Version 1.0 | **Last updated 24 July 2015**

Prisoners of War (Australia)

By Aaron Pegram

Prisoners of war are central to the public memory of Australian involvement in the Second World War, but very little historical scholarship has been dedicated to the national experience of captivity in the First World War. This is partly because only a minority of Australians actually endured captivity in the First World War. This article gives an overview of the capture and imprisonment of 4,044 members of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) by German and Ottoman Turkish forces in the First World War.

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Introduction: Prisoners in Australian national memory

Only 4,044 members of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) were taken prisoner across all theatres of operations between 1915 and 1918.[1] 213,000 Australian battle casualties quickly overshadowed the prisoners' hardships that included 60,000 war dead who became the focus of private and public mourning in the years after the war.[2] Only a minority of Australians endured captivity, but the

experiences of those imprisoned by the enemy did not sit comfortably within the overly heroic and masculine self-image that shaped perceptions of the Australian national character in the post-war period.[3] With all but 397 AIF prisoners surviving captivity and the war, imprisonment may have actually spared many Australians death or wounding in subsequent fighting, although this was not a common view at the time.[4] Within the context of the "Anzac legend," some Australians captured in the First World War felt they had somehow "surrendered manhood" the moment they were captured.[5]

The Capture of Australian Troops

Ottoman Turkish forces took a total of 209 Australians prisoner in the "sideshow" campaigns in the Dardanelles, Mesopotamia, and Sinai-Palestine.[6] The first four Australians to be taken prisoner in the First World War were captured on 25 April 1915 on the morning Anzac forces landed on the Gallipoli peninsula and the AIF first experienced combat. In the following days, the Australian submarine HMAS *AE2* was scuttled in the Sea of Marmara after it successfully penetrated the Dardanelles and a Turkish torpedo boat put it out of action. All thirty-five hands survived the engagement and were captured, although just twelve were members of the Royal Australian Navy (RAN).[7] The Australians remained on Gallipoli for a further seven months where the precipitous terrain and static nature of the fighting limited face-to-face contact with Turkish troops. By the time allied forces withdrew from Gallipoli in December 1915, the Australians had 27,000 battle casualties of which just seventy were prisoners.

While most Australian forces at the time were engaged on Gallipoli, a very small number of airmen and ground crew of the Australian Half-Flight were sent to Mesopotamia to assist the Indian Expeditionary Force to secure rich oil deposits from the Ottomans and uncooperative Arab tribes. The sweltering conditions were highly unsuited for the air-cooled aircraft that had no form of defensive armament. Three pilots were captured after developing engine trouble and putting their aircraft down behind Ottoman lines, and were roughly treated, as they had the misfortune of falling into the hands of Arab tribes living in the area.[8] Nine Australian air mechanics were captured when the Kut garrison surrendered in April 1916 and endured the gruelling 700 kilometre force-march across Anatolia and subsequent epidemics. By the war's end only two had survived.[9]

Most Australian prisoners of the Turks were captured in the Middle East in the last two years of the war. After Gallipoli, the AIF doubled in size and its infantry departed for the Western Front. However, the Australian Light Horse remained in Egypt and formed part of the ANZAC Mounted Division that took part in the British offensive that pushed Turkish forces across the Sinai to Palestine and into Jordan and Syria. The fighting in the Middle East was much more fluid and mobile than the static conditions of trench warfare, which is reflected in the higher number of prisoners than the Australians lost in Gallipoli. Australian mounted troops conducted long-range reconnaissance patrols and raids deep into the desert, incurring 4,851 battle casualties of which 102 were prisoners. In addition to

Australian ground forces in the Middle East, twenty-four airmen of the Australian Flying Corps (AFC) were brought down over enemy territory due to either mechanical failure or enemy ground fire.[10]

Reflecting both the intensity of the fighting and the number of troops engaged, 3,848 Australians were captured in the fighting on the Western Front. Australians were lost as prisoners in hundreds of small-scale trench raids, patrols, and minor attacks throughout the campaign, but were captured in their largest numbers at Fromelles between 19 and 20 July 1916 (470 prisoners), Bullecourt on 11 April 1917 (1,170 prisoners), and at Dernancourt on 4 April 1918 (400 prisoners). The RAN did not lose any sailors as prisoners to German forces, but twenty-one pilots from the two AFC scout squadrons were brought down behind German lines by either ground fire or mechanical failure.[11] In addition to Australian soldiers captured on the Western Front were seventy-five men of military age living in Germany as civilians at the outbreak of war who were interned at Ruhleben near Berlin, and thirty members of the merchant navy and Australian and Naval Military Expeditionary Force (AN&MEF) whose vessels were boarded and sunk in the Pacific ocean by the German merchant raider SMS *Wolf* in 1917. The latter spent up to eight months locked inside the raider's holds as it returned to Germany where they were subsequently imprisoned for the remainder of the war.[12]

Australian troops captured on the Western Front often came from units that succeeded in reaching their objectives when neighbouring units had failed. German troops sometimes picked up wounded Australians and gave them proper medical treatment, while others were captured unwounded and forced to surrender on the battlefield. During major attacks, German defensive doctrine called for squad-based counter-attacks when allied troops succeeded in breaking into the enemy trenches. German troops probed the beleaguered attackers and worked their way around their exposed flanks until the attacking force was cut-off and prevented from withdrawing. After waiting for the attackers to expend their ammunition, German troops would then "roll up" the flanks with rifle fire and grenades until the isolated attackers either surrendered or were killed.[13] Capture was therefore a function of tactics employed on the Western Front and indeed very few Australians were captured after June 1917 when better coordination between infantry and artillery allowed the British to "bite and hold" captured ground against German counter-attacks. With this in mind, Australians were not immune to demoralisation; at least two men became prisoners willingly after they deserted to German troops.[14]

Interrogation and Treatment

Australian troops were sometimes killed by Turkish and German soldiers attempting to surrender, and in some cases were killed as they made their way behind enemy lines.[15] Existing literature indicates that individuals usually killed prisoners in the heat of the moment rather than on orders from a higher authority, though prisoners who survived the "politics of surrender" sometimes went on to be roughly handled by enemy troops.[16] It was widely known on both sides that there were benefits to taking prisoners rather than killing them out of hand. Not only did killing prisoners make the enemy

less inclined to surrender; captives were vital for providing low-level intelligence on the morale and disposition of enemy forces. So valuable were prisoners as an intelligence source that Ottoman troops on Gallipoli were offered monetary rewards for bringing in prisoners, as were the Arab tribes in Egypt and Palestine.[17]

The British War Office was extremely vague on how men should behave if they have the misfortune of falling into enemy hands, which meant there were no procedures or formal training that informed and reminded Australian troops about what the military authorities expected of them if they were captured and interrogated. It was only after the 1916 Somme campaign and the news that some Australian prisoners had divulged sensitive operational information to the German Army that Australian troops were trained and routinely reminded of their obligations as prisoners. They were to say nothing more than their name and rank under interrogation, but a study of German intelligence documents shows that Australian prisoners continued to divulge operational information to the enemy. They were captured with operational orders, photographs, personal diaries, and even spoke openly to their captors about the disposition of the Australian defences and life behind the lines.[18] By virtue of their rank and experience, captured officers and non-commissioned officers (NCO) were targeted by German intelligence officers and examined more rigorously than Other ranks men.

Violence during interrogations was extremely rare; German intelligence officers employed far more productive techniques for lulling prisoners into a false sense of security such as polite conversation and offering cigars and cognac. Captured officers, particularly airmen, were usually held in designated "listening hotels" such as the Europäischer Hof hotel in Karlsruhe, where prisoner conversations about aircraft, units, and other operational matters were secretly recorded for intelligence purposes.[19]

Turkish and German forces gave proper medical treatment to wounded Australian prisoners. Both had a tendency to prioritise treating their own casualties after major actions, which meant that wounded prisoners often went days without medical treatment. Of the 397 Australians who died in captivity in the First World War, 288 died from wounds received in action – roughly the same survival rate as those who passed through Australian dressing stations and field hospitals.[20]

The Privilege of Rank in Ottoman Turkey

The wounded could take up to six months recovering in a Turkish or German field hospital before being transported to a prison camp on the captor's home front, but the journey for non-wounded prisoners could sometimes take longer. The 1907 Hague Convention recognised officers as members of the upper class and protected them from working as manual labourers to support their captor's domestic economy. As such, they were transported to camps in either Germany or Turkey within days of capture, and the Australian Red Cross Society in London was notified of their whereabouts soon after.[21] Things were very different for Other ranks prisoners whose ability to work wholly defined their life in enemy hands. Whereas the Hague Convention protected officers

from working, it allowed captors to use the labour of Other ranks prisoners as long as the work had no immediate connection with military operations. Australians captured in Gallipoli and the Middle East were usually transported to Constantinople, then to Anatolia in Asia-Minor, where they worked on the construction of the Berlin-Baghdad Railway at the rail junction of Afion Kara Hissar. Most Australian prisoners were assigned to work parties in Taurus and Amanus mountains and spent up to twelve hours a day quarrying, drilling tunnels, felling timber, laying track, and blacksmithing.[22] Once the tunnel work was completed in 1917, most were moved east to Mosul or to Angora, then returned to Afion Kara Hissar after the British had pushed into Palestine in 1918.

Conditions varied according to the work parties and the front on which a prisoner was captured, but Other ranks men were often subjected to the same harsh living conditions and limited supplies as their Ottoman captors. Feeding and clothing prisoners in the far reaches of the Ottoman Empire proved woefully inadequate owing to the logistical problem of sending Red Cross parcels from London across Austria-Hungary, so many prisoners fell victim to sickness, hard labour and the prolonged effects of malnutrition.[23] Of the seventy Australians who died in Turkish hands as prisoners, thirty-nine were Other ranks prisoners who died of disease.[24] By means of comparison, Australian officers were sent to Afion Kara Hissar where they were detained separately from Other ranks prisoners. They were treated much better, but faced food shortages, monetary inflation, and endless periods managing frustration and boredom. No Australian officers died in Turkish captivity.

German Reprisals on the Western Front in 1917

Imprisonment was somewhat different on the Western Front. In 1916, both officers and Other ranks prisoners were transported to Germany within days of capture, but Australians captured in 1917 remained in France for several months working behind German lines. Coinciding with the largest capture of Australian prisoners in a single action on the Western Front at Bullecourt in April, the German Army instigated a reprisal policy against the British and French armies for working German prisoners behind allied lines and within range of German guns.[25] All British and French prisoners of war captured during the reprisal period became "prisoners of respite" - they were to be worked hard, given little food, and would be housed in poor lodgings without so much as a blanket. It is not entirely clear what the German term "prisoners of respite" actually meant because the reprisal terms implied Allied prisoners captured in the spring of 1917 were in fact prisoners *without* respite.[26] Whatever the misunderstanding, it is clear that the German Army was gambling with the health of the prisoners in an attempt to force the British to change their policy on the treatment of German prisoners. While German prisoners were employed behind Allied lines and the French had mistreated captive labour on the Verdun front in late 1916, the impetus of the reprisals was probably the German Army's manpower shortage after heavy casualties in 1916 and the consequences of fighting a long war on multiple fronts.

Over 1,500 Other ranks Australians captured at Noreuil, Bullecourt and Lagnicourt in April 1917 were

subjected to the reprisals that flagrantly disregarded the Hague Convention. After being captured, Australian prisoners were taken to Lille where they were locked in the casements of Fort MacDonald for ten days with little food or water, then returned to line areas to clear roads, dig trenches, bury bodies, and labour at engineering and ammunition dumps under British shellfire. Prisoners were encouraged to write to the War Office and the Australian High Commission in London about their treatment and condition, but were prevented from disclosing details about their whereabouts. The Australian Red Cross had been informed they were at a prison camp at Limburg and consequently dispatched thousands of food and clothing parcels to Germany. Without any welfare, conditions behind German lines were rough and violent. Hard labour and malnutrition made prisoners vulnerable to illness.[27] A number of Australians died of disease during the German reprisal period and at least seven were killed by Allied shellfire while working dangerously close to the front line.

Officers captured on the Western Front were spared the German reprisals in France. By January 1917, most British officers in Germany were concentrated in camps in the Rhineland as a reprisal against the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) bombing military targets in towns along the Rhine and Moselles rivers. Most Australian officers passed through the processing and distribution camp at Karlsruhe before proceeding to camps at Krefeld, Freiburg, Clausthal, Ströhen Moor, and Holzminden. As in Turkey, officers in German camps fared considerably well, even in the 10th Army Corps district near Hannover, where British officers were subjected to an organised system of coercion, strict discipline, and verbal abuse.[28] Despite this, officers' quarters in German camps were spacious; officers were permitted to have Other ranks prisoners cook and clean for them and many spent their days reading, studying, playing sports, gambling, and participating in camp theatres.[29] Australian officers also drew pay at the same level as their corresponding rank in the German Army and could go on escorted walks outside the camp in return for parole.

Work and Escape in Germany

Once they were transported to Germany, Other ranks prisoners were employed to support Germany's domestic needs. Since 1915, the German economy had struggled to cope with voids in essential home front industries, the British naval blockade, and the ever-growing demands of a war on multiple fronts.[30] Millions of prisoners were assigned to work parties that supported the German domestic economy; they spent the rest of the war working on farms, in mines, forests, and factories. Many Australians worked in the Rhineland and East Prussia. Living conditions and treatment varied between work parties, but treatment could be harsh, violent and unforgiving. Only the sick and injured remained in the large "parent camps" for Other ranks prisoners where all mail and Red Cross food parcels were sent via the neutral countries. The barracks in these camps were sometimes overcrowded, filthy, and susceptible to outbreaks of disease. Strict wartime rationing in Germany made the food supplied by camp administrators limited in both quality and quantity. Nonetheless, Australian prisoners in contact with the Red Cross could afford to forego the German rations and subsist wholly on fortnightly food consignments from London. By 1918, they were among the best-

fed people in Germany.

Despite the prominence and popularity of escape narratives in remembering the war behind the wire, few Australian prisoners of the First World War succeeded in their escape attempts. Of the 3,848 Australians taken prisoner by German forces, just forty-three escaped to neutral or friendly borders.[31] Recent research on the subject shows that prisoners were not expected to escape in the First World War as they were in the Second World War.[32] For Australians, only three officers managed to escape captivity – one from Turkish captivity and two from German captivity – with the remainder being Other ranks prisoners working close to the Dutch, Swiss, and Russian borders.[33] It may not have been an officer's duty to try to escape, but there were alternatives to sitting out the war inside a German prison camp. From 1916, Swiss medical commissioners examined the sick, the seriously wounded, and prisoners suffering from psychological conditions and determined whether they were eligible for internment in neutral Switzerland. By June 1917, all British officers and NCOs held captive in Germany for longer than eighteen months were eligible for internment in the Netherlands as a way of mitigating the psychological effects of prolonged incarceration.[34] The scheme worked on the basis of order of capture; only about 200 Australians experienced internment in The Netherlands before war's end in November 1918.

Conclusion: Repatriation, Historical Sources and the Australian Red Cross

In the days after their repatriation to Britain, more than 2,000 Australian prisoners from Germany and Turkey gave written statements about the circumstances of their capture and treatment in captivity. Some men gave harrowing accounts of their poor treatment, while others told their examiners that they fared quite well. Imprisonment in Turkey was radically different to captivity in Germany, but officers in both theatres benefited from the privilege of rank and coped better than the Other ranks prisoners. These statements are now held at the Australian War Memorial, where they are available to researchers studying Australians in captivity in the First World War (record series AWM30). This series does not, however, cover the at times problematic reintegration of prisoners of war back into the AIF and civilian life in the decades after the war.

After a mandatory four-week furlough, those who endured captivity were demobilised and discharged without any consideration of the physical or psychological consequences of prolonged incarceration. Despite this, one of the most consistent themes to emerge from such a large body of archival material was the value of the Australian Red Cross Society's assistance. Volunteers from the two branches of the Australian Red Cross worked tirelessly in support of prisoners of war and their families on the home front: the Wounded and Missing Bureau managed by Vera Deakin (1891-1978); and the Prisoner of War Department under Mary Elizabeth Chomley (1872-1960). Through their efforts in confirming that a man had been captured and then regularly sending him food and clothing parcels for the duration of the war, these women and their staff helped to relieve the anxieties of imprisonment and ensured that Australian prisoners had a much greater chance of survival.

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Notes

1. ↑ Butler, A. G. Special problems and services, Vol. 3 of Official history Australian Army Medical Services, Canberra 1943, pp. 896.

2. ↑ Australian War Records Section (AWRS), Australian Imperial Force: statistics of casualties, etc., London c. 1920, pp. 1–11.

3. ↑ Thomson, Alistair: '"Steadfast until death?" C.E.W. Bean and the representation of Australian military manhood', Australian Historical Studies, 23 (1989), pp. 462-478. See also Beaumont, Joan: "Prisoners of war in Australian national memory", in Moore, Bob and Hately-Broad, Barbara: Prisoners of war, prisoners of peace: captivity, homecoming and memory in World War II, New York 2005, pp.185-194.

4. ↑ Butler, Special problems and services 1943, pp. 896-897.

5. ↑ John Halpin cited in Gerster, Robin: Big-noting: the heroic theme in Australian war writing, Melbourne 1992, p. 20.

6. ↑ AWRS,Statistics of Casualties c.1920, p. 15

7. ↑ Jose, A. W.: The Royal Australian Navy, Vol. IX of Official history of Australia in the war of 1914-1918, Sydney 1941, pp. 241-248.

8. ↑ In some cases, Australian pilots who were forced down over Ottoman-held territory were met first by nomadic tribes which included the Bedouin. One Australian pilot captured by Arab tribes living in the area was beaten by a hammer, another was killed with an axe. See White, T. W.: Guests of the unspeakable: the odyssey of an Australian airman, London 1928.

9. ↑ Cutlack, F. W.: The Australian Flying Corps in the Western and Eastern theatres of war, 1914-1918, Vol. VIII, Official history of Australia in the war of 1914-1918, Sydney 1941, pp. 25-27.

10. ↑ AWRS, Statistics of Casualties c.1920, pp. 1–15.

11. ↑ For a study on the capture of Australians in France and Belgium, see Noble, Roger: 'Raising the white flag: the surrender of Australian soldiers on the Western Front', Revue Internationale d'Histoire Militaire, 72 (1990), pp. 48-79.

12. ↑ Hohnen, Peter and Guilliatt, Richard: The Wolf: how one German raider terrorized Australia and the Southern Oceans in the First World War, Sydney 2009.

13. ↑ Gudmundsson, Bruce: Stormtroop tactics: innovation in the German Army, 1914-1918, London 1995, p. 49.

14. ↑ Pegram, Aaron: 'Informing the enemy: Australian prisoners and German intelligence on the Western Front, 1916-1918', Journal of First World War Studies, 4/2 (2013), pp. 177-179.<

15. ↑ For examples, see Bean, C.E.W.: The Australian Imperial Force in France, 1917, Vol. IV, Official history of Australia in the war of 1914-1918, Sydney 1941, p. 340; Bean, C.E.W.: The Australian Imperial Force in France during the Main German Offensive, 1918, Vol. V, Official history of Australia in the war of 1914-1918, Sydney 1941, pp. 396-397.

16. ↑ Cook, Tim: 'The politics of surrender: Canadian soldiers and the killing of prisoners in the Great War', The Journal of Military History,70/3 (2006), pp. 637-665; Blair, Dale: No quarter: unlawful killing and surrender in the Australian war experience, 1915-18, Canberra 2006.

17. ↑ Robertson, John: Anzac & Empire: The Tragedy & Glory of Gallipoli, Sydney 1990, p. 214.

18. ↑ Pegram, 'Informing the enemy' 2013, p. 173.

19. ↑ Ibid., p. 174.

20. ↑ Butler, Official history medical services 1943, Vol. III, pp. 895-896.

21. ↑ Beaumont, Joan: 'Rank, privilege and prisoners of war', War & Society, 1/1 (1983), pp. 67-94.

22. ↑ For one prisoners' account of working on the railway in the Taurus Mountains, see Kerr, Greg: Lost Anzacs: The Story of two Brothers, Melbourne 1998.

23. ↑ Robertson, Anzac & Empire 1990, pp. 216-217.

24. ↑ Butler, Official history medical services 1943, Vol. III, pp. 895-896.

25. ↑ Jones, Heather: 'The German spring reprisals of 1917: Prisoners of war and the violence of the Western Front', German History, 26/3 (2008), pp. 335-356.

26. ↑ It most probably was a mistranslation of the German word Vergeltungsgefangener (retaliatory prisoner).

27. ↑ For Australian accounts of the German reprisals in 1917, see Chalk, David: 'Talks with old Gefangeners', Journal of the Australian War Memorial, 14 (1989), pp. 11-23; Coombes, David: Crossing the wire: The untold stories of Australian POWs in battle and captivity in WWI, Newport 2011.

28. ↑ This was the case for officers imprisoned at Ströhen Moor, Holzminden, Schwarmstedt and Clausthal. For conditions at one camp see Durnford, H.: The Tunnellers of Holzminden, Cambridge 1920.

29. ↑ For one Australian officers' account of life in German prison camps, see Cull, William: At all costs, Melbourne 1919.

30. ↑ Jones, Heather: 'A Missing paradigm? Military captivity and the prisoner of war 1914-1920', Immigrants & Minorities, 26/1-2 (2008), p. 28.

31. ↑ Pegram, Aaron: 'Bold Bids for Freedom: Escape and Australian Prisoners in Germany, 1916-1918' in Beaumont, Joan: Grant, Lachlan and Pegram, Aaron (eds.): Beyond Surrender: Australian Prisoners of War in the Twentieth Century, Melbourne 2015, p. 32.

32. ↑ MacKenzie, S. P.: 'The ethics of escape: British officer POWs in the First World War', War in History, 15/1 (2008), pp. 1–16.

33. ↑ Pegram, 'Bold Bids for Freedom' 2015, pp.32-35.

34. ↑ Yarnall, John: Barbed wire disease: British & German prisoners of war, 1914-1919, Stroud 2011, pp. 155-173.

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