

IN CAPTIVITY, ON THE RUN AND AFTER CAPTIVITY

In 1945 the Soviet Army entered the German territory. Up to 250,000 POWs of the Allied armies were held in concentration camps of the Eastern part of Reich. There were also several thousand Australians captured during battles in North Africa, Greece, Italy and many airmen from *RAF* planes shot down during air raids on the cities and industrial centers of Germany and occupied European countries.

Naturally, the German command didn't want the Soviet Army or its Allies to liberate POWs. In most of the cases the concentration camps were "evacuated" deeper into German territory, as far as possible from the front line. Hundreds of thousands of POWs had to endure marching hundreds kilometers long, often under bombs. That's why the liberation of POWs was mostly happening by the very end of war when the Western and Eastern front nearly came together. Some Australians had to return home over a circle route, for example POWs from the Grudziadz camp in Poland. About seventy prisoners liberated by the Soviet Army were initially sent to Odessa, and then - to Great Britain by sea.

Australians, as well as POWs of other nationalities, underwent a brainwashing. The Germans tried to incline them to join so called *British Free Corps* - a British unit in Waffen SS destined to fight "the Jewish plutocrats and international Bolshevism". Over all period of war 39 POWs joined the BFC. There were several Australians and one New Zealander amongst them. In April 1945 the Germans tried to throw this small group of people into a battle against the Soviet Army standing by the walls of Berlin. However, the motley crew never went into combat. Amazingly, the Australian renegades repatriated home after the end of war without serious problems and didn't undergo any severe legal persecution.

Some Australians were liberated by the Soviet Army from a Japanese concentration camp in Mukden (Manchuria) in 1945.

CAPTIVITY

First encounters between Russians and Australians took place in captivity. It was then when many Australians picked up some perception of the Eastern front. They often saw that the German guards who had been discharged from the Eastern front units after injuries were the most cruel and merciless with the POWs. It was not a secret for Australians that the guards were afraid most of all of being sent to the Eastern front which was incomparable to other fronts in terms of ferocity and bloodshed.



Donald Watt, an infantry soldier. He had taken part in battles in Palestine, North Africa and Crete. In 1941 he was wounded and imprisoned. In 1944 he escaped from a POW camp in Poland and managed to have reached the Swiss border. After being recaptured, he escaped again from another camp. He finished the war in Germany in the ranks of a British armor brigade.

Watt was injured in a camp Stalag XIIIC in Germany:

I was taken back to the camp in terrible pain< but it was three months before the guards got a doctor to see me. Not only did I have bad cuts and deep bruising from where the dump truck had run over my back, but there was something wrong with a couple of vertebrae. If that wasn't enough, all the physical strain had opened up the wound in my knee that had been cut to the bone by shrapnel in Crete. On top of that, the icing on the cake you might say, the doctor said I had a hernia and needed urgent hospital treatment. I was a mess.

Reluctantly, the camp administration gave permission for me to go to hospital. A week later I was bundled off, and I do mean bundled. Despite my injuries and the number of trucks that were available for transport, the guards made walk ten kilometers to the railway station. What with my back and hernia, I was nearly doubled up with pain, my head almost on my knees. Eventually, after a lot of travelling and a great deal of walking, I was taken to the POW hospital at Ebelsbach, where an English doctor was in charge. "Your hernia is a bad one, chum," the doctor said, after giving me a thorough examination. "We can fix up your leg and put your back in a plaster cast, but your hernia is another matter. You need an operation urgently, and I do mean urgently, or you will have trouble for the rest of your life. However, we have two problems. One, the only qualified surgeon is a Russian officer who speaks very little English, although I'm sure he would be happy to carry out the operation. Two, we don't have anaesthetic to knock you out with. So if you have the operation and take my word that it's urgent and you need it - you will feel everything."

I was in so much pain, I told them to go ahead and do the operation. After all, what did I have to lose? I was already suffering, so what difference did a bit more make? I was taken to the operating room, where I was stripped to a table, ankles, legs, chest and arms. The two doctors again checked that I was happy to go without anaesthetic. I asked for a minute or two to psyche myself up and started to think about the good times I'd had before I enlisted for the war.

Then I gave them the nod, and they put a thick stick in my mouth to bite on. They were about to rig up a blanket in front of my face so I wouldn't see what was going on, when I told them not to bother.

Not only did they have no anaesthetic at that hospital, they didn't have anything for the stitches, either. So, instead of sewing me up in the normal way, they formed a pyramid of small sandbags on my stomach to hold the sides of the wound together. I was like that for a week, lying flat on my back, unable to move, and with a huge weight bearing down on my stomach. It did the trick, however, and the wound soon started to heal.

Thus a Russian doctor saved an Australian comrade in captivity.



Ian Ramsey, an infantry soldier. He was captured in Greece in 1941: Soon after our arrival to the camp it became authentic news that the Germans had invaded Russia. Optimists thought that it would completely change the course of war in Europe and that the Germans would soon be defeated. Others said the Russians were "not worth a bumper". .. Mac said that they would be driven back and probably defeated as long as this could be done by Blitzkrieg before the snows came in the winter of 1941. He reckoned that if the Germans had not beaten the Russians by then, the latter would refit during the winter and would prove a difficult enemy for the Wehrmacht. This view, of course, proved to be correct.

In Wolfesburg camp, end of 1941:

A vast number of them [Russians] were herded in by their captors. To the British, French and other prisoners this was a grim event. The Russians appeared quite dispirited and silently did whatever they were told. Being so weak, they could hardly move. They were treated like cattle, quite differently to the other prisoners. We didn't know how the war was going, but the arrival of the Russians disheartened all of us.

British prisoners were requested to volunteer for certain daily camp fatigues which provided them with extra rations. Most of these were outside the outer fence of the camp. One was transporting Russian corpses to a large slit trench which had been dug about half a kilometer away. The bodies were tipped in, covered with lime and buried. Russians were dying at the rate of about ten a day and there was a rumor that they suffered from typhus. This was untrue; they mostly died from malnutrition. Often when one died, his corpse was kept by his comrades who took it on appeal to

have it counted and issued with a meal ticket by the unsuspecting guards who, for health reasons, kept their distance.

To those who had seen the mass funerals it had become important to help Russians.

I and a few gallant comrades, including Mac, had found that many satisfied British prisoners did not draw their filthy German soup and could exist generally lying all day in bed on the bread ration and the Red cross parcels. We used to collect these unwanted ration tickets and to go to the camp kitchens near the gate where the French cooks were stirring huge pots of dirty potato peels and other disgusting ingredients. We could draw this "soup" in buckets against the unused ratio tickets and return to our end of the compound with the object of giving it to the starving Russians next door.

The guards did not seem to object, but it was not easy to deliver the soup, as we weren't allowed into the Russian compound. We would tie the full bucket to a rope and then throw the other end over the high barbed wire fence separating us. The Russians would eagerly pull on the rope until the bucket reached the top of the fence. It would tilt over and the slops would fall to the ground on their side. The hungry recipients then would grovel on the ground, eating the soup and potato peel, together with quite a lot of earth. More generous Krigies gave them bread, cigarettes or, rarely, Red Cross food.

More and more Russians were admitted to the camp and large numbers were daily carted away on wagons to their graves. There was always speculation among the British and the other Europeans as to how their war was going. The only news we received was through the loudspeaker which announced everything in three languages, including English, latterly every evening.

The "news" bragged on their successes in Eastern Europe. Rommel's success on the front in North Africa, which was the only other theatre of war, was also acclaimed.

I had a bet of ten cigarettes with Mac that the Russian army was not as defeated and demoralized as the loudspeaker "news" said. To get a decision on this, we decided to ask a Ruski through the wire. It took ages to find one who could speak any language known to us. Finally, a little smelly mouse named Mikhail advised us, in German, that he came from Ukrainia where they were sent to war armed only with forks and spikes. They had no hope, he said. So Mac won. I think, Mikhail exaggerated. He gave me his address in Orlovskaja Oblast and I tried in vain to locate him when I visited the USSR.

The Russians were never allowed out of their compound except if dead. They were a people apart, and only a few cared what they were thinking or what would happen to them. On Christmas Eve, the spirit of jollity and camaraderie produced a strange event. The British prisoners gathered after nine o'clock at the intersection of their compound with that of the Russians on the other side and the Europeans on the other, and started to sing joyous Christmas carols like "Good King Wenceslas", who used to rule not far away.

The French prisoners reciprocated. Then British prisoners sang "Danny Boy" and "It's a Long Way to Tipperary". French prisoners sang "Mantelons", a rollicking French marching song. British sang "God save the Queen. French sang, ironically "Deutschland, Deutschland, Uber Alles". British sang "Tannenbaum", and to the same tune French sang "The Red Flag" and the "International".

Then the Russians, who had not taken any part in the concert, suddenly started to march lugubriously around their compound and the sound of their tramping song, which was the "Volga Boatmen", permeated the night with their deep, rich and sad voices as they marched. All this was too much for the guards, who raced into the French compound, firing their revolvers in the air and demanding that all prisoners return to bed and lights out without delay. It was better than all the concert parties.

The next day there was a rather large Russian burial.

Ian Ramsey made an escape with some comrades and soon was recaptured and found himself in a jail:

Two days before we were due to be released, there was much scuffling and shouting so that it became obvious to us that a fiendish character was being forced along the corridor and into the vacant cell. No one knew who this was until the spaziergang (walkabout) in the afternoon, when Henry informed me that it was a Russian who had disobeyed an order from one of the guards.

He had discovered this while going to the lavatory when he overheard a senior Feldvebel advising another that it would be necessary to take him away and shoot him early the following morning. When I quietly told this to the others as they walked up and down the yard, Lofty decided that an attempt should be made to avert this. So, we planned that after we had been locked up again, Lance should ask to go to the abort and on his way down the corridor, noiselessly slip the bolt of Lofty's cell. After the guard had left the corridor and locked the door, Lofty was to slip out and enter the Russian's cell.

About two hours later, they effected this plan and Lofty found the Russians in his cell, tied to a chair without his boots, pants or tunic.

Lofty signified to him that he should allow his bonds to be undone and follow him into the corridor and leave by a window at the other end which opened into the yard, so that later he could find a way out when the yard gate was left open which, strangely, it often was.

The Russian smiled hopelessly and shook his head; he did not understand a word and he refused to be helped. He was like a skinny, semi-naked monkey with a very large head and stank like a circus. Lofty left his cell, locked the door and entered his own. The following morning, looking through the tiny barred windows of our cells on to the road, we were saddened to see the Russian "monkey" being marched off into the dawn to his end by two big fat guards who would weigh in at, ten times as much as the skeleton that they escorted between them.

After his second escape Ian found himself in a jail again:

Hans Moigg was of lowly rank, an Untergefreiter or Lance-Corporal. A friendly soul, he started visiting me and discussing the war daily. He was terrified of losing his job in the camp, which he obtained after having been frost-bitten in "Russland". Russland was a place which inspired hatred and terror into the hearts of Jerries, which advanced it greatly in my regard.

John Williams, a private of medical service:

In less than three months we buried more than 3500 Russians. They died from ill-treatment, starvation, cold, and their battle wounds. The Germans threw the first batches of dead into open latrine trenches which were not even filled in. We used to give the Russians food from our Red Cross parcels, although for a while the Germans would not let us do this.

Once I was allowed to take a chaff-bag full of food to the Russian camp, but they rushed us like dogs, and knocked us flying. They grabbed the food, snarling at each other. I can tell you it was wicked to see.

Sam Birtles, navigator/bomb-aimer of the 454th bomber squadron RAAF. His aircraft was shot down near San-Marcello (Italy) on the 28th of August 1944:



Sam Birtles (second from the left) with his comrades

There were Russian prisoners at Lukenwalde. They didn't receive Red Cross parcels. They had to parade while the guards counted heads. To maintain their numbers, and hence their rations, the Russians brought their dead on parade and held them up to be counted. The weather was bitterly cold, so the bodies took some time to disintegrate.

Captain **John Wesley Fitzharding**, Regiment 2/3. He fought in North Africa, Greece and Crete and was captured by Italian submariners in the open sea trying to reach Africa from Crete on a motorboat. Fitzharding was in several camps. After the capitulation of Italy in 1943 he found himself in a German POW camp. He tried to escape on many occasions.

I found the Germans much less human and humane than the Italians. If you didn't move quick enough a German rifle belted you in the back of the neck. The food was so poor that many of us had gone from 14 stone to 9 stone. There were 85000 Russian prisoners treated like animals in one camp. Dogs were sent to get them out. They only had standing room, at least we could sit and stand and had some area to exercise in. They sent Russians into the town to sweep the snow, without boots. They were hovering on the stumps of their feet with frostbite, pathetic."

In 1990 a group of Australians - former POWs - visited places where they had been held in captivity once upon a time:

Sam Stratton (POW camp Wolfesburg in Carintia, Austria):

Nothing's left of the camp, nothing. The earth here is mixed with Russians bodies. I would hope one day flowers will grow here.

Ray Fairhall, private, signalist of the 1st Australian Corps. He escaped from captivity but was recaptured and sent to the Wolfesburg camp:

One German guard I wish I could dig up and kick is buried here. He was very hard on prisoners. Escapes would be taken out every morning or exercise (as opposed to just being POWs) and if you looked sideways, if you did anything, he'd give you a great jab with the butt of his rifle. One day a Russian was beside me and the German just ran his bayonet through him, killed this Russian and the man dropped to the ground and we went on marching on our exercise, through the almost fairy-tale setting in the Austrian Alps, beautiful firs like Christmas trees all around, Austrian houses clinging to mountain-sides with their little balconies, pretty cows in green fields, and the Russian dead behind us.

Doctor **Alan King**, 2/7 Field Ambulance. He was captured in Crete as he couldn't leave forty wounded and sick New Zealanders, Greeks, Australians. King found himself in Germany where

he treated POWs from TB. Later on he was transferred to a camp where dozens of thousands of Russian POWs were held:



Alan King

Tens of thousands of Russians were here it was forty degrees below zero and they were exhausted, shut out in the snow and cold outside the buildings. One day I saw one dying of typhus. Two of my doctors volunteered to treat him and both died of typhus. From our hospital we could see these young men walking round and round locked outside their huts, all terribly ill. No help was available to them. I asked permission to go in to see what I could do. But it was no use. They were all to die.

By early 1944 when the war was being brought home to Germany, there were air raids day and night, up to 1000 bombers at a time. The Russians were getting close from the other direction and the Germans used us as hostages. They put us staff and our patients on trains and left us at the railway siding overnight in an attempt to stop the planes bombing the big marshalling yards that were necessary to send their troops and supplies forward.

Alfred Passfield - an infantry soldier captured in Crete. He tried to escape eight times and each time he was recaptured and returned to camps:



Alfred Passfield

Every Saturday night a concert was held. The tables were placed together to make a stage, and, believe me, there were some funny acts, especially when some of the Frenchman did a female impersonation. I always sang a song, since every nationality had to be represented.

I remember one time they held a competition, and went round beforehand collecting prizes. Judging was done by the amount of applause after each item. I got first prize for singing "South of the Border" and singing and dancing "The Lambeth Walk". The Russians came next, with a song-and-dance quartet. The prizes were laid out and the winners took their pick in order, first, second, and third and so on. There was a second-hand safety razor; a pack of playing cards, much dog-eared; a pipe, very strong; half a dozen German weed cigarettes; and a few other little articles. I took the fags and gave the Russians one each, since I reckoned their turn was much better than mine anything. They picked the cards and had a real party, smoking a fag each and playing cards.

The main trouble was being able to eat a fair portion when back in the [penalty] barrack 40. There were many hungry Russians, Yugoslavs and Frenchmen there, who could not get Red Cross food. It was impossible to give them all some, so we used to employ one of them to get us firewood, and it was amazing where it used to come from. They would get under the floor and chip away at the bearers with pocket knives or an old table knife; they would get through the manhole in the ceiling and attack the rafters all for a drink of English tea.

We used to place our rations in a haversack and use it for a pillow. One night we are awakened by a scuffle: one of the boys had grabbed a thief, who was trying to get stuff from his bag. Imagine our humour when we found Jimmy hanging on the ankle of his "woodman". Who had a sheepish look on his face. I thought it was a good version of "He biteth the hand that fed him."

Another Russian used to eat seed pods off the poppy plants, which grew in abundance along the fence. He would spent the whole exercise hour (when we were allowed out of barracks daily) eating these, then lie in a kind of stupor for the rest of the day.

In going through the Stalag en route for the clothing store where my civilian clothing was to be changed for khaki (after another escape), we passed the Russian compound. In some way the inmates had found out that I was a British subject. There had never been any British POWs at Stalag XVII A, and consequently the Russians had no way of knowing what we were really like. At VII A we got on very well with them, and they just laughed at the propaganda the Germans dished out to try and incense them against the British. Here it was different. Week after week they received a newspaper printed by the Germans (as did the British in other camps), in which the Germans did their best to turn one against the other. The Russians at Stalag XVII A had begun to believe it, and when I passed the compound with the guard, many and varied were the catcalls and insults hurled at me through the wire.

The cells were not at all bad, compared with a lot I had been in. They measured about eight feet by ten feet. Most of the space was taken up by a wooden bench for sleeping on - a bench, because more often than not there were several prisoners in one cell. I had one all to myself, but in the next cell to mine were five Russians together.

The following day I asked the NCO in charge of the cells whether I could share mine with some of the others, since I was not really doing time but only awaiting transport to my old Stalag. He gave a grin, and said that if I valued my life I had far better stay in my own little cell. His words came back to me when, a new lot of guards took over, a day or two later, and let me out for my hour exercise at the same time as the rest of the inmates. Previously I had had mine after the rest had finished. The Russians fairly glowered at me when I walked near any of them, and I think I would have been in for a rough time if the guards had not been watching. So that is what propaganda does, I thought to myself, especially when it is dealt out as cunningly as the Germans did it.

The grub in these cells was rotten. I was on full rations, and not bread and water, because I had not received my sentence. The soup was brought from the Russian cookhouse and consisted mainly of chopped-up mangles of or turnips with a few rotten potatoes thrown in. the tops and roots were left on the mangles, as was the dirt and skins on the spuds. We got that at midday, and the only other victuals were a sixth of a loaf of bread and about one ounce of cheese; you pleased yourself whether you ate that for tea or breakfast. I always had it for breakfast, to give me a bit of a start for the day. I reckoned I would sooner sleep on an empty stomach than have one all the morning.

The German Orderly Corporal for the day always accompanied the Russian who brought the grub from the cookhouse, to see that it was dealt out fairly. All went well until the week-end, when the NCO was off duty, and only a guard escorted the grub carriers. I noticed straight away that the cheese ration was missing. I thought it must have been a recognised thing for Saturday, so I said nothing, but when none was forthcoming on Sunday either, I asked them where it was.

All I got was "Nix", for an answer, and the door slammed in my face. On Monday the Corporal was once more in charge . Knowing something fishy was going on - especially when the cheese ration came as usual - I told him I had not received any for two days. Did he abuse those Russians! Of course, they had been giving it to their mates. I suppose one should not blame them, as it was a truly communistic action.

During January a trainload of Russian prisoners arrived at Moosburg. Two hundred and fifty were either dead on arrival or died within a few days. It was pitiful to see them - just human skeletons, the stronger ones supporting the weaker. I have seen two in the one overcoat, and with it buttoned up too. They had had nothing to eat for days, and even in the Stalag they we kept practically on starvation diet. Often at night they tried to climb the fence from their own compound into ours, where they knew we would feed them. A few managed to make it, but some were shot halfway over, or else managed to scramble back when a fusillade of bullets greeted them.

It was amazing how some of the Russians, hardly able to get about themselves, tried to keep some other poor fellows alive. They would hold them up under the compulsory shower, to save them from just being thrown in, possibly to drown. Quite a few did not come out of the shower-room alive. More often than not, when the patient finally died, his mate would conceal him for a day or two, so as to be able to draw the bread ration for himself and his dead comrade.

The hearse, an outsize box mounted on wheels and drawn by two horses, would pull in daily, and two Russians orderlies would throw the bodies into the hearse, just as one would sacks of coal. Can you picture it? The top of the box was six or seven feet of the ground, and one orderly at each end of the completely naked body would give a swing and a heave, and the body would land in the box with a sickening thud. I have seen as many as half a dozen or more at a time thrown into the hearse. They would then be dumped in a mass grave, but the hole was never filled in, as there would be more the following day. Quicklime was thrown on the bodies from time to time, to check disease.

Peter Oats, signalman, captured in Crete in 1941:

In the eyes of that government Russian prisoners were totally expendable. The better end of the scale of treatment started five upwards for us "British" and the treatment of Russians remained always at zero. So, when men came back home after the war and said they were too badly treated it was a purely relative term.

If we say we were well-treated, it is because we cast our mind back to the Russians. It is not possible to adequately describe the bestial treatment the Russians got. There are literally thousands of mass graves all over Germany (and the countries Germany overran) in which Russian corpses rotted with quick-lime after surviving for a couple of years as breathing and pain-

filled corpses.... If a Russian escaped, they shot him. If a European prisoner escaped and got home to his German-occupied country, his local police simply sent him back.

Dennis Sandford, a merchant seaman. His ship *British Corporal* was sunk by German torpedo motorboats on 5 July 1940 in the English Channel. He spent nearly 5 years in captivity.

Sandbostel was a hell camp and when captured by British forces in April 1945, they were appalled at the dead and dying. Over 2000 British Empire Merchant Navy prisoners were in this place and it was, as well, a death camp for Jews, Poles, Serbs and Russians. Daily we saw the carts carrying the dead and dying pass through our compound on the way to be burned.

Captain **Cliff Mott** spent 4 years in the Oflag at Dussel-Warburg in Westfalia:

24 April [1945]. Today, when Germany is on last legs, two blankets are issued. In four years, first time we have had two, which is entitlement under Geneva Convention. For first time since becoming Prisoner of War, Russians have been allowed Red Cross parcels. Got them today. See them through wire in special compound. They are skin and bone no more.

ON THE RUN

In 1943 POWs of the camp VIIB, Eichstadt in Northern Bavaria dug a tunnel from their barrack to a hill slope, forming the northern boundary of the camp. On 30 July 1943 65 POWs broke to freedom. Most of them were recaptured (amongst them - 7 Australians) and transferred to a penalty camp.

Jack Champ, lieutenant (Infantry Battalion 2/6): I

It may seem to some that we wasted our time digging this tunnel which hardly seemed to reach a successful conclusion, but the escape caused a tremendous nuisance to the Germans. We shifted over 40 tons of earth and rocks without their knowledge, and we occupied 60,000 enemy personnel for over a week. We caused the camp Kommandant and his security officer to be sent to the dreaded Russian Front, and at the same time gave our own morale an enormous boost, believing that in some small way we had contributed to the Allied war effort as a whole, and the eventual victory.

Dudley Hannford, a wireless operator in a Lancaster, shot down 60 kilometers SW of Dresden on 14 February 1945. Hannaford and his mate tried to escape several times. During one escape he came across a Russian slave worker:

We had walked down about 15-20 miles that night. By three o'clock in the morning we decided that it was time to look for a hay barn. We found one in the backyard of one house and woke up early in the morning to the knocks of a ball kids were banging on the barn.

A bit later somebody climbed up the ladder next to us. Padge (Hannaford's mate) was sleeping. He always snored, he was also snoring at the time it happened. I smacked him and he woke up. It only made things worse as Padge began to cough. We dug ourselves into the hay, but that guy noticed us.

We stood up with hands up saying "Kamerad! Kamerad!". But the guy replied "Ruski! Ruski!". He was a Russian slave worker. He tried to find out from us where the Russians were. All we could say was that they were not far from Berlin. He cheered. Padge was a smoker and he gave Russian a couple of cigarettes. We became friends. But then the Russian disappeared. We did not know what was on his mind, but in a quarter of an hour he returned with two pieces of bread. Its taste was splendid. He never came back and we headed further after the sunset.

Alfred Passfield (1944, Austria, Mariazelle):

Despite the late hour, (it was about midnight) quite a few people were around the streets but as it was a black-out, my uniform was not noticed. I was just passing a large building, when from a out of the shadows of the doorway stepped a policeman, and grabbing me by my shoulder, without asking who I was or anything else, just said "Kom mitte", and opening the door, hauled me inside. The light was on and he looked satisfied as he saw my uniform. He ushered me upstairs into his office. This was the local police station, and I had been caught right on the doorstep...

He asked me if I was POW Number 156112, from Rosengraben. He had all the particulars down on a piece of paper, so it was no good me denying it. He did not seem a bad type of guy. He asked me if I thought the Russians would beat the Jerries. I naturally said it was a certainty and by the way he nodded I knew he thought the same. Then he said: "Why do the English fight us? Why don't they fight with us and beat the Russians, as Communism is no good to either of us?" I answered the question as best as I could, saying the Germans had started it and we had been forced to retaliate. He had to admit that was right. He was a true Austrian and I do not think he had a great deal of time for the Germans, but much less for the Russians.

LIBERATION

Alfred Passfield (he left the camp abandoned by the German guards):

Soon after passing through Innsbruck, we ran into the Yanks proper, and were taken to their headquarters, where we waited for a day before being taken by a truck to a central camp at Kufstein. This had been a large German training camp. The Jerries had been taken from the barracks, and were now camped in an open field, surrounded by machine guns. The camp was used for ex POWs awaiting transport to their various countries.

There were a large number of Russian POWs were and they found a tanker full of some kind of raw spirit in the railway yards. They celebrated the end of the war all too well, but not too wisely. Several died though drinking this stuff, and most of the others writhed in agony for hours.

On my way back to camp that evening I saw a mob of Russian ex-POWs, going down a hole into the cellars of a bombed out brewery and many were coming out, much worse that when they went in. This looked good, so I dived. They were huge cellars and as black as your hat, but one or another kept striking a match and it was certainly something to see. The floor was two feet deep in beer with kegs floating all around as if on a miniature lake. Most of the Russians were sitting on a keg each and scooping the beer up with their hands to drink it. I heard one of them vomiting , so did not try it. The barrels were all empty and there was no object in staying longer, so I went up to the surface. Further on I saw more of them diving into another hole, but thinking it would be the same, I kept on going. I was stopped by a jeep load of Yanks, who asked me if I knew where the Russians were getting all the grog. I told them what I had seen, and they said "Hop in. Let's go."

En route we passed another cellar which had been sealed by the American Military Police, and a "Strictly Forbidden" notice on it. I directed them to where I had seen the second lot of Russians/// The Russians had all gone back to camp, as there was a curfew on from dark to daylight. Clambering down the hole we saw much the same as we had in the other cellar, but the reek of wine was in the air and a lot spilt on the ground and the casks were empty. We were about to leave when one Yank noticed a hole in the wall. Clambering through the hole we tested the first cask. It was Burgundy. One remaining cask looked a real pet. The front of it was carved with huge swastika. Getting some tools from the jeep, the boys attacked the bung, and gradually worked it loose. Then, all of a sudden, out it shot. The wine came out like a geyser. We took it in turns holding our hands over the hole and drinking at the same time. Everyone there, and I think there were six Yanks, unanimously declared they had never tasted anything like it... We stayed in that cellar until daylight, by which time the cask was empty. We were all drunk, hilariously drunk.

Roy "Blue" Heron, 2/11th Battalion, captured in Crete:

I was a carpenter so I went into Munich and Pensburg building barracks for Russian prisoners. Then we pulled all the bells out of the churches because Hitler wanted the metal. The Allies now started bombing Munich and we were shifted up to Stalag VIIIB in Lamsdorf. Bad treatment and mad people. Then I was shifted to a steel factory. I wasn't there very long because in January [1945] I made my escape.

Me and some others were planning to escape but the actual escape was not planned, it happened on impulse. Some of us were standing at the gate one night, just looking. The guard was walking up and down and a German came in, leaving the gate open. It was dark, so I said, "I'm going out the gate. Is anybody coming with me?" And two chaps said, "yeah". So that made three of us. And I said, "Righto. Once we're out, don't look around, just keep walking. If we get shot in the back, bad lick."

Anyway, we got away without the guard seeing us. We went back into the factory where we knew of an old disused sewer and we went down there to hide out for a while, but we met some other blokes that had been there for some weeks and they were all mad. No lights, it was pitch-black-dark. They had a bit of a candle and they lit it for a while and they'd put it out again. .. Two of us made up our minds, we weren't going to stay. We went out and walked through town at midnight back to another village to a Pole who had been willing to help me with an earlier planned escape. He told us the Germans did their rounds every couple of hours because the Russians were on their way down. "They got into every house and flat and everything, checking." And his wife and family brought hot water to wash our feet because it was bitterly cold outside, about twenty-five below zero.

The Pole hid us down in the rabbit hutch. It was full of straw but it was freezing cold and we stayed there until about four o'clock in the morning and he came down and said, "You can come out now. The Germans are finished their rounds." We had a bit of breakfast, what there was of it, and didn't want to put him in jeopardy so we decided we'd take our chance and nick off.

We walked quite a few miles and found ourselves in the middle of a tank battle. We jumped into a big hole until the battle was over and then we saw the Russian tanks with the Red Star coming towards us so we hopped out of the hole. And one pulled up alongside of us and the door of the tank opened and a girl hopped out and I knew a few words of Russian from the prisoners and I said, "Tovarish" which means comrade. "Australian comrade." And oh, they threw their arms around us and they all got out of the tank then. The tank crew were all girls. This was January 1945.

After liberation Heron and his mate were issued passes on a train to Odessa, but prior to that they had had to get to Cracow on passing peasant carts. In Cracow Heron's mate came across the Ukrainian girl he had worked together on a factory in captivity. Soon they get married.

At Cracow the Polish commandant interrogated us. We had to tell him of any Germans we knew that had done bad things. We just answered what we could. They put on a bit of banquet for us and said we had to stay in Cracow until they repaired the railway lines and bridges to Odessa. There weren't very many people in Cracow then because the Germans had gone. So this Polish bloke said, "You can have a hotel, a block of flats, any building you like". E selected a flat, furniture in it and everything. The Pole told us there was an English chap had the YMCA nearby and we went up there and met him, and there were hundreds of girls there, nice girls, all trying to get to Australia and England. "You marry me, and when we get to Australia or England, we forget about it. We want to get out." I didn't fall for it but I knew some who did.

Finally we got on train to Odessa, crossing to the Ukraine as they hurriedly relaid the lines and built temporary bridges ahead of the train. There had been some pretty big bridges destroyed. It was very cold, the beginning of march, and we scrounged every bit of coal along the railway line to build the fire up at the end of the carriage. No blankets, hard board to sleep on.

When we got to Odessa they put us in showers and deloused us and gave us a bite to eat and we got on the boat. They wouldn't let my mate's wife on the boat, and he wouldn't get on the boat without her. Eventually he cut all her hair off and dressed her in British army uniform and got her on that way. On 18 April 1945 I landed home for my birthday.

We know now that the behavior of Soviet soldiers in the occupied Germany was far from merciful and gentle. Possibly, their negative attitude towards POW compatriots spread over the Allied POWs. That's why encounters with the Soviet soldiers left in Australian minds controversial and often negative feelings apart from gratitude. Herewith are some testimonies:

Keith Skidmore, mid-upper gunner of a bomber shot down in an attack on Rhemshied on 30/31 July 1943:



Keith Skidmore

The Russians liberated us on 23 April 1945. We then had to make our way home. There were no Jerries in the camp, except for the Commandant. They all shot through because the Russians were coming one way and the Americans the other. The Russians, on their arrival, shot the commandant.

We shot through as soon as the Russian arrived because there was no food. The Russians were battling for food themselves. A mate and I had to walk. We had to cross the Elbe - the Americans were on one side and the Russians on the other. We found a broken down bridge where we could cross. Before we were allowed to cross, the Russians took everything off us - including our watches.

Sam Birtles:

One day, a Russian commander came in and liberated us. It was almost anticlimatic – we'd been expecting it for so long. We'd been listening to [Blood and Guts Patton](#) making forty to sixty kilometers a day, when, suddenly, he stopped. We couldn't understand why. We later found it was under instructions, because the Russians, British and Americans were going to share Berlin.

The Russians put a guard on the camp and kept us there for a month. The Americans had sent fifty trucks to get us away, but the Russians sent them back, empty. They said they would swap us for the German prisoners which the Allies liberated. They treated us worse than the Germans had - at least they had given us the Red Cross parcels. You were lucky if a Russian didn't stick a

gun in your belly and steal your watch. They arrested one of their number and he had sixteen wrist watches on his arm.

A group of us wandered into a little warehouse and found some Russians who had baled up a Mongolian type who had defected to the Germans. They indicated to us that they were going to shoot him out of hand. We felt this was no place for us. When we had walked about a hundred yards away, they shot him because he was wearing a German uniform.

Out of curiosity, we had a look at the barracks in which the Russian POWs had been housed. You've never seen such filth and squalor. But, there was a surprise. Although the Russians as good communists were supposed to be atheists or agnostics, there was a little room, about twenty feet by ten. It was a Russian Orthodox chapel. It was spotless. There were holy pictures, drawn with crayons.



Russian soldier and Australians after liberation of the Luckenwalde camp



Australian airmen Watts, MacRitchie, Gay and Bower after liberation by the Soviet soldiers (camp Stalag Luft I)

The Russians insisted that they get the names of all 1500 POWs recorded as held at the camp. Until all were registered, none would be released. Some had already escaped, so we had to double up, to make up the number, and went through the check with any name we chose. Once they got 1500 names they arranged the release. The Americans picked us up and took us to Calais.

Dudley Hannaford, liberated by Americans from the Moosburg camp on 13 April 1945:

[American] jeeps arrived at the camp about noon. Soon they began to distribute doughnuts and coffee. You had to see the queue! General Patton arrived about the same time. He was mobbed by a crowd - mostly Americans. When the Russians came they got furious as the Americans had liberated us before them.

Donald Watt in April-May 1945 was in the ranks of the British Army.

The British patrolled the outskirts of Hannover hunting down the armed Germans who were hiding in the forests and villages. We did find a few Russians, part of an advance party of Russian troops who had come on ahead from the east. Two of them were rough-handling a couple of teenage girls aged 16 or so - it was easy to see what they were after - when suddenly there was a mighty scream.

I ran towards the sound and found another Russian trying to rape an old woman - the girls' grandmother, as it turned out. I shouted at him to pack it in and to let the woman o, but he turned and pointed a gun at me. I didn't like the look of that, and I couldn't come at an old woman being raped, or ant woman being raped for that matter, I'm just not that sort of person - so I pulled out

my service revolver in a flash and shot him on the spot. The woman thanked me and ran off. About an hour or so later we ran into a Russian patrol, and I explained to them what had happened and how I had just shot one of their fellow countrymen. They were obviously a decent bunch of blokes, because they took it surprisingly well, which was a load off my mind. Any other Russians might have shot me.

Noel Brown was in Lamsdorf:

The Russians arrived mid-afternoon. An armored unit and the men looked a very battle-seasoned bunch. Within an hour the town was a wreck. The Russians were looking for grog and females. They found both. We went into some shops after they had unceremoniously rifled them - our thoughts were still on food. And to our surprise we found plenty of tinned and preserved fruits and meats. The Russians took absolutely no notice of us and we kept our distance. They neglected their own prisoners so we reasoned that we were of no account.

A small number of Australians and Americans were held by the Japanese in a camp near Mukden (Manchuria). American paratroopers landed in Mukden on 16 August 1945. Several days later the Soviet troops arrived.

"Spud" Spurgeon, a bomber command airman, became a POW in 1941 in Malaya:

On 18 August a Russian tank broke through the camp gates. They were not wide enough and the tank knocked about part of the wall. Seemingly all the crew were drunk, as one of them had bright pijama pants over his uniform and was waving a bottle of vodka.

On the 20th of August three senior officers, including Sergeant Hurly, who could speak Russian, were called to the camp gates. There we met several Russian officers. Russian captain Elim Gekhtman spoke on their behalf from the hospital stairs: "Allied POWs! On behalf of the Soviet Army I declare that from this moment you're free. Russia entered the war ten days ago. Since then we have passed over 100 kilometers across the mountains and rivers and arrived here as victors. I congratulate the United States, Great Britain and Allied nations with this great victory and liberation from the Japanese yoke".

General Parker, senior of American officers present, stepped forward and said: "I am confident that I am speaking on behalf of all of us, expressing gratitude to the Russian Imperial (sic!) Army and congratulating it with this great victory". Then the Russians disarmed 11 Japanese officers and about 30 soldiers. Then a Russian captain asked the former POWs about the guarding order and gave them the Japanese arms.

Des Brennan, doctor, imprisoned in Singapore in 1942:



Des Brennan

And one very public relations type of guy says, "We have come all the way from Moscow to release you and now we are here". We didn't say, well the Yanks have already released us, mate. But he came on with a great to do: you can go anywhere, and that is how I got to have a bit of a look at Mukden. We went up town several times for a bit of a walk.

"Spud" Spurgeon:

We found a brewery, a shed full of Kurin beer, and we all got as pissed as newts. I have never been so drunk in all my life. The Russians came in, as I said, through the wall, and the following day a couple of truckloads of them came in and they put on a sort of a concert. They used to meet us in town with bottles of vodka. The whole bloody lot of them were always full.

The convivial relations between the Allies we place in jeopardy by rape. The perpetrators were said to be Russian soldiers who enticed a handsome young Australian officer into their truck and compelled him to act for their pleasure. The Australian did not press charges against the burly Russian women.

In the streets of Mukden shops were looted and factories stripped. Chinese continued to kill Japanese whenever they had the chance, and Chinese Nationalists, Communists and opportunists competed for spoils and positions. During the day sporadic shooting could be heard, and at night the firing would intensify until the Russian tanks and armored cars quietened things down. The prisoners were safe within their protective brick wall from everything except Russian hospitality. Russians and prisoners shared a desire to drink, and the Russians possessed an apparently endless supply of vodka, but the emaciated prisoners had a limited capacity to consume. In spite of having almost no words in common with the prisoners, the Russians were able to propose toasts for Stalin, Truman, "wifu", and mother, and insist that the glass be drained each time. Soon prisoners were cross-eyed" and the exuberant Russians were firing sub-machine gun bursts through the ceiling. Four Australians in an attempt to obtain some less potent beer hired droshkies to take them to a brewery. As they loaded the first crates two Russians strode, shot the horses and splattered the prisoners with blood. One of the Manchurian drivers panicked, ran and was shot. After searching the prisoners the Russians motioned for them to start walking. They walked the length of the drive wondering if they had been spared as prisoners only to be killed as looters by trigger-happy Russians. Once out of the gate and behind the shelter of the brewery wall they fled. They did not,

Lance Gibson says, *"Stir out of the gaol for another week".*

The Russians restored law and order. We visited the local airdrome, where a Russian squadron landed. We stunned by the fact, that there were many women amongst the pilots and some of them with battle awards.

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