

Narratives from North Africa: South African prisoner-of-war experience following the fall of Tobruk, June 1942

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Introduction

This article aims to present to the reader previously unknown narratives of former prisoners of war (POWs) immediately following the fall of Tobruk in June 1942. The intention is not to explain the events that led to the fall of Tobruk or to lay blame with any specific leader or Allied nation involved in the Western Desert Campaign. The focus is rather on the events during and following the battle, specifically the experiences of the South Africans who were captured and became prisoners of war. Of the 33 000 Allied soldiers captured on 21 June 1942, 10 722 were South Africans who were all part of the 2nd South African Infantry Division under command of Major General H.B. Klopper.¹ Making use of oral testimony, published and unpublished personal memoirs, as well as post-war statements found in the Department of Defence Archives and in the Ditsong National Museum of Military History, the article hopes to portray events as experienced by the ordinary rank and file men, giving a different perspective from that usually portrayed in military history publications which for the most part focus on the perspectives of those in command. Through this approach it should also become possible to extract the individual experience from the general experience, as each of the former POWs understood and interpreted what was happening to them in unique ways.

Internationally, research on the historical experience of POWs has increased with historians such as Moore and Fedorowich, Hatley-Broad, Kochavi, Mackenzie and Gilbert beginning to investigate the topic.² Most of these writers however, approach the topic thematically; most look at the treatment of prisoners by their captors. While the thematic approach is useful and provides interesting perspectives, the unique views of the different nationalities who formed part of the Allied forces are lost, as Australians, Canadians, New Zealanders and South Africans are all referred to simply as British or Commonwealth forces; this because POW experience is seen as international history because the war was fought on a global scale.³ In South Africa, although the focus has moved away from pure military history, POW experience has not yet received the same attention from local historians. Most of their recent work on World War Two looked at

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1. N. Roos, *Ordinary Springboks: White Servicemen and Social Justice in South Africa 1939–1961* (Ashgate, Aldershot, 2005), p 34.
2. See for instance B. Moore and K. Fedorowich, *Prisoners of War and their Captors in World War II* (Berg, Oxford, 1996); B. Moore and K. Fedorowich, *The British Empire and its Italian Prisoners of War, 1940–1947* (Palgrave, London, 2002); B. Moore and B. Hatley-Broad (eds), *Prisoners of War, Prisoners of Peace: Captivity, Homecoming and Memory in World War II* (Berg, Oxford, 2005); B. Moore, “Unwanted Guests in Troubled Times: German Prisoners of War in the Union of South Africa, 1942–43”, *The Journal of Military History*, 70, 1, 2006, pp 63–90; S.P. Mackenzie, *The Colditz Myth: British and Commonwealth Prisoners of War in Nazi Germany* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004); A.J. Kochavi, *Confronting Captivity: Britain and the United States and their POWs in Nazi Germany* (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2005); and A. Gilbert, *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe 1939–1945* (John Murray, London, 2007).
3. K. Fedorowich and B. Moore, “Co-Belligerency and Prisoners of War: Britain and Italy, 1943–1945”, *The International History Review*, 18, 1, 1996, pp 28–47.

aspects such as economic conditions, race and class relations before, during and after the war as well as the political motivations that informed these relations in the pre- and post-war years.⁴ However, regimental histories, especially of those regiments that were active at Tobruk, often have chapters or sections on the fall of Tobruk, which inevitably then also deals to some extent with POW experience. Most notably among these is *The Durban Light Infantry* which devotes 19 chapters to Tobruk.⁵ Other regimental histories with sections or chapters on Tobruk include *The Rand Light Infantry*; and *The History of the Transvaal Scottish* as well as *The Umvoti Mounted Rifles, 1864–1975*.⁶ Of the purely narrative works on the South African POW experience, Leigh's book, *Captives Courageous*, stands out, and although it lacks any form of analysis of POW experience, it presents readers with a compilation of POW experiences taken mostly from memoirs, all of which are now out of print.⁷ Paul Schamberger's *Interlude in Switzerland* is one of the few other publications on South African POW experience, but as the focus is on those who escaped from Italy to Switzerland, the German camp experience is omitted.⁸

The fall of Tobruk

The aim of Operation Crusader in 1941 was to relieve Tobruk and to recapture Cyrenaica from the Axis forces. Following two weeks of battle at Sidi Rezegh, Lieutenant General Erwin Rommel, Commander of the Afrika Korps, withdrew and Tobruk was relieved, but although Operation Crusader was successful in this respect, it came at a high price to the South Africans because the entire 5th South African Infantry Brigade was lost, with 224 killed, 379 wounded and 3 000 captured from the total force active at Sidi Rezegh.⁹ To authorities, however, these losses were considered insignificant in view of the fact that the Afrika Korps lost half their tanks.¹⁰ While the 1st South African Infantry Division was active in the Crusader battles, the 2nd SA Division was busy digging defences around the El Alamein area, and as the 2nd Division had not experienced any battles at that stage, their task of digging in the 30 mile bottleneck between the Mediterranean Sea and the Qattara Depression was met by some with disappointment and frustration because they wanted to become involved in active warfare, or be "blooded", as it was known by the men. Their duties however soon acquired a more prominent role as Tobruk became the responsibility of the SA 2nd Division under

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4. See for instance A.M. Grundlingh, "The King's Afrikaners? Enlistment and Ethnic Identity in the Union of South Africa's Defence Force during the Second World War, 1939–45", *Journal of African History*, 40, 1999, pp 351–365; P.J. Furlong, *Between Crown and Swastika: The Impact of the Radical Right on the Afrikaner Nationalist Movement in the Fascist Era* (Wesleyan University Press, Hanover, 1991); Roos, *Ordinary Springboks*.
 5. A.C. Martin, *The Durban Light Infantry, Volume II, 1935 to 1960* (Headquarter Board of DLI, Durban, 1969).
 6. B.G. Simpkins, *Rand Light Infantry* (Timmins, Cape Town, 1965); C. Birkby (ed.), *The Saga of the Transvaal Scottish Regiment 1932–1950* (Timmins, Cape Town, 1950); A.J. du Plessis, *The Umvoti Mounted Rifles, 1864–1975* (Natal Witness, Pietermaritzburg, 1975).
 7. M. Leigh, *Captives Courageous South African Prisoners of War World War II* (Ashanti, Johannesburg, 1992). Leigh's book is based on a number of other works, including the memoirs of I. Rosmarin, *Inside Story* (W.J. Flesch & Partners, Cape Town, 1999); L. du Preez, *Inside the Cage* (Struik, Cape Town, 1973); P. Ogilvie and N. Robinson, *In the Bag* (Macmillan, Johannesburg, 1975); and D. Scott, *My Luck Still Held* (Unie Volkspers, Cape Town, 1946) and general military histories.
 8. P. Schamberger, *Interlude in Switzerland. The Story of the South African Refugee-Soldiers in the Alps during the Second World War* (Maus Publishing, Johannesburg, 2001).
 9. C. Somerville, *Our War: How the British Commonwealth Fought the Second World War* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1998), p 94; J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and L.C.F. Turner, *Crisis in the Desert, May–July 1942* (Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1952), p 5.
 10. J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton & L.C.F. Turner, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles 1941* (Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1957), p 271.

Klopper's command when Rommel withdrew in December 1941.¹¹ During the months preceding the fall of Tobruk the men in the 2nd Division gained limited battle experience in the Benghazi Handicap and the Gazala Gallop during the initial phases of the Desert Campaign.¹² The task of the 2nd Division became increasingly difficult on 14 June when the Commander of the 8th Army, Lieutenant General N.M. Ritchie, ordered the withdrawal of the 1st SA Division and the British 50th Division to allow the 8th Army to rally its strength.¹³

With regard to the defence of Tobruk, General Sir Claude J.E. Auchinleck, Commander in Chief in the Middle East, wanted brigades to operate independently from divisions in an effort to ensure greater mobility, but Ritchie preferred a system of immobile defensive boxes along a line that ran from Gazala to Bir Hakeim, a stretch of 80 kilometres that became known as the Gazala line. Minefields were a vital part in the success of this system, but they were deficient, because "minefields had not been maintained and defensive positions had filled with sand",¹⁴ according to Michael de Lisle who served with the 2nd Anti-Aircraft Regiment. A.J. Cremer, attached to the 2nd SA Division and member of the Divisional Headquarters, also mentioned in his memoirs the bad state of the minefields and that the mines themselves were so old that they were completely ineffective.¹⁵ Furthermore, the two defensive boxes towards the south of the line were very far apart from each other and therefore unable to repel Rommel's advance effectively.¹⁶ When Rommel attacked, he bypassed the Gazala line, which put the South Africans at a disadvantage because they had their backs towards the Afrika Korps. Rommel's Stuka dive bombers, Mark III and IV tanks, and the use of superior German anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns, put the Germans in a position to defeat the Allied forces in Tobruk.¹⁷ Klopper was left to defend the harbour with "insufficient anti-aircraft and anti-tank guns" because the 8th Army was in retreat after the Battle of Gazala.¹⁸

For most in the 2nd Division, the battle at Tobruk was a chaotic experience characterised by conflicting orders. Many former POWs described the battle as frenzied and confused, mostly due to the fact that many of them were unaware of the full extent of events in the battlefield because it was spread out over such a wide area. In his memoirs, Ike Rosmarin, a war correspondent with the 2nd SA Division, described the attack as "terrifying [but] worst of all was the fact that we did not know what was happening as there were no orders from our officers. Confusion reigned with fear and panic".¹⁹ The dire situation is further emphasised by Private Gert Daniel van Zyl with the 1st South African Police Regiment, whose official statement on 19 January 1944 said he heard the BBC announce that Tobruk was besieged and no longer of strategic

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11. H. Klein (ed.), *Springbok Record* (South African Legion of the British Empire Service League, Johannesburg, 1946), pp 182, 186; H. Klein, *Springboks in Armour: The South African Armoured Cars in World War II* (Purnell, London, 1965), pp 147, 219 and 265.
 12. Somerville, *Our War*, p 138. The Benghazi Handicap took place in April 1941 and the Gazala Gallop in June 1942, just before the fall of Tobruk. In both cases the Allied forces were moving towards Egypt, away from the Germans in the West.
 13. M. Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War. Waging World War II in North Africa, 1941–1943* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009), p 237.
 14. M. de Lisle, *Over the Hills and Far Away: My Twenties in the Forties* (Unpublished Memoirs, c. 1995), p 19.
 15. A.J. Cremer, *Oorlogsherinneringe* (Unpublished Memoirs, undated), p 16.
 16. J. Holland, *Together we Stand Turning the Tide in the West: North Africa 1942–1943* (Harper-Collins, London, 2006), pp 38–39.
 17. J. Pimlott (ed.), *Rommel in his Own Words* (Greenhill Books, London, 1994), p 89.
 18. Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War*, p 238.
 19. Rosmarin, *Inside Story*, p 11.

importance. While it seems strange that the BBC would contradict Churchill, who two weeks before the fall of Tobruk sent a note to Auchinleck that Tobruk had to remain in Allied hands because this was vital to prevent Axis forces from entering Egypt, one can only assume that the BBC was attempting to influence the British public should the Allies suffer a defeat in North Africa.²⁰ At the time, Van Zyl did not even realise that Tobruk was in any danger and the BBC message must have added to his confusion.²¹ On 20 June, Van Zyl and the rest of the men in the 1st South Africa Police Brigade (1 SAP) was ordered to hand in their equipment, but an hour later the same equipment was re-issued to them. During the evening of 20 June they were told to move towards the coast as the Navy would come to their rescue, however, there were no clear orders and some men began to destroy their rifles while others simply walked away into the desert. Van Zyl described the men as “sheep without a shepherd”.²²

According to Fannin, at 16:00 on 20 June, the order of “every man for himself” was given, but his statement shows that after this order, attempts were still being made to contact regiments and to give orders, such as one to send out a “tank-hunting” force during the night. Fannin went on foot to inform Brigadier Johnson of the order, but found him “quite unperturbed ... the HQ was having tea ...” Problems were compounded during the night of 20 June when disagreements among the commanding officers resulted in a tentative decision to continue fighting but to allow commanding officers to surrender if they thought it necessary.²³ Ammunition and weapon supplies were another point of contention and according to Klopper the lack thereof was “the fatal factor” in his decision to surrender.²⁴ Many former POWs supported this view, for instance Fred Geldenhuis of The Second Transvaal Scottish said that they had no weapons whatsoever, and that not a single shot was fired from his position when the Germans came through.²⁵ In contrast with the widely held opinion that there was a shortage of ammunition at Tobruk, Captain Fannin stated during an interview in 1946 that “there was plenty of amn [ammunition] in Tobruk, the only serious shortage was in shells for the medium arty [artillery].”²⁶ This view is supported by Major N. Wessels, Commander of the 6th South African Light Anti-Aircraft Battery, who said in his interview in 1946 that the ammunition supply was adequate.²⁷ The matter of the perceived shortage of ammunition may be explained to an extent by Colonel H. McA. Richards, Commander of the Divisional Artillery, who told of one officer who was responsible for issuing ammunition who insisted on authority to do so from Headquarters, even though the German tanks were already visible and approaching fast at the time.²⁸

20. Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War*, p 237.

21. Department of Defence Archives, Pretoria (hereafter DOD), Union War Histories (hereafter UWH): Narep ME 3, Statement by 196202(V) Pte. Gert Daniel van Zyl of C COY, 1 SAP. 19 January 1944.

22. DOD, UWH: Narep ME 3, Statement by 196202(V) Pte. Gert Daniel van Zyl of C COY, 1 SAP. ‘Ons was soos ’n klomp skaap sonder ’n herder.’

23. DOD, UWH: Narep ME 13, Notes on interview with Capt D.G. Fannin, ex-int. officer, 4 SA INF BDE, 18 November 1946.

24. DOD, UWH: Narep ME 13, Report on interview with General H.B. Klopper DSO, conducted by Major L.C.F. Turner, chief narrator (Land), 6 May 1946.

25. Interview Fred Geldenhuis conducted by author, Pretoria, 9 July 2010.

26. DOD, UWH: Narep ME 13, Notes on interview with Capt. D.G. Fannin, ex-int. officer, 4 SA INF BDE, 18 November 1946.

27. DOD, UWH: Narep ME 13, Notes on interview with Maj. Wessels 2/c South Africa 2 LAA REGT, Tobruk, 20 November 1946.

28. DOD, UWH: Narep ME 13, Notes on interview with Col. W. Mc A. Richards, CRA 2 SA DIV, Tobruk, on 23 November 1946.

Evading capture

The confusion regarding orders resulted in many men taking matters into their own hands in an effort to evade capture. According to Jack Mortlock of Die Middelandse Regiment (DMR), the Germans advanced at such speed that by the time information and orders reached them they were inaccurate or no longer relevant.²⁹ Mortlock's memoirs also give insight into the influence of rumours on the battlefield:

It is said that General Klopper received, but did not succeed in transmitting to all units, the order to fight their way out if they could, and if not, to resist to the last. We certainly did not receive orders to this effect, even though General Klopper was at our Brigade Headquarters!³⁰

The indecision and disagreements between those in command affected everyone at Tobruk. For instance, the Cape Town Highlanders received an order that: "If anyone leaves Tobruk now, they'll be classified as a deserter." One of the Cape Town Highlanders, Gordon Fry, believed that had an order of "every man for himself" been given, he would have been able to evade capture, something that deeply troubled him throughout his time as a POW.³¹ On the other hand, H.L. Wood, who was stationed with the H.Q. Company of the Umvoti Mounted Rifles, simply took it for granted that it was a case of every man for himself and attempted to get away, as did many others.³² In his statement of 1943, Colonel du Plessis said "we who were at Divisional H.Q. were told that H.Q. staff was clearing out and that it was 'every man for himself'".³³ Gilbert points out that British rank and file did not submit easily to capture, regardless of orders from their superiors. In many cases men would ensure that they were caught with no ammunition in an effort not appear cowardly, as the lack of ammunition provided them with a valid and justifiable reason for surrender.³⁴

As the Germans approached, many men "dispersed in all directions" before they were even aware that Tobruk had fallen, while others who stayed put were informed by German troops that Klopper had surrendered.³⁵ Some escapees were lucky enough to find abandoned vehicles, which were driven towards Allied lines until their petrol supplies were exhausted. However, a few of these escape attempts were successful, such as was the case with two men of the Royal Durban Light Infantry, Goldman and Spear. After a few close encounters with German forces, they reached Allied lines on 29 June 1942.³⁶ In a letter to his family, John Davidson of the 7th Field Battery told of a Guards Major who refused to surrender and escaped with a "crowd of men". In the same letter he also mentioned Allan Bird who "just dashed through a minefield path" with an ambulance and a truck. According to Davidson, it was actually possible to drive through Italian camps; "you just drive through and wave and cheer – the Ities [Italians] are usually

29. J. Mortlock, *The Endless Years: Reminiscences of the 2nd World War* (Unpublished Memoirs, 1956), p 28.

30. Mortlock, *The Endless Years*, p 25.

31. Somerville, *Our War*, p 139.

32. H.L. Wood, *Memoirs of a Prisoner of War* (Unpublished Memoirs, undated), p 1.

33. DOD, UWH: Narep ME 1, Western Desert Campaign, Statement by Col. Du Plessis on the fall of Tobruk, 1943.

34. Gilbert, *POW Allied Prisoners*, p 24.

35. DOD, UWH: Narep ME 3, Statement by 196202(V) Pte. Gert Daniel van Zyl of C COY, 1 SAP.

36. DOD, UWH: Narep ME 1, Account by Lt. A.N. Goldman DCM and Sgt. C.H. Spear MM, Tobruk, no date.

so surprised that they just wave back”.³⁷ Other successful escapes from Tobruk included Lieutenant C.R. Featherstone of the DMR who escaped with 46 men, and Sergeant Woodley and nine others who escaped by hiding in caves and living on abandoned German rations.³⁸

When Dick Dickinson of the 2nd Transvaal Scottish Battalion attempted to escape, it was less successful. Dickinson and his friend, Rollo van der Burg came across an injured South African of the Non-European Army Services (NEAS) and convinced a German soldier that they had to take the man to hospital in the German’s truck. For some inexplicable reason the he agreed and Dickinson, Van der Burg and the injured man set off in the truck. From the start their attempt was doomed because they had no idea in which direction to travel or where the minefields were. As they proceeded, those trying to escape on foot climbed onto their truck until it was completely overloaded. Somewhere along the road the injured man disappeared and when they were again stopped by Germans they were detained.³⁹ In many cases men found themselves lost in the desert with diminishing food and water supplies, walking in circles and searching for the Allies. When the Germans eventually caught up with them, most were relieved because they realised the desert was a far more deadly enemy than the Axis forces.

Rommel considered the fall of Tobruk on 21 June 1941 the high point of the war in North Africa and as a reward he was promoted to field marshal.⁴⁰ For South Africa and the Allies, the fall of Tobruk was disastrous and rumours about South African incompetence threatened to further sour relations between South Africa and the United Kingdom.⁴¹ Relations between the two countries had become strained before the war, most notably as a result of the creation of South Africa’s Seaward Defence Force (SDF) which eventually led to the setting up of the South African Naval Forces in 1942.⁴² The SDF and the neutrality crisis of 1938 and 1939 were evidence of a growing sense of nationalism that was not unique to South Africa, but also gained momentum during the war in all dominions as they were seeking a greater sense of independence from their erstwhile colonial masters.⁴³ The impact of the surrender had far reaching consequences; Auchinleck’s subsequent report complicated the matter because it included references to the Tobruk garrison that the South African government found unacceptable.⁴⁴ In an effort to control “uninformed criticism”, rumours and German propaganda, the South

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37. DOD, UWH: Narep ME 1, Western Desert Campaigns, Letter by John Davidson 5399 7 Field BTY 3rd Regt, to his family re fall of Tobruk, 25 June 1942.
38. W.R. Tugay, *The Fighting Third* (Unie Volkspers, Cape Town, 1948), pp 205–221.
39. T. and D. Shearing (eds), *From Jo’burg to Dresden: A World War II Diary by E.B. Dickinson* (Privately published, Mossel Bay, 2010), pp 67–77.
40. Pimlott (ed.), *Rommel in his Own Words*, p 113. Ironically, Klopper became Commandant General of the South African Defence Force in 1956 under the National Party government, while Rommel committed suicide in 1944 because he was suspected of participating in a conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. See D.F. Albertyn (red.), *Ensiiklopedie van die Wêreld: Deel 6* (C.F. Albertyn Edms Bpk, Stellenbosch, 1974), p 111; R.G. Reuth, *Rommel: The End of a Legend* (Haus Publishing, London, 2005), p 209.
41. A. Stewart, “The Klopper Affair: Anglo-South African Relations and the Surrender of the Tobruk Garrison”, *Twentieth Century British History*, 17, 4, 2006, p 517.
42. I. van der Waag, “The Thin Edge of the Wedge: Anglo-South African Relations, Dominion Nationalism and the Formation of the Seaward Defence Force in 1939–1940”, *Contemporary British History*, 24, 4, 2010, p 429.
43. A. Stewart, “The British Government and the South African Neutrality Crisis, 1938–39”, *English Historical Review*, 123, 503, 2008, pp 947–972.
44. A. Stewart, “The Atomic ‘Despatch’: Field Marshal Auchinleck, the Fall of the Tobruk Garrison and Post-War Anglo-South African Relations”, *Scientia Militaria: South African Journal of Military History*, 36, 1, 2008, p 78.

African High Commissioner suggested that authentic accounts from survivors be made public in South Africa and the United Kingdom, but only if these accounts exonerated Klopper. It had been suggested that

Klopper was guilty of treachery [and] it [was] a fact that no government spokesman has made any appreciative or sympathetic reference to Klopper ... [Furthermore, the] decision to hold Tobruk against the whole force of Rommel while the 8th Army disappeared eastwards into the blue and thus was unable to assist the defence [was highly questionable].⁴⁵

Those captured at Tobruk, however, did not see or hear any of the immediate political, press or public reaction to the events of the battle; they formed a general opinion of Klopper, based on their experience, which was extremely negative. Shortly after arriving at the POW camp in Derna, Rosmarin described how Klopper was brought to the enclosure by German officers to address the prisoners,

but the prisoners of war, especially those from the British forces, were in no mood to listen to someone whom they thought had betrayed them. They were in an angry and belligerent mood and, amid boos and hisses, Klopper did an about turn without saying a word.⁴⁶

By the time the POWs reached Italy, the negativity towards Klopper and Tobruk had altered and South African rank and file POWs often experienced hostility from especially British and Australian POWs.⁴⁷ The fact that all South Africans volunteered for the Union Defence Force, and were not conscripted, must have emphasised the feelings of resentment from fellow POWs.⁴⁸

Making sense of capture

Understandably, memoirs and interviews of all former POWs revealed a sense of shock, humiliation and exasperation at becoming POWs. While some, like Clive Luyt of the 2nd Anti-Aircraft Regiment, blamed Klopper because he “was straight from a desk in Pretoria”,⁴⁹ others, like Fred van Alphen Stahl, also of the 2nd Anti-Aircraft Regiment, felt aggrieved at becoming a prisoner because he was not fighting at the time of his capture. During the interview Stahl described his experience as follows:

... of course your first feelings as a prisoner of war, this is the end, you imagined going to the army you could lose an arm, you could lose your life, you could lose your legs, your sight, but you never gave prisoner of war a thought, and so this, this is the end, I haven't ... I wasn't busy fighting at the time. I wasn't fighting at the time, we had been fighting in the Gazala handicap and on the rearguard coming back, and they said right now you are all moving ... we didn't even realise it was Tobruk ... and the next morning ... a signal just came in and they said destroy your guns, destroy your vehicles, Tobruk has fallen, you are now prisoners of war.⁵⁰

45. National Archives of South Africa, Pretoria (hereafter NASA), Secretary of Foreign Affairs (hereafter BTS): 1/54/12.

46. Rosmarin, *Inside Story*, p 17.

47. Examples of hostility towards South African POWs are found in most POW memoirs and the issue was also raised to some extent by most of those interviewed by the author.

48. Roos, *Ordinary Springboks*, p 26.

49. Interview with Clive Luyt conducted by author, Cape Town, 19 May 2010.

50. Interview with Fred van Alphen Stahl conducted by author, Cape Town, 25 May 2010.

Seen from another point of view, Wood, in his memoirs, described the disappointment felt by Captain De Jager of the Umvoti Mounted Rifles, who “with tear-filled eyes” conveyed the order to surrender.⁵¹ Sergeant Goldman stated that when he was told that “they have surrendered”, he thought “they” were German forces. When he realised that it was in fact the Allies who had surrendered, he said he was “astounded and flabbergasted. I had not for a moment thought that we would surrender. It seemed fantastic. We had not fired a shot”.⁵² Stanley Smollan of the Transvaal Scottish Regiment, was unfortunate enough to return to Tobruk after recovering from an injury in Cairo, arriving the day before it fell,⁵³ while David Brokensha, a dispatch rider with the 2nd South African Signal Company, was literally captured with his pants down, swimming naked in the sea after sharing a bottle of gin with his brother Paul and four others who believed they could swim to freedom following the surrender order. Brokensha’s capture was therefore humiliating on many different levels. Firstly he was part of a surrendering army; secondly they failed to escape; and thirdly he felt “embarrassed, not only at being a *hands-upper*, but also because I was ‘starko’ – as though this were not the right script; people did not get captured without clothes”.⁵⁴ After experiencing heavy fighting during the week before the fall of Tobruk at Point 209, also known as Commonwealth Keep, Mortlock simply stated that “continued resistance appeared hopeless” and they obeyed the order of destroying their weapons and documents.⁵⁵ Surrender was synonymous with the destruction of weapons and for everyone this was a difficult task to carry out. During interviews, former POWs had no difficulty in recalling this detailed process, while at other times they could not remember seemingly obvious elements, such as the names of the camps where they were held. De Lisle’s description shows the respect many had for their equipment:

the thing to do is to put a shell in the muzzle of the barrel and then fire a round at it, well that just blew apart the muzzle of the barrel and didn’t destroy the breach mechanism and that was good, solid, beautiful hard steel so we had to take the breach mechanism to bits and bury it in different places...⁵⁶

The shock of becoming a prisoner was followed by days of mental and physical hardship under Italian captors. Although the Germans captured the men, they immediately handed over their prisoners to the Italian forces who were responsible for the confinement of POWs, mostly in camps in Tobruk, Gazala, Tarhunah, Derna, Benghazi and Mersa Matruh. These were all transit camps and most POWs ended up in Benghazi before being transported to Italy. While most camps were simple wire enclosures with Italian and Senussi guards posted on the perimeter, there were exceptions, such as the graveyard in Derna where most POWs spent a night on their way to Benghazi. At this early stage of captivity no Red Cross delegates inspected any of the camps, and the conditions in the North African camps were so bad that POWs were mainly concerned with basic survival needs and only later began to concern themselves with the stipulations of the 1929 Geneva Convention. Similarly, faced with an

51. Wood, *Memoirs of a Prisoner of War*, p 1.

52. DOD, UWH: Narep ME 1, Account by Lt. A.N. Goldman, DCM and Sgt. C.H. Spear, MM, Tobruk.

53. Interview with Stanley Smollan conducted by author, Johannesburg, 15 March 2010.

54. D. Brokensha, *Brokie’s Way, an Anthropologist’s Story: Love and Work in Three Continents* (Amani Press, Fish Hoek, 2007), p 72.

55. Mortlock, *The Endless Years*, p 30.

56. Interview with Michael de Lisle conducted by author, Cape Town, 4 June 2010.

unexpected high number of POWs and inadequate temporary camps, the Italians did not regard the Geneva Convention as a priority at this time.⁵⁷

Views of the enemy and of each other

Before the events at Tobruk, some South Africans came across German and Italian prisoners of war and formed initial impressions of their adversaries. Mortlock described Italian POWs as behaving like animals while he thought the Germans “carried themselves [in POW camps] with that characteristic air of superiority that seemed second nature to the German Army at that time”.⁵⁸ Opinions about Italians were also formed when South Africans raided abandoned dug-outs at Mersa Matruh, Sidi Barrani, Sollum, Halfaya Pass and Bardia. According to Rosmarin it was “no wonder that the ‘Ities’ [Italians] were looked on as inferior to the Germans”,⁵⁹ as they often found women’s clothing and condoms in the dug-outs. Stahl also attested to finding condoms in Italian quarters in Abyssinia, but to him the hygiene of the Italians was of greater concern; he said that the Italians “would rather cover themselves with scent and powder, than use soap to wash ... so they were probably used to being lousy from time to time”. The distinction between their Italian and German enemies did not change much when the South Africans found themselves in POW camps. When Brokensha was captured, the Germans admitted that they considered the South Africans, and themselves, to be good soldiers, but that the Italians were not, therefore they felt obliged to apologise for handing them over to the Italians.⁶⁰ Apologies such as these were not limited to Tobruk, but also took place at Sidi Rezegh where Bernard Schwikkard of the 3rd Transvaal Scottish was captured. According to Schwikkard:

General Rommel, the famous German Commander, drove up to us and said he was sorry to be handing us over to the Italians, but he needed all his soldiers to do the fighting. He indicated that as soldiers, the Italians were a miserable lot.⁶¹

It is possible that Rommel’s reputation as an excellent soldier influenced POWs’ attitude towards German soldiers and guards.⁶² Brokensha, who experienced no fighting before he was captured at Tobruk, said in his interview that Rommel “was our favourite General, I won’t say our only favourite German General ... he had a very good name as a proper soldier, and very efficient”. The apparent respect Brokensha held for Rommel, did not, however, confuse his loyalties because he firmly believed that “we were the British, the Allies, we were going to defeat the bastards”.⁶³ While most English-speaking South Africans found the German apology regarding the Italians mildly ironic, between some Afrikaans-speaking South Africans and Germans there was an even greater chance of mutual association because many Afrikaans POWs were of German ancestry. Shortly after his capture, Cremer noticed a German soldier speaking Afrikaans to the POWs. The soldier was a South African student in Germany before the war and joined the German Army in 1939. The fact that South Africans were fighting on opposite sides while speaking the same language made a big impression on the Afrikaans-speaking Cremer,

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57. A. Bennet, *The Geneva Convention: The Hidden Origins of the Red Cross* (Sutton, Gloucestershire, 2005), p 212.
 58. Mortlock, *The Endless Years*, p 19.
 59. Rosmarin, *Inside Story*, p 8.
 60. Interview with David Brokensha conducted by author, Fish Hoek, 10 September 2010.
 61. B.E. Schwikkard, *My Life Briefly Told* (Unpublished Memoirs, 1999), p 25.
 62. P.P. Battistelli, *Erwin Rommel: The Background, Strategies, Tactics and Battlefield Experiences of the Greatest Commanders of History* (Osprey, Oxford, 2010), pp 55–56.
 63. Interview with David Brokensha conducted by author, Fish Hoek, 10 September 2010.

but this by no means meant that he questioned his own loyalty or nationality.⁶⁴ Dennis Mugglestone of the 6th Infantry Police Brigade also remembered recognising two South Africans, Van der Westhuizen and Le Roux, among the German guards. As an English-speaking South African, Mugglestone regarded these two as traitors and he was offended when they tried to enter into a conversation with him.⁶⁵ On the other hand, Stahl's German origins did not affect his South African identity, because he believed that the "Germans were bastards, but they were just bastards".⁶⁶ In complete contrast, Wessel Oosthuizen of the Police Brigade regarded the Germans as a proud nation and in some way regarded the British as the enemy because of stories told to him about the South African War of 1899–1902.⁶⁷ In most cases, the idea of Italians as inferior made accepting their POW status harder and in a few instances led to blatant defiance towards Italian guards. While being transported on a truck, Cremer and those with him became so irritated with their young guard who insisted on singing and whistling while firing shots at random targets in the desert, that one of the POWs grabbed his rifle and threw it into bushes next to the road. The guard was terrified and banged on the roof to alert the driver but he was ignored – or the driver was himself too terrified to stop the truck. When the POWs arrived at their camp, they disappeared into the already crowded camp and no action was taken against them.⁶⁸ In some cases, confronting the enemy after capture led to potentially dangerous situations, as was the case with Stahl, who together with De Lisle, was transported on a truck towards Derna. Stahl felt a sense of frustration and was offended by the Italians who had the audacity, according to him, to jeer at the prisoners. He described the Italians as

funny looking little people with great big helmets and clothes that didn't fit and unshaven ... and one, but he was particularly annoying, laughing and jeering at us and waving his rifle, and I said to old Michael de Lisle, he was a bit of a linguist, I said to him what's ice-cream in Italian and he said *gelati* – and I pointed to this chap who was waving his rifle around and I said 'two *gelati* tingelingeling' and he got so mad ... he fired two shots in the air, or one shot in the air – and I just wondered whether my big mouth could have got us into trouble there could have got somebody shot that day.⁶⁹

On another occasion Stahl used a form of reverse psychology against the Italians in an effort to protect prisoners' rights. When a bombardier had his watch taken by an Italian guard, Stahl said to an Italian officer

"I thought you Italians were all the same, honourable people" and he said: "So we are, so we are!", and I said: "Well that man over there has taken my friend's watch". And then he called this chap over, he got the watch back from him, gave him a slap through the face and handed the watch back.⁷⁰

In some instances, the Germans even sided with the South Africans against the Italians, as was the case when G.H. Collet, of the DMR, saw an Italian guard offering bread in exchange for watches or fountain pens. When a German saw this he took the loot from the Italian and threw it over the fence, resulting in humiliation for the Italian as

64. Cremer, *Oorlogsherinneringe*, p 18.

65. D.I.H. Mugglestone, *Destination Unknown* (Unpublished Memoirs, undated), p 23.

66. Interview with Fred van Alphen Stahl conducted by author, Cape Town, 25 May 2010.

67. Interview with Wessel Oosthuizen conducted by author, Hartenbos, 4 December 2010.

68. Cremer, *Oorlogsherinneringe*, p 20.

69. Interview with Fred van Alphen Stahl conducted by author, Cape Town, 25 May 2010.

70. Interview with Fred van Alphen Stahl.

the POWs clearly enjoyed this event. Collet states in his memoirs that “this incident epitomized the difference in the German and Italian behaviour to us as prisoners of war”.⁷¹ The Italians also used the local population to guard the POW camps and these guards seemed to have had no mercy or humanity towards the prisoners. None of the accounts by POWs reveal any vestige of goodwill between the Senussi and the prisoners. In his memoirs, L.G. Tupper of the Kaffrarian Rifles, described them as “a lot of black Senussi bastards guarding us and they would shoot for the slightest provocation. I remember one chap who showed them the ‘V’ for victory sign and was shot”.⁷² This description probably reflects most POWs’ feelings towards these people. Rosmarin described the Senussi guards at Benghazi as “raw desert natives” whose behaviour only increased the tension between the captives and captors.⁷³ Mortlock’s description of them goes one step further as he dehumanises them by comparing them to animals who

endeavoured to make their wishes known by bashing you about with a rifle butt. I believe there were cases of prisoners being shot by these creatures. Furthermore, if they noticed watches, fountain pens etc, these were immediately ripped off. It was indeed a lucky thing for the Senussis that none of the prisoners whom they handled were in the victorious Eighth Army advance in the latter part of 1942.⁷⁴

Whatever their opinion of the Italian guards, many South Africans were reduced to begging for water and food during the first few days in transit camps, as was the case in the Derna graveyard, where the water taps were on the outside, forcing POWs to plead with the guards for water. According to Cremer, the guards became irritated with the constant begging and started shouting insults at the prisoners. When a prisoner returned an insult, the guard reacted by shooting into the crowd, killing one of the prisoners. The prisoners reacted by storming the fence at which juncture the guard ran away. When the Italian officer asked the prisoners to bury the man, they refused as they felt they were not responsible for his death.⁷⁵

In the Tobruk camp, POWs also died at the hands of Italians who seemed to take advantage of their position of power. Private Connely was shot by an Italian commandant who ordered him to move away from the fence. Although Connely obeyed, the commandant shot him in the back. On another occasion, Private Myles was severely injured while looking for a toilet when an Italian guard threw a bomb into the camp.⁷⁶ Brokensha experienced a similar feeling of resentment towards Italian guards at Derna where he was kept in crowded army barracks. As the prisoners were being counted by Italian guards, he and a friend became impatient when the guards seemed incapable of counting the prisoners without making mistakes. Brokensha and his friend “flinched away from [the guard’s] grubby paw” as the guard clapped his hand on their shoulders while counting. Brokensha believes that their “refined reaction” offended the guard and afterwards they were taken to a small office where an Italian lieutenant “smelling of perfume and soap” pretentiously displayed his revolver. The guard then slapped both Brokensha and his friend in their faces as punishment. According to Brokensha, “the slaps didn’t really hurt, what was hurt was our youthful pride. I was furious – and

71. Ditsong National Museum of Military History, Johannesburg. (hereafter MHM): File B.472, Memoirs of G.H. Collet.

72. MHM: File B.472, Memoirs of L.G. Tupper.

73. Rosmarin, *Inside Story*, p 16.

74. Mortlock, *The Endless Years*, p 31.

75. Cremer, *Oorlogsherinneringe*, p 19.

76. NASA, BTS: 9/55/1, Vol. 2, South Africa House, London, to Secretary of External Affairs, Pretoria, 8 October 1942.

powerless”.⁷⁷ For many, the Italians’ blatant disregard of the POWs’ rights on medical matters increased their dislike of the Italians. In his memoirs De Lisle also pointed out how the Italian doctor at Benghazi spent most of his time discussing prices for loot taken from POWs by an Italian corporal rather than paying attention to their medical requirements.⁷⁸

Some POWs did realise however, that the terrible conditions in the camps in North Africa was a result of the unexpected number of POWs taken and apparently forgave the Italians. Smollan was shocked when he noticed the poor state of the Italians, especially with regard to their equipment, transport, rations and the fact that Italian troops had no socks, but were given pieces of cloth to put in their boots. Smollan emphasised that “the Italians were a very kindly people ... in Africa it was very bad, things were very bad and I can’t blame the Italians because I think they did what they could”.⁷⁹ De Lisle expressed similar views, saying that their Italian captors “proved inefficient, capricious, and unable to provide us with the necessities of life because they had very little for themselves”.⁸⁰ It is important to note, however, that both Smollan and De Lisle escaped in Italy following Mussolini’s capitulation and they became dependant on Italian peasant families for their survival. Their view of the Italians in Africa is therefore probably clouded by their subsequent experiences in Italy. For others though, it was simply a question of colour. Schwikkard explained the Italian behaviour toward the POWs as being related to how dark or light the Italians were, saying

we disrespected them and the result is that ... I never regained respect for them, except the fact that I realised afterwards that most of these people ... were from the South of Italy and not the North. South of Italy are peasants and so on, you know they are the darker people and ... they are from Naples.⁸¹

Similarly, South African soldiers belonging to the NEAS and the Cape Corps were seen by many white soldiers, as well as by the government of the day, as inferior to white soldiers.⁸² The superior attitude of white soldiers towards others can often be detected in the negative way they compared the behaviour of the Italians to that of South African blacks, indicating that they viewed both Italians and non-Europeans as inferior. Cremer, for instance, described how two young Italian guards carried on a very loud conversation “as if they were 50 steps away from each other – just like our Bantus are used to shouting at each other!”⁸³ Although most South African POWs looked down on their Italian captors, not all of them compared Italians to black or coloured South Africans. While many white POWs expressed paternalistic or blatantly racist views regarding other races, genuinely good relationships did exist, such as that between Ben Hermer, a medical officer with the 17th South African Field Ambulance, and his batman, July Monaremi. When the two of them were captured at Tobruk, they were put into separate POW camps, and Hermer described their last conversation as a “bitter goodbye; there were tears in July’s eyes and in mine too ... my heart was heavy as I knew I would

77. Brokensha, *Brokie’s Way*, p 75.

78. De Lisle, *Over the Hills and Far Away*, p 25.

79. Interview with Stanley Smollan conducted by author, Johannesburg, 15 March 2010.

80. De Lisle, *Over the Hills and Far Away*, p 19.

81. Interview with Bernard Schwikkard conducted by author, Johannesburg, 17 March 2010.

82. Gilbert, *POW Allied Prisoners*, pp 207–208.

83. Cremer, *Oorlogsherinneringe*, p 21. ‘... asof hulle minstens 50 treë van mekaar verwyder was – net soos ons Bantoes gewoon was om vir mekaar te skree!’

never see him again and I didn't".⁸⁴ Oosthuizen, on the other hand, described lying next to black patients in the Alexandria hospital as a very strange experience: "the black head and the white sheets, it just didn't fit, you know."⁸⁵ It is clear that the relationship between South Africans of different race groups cannot be generalised, because some express racist attitudes in their memoirs while others emphasise the good relationship they had with each other. The fact that no living former black or coloured POWs could be found for interview purposes, and that none of their written memoirs appear to be available, provides a one-sided view of the race situation during the war.

German and Italian forces displayed a complete disregard for the rights of black and coloured POWs as they did not view them as regular troops. Many non-European soldiers from different parts of the Commonwealth endured bad treatment from their captors, and several were shot if they gave too much trouble.⁸⁶ Mugglestone recalled how black soldiers were shot by German guards while being marched to the POW camp following the fall of Tobruk. Apparently the soldiers "were too drunk to move any further, and the Jerries [Germans] could not be worried. This was the result of the liquor they stole from Battalion HQ the previous night."⁸⁷ In the Tobruk camp, black South African POWs were forced "under threat of death" to do war work, which was contrary to the Geneva Convention.⁸⁸ Another report claims that Indian and black prisoners at Tobruk were not allowed to take cover in shelters when the town was bombed by the Allied forces. Furthermore, their food was totally inadequate – they were only given one packet of British Army biscuits per day and water rations were kept to a minimum – this while they were being assaulted by both German and Italian guards who supervised the war work they were doing.⁸⁹ On the other hand, black servicemen could not rely on sympathy from fellow South Africans either, as is illustrated by Cremer, who saw a black man shooting at Stuka dive bombers using a small Italian gun in the midst of the Tobruk battle. Cremer made no effort to help the man or to take him to the Headquarters, towards which Cremer was heading. The black man was left in the desert shooting straight up at the bombers, while Cremer "could only laugh" at the absurdity of the situation.⁹⁰

There were also examples of black South Africans escaping together with whites from the perimeters of Tobruk when it was about to fall, as was the case with Featherstone who escaped with 46 men, including six non-Europeans.⁹¹ Some black soldiers showed surprising loyalty to the cause despite the discriminatory treatment they received. One such example was Job Maseko who was captured at Tobruk and decided to sabotage the enemy "because of our ill-treatment by the enemy, especially the Italians, and because I felt it a duty in this way to assist my own people". Maseko was one of the soldiers who were off-loading military equipment in the Tobruk harbour and as he had experience of working with explosives, he put this knowledge to use by assembling a

84. G. Friedman, *The Piano War: A True Story of Love and Survival in World War II* (David Philip, Claremont, 2003), p 158.

85. Interview with Wessel Oosthuizen conducted by author, Hartenbos, 4 December 2010.

86. Gilbert, *POW Allied Prisoners*, p 208.

87. Mugglestone, *Destination Unknown*, p 22.

88. NASA, BTS: 9/55/1, Vol. 2, South Africa House, London, to Secretary of External Affairs, Pretoria, 8 October 1942.

89. DOD, UWH: Narep ME 4, Axis cruelty to native prisoners. 11 September 1942.

90. Cremer, *Oorlogsberinneringe*, p 18. 'Ek kon maar net lag.'

91. Tungay, *The Fighting Third*, p 214.

bomb using jerry cans, straw and petrol, resulting in the ship being destroyed.⁹² The fact that black and coloured troops were being used to do war work on the docks also held an advantage because they had the opportunity to acquire food, something white prisoners in camps could not do. De Lisle recalled how these men would return from the harbour with haversacks filled with mealie meal, and “the unfortunate consequence was that hungry English and even S[outh] Africans would lay siege to their tents at night to beg the crumbs of their charity”.⁹³

Camp conditions

As the Red Cross did not visit any of the camps in North Africa, there are no official reports on the living conditions in these camps and information has been gleaned from interviews, memoirs, diaries and to a lesser extent from *The Benghazi Forum*, a camp newspaper started by Eric Hurst, a British POW.⁹⁴ Many POWs consider their experiences in North Africa as dehumanising, referring to the camps as “cages”.⁹⁵ Maintaining a sense of dignity became a daily struggle, because living conditions worsened and most POWs lost on average between 20 and 30 kilograms in weight as a result of food shortages while in North Africa. Because there were so many prisoners, the distribution of food was a long process and after standing in line for hours, the POWs were always disappointed when they received their rations. In Derna the biscuits were so hard that Reverend Major Patrick J. Nolan asked an Italian guard to break the biscuit with his bayonet. The Italian replied that Nolan should soak the biscuit in water, but by that time the water had run out.⁹⁶ Often POWs received tins of bully beef, but these had to be shared between two or three of them.⁹⁷ The shortage of food forced POWs to look for food elsewhere and on one occasion Collet was desperate and lucky enough to catch and eat a mole.⁹⁸ Dickinson’s diary probably gives the most accurate description of the food POWs received:

Our daily ration is a tin of bully-beef and a small loaf of bread, the size of a large hot-cross bun, per man. The bully-beef is 300 grams. About every third day we are given a hot meal which is a pint and a half of stew, but which is mostly rice. When we get this meal, our bully is cut to half a tin.⁹⁹

For Dickinson, the lack of food was an indication of the bad state of the enemy forces, a view shared by Brokensha who emphasised that the Italians were not ready to accommodate the huge numbers of POWs.¹⁰⁰ However, at the time Brokensha did not see the lack of food as a result of bad organisational skill, but of pure maliciousness. When an Italian guard, who had slapped him earlier the same day, offered him some water, Brokensha refused because he believed his treatment was the result of animosity towards South Africans. However, Brokensha’s older brother, Paul, convinced him to accept the water and Brokensha, his youthful pride protesting, eventually accepted the

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92. DOD, UWH: Narep ME 2, Statement by No 4448 L/CPL Job Maseko, alleging to have sunk a boat in Tobruk harbour, c. 21 July 1942.
 93. De Lisle, *O'er the Hills and Far Away*, p 30.
 94. Friedman, *The Piano War*, p 200.
 95. Leigh, *Captives Courageous*, pp 14–31.
 96. DOD, UWH: Narep ME 2, Statement by Rev. Maj. Patrick J. Nolan. No date
 97. DOD, UWH: Narep ME 4, Enemy treatment of prisoners in Cyrenaica after Sidi Rezegh, extracts from a report by a SA officer, Major H.W. Boardman, 1 SA Irish. No date.
 98. MHM: File B.472, Memoirs of G.H. Collet.
 99. Shearing (eds), *From Jo'burg to Dresden*, p 69.
 100. Interview with David Brokensha conducted by author, Fish Hoek, 10 September 2010.

water and shared it with his brother and the others in their group.¹⁰¹ Prisoners who were caught stealing, especially those who stole food, were severely punished by fellow POWs, as was the case with two British POWs who were chained to a gate for 24 hours without food or water.¹⁰²

It was probably during this time in the North African camps that POWs established friendships that would last throughout their imprisonment, because everyone learnt to share resources, especially food and water. POWs also had to trust one another because food rations often had to be shared and each morsel of food became very important. Stahl and De Lisle were two such friends who were part of a group of four who supported each other during their stay in Benghazi and Derna. In his memoirs De Lisle pointed out that during his days in the Army he was never able to establish such close friendships, but that the “need for mutual support” in POW camps made such friendships a necessity.¹⁰³ High ranking officers like Klopper were separated from the rank and file at an early stage, but among the other ranks, it quickly became apparent that rank no longer mattered because in the camps it was a matter of “dog-eat-dog”.¹⁰⁴ Rosmarin was amazed at how quickly “Army apartheid” evaporated when he saw his commanding officer at the transit camp in Tobruk “too dispirited even to shoo away a mangy desert dog which was lifting his leg on his mackintosh”.¹⁰⁵

In most transit camps POWs were accommodated in tents, but in Benghazi some of the camps used converted barracks which were equipped with electricity. Hygiene, however, was a problem in all camps and POWs quickly became infested with lice and infected with dysentery. The toilet facilities were hopelessly inadequate and at some camps POWs were not allowed to go the toilets at night; instead they had to use small tins, a completely inadequate measure. In an attempt to solve the problem, a trench of about four meters was dug and a box with holes was placed over the trench. Toilet paper was simply non-existent and any paper found was reserved for those suffering from dysentery.¹⁰⁶

In contrast to memoirs and interviews, *The Benghazi Forum* paints a very different picture of life in the camp. In the first edition of 4 November 1942, the editor claimed that “there has been produced from chaos, law and order, efficient food and water supply; regular concerts with original material ... Arts and Crafts Exhibition; [and] a well organised Farmers’ Association”.¹⁰⁷ For the most part the newspaper focused on organisational aspects of the camps; biographies of inmates; and reports on concerts or sporting events. The tone of the articles was optimistic and even humorous and was clearly aimed at raising the morale of the prisoners.

Escape in North Africa

While the prisoners in Benghazi tried to make the best of their situation, the Allied forces were ordered to bomb Benghazi harbour continuously because it was an important

101. Brokensha, *Brokie's Way*, p 76.

102. Shearing (eds), *From Jo'burg to Dresden*, p 69.

103. De Lisle, *Over the Hills and Far Away*, p 21.

104. Shearing (eds), *From Jo'burg to Dresden*, p 69.

105. Rosmarin, *Inside Story*, p 14.

106. DOD, UWH: Narep ME 4, Enemy treatment of prisoners in Cyrenaica after Sidi Rezegh, extracts from a report by a SA officer, Major H.W. Boardman, 1 SA Irish.

107. MHM: Pam. B.472, PRI: Reproductions from POW newspapers, *The Benghazi Forum* and *Tuturano Times*.

supply line for the Axis forces in the desert.¹⁰⁸ It was ironic that the Allied bombing of the Benghazi harbour worsened the situation for POWs as far as food supplies were concerned, but it also kept their hopes up because they believed Allies would soon liberate them. Camp rumours were almost as frequent as the bombs in the harbour and in most cases only served to confuse prisoners. Tupper recalled that:

one day we heard rumours that Alexandria was taken. The Wogs were very excited and told us that they would soon be on holiday in that city. We were very down in the dumps but still had faith in that our bombers were still coming to bomb the harbour.¹⁰⁹

De Lisle remembered the rumours in Benghazi with mixed emotions because he recalled only one incident when the rumours were true and that

every other day there'd be a story of an Arab trader passing a message through over the fence with a loaf of bread, I think the enemy fostered these rumours to try and break our morale, raise our hopes and then dash them.¹¹⁰

The toilet facilities afforded no privacy and because they were in constant use became centres of information. Mortlock remembers that the “rumours or ‘latrineograms’ ... dogged our footsteps for as long as we were prisoners of war.”. Because most POWs were in a state of confusion, it was very difficult for anyone to determine the reliability of these rumours, dividing the camps into optimists and pessimists. However, Mortlock recalled that these “rumours were generally reputed to have come from reliable sources from outside the camp, and that it would only be a matter of days before we would be released”.¹¹¹ Many POWs believed that the Allied forces were planning an elaborate scheme to free them, and when the Italians started to transport POWs from Benghazi to Italy, many tried to postpone their departure, hoping to be liberated before they found themselves in Europe. De Lisle believes his group missed being liberated by four days, an opinion supported by some in the DMR, who left Benghazi four days before the 8th Army reached that city.¹¹² Others who did not believe the rumours could not wait to get to Italy because they believed the camp conditions there would be better.

On average, the Tobruk POWs spent five months in North African camps, but this was a long time to live on rumour, hard biscuits and bully beef, and a few POWs decided to escape and take their chances in the desert. Most POWs believed escape would be too dangerous because they did not have sufficient water or food and they were not sure of the local population's loyalties. Failed escapes were also a big deterrent. One such case was a prisoner who was trying to cut through the wire fence and was shot by an Italian guard. The corpse was left hanging on the fence as a warning.¹¹³ Others decided to take the risk as did Sergeant Dawie van der Merwe and Gunner Louw. While their accomplices distracted the Italian guards with exchanging boots for cigarettes, Louw and Van der Merwe made their escape. After several days in the desert, the two were apparently betrayed by a Senussi tribesman and they found themselves back in camp,

108. M. Gilbert, *Road to Victory: Winston S. Churchill 1941–1945* (Heinemann, London, 1986), p 145.

109. MHM: File B.472, Memoirs of L.G. Tupper.

110. Interview with Michael de Lisle conducted by author, Cape Town, 4 June 2010.

111. Mortlock, *The Endless Years*, p 34.

112. Interview with Michael de Lisle, Cape Town, 4 June 2010; Leigh, *Captives Courageous*, p 29.

113. Leigh, *Captives Courageous*, p 29.

shackled as punishment.¹¹⁴ Other attempts were more successful and some who escaped from POW camps met up with those who had evaded capture after the fall of Tobruk. In most cases meeting friendly Senussi travellers was a vital aspect in the success of the escape. Lieutenant L.A.H.R. Bailie and Sergeant “Toys” Norton of the Kaffrarian Rifles escaped and reached a New Zealand battalion at Ruweisat Ridge. Bailie’s experience of the generosity of the Senussi was expressed in an interview with the *East London Daily Dispatch* some time later. According to Bailie:

the friendship and charity extended to us by these four primitive souls was touching, and presented an object lesson which if studied and carried into effect by the so-called ‘advanced’ and civilised races of this world, would do much to put an end to avarice.¹¹⁵

Another successful escape was from a temporary camp at Mersa Matruh by Reuben Maloyi of the 15th South African Field Ambulance. While unloading ammunition for German forces, Maloyi and a friend escaped through a weak point in the fence, leaving behind a fellow countryman because they believed the man’s fear of escaping would delay their progress. After successfully negotiating a minefield and with the assistance of an Arab who provided them with water and directions, they reached the Allied forces at Alexandria after 17 nights in the desert.¹¹⁶

In the case of Ben Hermer, escape and braving the desert was motivated by love as well as a desire for liberty. At first he tried to settle into camp life by petitioning the camp commander to provide better hygiene facilities, and used his medical knowledge in an attempt to ease prisoners’ suffering. A devout Jew, he also organised religious services on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. When the transports to Italy began, Hermer was desperate not to leave the continent because he received news that his fiancé was missing somewhere in Germany. While prisoners were lining up to go on board ships, Hermer’s anxiety got the better of him and he told the camp commander that one of the POWs had contracted typhoid. The commander, already impatient with Hermer, was forced to take action and because the Italians went looking for the non-existent patient, Hermer simply walked out of the camp. On his way to Allied lines, Hermer’s life, like other escaped POWs, depended on the goodwill of the local people and in this case Hermer spent several days with a Senussi family, recovering from dysentery and waiting for news about Allied advances. Following his rescue by Allied forces, he flew to Cairo, where by extraordinary coincidence he came across his fiancé, who had escaped from Nazi Germany with her mother.¹¹⁷

Conclusion

POW experience in North Africa was marked by a range of aspects that can be categorised as common to most POWs. In chronological order these included the chaos and confusion during the battle; and the negative perceptions about those in command. Once captured, most South Africans experienced shock and humiliation and in this confused state they identified to some extent with German soldiers, mainly because of the shared disrespect of Italian forces, which in some cases was motivated by perceptions

114. De Lisle, *Over the Hills and Far Away*, p 27.

115. MHM: Pam B.472, BAI: Escape from Tobruk by Lieut L.H. Bailie. No date.

116. DOD, UWH: Narep ME 2, Western Desert Campaign. Statement by no. 14051 Reuben Maloyi escaped POW from Mersa Matruh. October 1942.

117. Friedman, *The Piano War*, pp 185, 190–192, 208–209, 240, 247.

of race. In some instances, POW testimony reveals a more sympathetic view of their Italian captors, but this is probably due to the influence of their later experiences in Italy when they became dependant on Italians for their survival. The negative attitude towards Italians resulted in many POWs finding it extremely difficult to accept their POW status and probably led to confrontations with Italian and Senussi guards that held harmful consequences for POWs.

Most POWs coped with the deplorable conditions in the camps in a similar manner, realising that friendship and trust was the determining factor. It was during this time that prisoners established their POW identities, either as team players or as loners who would be looked upon suspiciously because the sharing of food became a necessary part of life. The unique experience can be distinguished from the general experience in how the POWs chose to react to their circumstances, and this is seen most prominently in each prisoner's decision to escape or not to escape; or on the other hand, to attempt to speed up or delay his departure to Italy. It was also during this time that white South African POWs especially, began to set themselves apart from the other white Commonwealth POWs, albeit in minor ways. For the most part, in North Africa the uniqueness of the South African POWs depended on whether they were English or Afrikaans-speaking, allowing them to identify or even sympathise with German forces to a greater or lesser extent. For most English-speaking South Africans there were more similarities than differences between Commonwealth forces, but for some Afrikaans speakers, the dividing line was clear, as was the case with Oosthuizen who admitted that life in POW camps was difficult for all, but nevertheless emphasised that language played an important role when it came to coping with difficult situations.¹¹⁸

Abstract

South African prisoners of war (POWs) captured at Tobruk in June 1942 experienced similar events and conditions. All shared a feeling of shock at becoming POWs and all of them had to deal with extremely difficult living conditions in prison camps. Attitudes towards their enemies, German or Italian, were for the most part very similar among POWs, although differences can to an extent be ascribed to the home language or family ancestry of the specific POW in question. On the other hand, attitudes towards fellow POWs, especially between black and white, cannot be generalised, and each case needs to be assessed individually. Characteristics unique to South African POWs are even more difficult to identify because the South Africa forces were a very diverse group, with the only distinguishing factor being that of language. When discerning between the general experience and the individual experiences, it is important to separate the circumstances from the POWs reactions to those circumstances, because the circumstances represent the general experience and the reaction to such situations represents the individual experience.

Key words: Prisoners of war; South Africa; World War Two; 2nd South African Infantry Division; Major General H.B. Klopper; Western Desert Campaign; rank and file troops; Tobruk; Benghazi; Gazala; Mersa Matruh; Derna; capture; escape; German forces; Italian forces.

118. Interview with Wessel Oosthuizen conducted by author, Hartenbos, 4 December 2010. '*Soort soek soort jy weet.*'

Opsomming

Narratiewe uit Noord Afrika: Die ervarings van Suid-Afrikaanse krygsgevangenes na die val van Tobruk, Junie 1942

Die Suid-Afrikaners wat in Junie 1942 tydens die val van Tobruk gevange geneem is, het almal gelyksoortige ervarings en omstandighede beleef. Elkeen het die skok van gevangeneeming ervaar en almal moes in haglike omstandighede in gevangekampe oorleef. Die krygsgevangenes se houding teenoor die vyand, Duits of Italiaans, was oor die algemeen redelik vergelykbaar. Die onderskeid wat daar wel was, kan tot 'n mate toegeskryf word aan die verskil in huistaal en familie-afkoms tussen die spesifieke krygsgevangenes. Wat die verhouding tussen krygsgevangenes betref, veral tussen wit en swart, kan geen veralgemenings gemaak word nie en elke geval moet individueel ondersoek word. Omdat die Suid-Afrikaners so 'n diverse groep was, met taal een van die min onderskeidende faktore, is dit besonder moeilik om eienskappe te identifiseer wat uniek was aan hulle. Wanneer daar tussen die algemene en individuele ervaring onderskei word, is dit belangrik om 'n onderskeid te tref tussen die omstandighede en die reaksies op die omstandighede omdat die omstandighede die algemene ervaring verteenwoordig terwyl die reaksie daarop die individuele ervaring verteenwoordig.

Sleutelwoorde: Krygsgevangene; Suid-Afrika; Tweede Wêreldoorlog; Tweede Suid-Afrikaanse Infanteriedivisie; Generaal-Majoor H.B. Klopper; Westelike Woestynveldtog; laer range; Tobruk; Benghazi; Gazala; Mersa Matruh; Derna; gevangeneeming; ontvlugting; Duitse magte; Italiaanse magte.