

# George Savage, the Australian digger used as a guinea pig in Nazi medical experiments

By Frank Walker

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*The young Australian digger listened intently to the heavy footsteps coming down the corridor. He turned his head and saw the Nazi doctor in the long white lab coat take a salute from the German army guard as he entered the hospital ward.*

*'Not again,' he cried to himself. 'No more, I can't take any more.' He was just 21 years old, a nuggety sheetmetal worker from Melbourne. Now he was a lab rat for mad Nazi doctors.*

Lance Corporal George Alan Savage was captured on Crete on the last day of the Allied fighting, 1 June 1941, and marched into a POW camp. Savage and his fellow non-commissioned officer prisoners were put to work repairing damaged airfields and roads. To comply with the Geneva Convention, which stipulates POWs can't be used as slave labour, they were told they would be paid ten drachmas a day for their work, but they never saw any money. Five weeks later, Savage and two other POWs escaped, hiding in the hills with Cretan resistance fighters. They were recaptured and sentenced to hard labour, working 10 hours a day building defence works around an aerodrome and laying wire entanglements on the beaches.



May 1941: German parachutists drop onto Crete during the invasion of Greece.  
*Credit:Keystone/Getty Images*

Conditions were hard. Savage later recollected: "One meal only a day was provided consisting of a handful of cooked beans and one slice of Greek bread at midday. About half a pint of drinking water was provided in the morning and in the evening, but nothing to drink was allowed with the midday meal. In consequence of this treatment I lost nearly three stone in weight."

Savage and fellow POWs were set to work mixing concrete at Rethymno Hospital on the north coast of Crete. Savage had been there just a few hours when a doctor arrived and stood watching the POWs work. After a while the doctor walked over and, with guards watching, approached Savage. The doctor told him to stand still, then examined his eyes, turning up his eyelids. The next day the same doctor returned and ordered Savage to go inside the hospital. The doctor then gave Savage a thorough medical examination, X-rayed his chest, tested his urine and took blood samples.



Australian and British soldiers on Crete in 1941.

The doctor told Savage he was ill and took him to a ward where several German soldiers lay sick in rows of beds. He ordered Savage into one of five empty beds that had been sectioned off in the ward. Over the course of the day, four other Australian POWs who had been working with Savage were ushered into the ward and ordered into the empty beds. Savage identified them as Private Douglas Cheeseman, 23, a grocer from Hawthorn; Private Stanley Williams, 33, a married labourer from Hobart (both with the 2/5th Battalion); Private James Devlin, 23, from Manly in Sydney; and Private William Lindley, 29, a cook with a wife back in Dulwich Hill in Sydney's inner-west (both with the 2/3rd Battalion). The doctor examined these new arrivals as

he had Savage, poking and prodding and taking blood and urine samples. At this stage it seemed a good deal for Savage and the four diggers. Although weak, they weren't sick, they had a comfortable bed, and apart from sharing a ward with sick German soldiers, they could relax in relative comfort.

The next morning the doctor once again examined the Australian POWs, taking temperatures, pulse readings and blood and urine tests. The doctor returned in the afternoon and Savage saw him use a six-inch (15-centimetre) long syringe to draw half a syringe of blood from one of the nearby sick German patients. The doctor then walked over to Savage, applied a tourniquet to his arm and promptly injected the syringe of blood straight into a vein. Savage was no doctor, but he knew this wasn't normal medical procedure.

The guards were standing next to his bed and Savage was too weak to protest. He watched as the doctor did exactly the same to the four other Australian POWs. Savage had no idea what was going on, and the doctor said nothing to them. The next day the doctor came back and conducted the same methodical tests of their temperature, pulse, blood and urine, jotting everything down on a clipboard. The doctor then injected Savage and the four other Australians in the arm with a clear fluid. Again, the doctor said nothing.

Within hours Savage felt terrible. He was sweating, felt faint, his head was swirling, his heart was racing and his innards were churning. He was extremely sick, vomiting up what little he had in his stomach. The doctor took notes but offered no explanation, no medicine to help, not even aspirin. Instead, every morning he marched into the ward and diligently took temperature, pulse, blood and urine tests, checked eyes, then prodded and poked the five Aussies in various parts of their bodies to see if they cried out in pain. He took detailed notes on his clipboard and left.



Australian and New Zealand hospital staff arrive on Crete after being forced out of Greece following German attacks, June 1941.

The doctor did this every day for the next 10 days. It was the same routine every time. Still no explanation or medicine was offered. Savage thought the doctor looked disappointed when he examined the colour of his urine. He didn't know if the doctor was disappointed because the colour wasn't bad enough, or because he was getting better; the doctor didn't say.

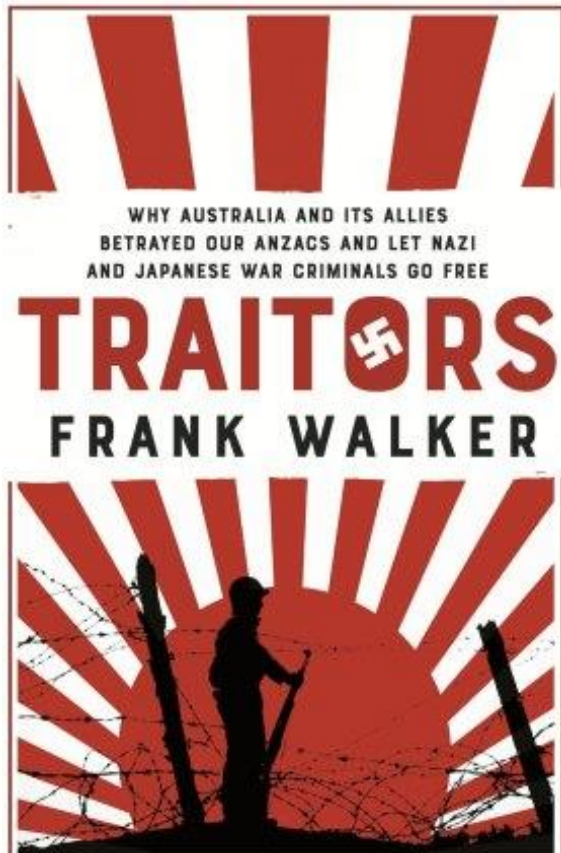
By the 10th day the pain and fever had subsided somewhat. The doctor then gave the Australian POWs a second injection of blood taken from someone else. Savage couldn't be sure if it was taken from one of the sick German troops. By this time he was too weak and exhausted to notice. Two hours later the Australians all fell very sick again. They had the same symptoms as the first attack. But this time their reaction was much stronger.



German paratroops land during the invasion of Crete. *Credit: Keystone/Getty Images*

In the morning the doctor returned and injected the Australian prisoners with a clear fluid. Over the next eight days the doctor examined the POWs every morning, taking detailed notes on their temperatures, aches and pains, and taking blood and urine samples. Through his pain and fever, Savage could see on neighbouring beds that at least two of his Aussie mates had a tube inserted into their stomachs through their throats. It wasn't clear to Savage whether the Germans were forcing something into their stomach or taking stuff out. Again, no medicine was administered, but the doctor frequently examined the Australians' eyes, taking detailed notes on what he found.

Savage saw that the sick German soldiers in the ward received regular doses of medicine. He didn't know the nature of their illness but could see that they were shaking and sweating from fever and their skin was markedly yellow. One patient was close enough for Savage to see his eyes, and he was shocked to see that even his eyes were yellow.



Traitors, by Frank Walker.

His account was recorded in the usual dry military manner, but the contents were shocking.

By the 18th day Savage and his fellow POWs were starting to recover. He feared the doctor would see their improved condition and try to inflict another bout of injections and tests on them. When the doctor came in that morning with a collection of needles, Savage knew he had to make a stand. He only had one stripe as a lance corporal, but he was the senior soldier in that horror ward and he felt a tremendous responsibility for the four privates with him. By this stage they all knew they were being used as guinea pigs for Nazi medical experiments. Despite their frail condition, the POWs were determined to fight back. During the night the five had whispered to each other so the guards could not hear, and agreed they would not let themselves be injected again.

As the doctor approached, Savage struggled and lashed out at him, shouting as hard as he could that he would not be injected again. He thrashed around, making it difficult for the doctor to get a grip. The four other diggers started shouting too, telling the doctor in good Aussie vernacular to leave Savage alone.

In the stiff, dry words of a military report typed up years later, when Savage reported to Australian army authorities what had happened at the hospital: 'I protested [in which the other four joined in] against the treatment we were receiving. I stated that we all knew that we were being used for experimental purposes and objected.'

Three German guards leapt on Savage, dragging him from the bed where he'd been confined for the past 18 days. They laid into him, kicking and punching him on the ground and beating him with the truncheons they always had ready to enforce discipline. Savage had been a POW long enough to recognise the bruisers who were beating him – a warrant officer and two sergeants; ranks well above the brutes who normally enforced authority in a POW camp. The doctor must have been influential to have those relatively senior NCOs assigned to act as his enforcers.

Savage doesn't recount the reaction of the doctor to this act of brutality, but says that after the beating they were all told to get dressed in their army uniforms and were taken back to the POW camp.

In April 1943 Savage - who had been able to escape the camp, the island of Crete and return to Australia - sat down with Australian military intelligence officers and finally told his story.

His account was recorded in the usual dry military manner, but the contents were shocking. It was classified 'Secret' and filed away. Copies were sent to Australian military authorities in London to be passed on to British authorities 'for any action deemed necessary'. So far as is known, the file disappeared into the dusty war archives and nothing was done.

Savage's file is the only known documented account of Australian prisoners of war being used in Nazi medical experiments. Perhaps other Australians were used, but none made it home to tell their story.

The file gathered dust until 2016 when it was found in the Australian National Archives. Australian surgeon and academic George Weisz examined the file and, using his medical knowledge, tracked down the identity of the Nazi doctor who had conducted the illegal experiments on the Australian POWs. Weisz identified the doctor as SS physician Dr Friedrich Meythaler, a renowned German bacteriologist who was trying to establish how infectious hepatitis was transmitted from one human to another.

Weisz wrote in a 2015 academic paper that Meythaler's impressive record of medical papers on infectious diseases enabled him to join German invasion forces in Crete, where soldiers on both sides were severely affected by jaundice. Meythaler wanted to research the transmission of hepatitis, and the POWs gave him the human guinea pigs he needed.

World-renowned Nazi hunter Professor Konrad Kwiet of Sydney's Macquarie University and resident historian at the Sydney Jewish Museum said there were hundreds of thousands of medical experiments on prisoners of war from all nations conducted by German military doctors. 'Meythaler injected the Australian prisoners with hepatitis, but he went on to conduct many more experiments on prisoners, injecting them with malaria and other war-related infections and diseases that affected German soldiers,' Kwiet said.

He explained that barbaric and bizarre medical experiments on prisoners in concentration camps and mental asylums, like those done by the notorious Dr Josef Mengele, needed the personal approval of Gestapo and SS chief Heinrich Himmler. But military doctors doing human

experiments on POWs, like those done by Meythaler, needed no permission. Each doctor operated under his own code and initiative.

'There were about fifty Mengele-type doctors out of 40,000 doctors – like Meythaler – who were all polite and respected citizens but who did experiments on humans they couldn't do in peacetime. They conducted experiments on prisoners of war to pursue their own professional research,' said Kwiet.

**This is an edited extract from *Traitors: Why Australia And Its Allies Betrayed Our ANZACs And Let Nazi And Japanese War Criminals Go Free*, by Frank Walker (Hachette, RRP\$32.99)**