ... Thank goodness he was not able to tell them I was an Australian!  

Not being seen to be an Australian and to be correctly dressed as a soldier was not something that those of the 2/11th Battalion who became farm labourers at Stalag XIIIIC, Hammelberg saw as an issue. This camp, 50 miles east of Frankfurt-on-Main in Bavaria, was:

_Certainly one of the least bad in Germany, at the least its occupants are not exposed to bombing, and the majority of the detachments are doing agricultural work or are in small industries._

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**Fig. 46: Another task for the 'Man of Confidence'.**

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17 Passfield, 30-31.
19 Photo Album, Stalag XIIIIC, WAM, 10.0, n.p.
Add to this report that the ‘man of confidence’ was as active here as elsewhere, but had time for some niceties of life, like making Christmas cards, to help make life more bearable and normal as most prisoners would have been enjoying in their own homes. Christmas aside, these circumstances, while not exactly attractive, favoured prisoners like Gordon Williams who decided to work out his time as Hitler’s guest. He had watched the diabolical sewer incident in Salonika and wanted nothing more of it.20 His story has a straightforward account of the places, the people and the things he encountered from late 1941 to early 1945.

According to Williams he was amongst the first batch of prisoners from Crete to leave Salonika for Germany arriving there sometime in September. In describing the journey he recalled with some disquiet his physical and mental state. When he stood up in the truck to ease the weight off his body he was so weak he blacked-out and had to be helped. He didn’t remember what they did about water, but he did say that when they were let out at Belgrade he was so thirsty he snatched up handfuls of grass to chew.21

The adage of the prisoners of war that ‘food sent the morale up and lack of it caused despondency’ was borne out by Williams in his description of their arrival at Hammelburg railway station:

> We were met by French prisoners of war from Stalag XIIIC nearby and they had hot coppers of hot meat ... it was the best meal we had since we left Crete. This really bucked us up considerably... . We had to march along a road up a steep incline ... and those of us who had enough energy left jumped up and retrieved apples from the trees [alongside] which helped to relieve the pangs of hunger.22

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20 Williams, 23.
22 Williams, 24.
But Williams was not one of those leaping for joy or apples. Salonika and the trip had stripped him of his energy and his boots. Having gone ‘barefooted’ since the night of the sewer episode his need was urgent, and the German guards complied. He was given a “pair of clogs which”, he explained, “had leather uppers and wooden soles, ... [and were worn] with a square piece of cloth which you wrapped around your feet”. This form of footwear had little appeal for the men and while Williams’ laconic comment that it was “fortunate” that it wasn’t “the middle of winter” others thought differently. The poet Ryan found them useful for an ‘Ode’ and, the leather parts useful for a brew of tea. Levity was often the only retreat the prisoners had from the homesickness that arose on such occasions.

Williams was unashamedly grateful for being off the train and settled into a camp in Germany. “Everything”, in his view, “was a big improvement to what we had previously had and consequently morale was higher”. That this change in direction by the Germans was consistent with their aim to get the prisoners healthy and out to work was not a concern. Rather he saw it as a means to his salvation: to be drafted to work would free him from the confines of the barbed wire, the rifle butt treatment and the loss of identity.

Because Williams had been out of the work-force for so long his experience at the Arbeitskommando in the last two months of 1941 was one of mixed fortune. For a start he found working in a road gang near the village of Oberbech

23 For this and the previous quotation see Williams, 24.
24 See Imelda Ryan, 160.
25 Williams, 25.
not only boring but the rations there were so poor that he was forced to make up the shortfall by stealing some apples and root vegetables.

Feeling anxious about his possible fate at the hands of the Germans, Williams did little better at his next job as a farm-hand at Landendorf. Here to impress the farmer he worked so hard and so fast that after the first day he was returned to the pool as being unsatisfactory only to be sent to another farm in nearby Eurdoff town. While he was desperate to be settled he had however not yet come to terms with himself. “This man’s name”, wrote Williams:

*was Seufert and he was an old man and there was just he and his wife. With these farming jobs you worked from daylight to dark with the farmer and then returned to a small building in the middle of the village under guard. The farmer was responsible for feeding you and in most cases you ate the same food as he did so these jobs in that regard would be the pick of most of the available work. Once again it was largely luck who you got, ... I did not get on well with this man I was working for and as winter was approaching I thought it would be best if I toughed it out until winter was gone.*

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26 Williams, 25.
To make matters worse for Williams, the winter of 1941 was the coldest in Germany for fifty years. "The temperature", according to W.G. Ryan, "fell to 40 degrees below centigrade".27

Williams' decision to remain with Seufert was under the circumstances a wise one until an incident changed his position from one of temporary security to one of disaster.

Early in 1942 during a melee at the work barracks between the guard and a prisoner over getting out of bed, Williams was wounded in the foot.28 As a result, he was sent to the local gaol in Hammelburg for a month, before being returned to the main camp at Stalag XIIIIC. The month Williams spent as a common felon in the local gaol was a frightening experience. What worried him most was that his position as a farm labourer would be lost. His concern was unfounded as was his general state of anxiety, for by the time he got to doing forestry work at Grasendorf, his fears were over. "[U]s Australians", he remarked:

were all working together with German civilians as overseers and bosses and we come home each evening to a building with guards at night. We had a little bit of freedom sometimes for a walk in the village. By this time through the International Red Cross we had all been issued with British uniforms and boots which was a godsend and thoroughly appreciated.29

A verdict in direct contrast to that which he had felt on Crete. However the business of the issue of the Red Cross food and clothes parcels particularly remained contentious. Had sufficient supplies of both been on hand earlier, there is little doubt that the unfortunate plight of the prisoners would have been different.

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27 W.G. Ryan, 47.
28 Williams, 25. The prisoner involved was Frank Bellchambers, 2/7th Battalion, Victoria.
29 Williams, 25-26.
By the end of 1942 Williams' job at Grasendorf had finished and after another brief stay in the main camp he was in a group of 12 sent to a new camp on the railway line at Shonau, between Bad Neustadt and Blechofsheim. This period his memoirs stated: "was the best time of any part of my POW days". Apart from a few visits to the main camp at Stalag XIIIC for personal reasons, and a short stay in the hospital at Edelsbach near Wurzburg, he not only remained there until December 1944 but he made himself enjoy it.

Enjoyment for a prisoner of war was not obtained from the environment without difficulties. Cutting timber for use in the railways and the mines in the Ruhr industrial area to keep the wheels of Hitler's war machine turning was galling. But Williams, having decided to be free of the cruelty and constraints imposed by stalag life, could do little but see that the daily output of logs and timber lengths were kept to a minimum and wait. That waiting is a thankless task was never far from Williams' mind, yet the work kept him healthy and travelling around by train between the different railways gave him the 'bit of freedom' he craved. This, and the fact that the guards and the civilians he worked side by side with were pleasant, and that he had Red Cross food parcels coming in regularly made Williams' life bearable for the first time since his imprisonment.

This was the turning point for Williams. Confident of himself at last he made full use of the chance to exchange visits with prisoners in other work camps in Shonau. On one of these occasions, he met with two 2/11th mates, Stan (Curly) Aiken and Owen Kendrick and on another with a Fritz Feich, an English speaking German soldier from the Russian front. Coming at a time when Williams had had little personal contact with anyone outside the 'prison' system since Crete the
ramification of the meeting with Feich was remarkable. Avid for familial type news he learned, for example that Fritz had been in America promoting an invention of his (Fritz’s) father called the Aero Wheel and, as Williams says:

I got to know the family quite well and after Fritz went back to the front and his father also went back to Würzburg where he had firefighting duties. This left Mrs Feich in the house by the railway station ... by herself. She used to ask the guards if it was alright for me to go down and cut wood for her and she would give me cakes and other goodies for performing the work.

The relationship between the Australian prisoner and the German housewife proved beneficial in another way. Listening to the London BBC was strictly forbidden for the German population, “yet when she got to know me better”, Williams wrote:

she allowed me to listen to her radio which was picking up the BBC news from London. This allowed us [prisoners] to keep in touch with what was going on in the war instead of only being aware of the German propaganda.30

Mrs Feich’s (as Williams called her) goodwill towards the prisoners is not doubted, but as the Allies’ attacks drew closer to Frankfurt,31 the need to be seen as treating them humanely may have been a mitigating factor.

In the final months of his imprisonment Williams moved a number of times in the vicinity of the main camp. He worked in turn at Wulfershousen on a milk truck, at Walterhousen on a farm and in a grocery store at Königshofen until, finally he went to Oberelsbach (work camp) and started on a farm at Unterrelleshoch. “It was

30 See Williams, 25-26 for details of the Shonsu experience and the two quotations at this point in this paragraph.
now February 1945 and the war seemed to be getting closer to us", recorded Williams:

I was working for quite a pleasant old man named Domling and he was anti-Nazi and fed me very well. This was important because the war was drawing to a close, rations were getting worse in Germany. In March we could hear the gun-fire coming from the front... Towards the end of March it seemed as though the Germans were preparing for us to be marched away from the approaching Allies. This did not suit me.\[32\]

Nor did it suit Domling. Williams was to be his security against possible reprisals when the Allied soldiers arrived. Consequently, he not only treated Williams exceptionally well, but he also urged him to escape from the march and return to the farm quickly where he could hide until the Allies rescued him.

The proposal pleased Williams. He had no qualms about leaving and confidently presented himself to the guard at the work barracks on Sunday, 1 April 1945, before marching to the assembly point at Bad Konigsholen, some seven miles further on. Not wishing to lose himself he took care to watch the direction they were taking and the names of the towns they passed through. In addition he 'chummed' up with a South African for company and for moral support. Given the circumstances of the past three and a half years and the uncertain future facing him Williams' need for extra assurance was understandable, especially as the prisoners were told they would be shot if they attempted to escape.\[33\]

Williams' story made no mention of shootings. He fortunately left the march before such atrocities began. His problem was to remain unnoticed as he made his way back to the Domling house against the flow of German soldiers straggling along the road (like the Greek soldiers at Larisa, Greece in April 1941) hoping to

\[32\] Williams, 27.

\[33\] Williams, 27.
reach home ahead of the Russians. Domling proved to be a decent man who, from the time Williams arrived back at the house on the 3rd April until the 8th when the Americans liberated him he kept him hidden, well-fed and in the process up to date with the latest war news.

The 8 April 1945 was a land-mark in Williams' story. He was liberated and the burden of suspense that he and Domling had shared was over. The Americans had accepted Williams' state of good health and spirit as testimony that no harm had come to him, and Domling had a letter of reference from Williams as a safeguard for his future.

Ironically the arrangement made by the Americans to get Williams out of the battle zone and back through the Americans' lines took him past most of the Arbeitskommandos he had lived in and worked at since 1942. First he went to Walfershausen which, "was only a short distance away, between Königshofen and Bad Newstadt, ... next was Bad Newstadt, then Hammelbury and Eurdong". From here his motor transport stayed overnight at Bad Kissenger before moving back through the badly damaged cities of Mannheim and Ludwigshaven.

It would have been callous of Williams not to feel sorry for the civilians after having lived amongst them for almost four years, but to be free 'of it all' was his first priority. His move from Worms on the Rhine through Nancy to Paris in France was an indescribable event. He didn't believe it to be true until he saw the Eiffel Tower. "By this time", wrote Williams:

*I was starting to enjoy life again. We stayed at the Grand Hotel which was taken over by the Americans and given an American uniform to wear and 1000 francs to spend.*

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34 See Williams, 28-29 for this quotation and the information in the preceding six paragraphs.
Dressed thus and with money in his pocket Williams' subsequent actions matched that of his Anzac heritage: In the company of a New Zealand soldier he commandeered a German vehicle, attached an American star to its side and toured Paris for two nights. Incidentally a dump of champagne somehow came into their hands and not wanting to spoil the chance of seeing Paris they, in turn, "dumped it in the street". Not surprisingly Williams' account of Paris says "he enjoyed every moment of it", before flying to England on 13 April 1945. His war was over.

Incarceration for prisoners of war as Privates W.G. Ryan, 'Blue' Heron, Bert Skillen and Gordon Williams in Hitler's stalags was a sobering experience. Describing the prisoners introduction to camps like Stalag VIIA, Moosburg; Stalag VIII B, Lamsdorf; and Stalag XIIIC, Hammelberg, the problems they encountered in each, and their manner of coping with captivity has opened the door to an understanding of this aspect of warfare. Williams' account of his personal battle in coming to terms with his imprisonment is significant. It foreshadows the events of non-working NCO prisoners in the Bavarian camp of Stalag 383, Hoherfels, which thus becomes the content of the next chapter.

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29 Williams, 29.
Chapter 11

Stalag 383, Hohenfels: June 1942 - January 1945

*We were always living on the edge of a precipice.* Ray Ryan

To cope with increasing numbers of prisoners of war resulting from the successes against the Allies since Dunkirk administrative changes were made to the running of the Stalags. Although ostensibly the purpose was to reduce overcrowding, the ensuing practice showed otherwise. Not only was the security of the camps tightened and reprisals imposed on the prisoners, but the non-working NCOs were removed from the ranks working for the Nazi Regime. By September 1942, therefore, Oflag IIIC at Sagan for ‘troublesome’ prisoners had been replaced by the newly formed Stalag 383 at Hohenfels, Bavaria for NCOs. It was a venture that symbolised the position of the prisoner of war camp in Germany later in 1942.

![Fig. 48: Hohenfels Camp](image-url)
Hohenfels Camp thus became an integral part of the war experience for a number of West Australians between the last part of 1942 and early 1945, and those who were there remember it well. The genesis of these recollections stem as much from the improved living conditions at this stalag as from the notoriety associated with the German hierarchy ordering the indiscriminate hand-cuffing of a thousand prisoners1 as reprisal for an incident at Dieppe. The background to this affair is complicated. What appeared to have happened was that following a diversionary raid in August by the Allies with Canadian troops on Dieppe the captured German prisoners' hands were tied to prevent them destroying their operational documents. Whether or not the prisoners from the Dieppe raid at Hohenfels did not understand the facts relating to the incident or because the prisoners as a body saw it as a chance to take a stand against the German overlordship was not clear.2 What was clear, however was that the Germans were prepared to punish them for a real or imagined wrong and they were going to fight it.

W.G. Ryan's summing up of this episode was explicit: "There were insufficient Canadians", he wrote; "the numbers were to be made up of British troops. A special compound was set aside and the game was on". The rules of this exercise were harsh. Until a supply of handcuffs became available the prisoner's hands were to be tied tightly together with rope from morning till night. No sitting down by these men on the parade ground was permitted, and the guards pleased themselves as to when they allowed the men to attend to their bodily functions.3

1 W.G. Ryan, 48.
2 See Mason, p.238 and 258 for explanations of the mediation and actions of the British and German Governments. For Ryan's recollection of the matter see the entries in the diary from 26-29 April, 1942. For a copy of the instructions supposedly from the British, see Appendix I.
3 For this quotation and information see W.G. Ryan, 48-49.
Predictably, on the day the handcuffs arrived, the German guards showed much pleasure in clapping them on. Disregarding the weather the guards paraded the men, manacled and without their overcoats, before the officials. This action was regarded as so outrageous by their mates that steps to rectify it were immediately taken. In a very short time camp-made keys appeared, handcuffs were unlocked, overcoats were put on, the cuffs replaced, and the prisoners were ready for the next parade. Thus outwitted by the ingenuity of the prisoners and made to look ridiculous in front of the Commandant, a hasty compromise in favour of the prisoners was reached between the two parties.

Initially the guards did no more than fit the cuffs on each morning and remove them at night. But later, when priority reinforcement for the German army had reduced the number of guards available in the camp a tacit agreement allowed the men to move about freely providing they appeared 'cuffed' for official parades. This charade satisfied the men's sense of humour; to be beating the Jerry at his own game was great sport, but it was to be shortlived. Late in 1943 changes to the management of Hohenfels were made and the cuffing reintroduced. Banking on regaining their earlier concessions the men refused to wear the handcuffs unless they were fitted and unlocked by the guards. To make things more difficult for the jailers the cuffs were closed to the last, least used notch so that they could only be opened by an official key.

But the Germans were not to be outdone: "To make a show of force", wrote Ryan:

a couple of [German] officers, twenty guards in full battle kit with a dozen Alsation dogs surrounded the ... groups of men. A detail started opening and fitting the cuffs.

4 W.G. Ryan, 49.
In appearance the men complied without protest to having the cuffs put on and stepped back from the ranks but in effect they were playing a tactical game. In turn each prisoner removed his cuffs and rejoined the never-ending ‘fitting’ parade to a point where as Ryan says:

_After a few hours the Jerries gave up in despair, saying the men were taking a mean disadvantage knowing the shortage of the guards. In future the cuffs were to be left on the bunks and worn if a high ranking officer came on inspection._

Forcing the German guards to give in on an official order was a turning-point for the NCOs. It marked a time at which decisive changes occurred in the prisoners’ attitude to their status. By presenting a united front on the business of the cuffs they had become more than non-working NCOs collected together under the one roof; they were now a force to be reckoned with. In this knowledge they knew that things were not routine, that it was the guards’ job to see that they came to no harm, that in sticking out against the system they could fight the war on their own terms. As a result of these changes the NCOs developed into a cohesive unit while the guards had to settle for second best.

Less significant than the protest at Hohenfels but equally important was the manner in which the NCO Ray Ryan reached Hohenfels. Still sick from the treatment he had received since Crete he was surprised to find that survival at Stalag VIIIIB, Lamsdorf depended on becoming a racketeer. This prospect did not suit Ryan and his brother Laurie, also a prisoner at Lamsdorf. They thought the rackets operating in the British compound between the NCOs and the German

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5 W.G. Ryan, 49-50, for the information and two quotations in the above paragraphs.
guards on the distribution of essential goods deplorable. “The Pommies”, as Ryan put it, “had a year start on us and we couldn’t get a look in”.  

As a result, if a prisoner did not have the necessary watch, pen or any other personal item to swap he didn’t stand a chance of getting his weekly share of necessities. Many of the men, therefore, went without food parcels, clothes and even hot water for a shower.

This was a desperate situation for the new-comers, particularly as a shortfall such as bread made their lives infinitely worse. “Some days”, Ryan says:

*we only got 1/6 of a loaf owing to the shortage caused by theft. On bread soup days, 50 loaves were supposed to go into the soup, but only 25 went in. The resulting watery soup can be imagined.*

Not liking what they found at Lamsdorf the Ryans looked for a way out.

The choice to leave the camp came to the brothers quite unexpectedly. Having learned that the airforce unit at Lamsdorf was due to move to a new camp at Sagan and thinking to frustrate the guards in the process the Ryans initiated a swap-over with two willing airmen. Knowing the risk involved if they were caught

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6 For both quotations see Ryan, ‘Diary’, 17 March, 1942. Also, note as the events of 1942 were written after Ryan’s return from Sagan to Stalag 383 the dates given are therefore only a source index and not the date of the events described.
8 R. Ryan, ‘Diary’, 30 March and 4 April, 1942.
at this ploy the Ryans and their willing counterparts, Airmen Winter and Darwin, did two things. Firstly they became thoroughly familiar with each other's identity. Next they chose a day when both sides were playing a football match so that they could exchange uniforms, mix in the crowd and be ready to move back to their new barracks at the end of the game. The formula proved very successful. Not only did the Ryan's deception go unnoticed but by 3 May they had moved to Sagan.

It is scarcely possible to give an adequate idea of the relief the Ryans experienced from being at Sagan. Apart from feeling reassured by the formal address and standard of behaviour of the Airforce officers, the camp conditions and other activities available made life so much better. However there were tensions. The combination of knowing that the conditions of Sagan were created to discourage escapes and a growing awareness that the German reversals at the Russian front could provide the incentive for an uprising from thousands of 'forced' workers and prisoners of war led Ryan to say:

'We were always living on the edge of a precipice even in the good camps. When parcels cut out we were nearly desperate for food and it was at this camp (after we had left) that 50 officers were shot.'

That the officers were shot because the Germans decided that group escapes were a risk to the German civil security is correct as far as it goes. It was the explanation given by the "Germans to the Protecting Power on 12 June, 1944". But there was more to it than this. In March of this year following an attempted mass escape by 200 airmen from Sagan, when seventy six airmen got away, the Gestapo ordered that the escapees (other than British and American nationals) would not be returned to their camp but would be shot. What was more alarming...

9 R. Ryan, 'Diary', 9-10 April, 1942; Mason, 143.
10 Ryan, 'Diary', 15 April, 1942.
was that the International Red Cross was to be told that they had not been captured. There are no records in Mason’s account to show that any Australians were in this break out, but three New Zealanders were. Mason described their shooting: “In every case”, he says

the victims had been driven to a lonely piece of country, ordered to walk away from the vehicles, and then shot as though in a further attempted escape.\(^{11}\)

This episode was one aspect of Nazism that made Hitler’s regime so repugnant to the Western World.

Less distressing than the shortage of food and the threat of shooting, but equally important to the Ryan’s existence as airmen was the chance of being exposed as fakes. In the beginning of this swap-over they had benefited from the time taken to make the transfer from Lamsdorf to Sagan to become familiar with the airforce routine. But in the end it was Laurie’s indifference to the smoking ban on parade\(^ {12}\) that put an end to their stay. In addition to receiving five days in the detention barrack Laurie also was caught taking delivery of their mail from another swap-over airman returned from Lamsdorf to serve his time at Sagan. The date of this event was not given but as Ryan’s records show they returned to Lamsdorf on 3 February 1943, it must therefore have been some time in December. His comments on the episode were:

We remained at Sagan for another 6 weeks before Nemesis arrived in the shape of a guard to take us back to VIIIB. Still, we had had a good holiday and dodged the worst of the chains’ period.

\(^{11}\) Mason, 402-403. See also Maxin XXV for the term ‘Protecting Power’, described as being a neutral Government accepted as representing the interests of the belligerent state within the territory of another.

\(^{12}\) R. Ryan, 18 March, 1942.
Furthermore, Ryan says: "We were still at Sagan for Xmas and the New Year and had a very nice time". In other words he had thankfully survived another year.

Fig. 50: Having a very nice time, Christmas 1942.

A greater understanding of camp life during the months the Ryans spent at Lamsdorf before moving to Hohenfels can be gleaned from Ray's diary. By 9th February it was clear that they were to be part of the hand cuffing experience (Ryan called it 'the chains' period) and therefore could expect to spend their day outside and to have armed guards stopping them from going inside during the day. Wet weather compounded this misery. As a result their life had changed from one of prescribed standards of behaviour to that of: "a real prison outlet ... mud, cold, wind, clogs, chains, swedes, and raus-raus" (out-out).

By March the system of hand cuffing amongst the Australians as compared to the New Zealand and British prisoners had finally broken down and passes were issued exempting the Australians from this practice. Instead of being pleased with this favour the men in a body handed them back, and formally protested at being

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13 R. Ryan, 'Diary', 15 April, 1942.
14 R. Ryan, 'Diary', 15 February, 1943.
given preferential treatment. This protest made a point, but promised threats by the guards against those still 'chained' prevailed. The passes were used.

Any new happening, real or imagined, produced a diversion for the prisoners. While some found writing a humorous ditty like:

_I wonder what old Churchill is doing tonight,
Is he on one month’s vacation
Planning another evacuation._

_Yes, we wonder what our Winnie’s doing tonight._

Others like the Ryans derived great pleasure from the arrival from Moosburg in April of many of the 2/11th Battalion men. It was a nostalgic meeting; three years since they left on the Newassa from Fremantle, and some of these men had not seen one another since Crete. The unspoken word was about peace and home but the main talk was of the war. Allegations in the German newspaper that the "U.S.A. is seizing control of N.Z. and Aust." were laughed at, and the lack of news on the battle for "Tunis" made the men sure that the 6th Division must be winning there.

April gave way to May and the information for 19 May reads:

_Orders to move to the N.C.O. 'scamp [Hohenfelts] came as a complete surprise. It is a year ago since I went to Sagan and now we are moving again - for good this time I hope._

It was right of Ryan to cling to such a desire, but wrong to think it might be the last. Still it was a step in the right direction as he wrote:

_At 6 p.m. we arrived at Parsberg and put our gear on a truck and walked 12 miles to the new camp 383. I enjoyed the walk through the mountain country - Bavaria. This camp composes of single room cottages arranged in streets. There are many West Australians here._

16 For these quotations see R. Ryan, ‘Diary’, 1 March, 15 April, 19 and 22 May in that order.
These two commodities, comfort and companionship dominated the social environment at Hohenfels.

At Hohenfels the memory of overcrowded barracks as at Lamsdorf became a thing of the past. In place of sharing the one ablution block and a few tables and chairs with no less than 360 men they now shared a hut with 12 other men. In addition they enjoyed the privilege of having water laid on and the prospect of a hot shower regularly. Most extraordinary stories are told by the NCOs about their feeling at this incredible transformation, but none were more significant than the relief that they felt that no longer would their personal hygiene be a problem.

In setting up house at Hohenfels the pattern of activity in the huts was much the same. As each detail arrived groups of twelve men were assigned to a hut. The more adventurous and experienced prisoners made sure they had some of their mates with them. Laurie Ryan who had gone ahead of his brother, for example, had reserved a place in his hut for Ray. Some of the in-house groups stayed comfortably together indefinitely, while others shifted.

In a matter of months, Ryan was to write, "four of the chaps shifted to another hut", reducing their numbers to a "three combine", or a six prisoners establishment. Many others got together and made structural alteration to the layout of their huts. Ryan's description of what went on in their hut serves to show the freedom the NCOs enjoyed. "Today", 29 September, 1943, "we altered the bunks to make way for the crockery". Their intent was clear, they had taken a stand against working for the Fuehrer and now they were working for themselves.

18 R. Ryan, 'Diary', 16 September, 1943.
19 R. Ryan, 'Diary', 9 June, 1943.
Nothing altered these demonstrations of independence during the next eighteen months to two years of their imprisonment. But while, in part, the environment the NCOs had created for themselves at Stalag 383 owed its success to the Germans providing barracks and grounds for indoor and outdoor activities, they nevertheless had to make the system work.

The remarkable and simple fact was that it was very much in the interest of the prisoners to be seen by the guards to be physically and mentally active. The reason for this was that by taking part in organised sport as conducting trials for mock Empire Games all the national groups in the camp were involved in the one venture. Since the process took many days the enthusiasm for the event and the participation of the crowd (Germans and prisoners alike) increased. Add to this the fact that encouraging the less enthusiastic prisoners to play games like marbles did wonders for morale: the act of two grown men on their hands and their knees contesting ownership of small balls of glass appealed to the humour of the men, made the guards suspicious, and gave immense pleasure to the on-lookers. In addition while many of the thousands of prisoners were engaged in all kinds of sport equally as many were attending organised entertainment of another nature.
The combination of the well established, open and covered spaces by the Germans and the ready supply of recreation equipment from the Relief Organisations ensured that at all times the men could be occupied.

Ryan and the rest of the inhabitants of Hohenfels appreciation for these facilities only wavered when the shortage of food at the end of 1944 weakened their interest. This summary of Ryan’s interest is only a sample of what was available. Educated at Christian Brothers College, Perth, and a staunch Catholic, he made meticulous notes on his ‘in-house’ interest. He appreciated the services of a priest, enjoyed the Arts and Craft Exhibition, took sides at sport, learned to dance, attended the many stage shows and read. Between 19 June and 12 August 1943 he read a number of books varying from a seventeenth century author to a modern war novel. While he found Abbe Prevos’ book *Manon Lecant* dull, Kipling’s *Wee Willie Winkle* differed from the picture and, he recalled, he liked Philip Gibbs’, *The Long Alert* and was surprised to read about the debacle in Greece and Crete in a modern novel. Reading was one of the surest devices used by the prisoners to take their minds off the bad times, especially when they were hungry. The time flew as their appetites shrunk.

Fig. 52: Looking for a book.

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In January 1944, Ryan was amongst a party of 400 who marched three miles to a nearby hall to see a film called "Offspring of First Marriage". Despite the title of the picture the occasion of the outing coming after three years of imprisonment was a special event. He was so overwhelmed with delight from the walk, the chance to see civilians again and to hear music that he hardly knew which he enjoyed most. Other festive events seen by Ryan in this month included the Mikado at the camp theatre, sung by an all male choir, and a pageant to commemorate the foundation of Australia. Amid so much entertainment Ryan was able to imagine for a short while that he was home again.

"There may be more important things in life than food. But not to a prisoner of war", stated McKibben. "For hunger, real hunger", he continued:

was not our normal lot and it is with our normal lot that I shall henceforth deal, putting down briefly some facts about our food.

The first fact was that during almost all of 1942 and 1943 every prisoner "received a Red Cross parcel weekly, and these precious parcels were the blessings of our lives". The second fact was the anticipation arrival of the British food parcels aroused in the men. This was not that the food content was any better than that of the Canadians', but that they contained unexpected luxuries. The men naturally speculated amongst themselves on who might have packed these 'goodies'. Most decided it was a nice 'Sheila', but McKibben firmly believed that only a mother would think of doing this "for who else", he wrote "would pop bulls-eyes amongst
the solid foodstuffs, or think of sending a pancake mixture to a prisoner of war?"\(^{21}\)

Facts in this case may have been exaggerated, but imaginations were stirred.

![Fig. 53: Was it pancakes all round?](image)

By November 1944 it was generally agreed by the NCOs that on a daily ration of one loaf of bread amongst eight men and a midday meal of potato and swede soup, augmented by half a parcel a week, they would be "feeling the pinch".\(^{22}\) It was not an exaggeration. It was also clear that facing up to the changed circumstances was not confined to a few.

Many of the hospital patients are those whose mail has been scarce and in particular those who were most confident of not spending this winter here. It seems that the bitter disappointment has weakened their resistance to the ailments that are always about...

The feeling of other prisoners was well captured by Ryan:

\[I\ \text{don't think there is anyone who doesn't feel the effects of once more having our hopes dashed & it is apparent in the general quiet which pervades the camp, both in the rooms and out.}\]\(^{23}\)

Any doubts they had were seldom put into words because of the horror that was connected with self-pity. The men preferred to die rather than admit defeat.

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\(^{21}\) See McKibben, 31, for the three passages in this paragraph.

\(^{22}\) R. Ryan, 'Diary', 18 November, 1944; and McKibben, 21.

Making sense of the prisoner of war experience in Germany requires recalling that just as the armed forces on Crete in June 1941 had become the victims of Hitler's relentless ambition, so they faced the same prospect in Germany in 1944, but under different circumstances. In place of being rounded up by elite German paratroopers and removed under the most appalling conditions to Hitler's Stalags, they were, by January 1945, about to be driven by German guards westward on foot ahead of a rapidly advancing Russian army, and inwards away from the Anglo-American advance towards the German collection centre. Although they did not realise it, years of imprisonment were behind them, and they had reached the turning-point. The final phase in their liberation was beginning.
Chapter 12

The Movement of Prisoners

"Lauf-Lauf - faster-faster". Ray Ryan

The advance of the Allies into Germany by the autumn of 1944 gave the prisoners of war the strength needed to hang on until the liberating force reached their stalags. But there were many moments of concern. The most pressing of these was being aware of the rapid advance of the Allied and Russian Army into German occupied territories yet not knowing the intention of either towards the occupants of the prisoner of war camps.¹

Similarly the requirement in the stalags to accommodate the prisoners moving westward ahead of the Russian and inwards away from Allied armies could not be calculated. Camps were filled to overflowing; food, fuel and lighting was short, and prisoners' behaviour was becoming unpredictable. These many difficulties, with a wide gulf between the need of the prisoners and the actualities of the war, dominated the camp situation.

Despite these problems there was a reluctance amongst the guards to accept this situation. They preferred to be optimistic about the outcome of the battles being fought on both fronts, and any show of interest in the war, as Katie Johnson found out in Oflag VIIB, was instantly quelled by the guards.

¹ Wilmott, 182, for a map of The Western Front, Autumn 1944, 571.
Fig. 54: Oflag VIIB, Eichstatt, Bavaria.

Therefore it is hardly surprising to read in his account of the camp that for a year or so prior to leaving Einstatt part of their time was spent in counting the bombers as they flew overhead. As a result "the Germans", he says:

\[\text{were very angry when the prisoners took an interest in these aircraft and we were expected to remain in our huts. Several prisoners were shot by the guards for standing near the entrance to their hut during these times.}\]

It was the first time to Johnson's knowledge that an incident of this sort had occurred at the camp and he was understandably shocked: "The NCO in charge of this party" he added, "was later convicted of his crime at Nuremberg".

\[\text{See Johnson's hand-written Service Records, 4, appended to the Oral History Programme cited previously.}\]

\[\text{Johnson, 18.}\]
Meanwhile, at Hohenfels the NCOs were feeling the effects the Allied bombing had on the goods and services necessary for their survival. During February and March 1945 they were fearful that if the Red Cross parcels did not reach them soon they might not be in a fit state to make the final effort required to gain their liberty. In fact, in desperation they counted “every day that goes now as one nearer to the end of this hard winter”. This was the situation when to their dismay a further 1700 prisoners arrived from Stalag VIIA, Moosburg just as some of their own men had begun to die. “A double funeral of the two chaps who died lately” wrote Ryan:

was held this morning. We lined the muddy roads and noticed how thin and drawn were the faces of the funeral cortege... I hope its the last funeral I see in this life.

Fig. 55: The men found this hard to bear.

But this funeral was not to be the last. Before the arrival on the 13 March of the "long dreamed of parcels" two more deaths were reported. Such a miserable situation was further compounded by the news on the 16th of another death. This time it was an AIF man, the fifth from beri-beri and malnutrition since February.

Fate was knocking on the door and fear took hold.

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6 For these extracts see R. Ryan, ‘Diary’, 6 and 16, March, 1945.
It was no coincidence that fears of a more personal nature were not far from the prisoners' minds. Doubts on the possible long-term effects that malnutrition could have on their sterility were often raised. A jocular discussion amongst the men on the unlikeliness of this was mostly accepted. If this failed, the reassurance from the overworked but kindly medical staff that when the time came "John Thomas" would do his job, was gratefully received. Such was their uncertainty.

Perhaps the prisoners were right to retreat into speculative ideas on the future. The prospect of enduring once again the abject misery they had suffered in the early days of their captivity must have been almost too difficult for some to bear. Whether or not such a claim about their fortitude is valid, two facts of the matter are relevant. The first of these was that many of the prisoners grew stronger from seeing the 'other fellow' under stress. They made a greater effort to be seen in control of themselves and made a show at keeping the peace in the huts. The second fact was some men put a taboo on certain subjects and made it clear that they had no intention of labouring for the Jerries. Apparently this show of spirit was good for morale but hidden in this approach was a factor critical to their survival: some of the NCOs had decided not to march away from the conquering armies. Instead they would take a chance that in the rush of rounding up the men into columns they could stay hidden long enough for the guards to give up and move off without them. It was a bold plan which in the end worked, for not only did many remain hidden but others took refuge with German families in the village.8

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7 A risque word used, it is understood, between the young and the older male and, in this case, by polite army personnel.

8 Keith 'Scoop' Hooper, "Hoping and Hiding", McKibben, 120 - 128.
At Hohenfels the pressure on the troops mounted. The arrival on 4 March of the six ‘White Angels’, had eased the food problem and the “rumble of gunfire from the Allied front ... [and the] hundreds of bombers passing overhead” kept the guards in a turmoil. Lacking any first-hand information on what to do the men could do little but get ready to evacuate. Luckily it was to be a shorter route than many others. All but those who were in hiding or sick left on foot on the 14th for Moosberg. The numbers are uncertain as some thousands of prisoners from the Thorn and Munich camps had increased their numbers, but an estimate was 7000 NCOs. There could not have been a more ready group preparing to move than these 7000, but the uncertainty of their future remained.

Because of the lack of material relating to prisoners of war in Germany the following passages are intentionally lengthy. They are evidence not only of the reaction of the men to the end of their incarceration, but are also a fair description of their movements. Ryan tells it well. “Today [14th] started quietly and suddenly the bombshell burst”, he began:

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9 The term ‘White Angels’ was the name given to the Red Cross parcel trucks in the last months of the war. Mason, 462, n1.
The allied armies are approaching & the camp is to move. Hurried conferences were held & the Red Cross supplies were issued to clear the store. As we ca'nt carry it all everyone is busy cooking & eating without stopping. Fuel is the problem as everything is being burnt, bedheads, forms etc. Nobody slept much tonight. Gear is being thrown away everywhere & we are prepared for almost any eventuality. The Germans have ordered us to move at 4 AM tomorrow & we don't know whether to go or to hide. TONIGHT. We can't believe liberty is so close but so uncertain. Squads of armed guards come in to grab the chaps detailed to move in the first party. There was the most terrible air-raid I've ever heard on a nearby town in the early morning. At 7 PM we set out on the march, & towards dawn arrived at a former Yankee camp. It was bitterly cold and we didn't get any sleep ... & there was no bread available. We got 1 tin of meat for 2 men for two days.\textsuperscript{10}

There seems to have been some attempt by the civilian population to supplement the prisoners' rations with hand-outs of bread. Perhaps their relief to see the end of the stalag system was akin to that of the prisoners. Their war also was over.

Other incidents followed. Much to his discomfort, Ryan's feet cracked up as they had in '41:

they are skinned and bleeding and terrible to walk on. The guards drive us on all the time and we hear nothing but "Laus-laus" [sic] - "faster-faster". At the rear of the column is a guard with a dog to harry the stragglers.\textsuperscript{11}

\textbf{Fig. 57: Eating and marching to freedom, 1945.}

\textsuperscript{10} R. Ryan, 'Diary', 14-19 April, passim.
\textsuperscript{11} R. Ryan, 'Diary', 20 April, 1945. (This word is spelt \textit{Lauf}. )
At some point along the way the column stopped in a village for a few days where the Red Cross caught up with them. Conditions were still terrible: "Mud & filth. Wet & cold & cooking is done under heavy handicaps", wrote Ryan:

But everyone is cheerful all the same. We hear the Yanks are at Regensburg & are hoping like hell that they push on quickly. We march most of the night & then can't sleep for bitter cold & frost. We won't forget Anzac Day down in a hurry as we awoke with a large layer of frost on the blanket. Every day many men drop out and are left behind - the lucky ones. Possibly these men were considered 'lucky' because the Hohenfels columns had their medical staff and their support units in attendance. A luxury the men from most other columns did not enjoy.

On the 27th:

We camp at a nice spot .... We earnestly hope this is the finish of this marching. It is reported that 383 was liberated last Sunday. The noise of shellfire is coming closer. One of our planes gives us the "V" roll. Civvies are very scared of the Yanks & ask us the forms of greeting - "Welcome". Shells came over the barn last night & on the village which hoisted white flags. Everyone is tired of waiting and we wonder if we will be the last in Germany to be liberated. It was so cold & depressing this morning that we decided to move into a friendly farmhouse. We were sitting in the kitchen when a Yank soldier appeared at the window. We dashed outside hardly believing it, & saw hundreds more.

It was evident that by the time they made camp on this day that the German guards had either abandoned the column or had been overtaken by the American troops, as Ryan says:

We at once began to move back into Allied territory. We push on again. It is very cold & we were a little depressed at the prospect of a 3 day march to Rburg. Then we got a car and did it in style in a few hours.

12 R. Ryan, 'Diary', 22-25 April, 1945, passim.
The final release and the chance to eat and sleep for the NCOs in Ryan's column were not immediately mentioned. Instead he noted the things that impressed him most: "I saw some proclamations by Eisenhower" was the entry for the 2nd. Followed by "The Germans are subdued & I saw some of our old posters as POWs." Abundant evidence of a less than rosy picture.

Ryan and his mates had now reached the final stage of their liberation from the German camps. Not only was a former plane factory made available for their use at Regenburg but it was also equipped with the sort of things "kriegies dream [about]. Tons of food, fuel and blankets". While it was to be a number of 'irksome' days before it was their "turn for a plane" Ryan wrote, his epitaph to their POW days was that which follows: "Today", he wrote, is called "V" day, which means Victory in Europe".

While Ryan's account of the liberation of the NCOs from Hohenfels appeared fairly simple the stories of ex-prisoners from other ranks vary from that experienced by the NCOs. This was mainly because they had either been caught up in Hitler's evacuation plan and had left much earlier, or had been isolated in working camps. Even so, each is worth telling.

A typical example of forced marches was told by W.G. Ryan. His column of 700 men was one of the many from the 8000 prisoners who left Stalag 344, Lamsdorf, in the depth of winter and walked in a rambling manner from 22 January to 1 May 1945. During this trek the prisoners saw and experienced unforgettable

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14 For quotations in this paragraph, see R. Ryan, 'Diary', 1-2 May, 1945. (RBurg is short for Regenburg).
15 For the quotations in this paragraph see R. Ryan's 'Diary', 3 and 8 May 1945 respectively. The term 'kriegies' is short for kriegsgefangener or prisoner of war.
16 This camp was the former Stalag VIIIB.
incidents. On the one hand they were horrified to find dead and dying prisoners beside the roads. On the other they were cheered when the Allies' bombers found their mark as they did on Dresden. "Fourteen weeks [not days] we spent on foot", wrote Ryan:

From Ober Silisia through Sudetenland into Czecho Slovakia, back into Sudetenland and again into Czecho, then into Bavaria. It was the dead of winter when we started, the cold intense. Frostbite caused a good deal of trouble and our rations were deplorably light. 17

With the advantage of hindsight, it is easy to see that Hitler misjudged several possible outcomes of the movement of prisoners in 1945. For example, the rapid advance of the Russian army not only forced the German people to retreat in disarray, but it also disrupted the routes the marching prisoners were to take. As a result the difficulties of the undertaking had been immeasurably increased. The camps they were to stay in over-night had not been vacated by the original prisoners or were occupied by the mass of people: Germans, refugees and prisoners alike. The guards, therefore, in fear for their future, could do little but keep the men moving until eventually they too moved off and left the management of the columns in the hands of the men themselves. 18

This, however, was not the case for Ryan's column. They marched on, over the river Elbe, and through a fertile valley until they reached the village of Falkinou. It was not a pleasant place and the situation there must have reminded Ryan of the night at Suda Bay, when the cook did wonders with their cups of tea, for as he stated:

17 W.G. Ryan, WAM 8.0, 55.
18 Mason, 449-461, passim.
Here we spent two nights and the soup was issued each night in the night during a snowfall. ... It was really a remarkable performance because each one of the 700 remaining men received his ration, and on neither occasion did there remain even a tablespoon of soup.\(^{19}\)

Lack of knowing when the march would end demoralised many of the men.

Now the pace of events quickened for next they skirted Nuremberg, until they came to another stalag (XIIID). Here "they were crowded into tents for a few days and herded out again when the sound of Yankee guns drew too close". Thus, "having been chased from the East by the Russians 600 miles away and now by the Yanks from the West", their column could do little but move south-west. This strategic manoeuvre, if it may be called that, was fortunate. Urged by their guards to keep ahead of the S.S. (Sturm Stoffel : military police seeded into the army fighting the rear-guard action) for both their sakes, they managed to reach a village close to Stalag VIIB, Moosburg, by 28 April. According to Ryan they were not the first: "there were already 40,000 there so we were quartered in a factory nearby". Few recalled much about the next few days, they just ate and slept before being transported to Salsburg, on 7 May, to catch their plane to England. Not only was Ryan's wandering over but in the last analysis he "wanted nothing more than to get in touch with his family waiting so anxiously at home"\(^{20}\) to hear from him.

Bert Skillen, POW No: 22938, was also one of the prisoners from Lamsdorf who began the "big march" as he called it some time in March 1945. Uncertain of what might happen after a few days of this he just walked off and got lost in the throng of refugees. Skillen was a resourceful man. Brought out from England

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\(^{19}\) W.G. Ryan, WAM 8.0, 56.

\(^{20}\) These extracts are from W.R. Ryan, WAM 8.0, 57-58.
under the Banwell Immigration Scheme in 1923, aged 15, he was a miner from Kalgoorlie when he joined the 2/11th Battalion early in 1940. In retrospect Skillen believes he was very lucky. And perhaps this was so; the fact, however, was that he knew that to stay alive he needed to keep moving and to get amongst people. He managed to do both fairly quickly.

Unbeknown to him another prisoner had followed him and together they made for the nearest large hospital. Here the Matron was sympathetic to their plight and gave them refuge for a few days before urging him to ‘join up’ with the Partisans or ‘Freedom Fighters’. In the process of this association, Skillen and his mate helped in ambushing a German transport. This enabled them to keep moving towards Prague and beyond, until they caught up with the advancing Americans.

“The Yanks”, he concluded:

took us over the River Danube then into their camp at Nuremberg. While I was there we had a general clean up ... [had] some good meals and a lovely bath. I never saw the other people who were with me again.21

At this point, while each story may differ in the telling, the aim of the ex-prisoner to get away never did. As for the Americans who had played such a vital part in this rescue, it must have been a remarkable experience, for: “After 4 days”, as Skillen says:

we were on again. They put us on Douglas Planes, the seats run on each side of the plane. The pilot said ‘I will take you across France and show you the damage’. What a mess! I could not believe my eyes, it was horrific. He flew us to a place called Rennes, [sic] where the British Air Force were waiting with Lancaster Bombers to fly us to England. We had to lay on the bomb bays. ...

21 For these comments see Skillen, 45.
Skillen was lucky again. When it was his turn to go up front with the pilot he saw "the 'white cliffs of Dover'. A wonderful sight".

The German speaking Alf Traub's, whose reputation as an interpreter on Crete had followed him to Germany, account of the state of affairs at Stalag VIIIB is no less revealing. In this camp Traub became head interpreter for the British camp leader, RSM Goody and took to heart the grievances from the men about the conditions there. They resented the Germans making only a token gesture of rebuilding the camp and changing its name, despite the fact that the Red Cross had recommended it be replaced. Claims that could not be substantiated, but still rankled, were that Red Cross parcels and cigarettes were few and far between. Another grievance of the men he vigorously pursued was the amount they were paid for the work they did in the various industries. "This", he wrote:

*was a task that I was eventually chosen to perform by being shifted from working party to working party to represent my fellow men. This I can safely say that I achieved to the best of my ability and without any fear of contradiction.*

A task of this nature, however, was not without its risks. He was accused by the guards of encouraging escapees. Traub resented this accusation on the basis that "it was up to the individual to do so without being told". Thus when his own escape attempt was not successful he received no preferential treatment despite his position and suffered the consequence: he spent twenty-four hours in solitary

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22 Skillen, 45.
23 Traub, WAM 6.4, 51. This comment, in part, is correct, but other camps were built to complement it. See Mason, 298.
24 Traub, WAM 6.4, 51. See Skillen, 21-34 for notes on payment in camp money for work. (The exchange rate was 15 Reichsmarks for one English pound, and 70 pfennigs was equivalent to a fraction more than 11 pence.) Note: in November 1941, Skillen received "5 marks for 6 weeks' work".
confinement on a diet of bread and water, was imprisoned, and had his movements restricted to the boundaries of the Stalag indefinitely. This was harsh treatment for a prisoner doing his job but it had its compensation. During this episode Traub struck up a friendship with the legless pilot Douglas Bader; became his legs by carrying him on his shoulders, and passed the time in swapping army yarns with a man who was to be famous. Traub did not enjoy being a prisoner, but he was proud to know Bader.  

Fig. 58: Private A. Traub, the interpreter.

Although Traub was pleased to get back his job as interpreter with Sergeant Major Goody, this particular NCO was not popular with everyone because of the racketeering endemic in this stalag. There were rumours that Goody not only condoned this custom but was also part of it. This incensed the prisoners to such an extent that Ray Ryan stated "they were infiltrating the cookhouse and magazine [stores] to such good effect that I was able to get [not a share] but a box of

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25 For the details of this paragraph see Traub, WAM 6.4, 51. Also Author’s notes for the Bader incident.
spuds..." 26 While his brother Laurie paraphrases Goody's habits in his 'Death of a Sergeant Major':

"Oh, Peter," he said, in a parade ground voice,
"I'm just in from Stalag VIIIB,
Find me a private to carry my pack,
While another is brewing my tea."

"Find me a bed with hospital sheets
And order me two or three jackets,
Find me a job that is worthy of trust
And I'll see about starting some rackets!"

In such circumstances, Ryan continued:

"Just hold a minute!" old Peter chipped in
When the Major at last paused for breath
"Tell me the good that you did for men
Up till the time of your death." 27

In the final analysis of a practice of this sort there seems little doubt whose side Saint Peter would be on.

Just as any prisoner occupied in the management of the barracks, Traub remained at Stalag VIIIB until January 1945, when they were ordered to "evacuate the camp in an orderly manner, mainly on foot". For by then most of Germany's transport system had been put out of action by the allied bombing. "So we marched", he says:

for days, for weeks and for months, until we eventually arrived at a small village past Nuremberg which is in Bavaria. All were hungry, exhausted and lousy but managed to hang on till we were surprisingly liberated by an American Armoured Division. That is where my task as leader of this group terminated. 28

27 Imelda Ryan, 155.
28 Traub, WAM 6.4, 51.
Because of his Jewish origins and his language skills the vagaries of war had placed an unexpected burden on Traub, which he carried uncomfortably at times, but without flinching. Even at the last stage of his liberation he was co-opted to ensure that the rations for the new arrivals at Nuremberg were distributed equally. Saying goodbye to the men was easy for as he pointed out from “there onwards it was every man for himself”. A stalwart Australian, Traub’s part on Crete and in Germany was immeasurable.

Finding his way out of Nuremberg and into Brussels Traub found easy. It was regaining his lost identity that was difficult. After having waited for four years to get away from the semi-starvation and the brutal treatment that being a prisoner of war had inflicted on him, he could not immediately orientate to his free status. Far from being elated at this change, he found getting cleaned-up, being fully dressed and being free to mix with the Americans, a terrible ordeal.

At first he was unable to face the prospect of sitting at a table with free people. Then there was the problem of money. It was VE-Day and every person at the army base was invited to attend the celebrations and he was penniless.

29 For the quotations in this and the previous paragraph see Traub, WAM 6.4, 52.
Being penniless was not something the Americans allowed Traub to hide behind. "One", he recorded, "gave me 50 dollars out of his own pocket". The extent to which this good-will gesture contributed to Traub's reorientation cannot be measured, excepting that he did sleep well that night and was on his way to England next day on a "Wellington bomber sitting on a piece of piping" with one of the dollars safely in his pocket as a reminder of the occasion.30

Hitler's policy of evacuating the prisoners out of the war zone and away from the fighting that began early in 1944 had by January 1945 become a failure. While the idea in theory might be acceptable, the implications of it for the safety and security of the prisoners were many. One consequence was that the men had to carry their few precious belongings on their backs or on make-shift sledges and march until a suitable place was found (if any) to camp the night.

Fig. 60: Make-shift sledges: getting ready for the march.

The practise of the men to feed themselves on the rations provided before they left camp and then to compete with the hordes of civilian refugees for whatever food

30 Traub, WAM 6.4. 52. Mary Traub, Interview, 1 February, 1995.
the ration dumps provided or could be scrounged was clear evidence of the futility of this enforced march.

Another consequence was that, while at the beginning of this venture the German transport system was at an acceptable level, this had changed. The rolling stock needed to keep the prisoners still in the camps and on the road supplied with provisions was non-existent. In fact the men were facing starvation and deprivation not experienced since their days in Salonika. Furthermore being unaware that the Allies had issued a solemn warning to the Germans that maltreatment of prisoners, wherever in the battle zone, would be “ruthlessly pursued and punished” kept the men in a state of unease. Yet commonsense told them that while the Allies’ planes kept circling overhead they were safe. But ultimately it was thoughts of returning to England and home that occupied the prisoners’ minds most of all.

\[31\] Mason, 449-450, 486.
Chapter 13

The Release and the Relief

It's good to feel a solid man again. R. Ryan

"A very fine effort indeed!" was the way many of the 2/11th Battalion ex-prisoners of war described the action of the British and American pilots in bringing them out of the Allies' reception area in Europe to England. After having spent four years incarcerated in Hitler's Stalags not knowing for the last four months what to expect next, to find themselves on friendly ground at Eastbourne was a relief that needed few words to acknowledge. In an ironic way Eastbourne AIF Military Reception Centre, under the command of the Retimo force commander, Lieutenant-Colonel (now Brigadier) I.R. Campbell, played an important role in the recovery of the men. The rehabilitation they received there both reinstated them as AIF soldiers yet helped to terminate their period of soldiering. To begin with, as ex-prisoners of war they were immediately brought into contact with war-time events when they were required by the Army to attend at Eastbourne and found the Women's Voluntary Services Units waiting to welcome them and to carry their bags. It was here they first developed a respect for, yet dislike of, their status as prisoners and also felt something of what it was like to be in mixed company.

2 Johnson, The 2/11th (City of Perth) Australian Infantry Battalion, 185.
Notwithstanding these conflicting ideals, the men were not slow to state their feelings. The thought that they needed help to carry their bags raised the ire of some; one saying decisively that: "As most [of the men] had been carrying their own baggage for a number of years, they politely declined the offer". The idea that the men had a point to make about being forgotten as prisoners is a favourite theme in some stories, while others say that they wanted to keep their feeling about being free to themselves until they reached home. Whether or not such claims about the reaction of the men are valid, two ideas are very relevant to appreciating the role of this phase in the men's recovery.

Fig. 61: Sitting around in a group.

The first of these was that the inclusion of the women's armed forces in the reception centre was extremely effective. The impact on the returned soldier in respect of his worth as an individual was probably the most important of any measure employed. The very determined yet impersonal fashion in which these women went about the business of making their presence felt as the men came to terms with their liberation was undoubtedly sound. The second idea was that as

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3 Johnson, OHP, 19.
soldiering was no longer the temporary affair it had been since June 1941 the problems confronted by the men had to be solved.

Basically the two immediate problems that most concerned the former prisoners of war were the after-effects of the German *kulturn*, and their place in the world. Having been subjected to intolerable racial arrogance and intense militarism the men had developed an almost unholy belief in the value of liberty as something to be prized next to life itself. This belief did not however come without some cost. Many fears, doubts and some recriminations on the value of their existence had not vanished with their release. The conclusion drawn was that this form of *kulturn* created despair:

*Soldiers with their own armies, and certainly civilians, see at least something of what goes on, have even in wartime sources of factual news... The prisoner, in contrast, seems to be lied to from all sides, doesn't know what to believe and what not to believe, lives in the shadow of mountains of doubt, suffering indignities and physical restraint, and the least able of all humans to do anything about it.*

But the effect of being out of touch with reality not only made life difficult for the returning warriors, it also forced them into a community that had no idea of the impact that being free had on them. Clearly, the onus was on the men to make their own way. As a result from the time they were re-kitted, declared healthy soldiers and decided themselves that: “It’s good to feel a solid man again”, the question of how to spend the well deserved leave was a much discussed subject. According to Passfield the English night life was a favourite. He decided that “one has not seen life until one has seen London”.

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4 Gavin Casey, “The Isles of Doom”, WAM 7.1, 22.
6 Passfield, 248.
Undoubtedly, the success of the 14 days’ leave that followed was due to the foresight of the army in issuing them with a return railway pass to anywhere in the British Isles; the welcome the people gave; and the bond they shared in having come through a war together. Not surprisingly after the unreal, cold and comfortless world of the camp Ryan wrote of the benefits of this in the following words:

_Went to Bournemouth today and settled in at the Morgan’s home. It is a nice place and Mrs Morgan gives us a free hand as regards hours etc. It is very pleasant to be in a private house again so much better than a hotel._

What is more he added:

_Spent the day eating and sleeping. It is quiet down here and no other Aussies. We were amused to learn how the locals dislike the Yanks and think the Aussies are just it. They’d change their minds if we had a division here._

The Ryans’ experience at the Morgan’s home was not an exception. Many of the 2/11th soldiers enjoyed the same settling environment. Gordon Williams, for instance, spent his home visit with a General and his family at Camberley in

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7 For these two passages see R. Ryan, “Diary”, 23-24 May, 1945.
Surrey, while Ken Johnson, after a visit with Arthur McRobbie to Aberdeen, went with him to Hindhead in Surrey. Here the pleasure of the visit by these two young lieutenants and the host family was shared. The Hewitts enjoyed the few items of food from the officers' mess as much as these two men enjoyed the welcome relief from the Oflags. Others like Bert Skillen returned home to their families and Arthur Ford and his mate Syd Watt visited Ford's uncle at a hamlet in Scotland.

It is not possible to give an idea of the excitement this prospect aroused in these two close friends. But Ford, despite being dressed for the occasion, had yet to realise that his physical and mental state was not quite up to being part of a family. Much to the dismay of these kind folk he kept disappearing from each and every gathering they arranged.

Stan Wood found himself in much the same state of being as Ford except that he became speechless the minute women joined a group and spent much of his time avoiding mixed company. The problem in cases like these was not that the

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8 Williams, 30.
9 Johnson, OHP, 19.
10 Writer's notes, 1948.
warriors were constitutionally anti-social or collectively graceless, although some may have been, but that they could not summon immediately the skill required to replace the male image and the idioms of war with the social graces normal to civilized society.

In time the difficulty of making the transition from soldiers' talk to civilian manners was swiftly overcome by the men adapting their stories to the company they were in. The farmer learned that his counterpart in Germany didn't exactly live off the fat of the land; the old miner nodded and understood about working underground on an empty stomach; and the laughter that accompanied the yarn about nipping off the tap-roots of trees for Hitler's new forest was shared. That the talking and the remembering might hurt, the teller did not consider: the point was to convey to the listener that a prisoner of war couldn't hope to win, but that he could have some fun by trying to.

Naturally characters of a more serious nature, like those in Sydney for the first Christmas away from home, tried to put their leave to good use also. Seeing London and its environs, amongst friendly people, and being themselves was their collective aim. Activities like fronting up to the barber for a haircut, shampoo and shave with money in your pocket was a luxury most indulged in. Others enjoyed the first cricket test at Lords since 1939; many visited the much damaged Parliament House; went over the Tower of London and some even saw a German U-Boat come up the Thames. Some meanwhile were content to just travel. To get on a bike (as Passfield had done in Germany) and enjoy a pleasant ride along the
smooth roads, stopping off at the local pubs going to no one knows where but being a free spirit, was popular.\textsuperscript{11}

This summary of the rehabilitation phase indicates the extent of the coping abilities of the 2/11th Battalion men in England under the Army's astute tactics. However it is doubtful if this would have worked so well had it not been for the presence of personnel from the Armed Services Women's Services who brought into focus the need for and the benefit of social relationships. In a matter of a few weeks the soldiers' perspective of living therefore was transferred from a discrete male dominant community into one in which women played an equal if not dominant role. While ideas of this nature may seem commonplace today, their implications in assessing the men's reaction to society was startling. One consequence, as has been explained, was that the men re-discovered themselves, took their place with assurance as returned soldiers and felt better equipped to return home. Another was that by providing for the well-being of the men and giving them a chance to take a job in the army (as Johnson and Williams did)\textsuperscript{12} or be on the next draft home, the army had ensured that 'away without leave' was kept to a minimum. This factor was an additional benefit for to have been held back in England, on a charge, would have been an intolerable burden.

For their return to Australia, the problems that most concerned the men of money, clothes and travel arrangements had suddenly disappeared, yet the need to reach home as quickly as possible was considered to be a matter of priority by most. Many took stock of themselves, learned about what had happened in the

\textsuperscript{11} Writer's notes, Group Discussion, 1994.
\textsuperscript{12} See Johnson, OHP, 19 and Williams, 30 respectively.
South West Pacific and realised that life might have been tough at home while the Japanese menace was at the door. Meanwhile, the movement of the troops from Eastbourne was generally by train to Liverpool where they embarked on His Majesty's Troopships by way of the Panama Canal to Sydney, stopping only in the Panama Canal zone for leave and for refuelling at Pearl Harbour or Wellington as was necessary.

The Ryan brothers, for example, who had been in England since 10 May left on the 30th on the Arundel Castle. Johnson, who likewise had arrived in England on the 10th, departed on the Maurearte on 3 July 1945. For Williams, who was the last of these four to embark, the route home was different. He left on the TSS Otranto from Southampton on the 20 August, came through the Panama Canal and on into Fremantle, arriving in Gage Roads on 20 September 1945.

While these 2/11th Battalion ex-prisoners of war were finding their way home after their sojourn in the United Kingdom, the new battalion of the 2/11th Battalion soldiers were on active service against the Japanese in New Guinea. By piecing together events since Crete the men were to learn that the future of their successors was as uncertain as their own, particularly since November 1944. While some of the prisoners were toughing it out on Hitler's farms, hiding out at Hohenfels or trekking and hoping for the best and fearing the worst, these soldiers were on the trail of the Japanese, proving themselves to be a worthy replacement for the original volunteers of the battalion.

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14 Johnson, OHP, "Major Movements", 6-7. (In addendum to OHP.)
15 Williams, 31.
Following events in Crete Lieutenant-Colonel Sandover had the task of reforming a new 2/11th Battalion in Syria. A substantial nucleus of officers and a few of the other ranks were assembled, reinforced and retrained only to find that the part of the AIF in the Middle East was almost finished. This was a bitter blow for the 2/11th Battalion who were hoping to go into action against Rommel's force, but the unprecedented successes of the Japanese thrust into the Southern Pacific had convinced the Prime Minister that the welfare of Australia must come first. The fall of Singapore with the complete loss of the 2/4th Machine Gun Battalion in a manner similar to that of the 2/11th on Crete had decided the future of the 2/11th in the Middle East. While debates on the issue flew back and forth between Churchill and Curtin by way of Cairo the devastating bombing of Darwin, Broome and Sydney Harbour emphasised the immediate need for the troops to return. Australia was to have her army units back forthwith.

The homecoming of the 2/11th Battalion in 1942 did not mean that they were pressed into service against the Japanese immediately. Rather, factors relating to war strategies now that the Americans were playing a vital part; the need to defend Australia against invasion; and to provide services for rest and recreation of combat troops already fighting the Japanese, had to be dealt with first.

By March 1943, however, the battalion was at full strength in camp at Chidlow when a storm akin to an enemy attack laid waste a wide part of the countryside and temporarily stopped their training. Many of the men were lucky to escape unscathed and nearly all the buildings were damaged. In place of getting fit and able to fight the enemy the troops had not only to recreate their camp but they

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16 For the description of these events and that which follows on the New Guinea episode see, Casey, 27-33 passim; The 2/11th Australian Infantry Battalion, Chapters VIII-IX passim.
had also to remake the roads and make good the damage elsewhere. In the
time Sandover's worth as a senior, experienced soldier was recognised by the
army. On 1 May he was promoted to Acting-Brigadier of the 6th Brigade\textsuperscript{17} and
was replaced by his second in command, Major (now Lieutenant-Colonel) Hector
Binks, a veteran of the 2/11th experience in the Middle East, and the Balkans.

![Fig. 64: Lieutenant-Colonel H.M. Binks, 6 May 1943 - 19 January 1945](image)

By June, Binks had seen the battalion through its jungle training at Worsley
(W.A.) and a month later at Wondeela, Queensland. This move brought little joy to
these soldiers. They could understand the need to guard Australia, but they had
enlisted to fight the Japanese not wait till they arrived. But as the months went by
and the prospect of an invasion lessened, the thought that the 'Japs' might just do
it if there were not adequate forces to meet them, was a reality the battalions in
Australia, including the 2/11th, had to accept. Just when they had got to the point
of thinking that the battle weary troops in New Guinea might be brought home for
Christmas, the impossible happened. Without prior warning but with much cheer

\textsuperscript{17} Long (1963), 249.
on 1 November, 1944 the 2/11th moved through Jugato staging camp at Townsville to Finschhaven, New Guinea, stopping only while the Armistice Day services were held before disembarking at Aitape on the 13th. Like Skillen and his mates in the Middle East three years earlier their "war had begun".18

Some of this was 'pretty dull stuff' for the ex-prisoners of war to absorb as their ships brought them home. But it allowed them to appreciate what had occurred on the 'home front' and how their battalion came to terms with a war that threatened Australia. It was a relief to know that the 2/11th had been guarding their home and families while they were Hitler's guests.19

Fig. 65: Aitape Landing, New Guinea.

At Aitape, the new arrivals received an uncertain welcome. The men wrote home, like McRobbie in his last letter to his mother from Crete, telling their mothers about the situation. The Australian Comfort Fund fed them while they set up their camp and kitchen. The parallels with the incidents that preceded the original 2/11th going into battle in the Middle East are surprisingly similar. In place of an exercise against the 16th and 17th Brigades battalions at Burg-el-Arab, at

18 Skillen, 1.
19 Writer's notes, New Guinea.
Aitape the 2/11th boxing team were victors on four out of six bouts against the Americans. In turn the Americans, it seemed, had their revenge by winning, hands down, at softball. Sorties of this nature were part of a soldier’s life.

Over Christmas patrols occurred during the day and films were showed at night. The reconnoitres by the 2/11th to the Yakamul area disclosed an inhospitable country but little sign of the enemy. But later a Japanese captive admitted that his detail on a similar mission had seen the 2/11th watching the film shows at night from their camouflage position in that horrible terrain. It was a land of jungle, mountains, rivers and defiles where the Japanese were adept at hiding out and killing the unwary troops before fading back into the undergrowth or across the waterways without leaving a trace, as the Australians were soon to find out.20

While it was a different and difficult environment the 2/11th soon came to terms with it. Regular patrols during January 1945 of Nambut Creek, Nambut Hill and Abau areas21 made them familiar with the pitfalls and the tactics needed to engage the enemy. By playing the Japanese at their own game and booby-trapping their escape routes the Australians showed they meant business. There were casualties on both sides, far more suffered by the enemy than the 2/11th, but they had a job to do, and the quicker they got it over and done with the sooner they would be out of the place. Meanwhile the battalion’s commanding officer had changed. Binks was given a temporary command of the 3rd Australian Base Sub-Area22 at Aitape and Lieutenant-Colonel C.H. Green had taken over.

20 See Long, *The Final Campaigns* (1963), for the map of the location of Yakamul, p.276; and for battle casualties see p.385.
21 Long (1963) for the position of Nambut Hill and Nambut Creek in relationship to Abau, p.284 and p.297 respectively.
22 *The 2/11th Infantry Battalion*, 145.
The clearing out of the Japanese from New Guinea was a treacherous job. Without the benefits of defensive positions the enemy had to be hunted from the shelter of their fox holes by small details, leaving the soldiers highly vulnerable and without protection. After three months of active duty the 2/11th was relieved by their companion in arms at Retimo, the 2/1st Battalion, before taking a break at Aitape until March. It was a nostalgic reunion for the few left from the volunteers of the two battalions who had shared that disastrous battle.

There seemed little doubt that by May 1945, when the 2/11th began the hardest movement they were to experience in New Guinea, the war must end soon. The sequence of events in Europe had spread to the South Pacific. The Japanese had been driven out of the major parts of New Guinea and the Allies were in control.

By 10 May the unit was struggling in mud, floods and unimaginable conditions through Boiken and Cape Pus to Wom, in the process killing Japanese
stragglers from Wewak. They took Hill 710 on the 15th and capturing Wewak on the 17th and 18th was the toughest action of all. The follow-up patrols for the rest of the month through this inhospitable country thick with snipers was not easy either, but the rewards were worthwhile. The battalion enjoyed a spell as Brigade reserve on Wirai beach and three of their number were awarded the Military Medal.

In June the 2/11th Battalion was relieved by the 2/1st Anti Tank Regiment before being ordered to protect the Boram Airfield to Cape Moem. These tasks, as Long explained "were not sinecures...", as the enemy was still active. Patrols, therefore, interspersed by spasmodic fighting and rest periods, remained the operational orders for the 2/11th Battalion from then on. How close peace was to them when screeds on the problem of rehabilitation began to filter through the Battalion’s Education Officer some time in July. Therefore, in August, when the news of the Japanese surrender came over the radio, it was no particular surprise, but it was certainly a relief.

September began with a parade for General H.C.H. Robertson, the original 19th Brigade Commander, who reminded them of his long association with the 6th Division, and his pride in the 19th. The men were suitably impressed, and knowing the General’s reputation for not standing on ceremony, felt he was specially suited to demand General Adachi surrender. Of the 3,000 troops present to see the surrender document signed by Adachi, one hundred were from the 2/11th. It was a just reward for their service.

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21 For position of Cape Pus and Cape Worn in relationship to Wewak, see Long (1963) p.345.
22 Long (1963), 342-354 passim.
23 Long (1963), 372 and 559 respectively.
By November the disbandment of the unit was taking place. Most soldiers returned to Australia through Finschhafen, Port Moresby, Brisbane and Chermside Camp to Puckapunyal, where their return to civilian life became official.\footnote{Casey, "The Isles of Doom", WAM 7.1, 32.}

While events in New Guinea were drawing to a close the ex-prisoners of war were making their way home. As might be expected the men were chafing at confinement in an army troopship again. Ryan, for example, explained that "the Aussies are not settling down to Army life again and as a result of a row over duties and fatigues the AIF have been sacked from guard and picquet duties".\footnote{R. Ryan, "Diary", 2 June, 1945.} The latter event no doubt pleased more than worried them.

Despite such incidents there was a general feeling of optimism amongst the men. They just wanted to get the voyage over so that they could get back home to their loved ones. After the occasion of the official welcome from the GOC, General Blamey, and the Australian Governor, the Duke of Gloucester when the \textit{Stirling Castle} loaded with ex-prisoners of war put into Sydney Harbour early in August, it
was not surprising that there were relatives to meet many of them. Syd Watt’s mother, sister and his cousin Peggy, Arthur Ford’s fiancée, were all there and within a matter of days Ford had procured a special license and married his much loved Peggy who had waited for his return for four years.

Fig. 68: A happy ending.

The Fords’ happiness that resulted from this union in 1945 was not isolated. Two others, Fred Whiteaker and Stan Woods were also happily married. Fred to his Newcastle girlfriend and Stan to his Perth fiancée. Others, like the Ryan brothers, were equally successful in picking up the threads of their former lives.\(^{28}\) The eldest of a family of seven, these two young men returned to a very loving and caring household. Ray (a Staff-Sergeant in the Pay Corps, adopted into the 2/11th during his imprisonment) was recalled by his wife as being a lonely, shy person at first, who always kept close to the walls of a room when they were out. A habit, she smilingly admitted, that he soon lost as he became used to escorting her about and being in mixed company. Laurie’s return to society was no less satisfactory. He married, continued to write, but only social notes on work events. He retired from a State Government position in 1980.

\(^{28}\) See Writer’s Notes for the former and for the latter, Imelda Ryan, 35.
Unlike most of the other 2/11th men at Eastbourne, who took the draft home as soon as possible, Gordon Williams was captivated by the English countryside. "The children speaking English fascinated him", so he decided to stay. In a manner characteristic of his approach to being a prisoner he had decided to make the most of his time. The regular yet undemanding work at the AIF Reception Centre added to his sense of well-being and clad proudly in his Australian uniform he went on leave regularly. The days at Herr Domling's place were gone for good; Williams was steadfastly looking to the future. Certainly he still had some rough times and was in hospital when the Hiroshima bomb was dropped on 6 August. In the meantime he and two other 2/11th men, Vic Holyoake and D.R. (Curly) Atkins found many outlets for their mutual enjoyment until they were drafted home late in August.

When the chance came for Williams and Atkins to jump onto a launch to get ashore from the Oronto as she anchored in Gage Road, only Atkins (who had been writing to Williams' sister in Shenton Park) made the break. Williams wanted to savour the meeting with his parents to the full at the appointed time. Facts often defy fiction. Williams' father meanwhile, needing to pass the time away until his son arrived, went to the Shenton Park Hotel, saw Atkins' 2/11th colour patch and took him home for the night. Thus Williams' homecoming was doubly rewarding. Not only was he greeted on the wharf by his family but by a quirk of fate by one of his best friends.29

A soldier's life changes abruptly on his discharge. Without any fanfare he is a soldier one day and a civilian the next: family life instead of the army drill. The friends he remembered from civilian days spoke another language, but that it was a

29 For the quotation and information in the last two paragraphs see Williams,31.
lot better than the 'raus-raus', rifle butts and barbed wire was never in doubt. That he was home was what mattered.

Australia they found was prosperous. The need for a plentiful supply of goods and services for the returned men and the migrants flocking in from Europe meant there was no shortage of jobs. And they had a choice: they could work for the government, let a boss take the responsibility, go on the land or be on their own. A life quite different from the depression years that they had grown up with and the camps they had left behind.

Returned Service League clubs and unit associations filled the want the men had to be with their mates and eased the 'culture shock' of their return.

Outsiders who think that such groups do little but glorify war don't know what it is to need the reassurance that these meetings give to the members. It is from these gatherings and the facts known about the prisoners of war in Germany that the images of their existence have become engraved in the folk memory of Western Australia.

In Western Australia the 11th and 2/11th Infantry Battalion and the Ex-Prisoner of War Association ensured that their fallen comrades and their experiences in the Second World War, especially that of being 'stunned and stymied' by the order to surrender, are not forgotten.
Conclusion

The Western Australian 2/11th Infantry Battalion was part of the 6th Division of the Australian Imperial Force raised late in 1939. Although the war was in its infancy this unit became a component of the Allies' fight against Germany's ambition in Europe and Japan's aspiration in South East Asia that was to take on global proportions before the surrender of these two powers in 1945.

The decision taken by Prime Minister Menzies to declare war on Germany on 3 September 1939 in concert with Great Britain, marked the beginning of the 2/11th Battalion involvement in the Allies' offensive in the Middle East and the Balkans and determined the future of most of the volunteers. Greece, believed to be essential as a bulwark against Hitler's southward thrust, received the Allied Expeditionary Force in March 1941 with enthusiasm, but with few resources, resulting in Wavell's Anzac Corp withdrawing just ahead of the German war machine. The 2/11th Battalion, unaware of these difficulties, arrived in time to stiffen the defences of the retreating army and in turn became part of the force evacuating to Crete. The resultant debacle that began for the 2/11th on 17 April and ended on 30 May 1941, stands in sharp contrast to the victorious march across the African desert just three months before.

The total lack of air cover, the few properly equipped army units and the rugged island terrain on Crete meant that Freyberg's Creforce defending the island's three airstrips on the north coast, stood little chance against the limitless number of paratroopers who descended on 20 May. As a result once Maleme and
Heraklion airstrip fell to the enemy, the force of the 2/1st and the 2/11th Battalions had neither the space to move, nor the means to receive information on the plans to evacuate to Sfarkia on the south coast. As defending the Retimo airstrip was no longer a viable proposition, the men of the 2/11th were given the option of escaping or surrendering. They had little choice. By the time this news reached them they were surrounded by the grinning, victorious Germans.

Because most of the 2/11th and almost all of the 2/1st Battalions became prisoners of war, they were forced to rely on the Germans for their future existence. This was not to be a pleasant existence. Archival material of the 2/11th Battalion, supplemented by material from the veterans of the unit and their family members, has provided an insight into the experiences of the prisoners in the German stalags. This evidence revealed the treatment they received on Crete, in Salonika and in transit to Germany, as well as the options they created for themselves as a result of their response to the Nazi Regime. Such factors enhance the picture of prisoners of war as part of their war effort that might not otherwise have become known.

In theory the Geneva Convention provided directives on the range of work that prisoners of war, according to their rank, could be asked to do. But in practice the Germans frequently ignored these guidelines. NCOs were selected for work-parties without any notice being taken of the immunity this implied or their rights in the matter. The prisoners, for their part, could do little beyond protesting officially through the 'Man of Confidence', but unofficially they defied the order and took the punishment. Once having found a common cause the NCOs, with right on their
side, did not hesitate. They banded together to take a stand against a legitimate injustice.

One such example of this strength was the reaction of the NCOs at Hohenfels, Stalag 383. It concerned the business of hand-cuffing 1000 Allied prisoners, in a number of camps, for real or believed wrong-doing by the British and Canadian troops at Dieppe in August 1942. At the height of this protest the NCOs refused to wear the cuffs unless the guards fitted them in the morning and unlocked them at night. Knowing full well the length of time this would take and the extent to which the guards would be exposed to their hostility the prisoners were determined not to give in. The formula worked. In future the cuffs were only to be worn on official occasions, until eventually the practice was phased out and a pass issued to exempt the Australians from such a detail.

Less spectacular than the cuffs episode, but equally important for the prisoners' state of well-being were the actions of the 'escape artists'. The methods they employed may have varied, but the intent remained the same. For some the time taken up in planning to outwit the 'Jerry', in digging the tunnel and in the split-second timing to make the final break (despite that most ended in failure) was sufficient to satisfy the escape customers. For others, like Alf Passfield, escaping for him became a way of life. In his opinion, his reported attempts at escaping, his return to the stalag, his elation at being free and in outwitting the system all contributed to the Allies' war effort. Escaping and keeping the Germans alert to this practice, for men of his ilk, was a vast improvement on being under the heel of the guards all the time. Also, it made easier the stigma the men believed was
attached to being a prisoner of war, and allowed them to think about life beyond the camp.

In front stalags like Moosburg and Lamsdorf, the social and physical environment exerted a significant influence on the health of the prisoners. Without taking into account the mental anguish they suffered through isolation and loss of contact with their loved ones, they suffered from disease, injury through accidents at work or from incidental and orchestrated abuse from the guards. Death was not something that happened often, but when it came the men were desolate.

Evidence shows that fear of starvation played a part in the life of prisoners. In good times a regular supply of Red Cross parcels kept them going. Later, when the Russian army was advancing into Germany's occupied territories and the Allied bombing had destroyed the German transport system, it was different. Then they lived more on hope than on substance.

Beside these accounts of misery, starvation and deprivation must be acknowledged the achievements of the relief organisations. In the early days of the 2/11th imprisonment the British Red Cross was to the fore in providing food and clothing parcels together with invalid food and medical and surgical supplies for thousands of the prisoners. While in the background it was through the work of the International Red Cross Committee in Geneva and the influence of the Protecting Powers that (among other things) the prisoners' families got to know of their whereabouts, and made available the camp cards for prisoners to write home. In addition vast quantities of books, sports gear, educational programmes, musical instruments and concert party equipment were supplied. Most extraordinary stories are told of the concerts attended, books read, lessons taken and the time passed in
being involved, or just being interested in the ingenuity or prowess of their fellow prisoners.

Apart from the prisoners who took an interest in whatever the day brought forth there were a few of the 2/11th men like Bert Skillen and Gordon Williams who adjusted to their lot, worked on farms, in factories or on maintenance jobs. Accepting within reason whatever was asked of them and biding their time they were able to take evasive action when ordered by the Germans to march away from the advancing Russian army. Williams’ story of his pact with his employer, and Skillen’s sense of timing in walking away from the column demonstrated their ability to cope and signalled to the German civilians and the retreating German troops that they were no longer their subjects.

Alongside the account of individual prisoners who made their way successfully to freedom are the horrendous stories of the forced march from main camps like Lamsdorf and Hohenfels. The Ryan brothers, Ray and Laurie, were fortunate to reach Regenberg and freedom together, before being flown to England, while others like W.G. Ryan were not so lucky. His account tells of their 700 strong column’s aimless 14 week march away from the work camps in upper Silesia from the 22 January to the 28 April 1945 and back to near Moosburg. It may not have been the longest trek but it had its hazards. The cold was intense, frost bite caused a good deal of trouble and the rations were light. Days of continuous marching, sometimes covering over forty miles in a day and those who couldn’t keep up just dropped out and were not seen again. Health and sanitation services were stretched to the limit and in the first six weeks one young black-
haired English lad turned white. Eventually, after competing for road space with the retreating German troops, who like the Greeks at Larisa were trying to reach home ahead of the enemy, they got within a few miles of their goal. But not before the guards, fearful not only for their lives but also of being caught up in the rearguard actions being fought by the military police troops, urged them to keep going. When this was realised and knowing that their release was so close, they stayed put and had hardly settled before the American troops rolled in. The relief was immeasurable; the release timely.

Categories of behaviour have emerged revealing the impact imprisonment had on the volunteer soldier like those of the 2/11th Battalion. But these categories may only be justified from an examination of the experiences of other units in the same position. The history of one unit however has shown that rank has its privilege. It would seem imperative therefore that front-line soldiers, especially volunteers who bring a wealth of experience into an armed force, should from necessity know that when an army passes through a disastrous military operation that for survival part of its force may be abandoned. Likewise, the army should acknowledge the worth of the volunteer soldier and the possibility that some of them may become prisoners. And as an insurance perhaps consider conferring the rank of a NCO on all those going into battle against a belligerent force.

This study addresses the non-operational aspect of military history. The reaction of the prisoners to being deprived of the most basic of human needs and

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1 See W.G. Ryan, 55-58 passim for details of this account.
their action as a consequence has provided strong evidence for the inclusion of this facet of warfare into the body of Australian military history. Like the prisoners of war from the 2/5th Infantry Battalion they felt part of their unit throughout the duration, therefore their conduct in an atmosphere of war is a cause of pride not to be forgotten or remain unheralded. This study also demonstrates the perceived imbalances in the theoretical component of the soldiers' curriculum, in the firm belief that soldiers should not be 'stunned and stymied' when called on to surrender, rather that all eventualities of warfare should be understood by soldiers and should likewise become an integral part of a nation's history.

In conclusion it is fitting to re-emphasise that the study of the prisoner of war is an important area for the military historian. For until the consequence and significance of this phenomenon is examined with the same attention that official historians have given to the political and strategic aspect of war history, this area will continue to remain a subject outside the canons of established historiography.
Appendix A

You ... will bring two cooked meals

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NOTICE TO ATTEND FOR ENLISTMENT.

Surbaco Recruiting Office.

To:

Surbaco Hotel

Surbaco

H having been accepted for enlistment in the Australian Military Forces
for service in Australia or abroad, you are hereby required to attend at

Drill Hall

Surbaco

at 9 a.m. on 7 NOV 1939 for attestation.

You will be required to proceed to camp on 8 NOV 1939 (date),
and will bring two cooked meals.

You should wear uniform, if in your possession, and bring with you the
following other articles (including those which you are wearing):

| * Piece of soap | Two pairs woollen underpants | * Razor |
| * Shaving soap   | Two shirts                    | Table knife, fork, spoon |
| * Razor strap (if required) | Two singlets                | Plate, enamel or tin |
| * Padlock and key (for kit bag when issued) | Two pairs woolen socks | Panini, enamel or tin (1 pt.) |
| * Combs         | Two towels                   | Cardigan, jersey, or sweater |
| * Tooth paste   | Hair brush                   | * One pair sand shoes |
| * Pair of brushes | Tooth brush                |
|               | Shaving brush               |

Except those marked * all of the above articles which are considered satisfactory will be paid for
at rates determined by the Department, and, though becoming the property of the Department, will
remain in your possession.

When uniform is issued to you your plain clothes will be despatched to
the address desired by you free of charge.

S. A. SHELLABEAR.

Reconci Oil Office.

Source: Writers notes
THE ISLE OF DOOM

Here I sit on the Isle of Crete
Bludging on my blistered feet!
Little wonder I’ve the blues
With feet encased in great canoes,
Khaki shorts instead of slacks,
Living like a tribe of blacks
Except that blacks don’t sit and brood,
And wail throughout the day for food!

T’was just a month ago, not more,
We sailed to Greece to win the war,
We marched and groaned beneath our load,
While bombers bombèd us off the road
They chased us here, they chased us there,
The blighters chased us everywhere,
And while they dropped their loads of death
We cursed the bloody RAF.

Yet the RAF were there in force
(They tell a few at home, of course),
We saw the entire squad one day
When a spitfire spat the other way
And then we heard the wireless news
When portly Winston gave his views
“The RAF” he said “in Greece”
Are fighting hard to bring us peace.
And so we scratched our heads and thought
“This smells distinctly like a rort,
For if in Greece the Airforce be
Then where the flaming hell are we?”
And then at last we met the Hun
At odds of thirty three to one,
And tho’ he made it pretty hot
We gave the beggar all we got.
The bullets whizzed - the big gun roared
We howled for ships to get aboard.
At length they came and on we got
And hurried from that cursed spot.

And then they landed us at Crete
And marched us off our bloody feet!
The food was light, the water crook,
I got fed up and slung my hook,
Returned that night full up with wine
And next day copped a ten shilling fine.
My pay book was behind to hell
When pay was called I said “O well;
They won’t pay me, I’m sure of that”
And when they did, I smelt a rat
But when next day no rations came
I realised their wily game
For sooner than sit down and die
We spent our rent on food supply.
So now it looks like even bettin’
A man’ll soon become a Cretin
And spend his days in blackest gloom
On Adolph Hitler’s Isle of Doom.

L. D. Ryan 2/11 Bn
Written at Georgiopulis, Crete on May 10th, 1941. I have met many in different camps who claim to have written this, but Laurie read it to me when he came to Canea before the blitz commenced. (R.E.Ryan)
Appendix C

Origin of Escape of Troops from Crete, G. Greenway [WX978]

1. Organisation chiefly responsible or organised contact and rescue of troops on Crete after all military & naval evacuations had been completed was M.1.5.

This department was not responsible to either Army or Navy Intelligence Services, but was directly under the War Ministry & its duties covered many fields both in Intelligence Counter-Intelligence directions - some of which included the dropping of agents in Occupied Territories countering the activities of enemy agents in those countries, and many more activities.

When Crete was evacuated M.1.5 had already made its plans and had established several bases in the mountains equipped with wireless sets and maintenance either by air-droppings or fast MLs (FAIRMILE launches). M.1.5 was informed that several bodies of Allied tps were still at large on the Island and arrived with the Navy to land one of their agents (Cmdr POOLE) in order that organised parties could be gathered together & taken to selected spots for evacuation by submarine.

Two trips were made in this way and all large parties of evacuees were accounted for, but it was known that there were other troops in one's and two's scattered throughout Crete but the Navy was unable to risk submarines for isolated parties at this stage as the Naval situation in the Med. at this time was not a very happy one and every ship was required for the harassing of enemy convoys on the NORTH AMERICAN run.

2. I became involved with M.1.5 when I reached Alexandria from Crete and together with all “Ex Cretans” was interviewed by British Intelligence people and among other things, asked if I was prepared to return to Crete in an endeavour to collect further Commonwealth troops on the island - ...

Source: WAM 6.5, 37
Appendix D

The Chapel of St John, the Theologian, Prevelly Park, Margaret River, Western Australia

Prevali Monastery on the south coast of Crete overlooking the Libyan Sea

### Appendix E

**Red Cross parcels**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CANADIAN</th>
<th>BRITISH</th>
<th>GERMAN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 bully ...</td>
<td>1 M. &amp; V. ...</td>
<td>Meat ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 pork roll</td>
<td>1 bacon</td>
<td>sausage (ersatz)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 salmon</td>
<td>1 meat roll</td>
<td>jam (turnip)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 sardines</td>
<td>1 salmon</td>
<td>sugar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 jam</td>
<td>1 oats</td>
<td>cheese (ersatz)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 cheese</td>
<td>1 syrup</td>
<td>margarine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 biscuits</td>
<td>1 sugar</td>
<td>fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 chocolate</td>
<td>1 tea</td>
<td>cereal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 tea</td>
<td>1 cocoa</td>
<td>bread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 klim</td>
<td>1 condensed milk</td>
<td>tea (ersatz)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 sugar</td>
<td>1 service biscuits</td>
<td>coffee (ersatz)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 packet raisins</td>
<td>1 packet raisins</td>
<td>salt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 packet prunes</td>
<td>1 chocolate</td>
<td>dried vegetable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 butter</td>
<td>1 cheese</td>
<td>fresh vegetable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 tablet soap.</td>
<td>1 dried egg</td>
<td>potatoes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 packet pepper and salt.</td>
<td>1 margarine</td>
<td>peas (dried)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 tablet soap.</td>
<td>1 tablet soap.</td>
<td>barley</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Oats ... 5\(\frac{1}{4}\) oz.

Source: 2/11th (City of Perth) Australian Infantry Battalion, 1939-45, 195

Extract from book "Joe in Germany" published in 1946.
Appendix F

Stalag VIIA, Moosburg, Germany

Lagerplan

Appendix G

Field postcards.

Source: Mary Traub, 1995
Alf Passfield’s escape routes, 1942-1945.

Source: A. Passfield The Escape Artist, 101, 130.
Appendix I

German Prisoners of War tied near Dieppe

Photo copy made of the detailed British military plan for the invasion of PRISONERS OF WAR attempted near Dieppe.

a) Disposal and Custody.
(1) A P.W. Cago. will be established by 2 Cdn Div Intelligence Officer (Capt. Innsingor) in the vicinity of WUTE beach with Provost personnel provided for this purpose.
(2) Units will provide escorts for prisoners to P.W. Cago. Provost personnel outside H.C. Area will advise exact location of Cago.

b) Labelling of Prisorners.
(1) After searching prisoners for arms, special tags which will be in the possession of an I.0's, will be attached to prisoners' clothing. Those tags will show:
   - Unit affording capture.
   - Place and time of capture.
   - (ii) Wherever possible, prisoners' hands will be tied to prevent destruction of their documents.

(c) Searching of Prisoners.
(1) At the Cago all documents will be removed and labelled. Documents etc. will then be despatched to Force H.Q. Ship No.2 (U.S.S. WRENS) by H.O.
(2) Prisoners will be left in possession of all badges, identity discs, decorations, etc.

Source: Photo Album, WAM 10.0, n.d.
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4.2 History Cover Design and other Sketches
5.1 Unit War History - Funds
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7.2 Early Comments on the Synopsis
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Jean Pullin
Imelda Ryan
May Ryan
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