

South African Prisoner-of-War Experience during and after World War II: 1939 – c.1950

by

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Abstract

This thesis narrates and analyses the experiences of a sample of South Africans who were captured during the Second World War. The research is based on oral testimony, memoirs, archival evidence and to a lesser degree on secondary sources. The former prisoners-of-war (POW) who participated in the research and those whose memoirs were studied were all captured at the Battle of Sidi Rezegh in November 1941 or during the fall of Tobruk in June 1942.

The aim of the research is to present oral and written POW testimony in order to augment the dearth of knowledge regarding South African POW historical experience. The scope of the research includes the decision to volunteer for the Union Defence Force, the experiences in North Africa, capture and initial experiences in the so-called 'hell camps of North Africa', the transportation to Italy and life in the Italian prison camps, events surrounding the Italian Armistice and the consequent escape attempts thereafter. For those POWs who did not escape, the experience of captivity continued with transport to Germany, experiences in German camps, including working in labour camps and the Allied bombing campaign.

Lastly, the end of the war and the experience of liberation, which in most cases included forced marches, are dealt with before the focus turns once again towards South Africa and the experience of homecoming and demobilisation. The affective and intellectual experiences of the POWs are also investigated as their personal experience and emotions are presented and examined. These include the experience of guilt and shame during capture, the acceptance or non-acceptance of captivity, blame, attitudes towards the enemy and towards each other, as well as the experience of fear and hope, which was especially relevant during the bombing campaign and during periods when they were being transported between countries and camps. The thesis concludes with an analysis of the POW experience which looks at aspects relating to identity among South African POWs.

The final conclusion is drawn that the POW identity took precedence over national identity. As a result of the strong POW identity and their desire for complete freedom and desire to claim individuality, the POWs did not, on the whole, display great interest in becoming involved in South African politics after the war even though many of them strongly disagreed with the Nationalist segregationist ideologies that claimed increasing support between 1945 and 1948.

Opsomming

Hierdie tesis beskryf en ontleed die ervarings van dié Suid-Afrikaners wat tydens die Tweede Wêreldoorlog gevange geneem is. Die navorsing is gebaseer op mondelinge getuienis, memoires, argivale bewysmateriaal en, in 'n mindere mate, op sekondêre bronne. Die voormalige krygsgevangenes wat aan die navorsing deelgeneem het en wie se memoires bestudeer is, is almal in November 1941 by die Geveg van Sidi Rezegh of in Junie 1942 met die val van Tobruk gevange geneem.

Die doel van die navorsing is om mondelinge en skriftelike getuienisse van krygsgevangenes aan te bied ten einde die gebrekkige kennis ten opsigte van Suid-Afrikaanse krygsgevangenes se historiese ervaring uit te brei. Die omvang van die navorsing sluit die besluit in om vrywillig diens te doen vir die Unie-verdedigingsmag, die ervarings in Noord-Afrika, gevangeneneming en eerste ervarings in die sogenaamde “helkampe van Noord-Afrika”, die vervoer na Italië en lewe in die Italiaanse gevangenskampe, gebeure rondom die Italiaanse wapenstilstand en die daaropvolgende ontsnappingspogings. Vir die krygsgevangenes wat nie ontsnap het nie, het die ervaring van gevangenskap voortgeduur deur vervoer na Duitsland, ervarings in Duitse kampe, waaronder strafkampe, en die bombarderings deur die Geallieerdes.

Ten slotte word aandag gegee aan die einde van die oorlog en die ervaring van vryheid, wat in die meeste gevalle gedwonge marse behels het, voordat die fokus terugkeer na Suid-Afrika en die ervaring van tuiskoms en demobilisasie. Die affektiewe en intellektuele ervarings van die krygsgevangenes word ook ontleed, aangesien hul persoonlike ervarings en emosies ondersoek en aangebied word. Dit sluit die ervaring van skuld en skaamte tydens die gevangeneneming in, die aanvaarding of nie-aanvaarding van gevangenskap, blaam, houdings teenoor die vyand en mekaar, sowel as die ervaring van vrees en hoop, wat veral belangrik was gedurende die bombarderingveldtog en vervoer tussen lande en kampe.

Die tesis sluit af met 'n ontleding van aspekte wat verband hou met identiteit onder die Suid-Afrikaanse krygsgevangenes. Die bevinding is dat die krygsgevangene-identiteit voorrang geniet het bo die nasionale identiteit. Verder het die sterk drang na volkome vryheid en die begeerte om hul individualiteit terug te kry daartoe gelei dat die voormalige krygsgevangenes na die oorlog oor die algemeen 'n ambivalensie jeens Suid-Afrikaanse politiek openbaar.

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I dedicate this thesis to my parents, Estelle and Fred Horn, as without their support and encouragement this research would never have been done.

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Fred van Alphen Stahl,

George Tewkesbury,

Matthys Beukes,

Michael de Lisle,

Stanley Smollan, and

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Figure 1: The Prisoner-of-War Medal

Abbreviations

ACF:	Active Citizen Force
BFC:	British Free Corps
HQ:	Headquarters
CO:	Commanding officer
NCO:	Non-commissioned officer
AG:	Adjutant-General
BFC:	British Free Corps
CRU:	Civil Resettlement Units
DMR:	Die Middelandse Regement
DPW:	Directorate of Prisoners of War
ICRC:	International Committee of the Red Cross
MI9:	British Military Intelligence
MOTHS:	Memorable Order of the Tin Hats
NEAS:	Non-European Army Services
OB:	Ossewabrandwag (Ox-wagon sentinel)
OKW:	Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (High Command of the German Armed Forces)
POW:	Prisoner-of-war
POWRA:	British Prisoner-of-War Relatives Association
POWRFA:	South African Prisoner-of-War Relatives and Friends Association
RAF:	Royal Air Force
RPS:	Regiment President Steyn

RSM:	Regimental Sergeant Major
SDF:	Seaward Defence Force
Sgt:	Sergeant
UDF:	Union Defence Force
PWIB:	Prisoner-of-war Information Bureaux

Chapter 1: Introduction

Motivation and rationale

It is indeed extremely hard to generalize about prison life and conditions. It is so much a matter of personal experience [...] the truth is that prison life was – like all life – good at times and bad at times, and this was conditioned both by outward circumstance and the mood state of the individual concerned.¹

Reverend James Chutter was a senior chaplain with the 2nd South African Division who spent most of World War II in prisoner-of-war camps along with many other South Africans. In his memoirs he claimed that he was able to present an objective narrative of POW experience as he witnessed soldiers of most Allied countries struggle with the demands of captivity. In general, prisoner-of-war (POW) experience may be summed up by Chutter's statement above, but this thesis aims to critically analyse POW experience, especially in terms of how the 'outward circumstance and the mood state of the individual' influenced the 'good [and] bad' experiences to determine the extent to which POW experience can in fact be compared to 'all life', as stated by Chutter. When one considers that each prisoner approached and experienced POW life differently as a result of their unique personalities and characteristics, the investigation attains a far more complex level, especially with regard to South African POWs and the unique context of their country at that time. The focus falls furthermore mainly on the rank and file soldiers as they were all volunteers. Thus, whether they volunteered for ideological, personal or economic reasons, their point of view on capture and on being prevented from active participation in the war was different from that of career soldiers, in other words those professionals with rank.

In most Allied countries, public perception of POW experience has thus far largely been shaped by the literature generated by officers who survived captivity. In turn, these memoirs formed the basis of a number of scholarly investigations of POW experience. However, the Geneva Convention afforded privileged treatment to officers, with the result that POW experience acquired a somewhat romantic status which contributed to the creation of myths surrounding Second World War POWs.² In South Africa, however, a significant

¹ Chutter, J.B. *Captivity Captive*: 125.

² Beaumont, J. 1983. 'Rank, Privilege and Prisoners of War.' *War & society*, 1: 67.

historiography on POW experience never materialised, due in large part to exceptional disunity along race and class lines at the time and the discriminatory regime instituted by the Nationalist government that lasted from 1948 to 1994. Through their post-1948 policies, the apartheid government not only rendered South African World War II veterans virtually voiceless regarding their participation in the war, but the government's chosen ideology also resulted in international historians marginalising South Africa's role and contribution to the war. On the other hand, those officers who aligned themselves with the Nationalists in both the pre- and post-war era benefitted despite their participation in the war. For example, Major-General H.B. Klopper, Commanding Officer of the forces at Tobruk, was promoted to Commandant General of the South African Defence Force in 1956,³ while at the same time the Government stopped supporting veterans' organisations such as the Memorable Order of the Tin Hats (MOTH).⁴ The fact that the Nationalist government supported Klopper also shows the extent to which the authorities ignored his role in the fall of Tobruk, a role for which many others, especially the rank and file who were captured there, blamed him. It also reveals how the government of the post-war era distanced itself from South Africa's participation in the war, as they even went as far as putting a stop to the production of an official history of the country's role in the conflict.⁵

As a result of all of these factors, South African public perception of the Second World War is almost non-existent as the entire experience has been overshadowed and manipulated by political motivations. This thesis, therefore, hopes to give those rank and file soldiers, specifically the POWs, an opportunity to be articulate as they form part of the group which has been neglected or silenced both by international historiography and nationally by political manipulation and imposed ideologies. With the unique South African context in mind, Second World War POW experience must inevitably include issues of nationalism and the ideology of the captor and the ideology of the captive. Other important aspects are physical and psychological survival in captivity, escape attempts and relations between different nationalities. Taking into account the political, economic, racial and class divisions among South Africans at the time of the Second World War, the research also seeks to determine to what extent – if any – the POW experience changed the consciousness of those under investigation.

³ Albertyn, D.F. (red.) 1974. *Ensiklopedie van die Wêreld: Deel 6*.

⁴ Roos, N. 2009. 'The Springbok and the Skunk: War Veterans and the Politics of Whiteness in South Africa during the 1940s and 1950s.' *Journal of Southern African Studies* 35(3):657.

⁵ Nasson, B. Forthcoming 2012. *South Africa at War 1939 – 1945*: 14.

To understand South Africa's participation in the Second World War and understand POW experience during this war, it is crucial to take into account POW experience and participation in both the Anglo-Boer War and World War One as these events played a role in shaping white South African identity and attitudes towards the British Empire. The legacy of the Anglo-Boer War is especially important as this war was fought between enemies who became consenting allies during the subsequent world wars, but not universally so. The result was that certain groups rebelled against the idea of fighting alongside their erstwhile enemies during the First and Second World Wars.

On the other hand, during both World Wars many South Africans enlisted for reasons other than loyalty to the British Empire, resulting in a situation where a man could find himself fighting for a cause with which he did not agree nor care about. How these men experienced being captured by Italians or Germans would have had an impact on their attitude towards fellow South Africans as well as their captors, which raises questions about the nature and significance of the impact. Although some camaraderie during battles such as Delville Wood in World War One led to a perceived growth of a 'cohesive white national identity'⁶, being captured no doubt prompted some to rethink their reasons for volunteering as their status as POWs exposed a wide range of characteristics and emotions among POWs.⁷

At the outbreak of World War Two, the political split in the government as a result mainly of disagreements between J.C. Smuts and J.B.M. Hertzog as well as propaganda from organisations like the *Ossewabrandwag* (OB), would have intensified frustrations among later POWs, especially Afrikaners. As many of them were of German descent, some may, in many cases, have sympathised with the German position but volunteered nevertheless in an effort to improve their economic circumstances.⁸

Preliminary study

The preliminary study has revealed a large gap in the knowledge regarding South African POW experience. As mentioned in the literature review, Maxwell Leigh's book, *Captives Courageous*, is the only publication that deals specifically with South African POWs during

⁶ Nasson, B. 2004. 'Delville Wood and South African Great War Commemoration.' *English Historical Review*, cxix(480):57 – 86.

⁷ Close, P. n.d. *A prisoner of the Germans in South-West Africa*: 312.

⁸ Grundlingh, A.M. 1999. '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*, 40:351 – 365.

World War II.⁹ Archival research into this topic will make known new knowledge, but will also broaden and intensify the scope of research on this theme. Internationally, research into POW experience during World War II overlooks the specific South African aspect as most researchers tend simply to refer to ‘Commonwealth prisoners’,¹⁰ while others include South African POWs in a very broad sense, for example ‘British contingents comprised units drawn from almost every ethnic group then within the British Empire.’¹¹ This approach does not take into account the unique South African context that would have influenced how South Africans experienced the war and captivity by enemy forces. Moreover, the existing research does not explore the racial attitudes among POWs and neither does it consider the changes – or lack thereof – in attitudes towards different races and nationalities during captivity and how this affected POWs’ sense of identity and nationalism.

Yet as many memoirs by South African POWs, such as Laurie du Preez’s *Inside the Cage* and Douglas Scott’s *My luck still held*, distinguish between South African POWs and other nationalities, it is important to seek more insight into the South African POW experience. Du Preez’s diary provides a few hints at how South Africans experienced life as POWs differently from other nationalities. According to Du Preez, POWs were divided into groups, ‘South Africans to one half of the camp and the Englishmen to the other.’¹² For Du Preez it was clear that the lack of basic needs, in this case food, negatively affected feelings of patriotism and created a desire among the POWs to see an end to the war, regardless of who would be victorious.¹³ The occurrence of such sentiment among POWs leads one to consider if being South African or being a POW counted more towards feelings of camaraderie than patriotism amongst captives.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) played an important role in POW experience in that it attempted to ensure adherence to the 1929 Geneva Convention, and made communication regarding POWs between Allies and Axis powers possible, allowing for, among other things, prisoner exchanges.¹⁴ On a different level, ICRC interventions in the form of food parcels to prison camps sometimes meant the difference between life and death

⁹ Leigh, M. 1992. *Captives Courageous South African Prisoners of War World War II*. Johannesburg.

¹⁰ Mackenzie, S.P. 1994. ‘The Treatment of Prisoners of War in World War II.’ *The Journal of Modern History*, 66(3):491.

¹¹ Absalom, R. 1995. ‘The Allies: the Resistance and the Others in Occupied Italy 1943 – 1945.’ *The Historical Journal*, 38(1):112.

¹² Du Preez, L. 1973. *Inside the cage*: 44.

¹³ Du Preez, L. 1973. *Inside the cage*: 48 – 49.

¹⁴ Mackenzie, S.P. 1994. ‘The Treatment of Prisoners of War in World War II.’ *The Journal of Modern History*, 66(3):489, 490.

for POWs. Among prisoners, Red Cross parcels provided much needed relief, but could also lead to conflict as there were instances of prisoners stealing food from others.¹⁵ As far as mental survival was concerned, the Red Cross contributions in the form of musical instruments, books and sport equipment must have brought some relief from the long hours of boredom.¹⁶ The importance of the Red Cross to prisoners is obvious as diaries and memoirs often devote entire chapters to the role of this organization.¹⁷

Methodology

As is clear from the literature review (see chapter two), there is a significant gap in knowledge regarding South African POW experience during World War Two. It is for this reason that the focus of this thesis falls mainly within the narrative genre, as it attempts primarily to relate the various experiences. The nature of the oral testimonies and memoirs, together with the influence of memory and hindsight, as well as the extent to which the experiences can be generalised, leads, at this early stage of research into South African POW experience, to the descriptive and narrative rhetorical mode rather than the abstract and analytical. The analysis in the final chapter concerns aspects of identity among POWs, but further analysis, based on the initial narrative, is certainly realizable for future research projects.

Information gathering

This study relies for the most part on the oral testimonies of former South African POWs. In some cases, the interviewees provided memoirs which supplemented information gained from interviews. In other instances, memoirs were obtained from relatives in cases where the former POWs had already passed on. By studying these primary sources, specific themes were identified indicating the extent to which the POW experience can be generalised. However, the interviews and memoirs also clearly indicated that POW experience was in many ways unique to each person. In a limited way, archival sources verified information gained from oral narratives and memoirs, but the archives also revealed political, economic

¹⁵ Scott, D. 1946. *My luck still held*: 57.

¹⁶ Leigh, M. 1992. *Captives Courageous South African Prisoners of War World War II*: 105.

¹⁷ See for example Du Preez, L. 1973. *Inside the cage*, chapter 6: 'Red Cross Food parcels'; Leigh, M. 1992. *Captives Courageous South African Prisoners of War World War II*, part 1: 'The Red Cross – Indestructible symbol'; Mackenzie, S.P. 2004. *The Colditz Myth: British and Commonwealth Prisoners of War in Nazi Germany*. Oxford, chapter 5: 'Body and Soul.'

and bureaucratic aspects that influenced the lives of POWs without them being aware of those external factors. As every research participant experienced the war and their captivity in a very personal and unique manner, their oral testimony and memoirs are not looked upon as providing generalisable evidence, but as a testimony of their assembled individual experience. In this case, archival evidence can at best be used to add clarity to what they describe in their interviews or memoirs. Examples of archival evidence as clarification are the reports of the Red Cross inspectors and those of the Protecting Power¹⁸ on camp conditions. As the emphasis of the study is on *experience*, the methodological approach is source-based, as each source, be they oral testimony, memoirs, archival evidence or published secondary sources, simultaneously reveal the individual and the general experience.

The following table indicates in which instances it was possible to compare oral testimony with written memoirs:

¹⁸ The Protecting Power was first officially recognised by the Geneva Convention in 1929 when it was accepted that a body in a neutral state would act to represent interests of belligerents. Levie, H.S. 1961. 'Prisoners of War and the Protecting Power.' *American Journal of International Law*, 55:374 – 397.

NAME	INTERVIEW	DIARY	MEMOIRS
George Tewkesbury	Yes	Yes	No
Fred van Alphen Stahl	Yes	No	No
Michael de Lisle	Yes	No	Yes (<i>My twenties in the forties</i> *)
Clive Luyt	Yes	No	Yes (<i>'Escape' to Monte Gennaro</i> *)
Stanley Smollan	Yes	No	No
David Brokensha	Yes	No	Yes (<i>Brokie's Way An Anthropologist's Story</i>)
E.B. (Dick) Dickinson	Yes	Yes	Yes ¹⁹
Bernard Egner Schwikkard	Yes	No	Yes (<i>My life briefly told</i> *)
William (Bill) Hindshaw	Yes	No	Yes (<i>An Account of my experience as a prisoner-of-war and escapee in the Italian Alps during the Second World War</i> *)
Fred J.W. Geldenhuis	Yes	No	Yes (<i>A Soldier's scrapbook</i> *)
Wessel Oosthuizen	Yes	No	No
Matthys Beukes	Yes	No	No
Bennie Hermer	No	No	Yes (<i>The Piano War</i>)
Jack Mortlock	No	No	Yes (<i>The endless years</i> *)

* Unpublished memoirs.

¹⁹ Dickinson's diary was published in 2010 and included explanatory notes by the editors, T & D Shearing.

H.L. Wood	No	No	Yes (<i>Memoirs of a prisoner-of-war</i> [*])
Jack Spencer	No	No	Yes (<i>No. 1 Squadron SAAF</i> [*])
Harry Rose-Innes	No	No	Yes (<i>The Po Valley Break</i>)
Laurie du Preez	No	No	Yes (<i>Inside the cage</i>)
Alan Flederman	No	No	Yes (<i>And Direction was given</i>)
Uys Krige	No	No	Yes (<i>The Way Out</i>)
Ike Rosmarin	No	No	Yes (<i>Inside Story</i>)
Douglas Scott	No	No	Yes (<i>My luck still held</i>)
A.J. Cremer	No	No	Yes (<i>Oorlogsherinneringe</i> [*])
Dennis I.H. Mugglestone	No	No	Yes (<i>Destination unknown</i> [*])

Oral sources

The Memorable Order of Tin Hats was approached in the first instance to locate former POWs for interviews. In a few cases finding one former POW led to finding another, as a few of them still maintain contact with each other. This in turn led to the situation interviews which were conducted with groups of former POWs who were all in the same camp at one point or another during the war. For instance, David Brokensha and Dick Dickinson were in the same labour camp in Germany, and from them it was possible to obtain the memoirs of Jack Mortlock who was also part of the group in that specific camp. In interpreting the oral testimonies of former POWs with regard to their experiences in the labour camp, it was therefore possible to compare and contrast their recollections of their experiences, which once again highlighted the difference between the general and the individual experience.

^{*} Unpublished memoirs.

Historical accuracy is an obvious concern when one considers that oral history helps POWs in ‘exploring and making their own histories.’²⁰ While their narratives may help the reader to better understand their experiences, it is also essential that aspects that influence the interpretation of oral testimony be taken into account. These are dual evaluation, intergenerational communication and memory. Dual evaluation allows interviewees to present the past using any of their past identities which may be relevant to the specific story. It is, therefore, natural that hindsight plays a significant role in recollection of war-time experiences, as it may determine what the interviewee chooses to share and how he shares his memories. The effects of intergenerational communication, where the interview is influenced by differences in age between the interviewer and interviewee, and dual evaluation ‘allows older narrators to offer alternative views of the past and to construct multiple identities simultaneously through storytelling.’²¹

Valerie Yow also advises interviewers to be aware of aspects that may influence the interview or the interpretation thereof, especially differences between interviewer and interviewee regarding age and gender, all relevant to the interviews with POWs.²² In this specific study, the continually changing and sometimes turbulent post-war history influenced former POWs and it was evident that they tried consciously to compensate for differences in age, gender and cultural group. One of the former (English-speaking) POWs, for example, repeatedly stated that he had nothing against the Afrikaners and that he admired them for their role in the war.²³ As a result, it was often necessary to conduct subsequent interviews in an attempt to establish greater rapport and gain further insight into their experiences, to probe beyond guarded expressions linked to the present.

Semi-structured interviews were used during all interviews in order to allow the former POWs the opportunity to expand on topics if they so wished. In many cases, interviews opened up unexpected themes or aspects of POW life that might not have been revealed if the interview was conducted in a formal interview which adhered strictly to set questions. In all cases, however, interviewees were asked to start with a description of their childhood, which then led to the pre-war period and their decision to volunteer. Other aspects which were touched upon in all interviews were questions related to the reaction of their family when

²⁰ Thomson, A. 2007. ‘Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History’, *The Oral History Review*, 34(1):53.

²¹ Norrick, N.R. 2006. ‘Humour in Oral History Interviews.’ *Oral History*, Autumn: 86.

²² Yow, V. 1997. ‘Do I like them too much?: Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Vice-versa’, *The Oral History Review*, 24(1):73 – 74.

²³ The interviewer’s first language is Afrikaans.

they volunteered for service, first battle experiences, facing the enemy upon capture, issues uppermost in their minds during capture, feelings of guilt (if any) at the time of capture and upon their return to South Africa after the war, possibilities of escape, aspects concerning other nationalities and/or races in prison camp, relationships and attitudes towards captors, comparing Italian captors to German captors, factors that influenced morale, daily routines in camps, liberation experiences and returning to South Africa and coping with the changes in the country. Finally, all former POWs were asked what they regarded as unique to South African POWs, the only question that received the same answer from all.

With regard to reliability of interviews there are many factors which may influence historical accuracy. Retrospective knowledge about the post-war period certainly played a role in how former POWs perceived their war-time experience. To a large extent, post-war experiences also determined what the former POWs chose to share during the interview and in their memoirs. As the political, social and economic landscape changed after the war, many western countries adopted more liberal meritocratic ideas on race, women's rights and class opportunities. But in South Africa, the rise of Afrikaner nationalism and the decline of the Smuts government enforced all manner of rigidities, which included white veterans being placed in a 'subordinate position [...] within the colonial master class.'²⁴

After the war, the Smuts government introduced various aid schemes for returning soldiers, but many veterans were disappointed and felt frustrated as their participation in the war was not recognised and in some cases deliberately ignored. When the anti-1939-45 war Nationalist government came to power in 1948 it alienated most veterans as the authoritarian policy of apartheid was seen by some as a form of fascism, an ideology UDF volunteers had been fighting against. The new government ended its support to ex-service organizations such as the MOTH, and many veterans were convinced that the government 'closed channels for promotion in the civil service to those who had volunteered.'²⁵ The insults from Afrikaner Nationalist supporters against veterans and the NP government's unwillingness to acknowledge veterans' contribution to the war most probably influenced their retrospective knowledge, especially in the writing of memoirs, all of which are characterised by a sombre

²⁴ Roos, N. 2005. *Ordinary Springboks White Servicemen and Social Justice in South Africa, 1939 – 1961*: 103.

²⁵ Roos, N. 2005. *Ordinary Springboks White Servicemen and Social Justice in South Africa, 1939 – 1961*: 125. The negative attitude towards the National Party government was expressed by both Fred Van Alphen Stahl, Michael de Lisle and all other POWs interviewed thus far. The only former POW interviewed for this project who did not view the victory of the NP government as a negative event, was an Afrikaans-speaking ex-policeman who felt that the Smuts government had deceived them into signing the oath, which saw them going to war against their will.

and serious tone that emphasises not only the solitary and inward-looking nature of the writing process, but also withdrawal from nationalist South Africa. As a result, most former POWs remained silent and expressed surprise at being asked for an interview on their POW experience. Yet, of all the former POWs who had been approached, only one refused to be interviewed.

In general, the more amiable the interview, the more useful it was in terms of gaining insight into the fluctuating experience of POW life, as opposed to day-to-day routine, such as would be recorded in a diary with an emphasis on routines followed, weather conditions, the state of clothing and the type of food available. In this sense, the influence of the genre became apparent and depending on the rapport between interviewer and interviewee, either the memoirs or the interview revealed more about each former POWs experiences, both in terms of daily routine and in terms of the affective experience of captivity.

Memoirs and memory

According to Thompson, the conventions of writing often obstruct the proper expression of the actual and true past experience, and in some instances, this was found to be the case with POW memoirs.²⁶ To some degree, the use of overly formal language in memoirs creates a different feel to that created during the oral narrative when former POWs tended to use informal conversational language. For instance, in his interview Bernard Schwikkard described an evacuation march in which his column was joined by an American doctor when he had decided at that moment to escape:

[I told the doctor] now that you have come with your whole medical outfit I'm handing over to you what little I've got because I'm now going to escape. So he said "you can't do that, I'll have you court-martialled", and I said "doctor you can have me court-martialled, I'm sorry I believe I've done my bit, I am not qualified for this job, rightly or wrongly I am now deciding to save my own skin, they really don't need me, you are here and you have all the tools and cheerio..."²⁷ (my emphasis)

In his memoirs, Schwikkard described the same incident as follows:

²⁶ Thompson, P.R. 2000. *The Voice of the Past Oral History*: 279.

²⁷ Bernard Schwikkard interview: 17 March 2010, Johannesburg.

He [American doctor] insisted that I did not leave, threatening me with court-martial if I disobeyed. I informed him that I was under no further obligation to the men as I was not an official medical orderly. I also reminded him that I was not subject to his orders. As far as I was concerned I had done my share and it was now time for him to do his. I felt that I should be allowed to exercise my right as a POW to escape.²⁸

However, the opposite was also true, as the memoirs were completed at a time when most former POWs memories were still fairly good. By the time the later interviews took place, some of the former POWs obviously relied on their memoirs and seemed to repeat verbatim what they had written ten or 20 years before, almost as if they had memorised their memoirs. An example of this occurs in Michael de Lisle's description of how they destroyed their anti-aircraft guns just before they were taken prisoner at the fall of Tobruk. In his interview, De Lisle said:

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 breech mechanism and that was good, solid, beautiful hard steel so we had to take the breech mechanism to bits and bury it in different places.²⁹

In his memoirs, the description is very similar:

... the breech mechanism of beautifully engineered stainless steel was undamaged, so we took it apart and buried the various pieces in different places.³⁰

In some cases, former POWs relied on repeating narratives of specific events when they were unable to recall another event, name, place or date. Clive Luyt's interview was a good example of this as he repeated the same narrative four times, in slightly different versions, during his first interview. During his second interview he again relied on the same narrative when confronted with imperfect memory. However, when compared to his memoirs which rely heavily on a diary, the narrative of his decision to leave the camp after the Italian Armistice is described very differently and creates the impression that his present-day narrative is a construction of personal memories of information gained during the post-war period regarding the Armistice, Fascists and the fall of Mussolini. During his interview, Luyt repeatedly recalled how he came to the decision to leave the Italian POW camp:

²⁸ Schwikkard, B.E. 1999. *My life briefly told*: 45.

²⁹ Michael de Lisle interview: 4 June 2010, Cape Town.

³⁰ De Lisle, M. n.d. *Over the hills and far away my twenties in the forties*: 19.

I went to my friend, [...], tall chap, you know you sort of form friendships and what have you and I said “Let’s get out of here” and we were told by our commanding officer “Don’t go out, you don’t know who is the fascist, who isn’t a fascist, who’s pro-Mussolini or against Mussolini and you can’t go wondering around the countryside you will just end up in trouble” and I said “Look I’m not worried about the fascist, I’m worried about the Germans, they fought the war in North Africa to catch guys like you and me” and I said “they’re not going to let us go, give them 24 hours and we will be in a train, cattle truck, and off to Germany” so he said “I think let’s get out”. And that’s the rest of the story.³¹

At the time of Luyt’s escape, he would not have known that POWs would be transferred to Germany by train or by cattle truck, in fact, the only way he could have known about the transfer of POWs to Germany was from sources which he consulted after the war. His final reference to the same incident included:

I said “give them 24 hours and they’ll be here” and I was right, almost to 24 hours. They came up with four tanks, put one tank at each corner of the, of the camp, on the outside of course, but with the guns and all pointing at us, but by that time [...] and I were out.³²

Yet, published memoirs include details of Italian POW camps being surrounded by Germans following the Armistice and the transport of POWs to Germany by train cattle trucks.³³ Luyt’s memoirs describe the same incident in very simple present terms as ‘We are advised by our senior NCOs and officers to stay in camp, but many prisoners have already left. [...] and I decide to go off on our own.’³⁴ According to his memoirs, Luyt and his friend were nowhere near the camp by the time 24 hours had elapsed as they had already reached Marcellina, almost 38 kilometres away from the camp at Fara Sabina.³⁵ As Luyt’s memory was obviously influenced by information acquired after the war, all interviews and memoirs have to be analysed and compared with memoirs, archival sources and with each other in order to expose discrepancies such as these.

³¹ Clive Luyt interview: 19 May 2010, Cape Town.

³² Clive Luyt interview: 19 May 2010, Cape Town.

³³ See for instance Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over The Story of Herbert Rhodes (Aussie) Hammond*: 65; Rosmarin, I. 1999. *Inside Story*: 39 – 40; Ogilvy, P. & N. Robinson. 1975. *In the bag*: 79.

³⁴ Luyt, C. n.d. “Escape” to Monte Gennaro Survival in the Mountains during WWII. *September 1943 to June 1944*: 2.

³⁵ Marcellina, Italy to Fara Sabina. Available at <http://maps.google.co.za/maps> Accessed 7 November 2011.

Chapter layout

Chapter 2: Literature review

The focus of the literature review is on sources that deal specifically with POW experience, policy and the theory of this academic field of study. The chapter firstly puts into perspective the position of South African POW experience in the historiography, then looks at books published on the topic, both by South African and international authors. The section also deals with both Allied and Axis POW experience. The third section in this chapter is on journal articles, but instead of looking at each article separately, authors are discussed in terms of the themes they investigate. Because archival sources are an integral part of this investigation, the details of the archival collections are discussed in part four of chapter two. Archival groups in the Department of Defence's Military Archives, the collections at the National Archives as well as the collections at the Ditsong National Museum of Military History in Johannesburg and the sources at the Castle of Good Hope Military Museum in Cape Town are charted and expanded upon in terms of the usefulness for this study. The last part of chapter two looks at online sources, such as the websites associated with a few of the larger POW camps in Germany.

Chapter 3: Background

The aim of chapter three is to place the entire study in context. The chapter introduces the POW concept and briefly explores South African POWs during previous conflicts. In the South African context, the political and social milieu is explained in terms of those events that shaped the ideologies of some of South Africa's people during preceding historical periods of conflict, specifically those of the Anglo-Boer War and World War One. Both of these historical events impacted on how South Africans viewed the country's place in the British Empire and helped to determine the extent and way in which different races and language groups reacted when Britain declared war on Germany in 1939. The start of the war put pressure on South Africa to finally confirm or repudiate its loyalty to its imperial ties, bringing the differences between Smuts and Hertzog to the fore and inspiring the empire loyalists and nationalists among the European population to either volunteer for the Union Defence Force (UDF) or to show their disapproval through neutrality or by joining anti-war organisations such as the *Ossewabrandwag*. Those volunteers who joined the UDF, who were

taken prisoner and who later wrote about their experiences or who agreed to interviews are also introduced in this chapter. Their life stories and their reasons for volunteering are discussed, as this is necessary to place their reactions to captivity and their wider POW experience in context.

Chapter 4: Battle and capture in North Africa

This chapter deals in part with UDF members' preparedness for war and initial battle experiences in East Africa. To a greater degree though, the chapter looks more specifically at the Battles of Sidi Rezegh in November 1941 and the fall of Tobruk in June 1942, as it was during these two battles that the POWs whose memoirs and oral narratives form a core part of this study were captured. The way in which the two battles unfolded, the manner in which the soldiers were taken prisoner and their initial reactions to the situation, whether it was escape attempts or conceding of defeat, is discussed in detail. It is also here that the point of view of many POWs regarding race and class is revealed, not only towards their captors, but also towards other Allied nationalities and even towards fellow South Africans of all races. Once captured, POWs had to make sense of their new situation and in this section POW reactions, ranging from guilt to anger and disbelief, are evaluated. It was at this stage that POWs were confronted for the first time with severe shortages of food and water, as well as basic necessities such as accommodation and medical care. The ways in which they dealt with these difficult circumstances are related, showing how each individual reacted to the physical difficulties and how it impacted on their mental state in terms of morale and coping mechanisms.

The first days and weeks of captivity required tremendous adjustment from all POWs, and one of the most demanding was accepting their new status as captives, inferior to an enemy towards whom most harboured extremely negative feelings. Learning to live with a large group of fellow POWs, all displaying diverse reactions to their situation, was another crucial adjustment necessary for survival in their new circumstances. The issue of hope, mostly based on rumours, is also discussed as this issue became especially relevant when the Italian authorities started to transport POWs to Italy. Many POWs hoped, and had heard rumours, that the Allies would rescue them, however, this became reality for only a small group. The disappointment and the uncertain future in an Axis country was therefore the fate of most

POWs captured in North Africa, with the few exceptions of those brave enough to risk escape in the desert.

Chapter 5: Daily life in Italy

The journey to Italy was viewed as a nightmare for almost all rank and file POWs, and as they were leaving the African continent, captivity became a sealed reality for many who had thus far not accepted their status. Transport in any theatre of war was dangerous and the chapter starts with a detailed investigation into the experiences of those who travelled on the *San Sebastian*, the Italian warship torpedoed by *HMS Porpoise* in December 1941. The focus of the second section of this chapter is on camp conditions and the way in which POWs reacted to their circumstances. The section includes aspects such as inadequate food and the delight at receiving the first Red Cross parcels and the types of labour performed on work detachments.

Chapter 6: Confinement and lost liberty

In the second chapter on Italy, attention is drawn to the way in which POWs started to deal with the fact that they were captives, especially as arriving in Italy confirmed their status and most realised that liberation would not be an option until the war ended, the date of which none of them could predict at that time. Changing attitudes of South African POWs towards their Italian captors as well as to fellow POWs from different Allied nations are also explored, as these were important aspects that influenced POW experience. The last section of the chapter considers the three options open to POWs regarding liberation, that of repatriation, escape before the armistice and the mass escapes following the overthrow of Mussolini. The chapter then concludes with the German takeover of the camps and the frustration and disappointment of those POWs who chose to stay interned, a result of confusion created by conflicting orders, rumours and propaganda. The accounts of those POWs who managed to escape successfully following the Armistice is taken up again in chapter nine as the main focus of this study is on POW experience in captivity, not on POW escape narratives.

Chapter 7: Confronting German discipline

When they were captured at Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk the attitude of most South African POWs was more positive towards their German captors than towards their Italian counterparts. However, when the Germans took control of POW camps in Italy following the armistice, many POWs were forced to adjust their point of view, especially after the rude awakening they received at the hands of the Germans during the course of the registration process in the large POW camps. This chapter looks at practical aspects that influenced and shaped POW experience in Germany.

Chapter 8: Conflict and compassion in Germany

Chapter eight investigates the changing relationship between POWs and German captors, paying specific attention to those friendships that developed between POWs and guards at work camps. As most of those in work camps also encountered German citizens, the complexities of these relationships are also investigated as it had an impact on the POW view in terms of their attitude towards South Africa's participation in the war as well as on Nazi ideology.

Another aspect of POW experience was the way in which POWs related to each other in terms of friendship and conflict as this impacted on their morale. Because these aspects shaped POW experience in terms of their ideas on identity and nationality, the focus is to a lesser extent on the daily camp conditions and activities as this chapter seeks to move beyond the narrative of the day-to-day routine of POW experience. The chapter ends with the evacuation of the camps and the eventual liberation of POWs.

Chapter 9: The home front and going home 1939 – c.1950

The first part of the chapter is the concluding part of the narrative of POW experiences and concerns mostly their adjustment to the changing circumstances in South Africa, both on a personal level as well as on a political level as Afrikaner nationalism started to gain more support, culminating in the electoral victory in 1948. The section also looks at communication between POWs and families during the war, as the difficulties in this aspect of their POW experience contributed much to their anxieties.

Part two of the chapter concerns the attitudes and actions of POW families and friends who experienced the war from South Africa. The work of the South African Red Cross and the South African Prisoner-of-War Relatives and Friends Association (POWRFA) is investigated, and it is concluded that although the International Red Cross played an enormous part in the lives of POWs, neither the South African Red Cross nor the Relatives Association could do much to make significant changes to their circumstances. In fact, the South African military authorities were equally disempowered as all matters relating to POW affairs were dealt with by the British Directorate of Prisoners of War (DPW) and by the Imperial Prisoners of War Committee A which represented the interests of all the Dominions.

Chapter 10: Concluding perspectives

This chapter analyses the narratives found in the chapters on North Africa, Italy and Germany and addresses themes such as the emotional and physical impact of POW experience; the complexities of the relationships between captives and captors; relationships between South African POWs of different races, ranks and classes before, during and after captivity; the policy of Italian and German authorities towards POWs with regard to race and class divisions; the extent to which POWs were informed of political developments in South Africa and the reaction from the home front regarding POWs. In this context, home front includes POW families, the government and the press. To a lesser extent, the experience of Italian POWs and those in internment camps in the Union are investigated mainly in terms of local reaction towards internees.

The main focus of this chapter is however on issues of national identity, mainly from the POW point of view, and to a lesser degree from the perspective of those who did not volunteer. Views on South Africa's status and future in the British Empire are also relevant here. On an individual level, POWs perceptions of South Africa upon his return is analysed to gain insight into how the entire war experience may have affected their views on nationalism, and on how they perceived their personal identity before and after the war. In this regard, aspects such as friendship, relationships with guards and enemy civilians, as well as their attitude towards authority, among others, are relevant as these were key issues for POWs when dealing with difficult circumstances during their captivity. The way in which POWs experienced the political and social changes in South Africa upon their return as well as how

they reacted to the victory of the National Party in the 1948 election is crucial to determine if and how their lives may have altered during captivity.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

South African prisoner-of-war experience in scholarly publications

Some years after the Second World War, a number of former South African POWs decided to put pen to paper to write about their experiences, with some concentrating on the POW camp experience while others focused on their escape attempts following the Italian armistice. Although all are out of print, published memoirs included *My luck still held* by Douglas Scott, Harry Rose-Innes' *The Po Valley Break*, Newman and Robinson's *In the bag*, as well as Ike Rosmarin's *Inside Story*, among others.¹ Because of the personal nature of memoirs and questions pertaining to reliability and historical accuracy, memoirs and diaries, both published and unpublished are discussed in more detail in the chapter on methodology. In this chapter, only those sources that deal specifically with POW experience during the Second World War are discussed in terms of their usability for this specific study.

As far as published scholarly sources are concerned, the scope on South African POW experience is extremely limited. Maxwell Leigh's book, *Captives Courageous*, deals with the entire experience from capture to liberation, but it is a basic narrative and it lacks any form of analysis of POW experience. Leigh's work does nevertheless present readers with a compilation of POW experiences taken mostly from personal memoirs. However, Leigh's uncritical approach is problematic as much of the information gathered from diaries or memoirs seems to be taken at face value, and no deeper analysis is made, for instance, of the topic of the general experience as opposed to the individual experience of each prisoner, neither does it investigate issues of nationalism and identity, both of which are central questions to that crucial period of South Africa's history. Leigh's lack of analysis also stems from the fact that no archival sources were used for his study, resulting in an uncritical approach which neglects to consider problems with regard to historical accuracy and bias. Nonetheless, Leigh's book is useful on aspects such as living conditions, day-to-day routine including education, theatre and sport in prison camps, as well as on the role the Red Cross played in the lives of POWs.² The other significant publication on South African POW experience is Paul Schamberger's book, *Interlude in Switzerland*, although its focus falls

¹ Scott, D. 1946. *My luck still held*. Cape Town; Rose-Innes, H. 1976. *The Po Valley Break*. Sandton; Ogilvie, P. & N. Robinson. 1975. *In the bag*. Johannesburg; Rosmarin, I. 1999. *Inside Story*. Cape Town.

² Leigh, M. 1992. *Captives Courageous South African Prisoners of war World War II*: Johannesburg.

somewhat outside of the scope of this study, as it concerns mainly those POWs who escaped to Switzerland from Italy.³

Fifty years after the war a chapter by D.G. Friend, *Reluctant guests of the Third Reich*, was included in John Keene's pictorial history of South Africa in World War II. Although interesting, the chapter describes POW experience in very general terms and lacks in-depth analysis.⁴ In 1989 Joel Mervis' book, *South Africa in World War II* was published. Mervis' bibliography lists scholarly books on the war, but the general approach of the two chapters on POWs is shallow as they do not analyse any of the deeper aspects of POW experience, focusing rather on the general experience of daily camp routine, entertainment and sports activities and on reading matter available to the prisoners. The second chapter on POW experience is taken from the memoirs of a prisoner captured at Tobruk and liberated from Stalag IXA and simply relates the events of the prisoner's last days in Germany.⁵ Neither of the two publications by Keene and Mervis can be regarded as in-depth research investigations as neither made use of archival material nor of first-hand oral sources, resulting in a lack of analysis and depth. Along with these there are regimental histories, especially those regiments that were active in the Desert War, which often contain chapters or sections on the fall of Tobruk, which inevitably then also deal to some degree with POW experience. Most notable among these is *The Durban Light Infantry* which devotes 19 sections to events at Tobruk.⁶ Other regimental histories with sections or chapters on Tobruk are *The Rand Light Infantry* and *The History of the Transvaal Scottish* as well as *The Umvoti Mounted Rifles, 1864 – 1975*.⁷

Some of the more recent work on South Africa during the Second World War is useful with regards to establishing context, as most of these publications concentrate on aspects such as economic conditions, race and class relations before, during and after the war as well as the political forces that informed these relations in the pre- and post-war years. While internationally, historians have been working to correct the potentially 'unrepresentative' image of POWs through oral history research, this has not been the case in South Africa to

³ Schamberger, P. 2001. *Interlude in Switzerland: The story of the South African refugee-soldiers in the Alps during the Second World War*. Johannesburg.

⁴ Keene, J. 1995. *South Africa in World War II a pictorial history*. Cape Town.

⁵ Mervis, J. 1989. *South Africa in World War II: 50 years*. Johannesburg.

⁶ Martin, A.C. 1969. *The Durban Light Infantry Volume II 1935 to 1960*. Durban.

⁷ Simpkins, B.G. 1965. *Rand Light Infantry*. Cape Town. Birkby, C. (ed.) 1950. *The Saga of the Transvaal Scottish Regiment 1932 – 1950*. Cape Town; Du Plessis, A.J. 1975. *The Umvoti Mounted Rifles, 1864 – 1975*. Pietermaritzburg.

date.⁸ While a number of local historians have analysed South African participation in World War Two, in most cases the scope of their work does not include POW experience. For instance, Neil Roos' *Ordinary Springboks*⁹ is valuable in terms of its analysis of the political consciousness of white South African servicemen, while Albert Grundlingh's article, *The King's Afrikaners?*¹⁰ provides insight into Afrikaner attitudes towards the war and their reasons for enlisting. For perspectives on the link between Afrikaner nationalism and Fascism, Patrick Furlong's *Between Crown and Swastika*¹¹ is useful as it also analyses the political split between Hertzog and Smuts before and during the war. However, notwithstanding the usefulness of such studies, none of the publications emanating from South Africa include, much less analyse, POW experience, leaving a gap both in terms of the subject and of potential oral history research.

On the other hand, internationally, research on the historical experience of POWs has increased as historians such as Bob Moore and Kent Fedorowich, Barbara Hatley-Broad, Arieh J. Kochavi, Simon Mackenzie and Adrian Gilbert have started to investigate the topic.¹² Most of these writers, though, approach the topic thematically, most common of which are the treatment of prisoners by their captors, and aspects of the daily life of POWs such as camp entertainment and recreation. Other very popular themes are those of escape and resistance, which have at other levels contributed to the myth of POW experience as being one of resourceful, always cheerful men, always able to outsmart their captors. While the thematic approach is valuable and provides informative 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

⁸ Beaumont, J. 1983. 'Rank, Privilege and Prisoners of War.' *War & society*, 1: 67.

⁹ Roos, N. 2005. *Ordinary Springboks: White Servicemen and Social Justice in South Africa, 1939 – 1961*: Hants.

¹⁰ Grundlingh, A.M. 1999. "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*, 40:351 – 365.

¹¹ Furlong, P.J. 1991. *Between Crown and Swastika The Impact of the Radical Right on the Afrikaner Nationalist Movement in the Fascist Era*: Hanover.

¹² See for instance Moore, B. & K. Fedorowich. 1996. *Prisoners of war and their captors in World War II*. Oxford; Moore, B. & B. Hatley-Broad. (eds). 2005. *Prisoners of War, Prisoners of Peace: Captivity, Homecoming and Memory in World War II*. Oxford; Moore, B. & K. Fedorowich. 2002. *The British Empire and Its Italian Prisoners of War, 1940-1947* London; Moore, B. 2006. 'Unwanted Guests in Troubled Times: German Prisoners of War in the Union of South Africa, 1942 – 43.' *The Journal of Military History*, 70(1):63 – 90; Mackenzie, S.P. 2004. *The Colditz Myth: British and Commonwealth Prisoners of War in Nazi Germany*. Oxford; Mason, W.W. 1954. *Prisoners of War Official History Prisoners of war New Zealand in the Second World War 1939 – 45*. Wellington; Kochavi, A.J. 2005. *Confronting Captivity Britain and the United States and their POWs in Nazi Germany*. Chapel Hill; Gilbert, A. 2007. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe 1939 – 1945*. London.

Commonwealth forces – POW experience is seen as international history because the war was fought on a global scale.¹³

Although the tendency to categorize all Commonwealth soldiers as ‘British’ is functional when the focus falls on themes, the approach does not take into account the unique context of each nationality. And in the case of South Africans, the political and social milieu was especially relevant and would have influenced South African war experience as well as relations of captivity by enemy forces. While most international authors interviewed former POWs, the research was carried out invariably in other World War Two Allied countries, with only very occasional references to South African POWs.¹⁴ Granted, as most Allied POWs had some very similar experiences during their captivity and generalisations are therefore possible, it is understandable that most researchers tend to refer simply to ‘Commonwealth prisoners’,¹⁵ or ‘British contingents comprised units drawn from almost every ethnic group then within the British Empire’¹⁶. Undeniably, there are many other aspects of POW experience that an author may deem as more important than nationality, especially if many of those nationalities involved in the war formed part of the Commonwealth, which was seen as a common political unit.

It is, however, necessary to consider South Africa’s unique war context as it illuminates the peculiarity and complexity of its race and class relations. At the start of the war, the Union was, obviously, divided among political, economic, class and, especially, racial lines. While numerous English-speaking South Africans did not think twice about volunteering, many more Afrikaners were reluctant to do so, having grown up listening to their grandparents’ stories of British concentration camps during the South African War. Although many Afrikaners volunteered, the majority of them did so mostly for financial reasons and not because they felt loyalty towards the British Empire or a commitment to the cause of the war.¹⁷ These obvious differences between English and Afrikaans-speaking South Africans regarding South Africa’s role in World War Two make for interesting research in the

¹³ Fedorowich, K. & B. Moore, 1996. ‘Co-Belligerency and Prisoners of War: Britain and Italy, 1943-1945’, *The International History Review*, 18 (1):28 – 47.

¹⁴ See for instance Gilbert, A. 2007. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe 1939 – 1945*. London. For his research Gilbert used the memoirs of Ike Rosmarin, a South African Jew who was captured at Tobruk in 1942.

¹⁵ MacKenzie, S.P. 1994 ‘The Treatment of Prisoners of War in World War II’, *The Journal of Modern History*, 66(3):491.

¹⁶ Absalom, R. 1995. ‘The Allies: the Resistance and the Others in Occupied Italy 1943 – 1945’, *The Historical Journal*, 38(1):112.

¹⁷ Grundlingh, A.M. 1999. ‘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*, 40:351 – 365.

experience of POWs, as they were forced to share the same camps, regardless of the social or ideological differences between them.

Predictably, many authors who have written on World War II have tended to concentrate on the role of Commonwealth nations such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand more often than to the participation of South Africa, most probably as a result of the fact that the National Party introduced Apartheid in 1948, a policy which was based on an ideology that was seen by some critics as fascist in tendency, and politically unacceptable for others in the Commonwealth. As a result of these post-war developments, South Africa's participation in the conflict came to be largely disregarded, not only in scholarly publications, but also in popular history, the most evident example of that being the *Great Escape*, a film about the mass escape attempt from Stalag Luft III under the leadership of the South African, Squadron Leader Roger Bushell. In the 1963 film, Bushell was portrayed as a British soldier named Bartlett, a decision by the film-makers perhaps influenced by the 'growing political crisis of white southern Africa'¹⁸ following shortly after the Sharpeville shootings for which South Africa was condemned internationally. This was only one of the many story changes made by the filmmakers, which not only affected historical accuracy but also deviated significantly from Paul Brickhill's book, on which the film was based.¹⁹

Archival sources

The Military Archives Depot in Pretoria (DOD) is a natural starting point for archival research on POW matters. More specifically, the collection of the Adjutant-General; Prisoner-of-War (AG POW and POW) deals with Union Defence Force POWs abroad as well as with German and Italian POWs in South Africa. This collection is grouped in AG POW or POW and in both groups references are found pertaining to UDF POWs in Italy and Germany, and to a lesser extent to POWs in North Africa.²⁰ These groups are the most useful with regard to finding information on living conditions in Italy as well as in Germany as the collections hold copies of reports from both the Protecting Power and the Red Cross inspectors who inspected each camp every three to four months. The reports describe camp conditions under headings such as *general conditions*, *interior arrangements*, *camp capacity*,

¹⁸Cull, N.J. 2002. 'Great Escapes: "Englishness" and the Prisoner of War Genre.' *Film History*, 14:282 – 295.

¹⁹ Brickhill, P.C.J. 1950. *The Great Escape*. New York.

²⁰ Abbreviations in references in POW and AG POW groups: AG: Adjutant General; CE: Correspondence and Censorship; NAREP: narratives and reports.

toilet facilities, food and cooking facilities, medical attention and sickness among POWs, clothing, laundry, money and pay, canteen, religious activity, recreation and exercise, mail, welfare work and complaints. Reports on camps with satellite work or hospital camps include conditions in these camps, although the inspectors often relied on the statements from the camp leader, also known as the Man of Confidence, as it was not always possible for inspectors to personally visit all the work and hospital camps.

In total, there were 994 POW camps in German-occupied territory, although the South African authorities naturally only received copies of reports on those camps where South Africans were held. While that significantly reduced the number of reports, it also creates difficulties regarding accuracy as most POWs did not remain in one camp throughout the war.²¹ In Italy, POWs were moved further north as the Allies approached from the south of the country, while in Germany those in work camps were moved from one camp to another, and often their work camps would fall under the control of different main camps. The official list of South African POWs, however, indicates only one Italian and one German camp for each POW, most often the main camp where they were registered when first arriving in Italy or Germany.

The War Diary collection at the Military Archives Depot in Pretoria contains diaries up to division level while the Divisional Documents of the 2nd South African Division is useful as this entire Division surrendered in Tobruk in 1942 and over 10, 700 South Africans were taken prisoner. The Military Archives Depot also contains minutes of the Defence Authorities Committee (from 1940 to 1945) which gives insight into policy matters regarding POWs. Other useful collections for POW matters at the DOD are Chief of the General Staff (CGS) and the Secretary of Defence (DC) collection, although references to POW matters in these collections are not as evident as in others such as the AG POW collection. Also at the DOD, *The Union War Histories*, established by J.C. Smuts in 1940, is useful in obtaining relevant oral history evidence, journals and original photographs as this collection concerns overall South African participation in the war.²²

At the National Archives of South Africa (NASA) in Pretoria, the collections of the Secretary of Foreign Affairs (BTS), Director General of Demobilisation (DGD), Secretary of Home Affairs (BNS), Ambassador, London (BLO), South African Police (AP) and the Governor

²¹ National Ex-Prisoner of War Association POW Camp Listings. Available at http://www.prisonerofwar.org.uk/camp_list.htm. Accessed 14 September 2011.

²² http://academic.sun.ac.za/mil/mil_history/military_archives_ww2.htm. Accessed 5 Nov 2009.

General (GG) all hold some references to POW matters. To a lesser degree, the collections of the Decisions of the Executive Council (URU), Department of Labour (ARB), Secretary of Union Education (UOD), Secretary of Public Works (PWD), Controller of Auditor-General (KOG), Custodian of Enemy Property (BVE) and the Secretary of the Treasury (TES) are useful especially for the periods directly before and after the war.²³

The Ditsong National Museum of Military History (MMH) holds substantial resources on POWs, especially POW memoirs and donations of photographs from former veterans. These are especially valuable as none of the archives holds extensive material on POW experience in North Africa. Indeed, as there is no evidence that the inspectors of the Red Cross or the Protecting Power ever visited the camps in Tobruk, Derna, Benghazi or any of the other transit camps in North Africa, in order to gain knowledge of this stage of POW experience it is necessary to rely on oral narratives, diaries and memoirs. To these can be added other soldiering records, like the *Benghazi Forum*, a camp newspaper initiated in November 1942 by Eric Hurst, a British POW.²⁴ Selected reproductions of the *Benghazi Forum* are available at the MMH, but the document centre at the Castle of Good Hope Military Museum in Cape Town holds all its editions, as well as its Italian successor, the *Tuturano Times*.

Books

Although there are numerous publications on Allied POW experience, Adrian Gilbert's *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe 1939 – 1945* and W. Wynne Mason's *Prisoners of War: Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939 – 45* are two of the most comprehensive. Gilbert looks at Allied POW experience thematically and includes experiences of both officers and other ranks, although conditions in officers' camps were very different from those experienced in camps for men of other ranks. Each chapter investigates a fundamental aspect of POW life, which includes surrender, transport to camps, camp conditions and management as well as relations between captives and captors and relations between different nationalities, all very useful topics for the present study. The chapter on *Resistance, Punishment and Collaboration* looks at sabotage attempts by POWs but also at those who joined forces with the enemy. Gilbert also focuses on recreation

²³ http://academic.sun.ac.za/mil/mil_history/military_archives_ww2.htm. Accessed 5 Nov 2009.

²⁴ Friedman, G. 2003. *The Piano War*: 200.

activities, medical treatment and religion, escape from Germany and from Italy, and finally at liberation and POWs return to their home countries.

In his book, *The Colditz Myth: British and Commonwealth Prisoners of War in Nazi Germany*, Simon Mackenzie's aim is to address the almost fictional quality that surrounds perceptions regarding POW experience as a result of the over-emphasis on escape stories, which the author argues, were not as common as assumed. As most escape attempts were made by officers, it is understandable that Mackenzie focused his research on experiences in officers' camps. Unfortunately, however, this leaves a gap in knowledge of other ranks where it is equally important to dispel myths created by fictional representations of POW experience. Published in 1944, Noel Barber's *Prisoner of War: The Story of British Prisoners held by the Enemy* is insightful into how the opinion of the British public could be manipulated by a romanticised view of the prison camps, one of which is even described as 'picturesque', and while the surrounding area may have been visually striking, the description certainly creates a false impression of conditions in POW camps.²⁵ There is also an over-emphasis on the resourcefulness and determination of the British POWs who seemed to be able to remain positive regardless of their negative circumstances and austere living conditions. Granted, the author is careful to note that the bad conditions that prevailed during the first years of the war had been rectified by the time he published his book, which ends up creating a positive image in the mind of the uninformed reader of the POW and his circumstances. The usefulness of the book is a result of its reliance on letters from POWs and the accounts of those who had been repatriated, but the interpretation and lack of critical analysis makes it best seen as a contemporary propaganda tool to boost the morale of anxious British citizens.

In *Confronting Captivity: Britain and the United States and their POWs in Nazi Germany*, Kochavi's research is on policy matters regarding POWs from both the British and American angles. It includes issues such as capture and medical treatment and examines the extent to which the Geneva Convention was upheld.²⁶ As South African authorities were informed through London of all decisions pertaining to POWs and received copies of reports on camps and so forth, they were not in a position to alter existing policy or to implement decisions autonomously from Britain, making this study essential to an understanding of the external

²⁵ Barber, N. 1944. *Prisoner of War the Story of British Prisoners held by the Enemy*: 17.

²⁶ Kochavi, A.J. 2005. *Confronting Captivity Britain and the United States and their POWs in Nazi Germany*. Chapel Hill.

factors, political and economic, that impacted on POW experience. Along with Vasilis Vourkoutiotis' PhD thesis, *The German Armed Forces Supreme Command and British and American Prisoners-of-War, 1939 – 1945: Policy and Practice*, it is possible to gain insight into the thought processes, decisions and implementations of policy regarding POW matters during the war.²⁷ Richard Lamb's *War in Italy 1943 – 1945: A Brutal Story* includes a chapter on British POWs in Italy following the armistice and the mass escapes from camps that followed soon after. The chapter pays considerable attention to POWs who had managed to escape and to the ways in which Italian peasants came to their aid. Although escape narratives are not directly relevant to this study, the chapter also analyses political and military aspects that contributed to the confusion among POWs at the time, for instance the conflicting orders given to POWs and Italian guards regarding authorisation for mass escapes, first by the Deputy Director of Military Intelligence in the British War Office and later by the Italian War Office.²⁸

Books that investigate both Allied and Axis POW experience as well as the theory of captivity include Bob Moore and Kent Fedorowich's *Prisoners of war and their captors in World War II* and Moore and Barbara Hatley-Broad's *Prisoners of War, Prisoners of Peace: Captivity, Homecoming and Memory in World War II*.²⁹ In *Prisoners of war and their captors* a number of authors contribute chapters on varying aspects of the topic. In chapter one, Moore investigates the problem faced by the British Government as well as by Dominion Governments on the matter of accommodation and transportation of Axis POWs. Other themes include the role of the Geneva Convention (Joan Beaumont), the experiences of black POWs (David Killingray) and the role of the Dominion Governments in the formulation of policy regarding POWs (J.F. Vance). In Moore and Hatley-Broad's volume, the focus is more on the issues of memory, anti-Fascist propaganda among Axis POWs and aspects of guilt during and after the war. From the different authors who also contribute to this publication the focus varies between relationships between prisoners and their captors, Fascist ideology and the way in which authorities attempted to re-educate German and Italian POWs. In part IV, writers contribute chapters on demobilisation and POW adaptation to civilian life following the war. For present purposes, the most relevant chapter in this section is Hatley-

²⁷ Vourkoutiotis, V. 2000. 'The German Armed Forces Supreme Command and British and American Prisoners-of-War, 1939 – 1945: Policy and Practice.' PhD Thesis. Montreal.

²⁸ Lamb, R. 1993. *War in Italy 1943 – 1945 A Brutal Story*. London.

²⁹ Moore, B. & K. Fedorowich. 1996. *Prisoners of war and their captors in World War II*. Oxford; Moore, B. & B. Hatley-Broad. (eds). 2005. *Prisoners of War, Prisoners of Peace: Captivity, Homecoming and Memory in World War II*. Oxford.

Broad's chapter on *Coping in Britain and France: a comparison of Family Issues affecting the Homecoming of Prisoners of War following World War II*.

Included among other authors who contributed chapters that are relevant to this study are, Rudiger Overmans (*The repatriation of Prisoners of War once Hostilities are Over: A Matter of Course?*), Moore (*British perceptions of Italian Prisoners of War, 1940 -7*) and Beaumont (*Prisoners of War in Australian National Memory*). Moore and Fedorowich also investigate Axis prisoners in *The British Empire and Its Italian Prisoners of War, 1940-1947*.³⁰ In *We Were Each Other's Prisoners*, Lewis Carlson offers a collection of oral narratives, from both American and German POWs. In the final chapter of the book, Carlson points out the importance of making known to the general public the stories of the POWs, as he believes 'the challenge of coping with the harrowing experiences of internment has a fascinating relevance for all human beings.'³¹ While all of these publications are necessary reading for a study of South African POW experience, none of them focus specifically on South Africans or refer to the South African war context.

Journal articles

This section considers authors who have contributed articles to various journals on POW matters, whether they are Allied or Axis prisoners. Instead of looking at each individual article, the focus falls on authors and the themes they present through their studies. However, articles on Allied prisoners in the Far East are not included as this falls outside of the scope of this study. The thematic range of articles on POW experience is very wide, with the most relevant to this study being that by I.B. Greeff which looked at aspects of the so-called long marches that took place during the final months of the war. As German authorities evacuated prison camps, many POWs joined thousands of refugees from German-occupied territories who tried to escape the advancing Allies who eventually enclosed them from the east and the west. The article explores the extent to which POWs were treated during the march, how relationships between captors and captives changed and how POWs in many cases took responsibility for their own liberty.³²

³⁰ Moore, B. & K. Fedorowich. 2002. *The British Empire and Its Italian Prisoners of War, 1940-1947*. London.

³¹ Carlson, L.H. 1997. *We Were Each Other's Prisoners An Oral History of World War II American and German Prisoners of War*. New York.

³² Greeff, I.B. 1991. 'South African Prisoners-of-War on the Long Marches 1944 – 1945.' *Military History Journal*, 8(6). Available at <http://samilitaryhistory.org/vol086ig.html>. Accessed 22 September 2011.

The work of Bob Moore considers German POWs in South Africa during 1942 to 1943, and is of particular comparative interest as these soldiers shared the South African POW experience to the extent that they were also captured in North Africa and transported to a foreign country. Moore also looks at the complex problems that authorities were faced with when confronted with large numbers of prisoners.³³ Also prominent is Simon Mackenzie, author of *The Colditz Myth*, whose articles include aspects on the treatment of POWs as well as political crises and the tendency for reprisal from both Allied and Axis Governments, the most significant example of that being the so-called shackling crisis when German authorities shackled Allied POWs in reprisal for the Allies who tied up Axis captives during the Dieppe raid in August 1942.³⁴ Also on the topic of interpretation of POW experience is Peter Liddle and Ian Whitehead's work that looks at the way in which film contributed to the creation of myths and an almost romantic view of POW life.³⁵ For his part, Cull evaluates the notion of 'Englishness', and how this notion was instilled through myth-creating interpretations of POW experience.³⁶

As with most literature on POW experience, references to South African participation in the war are rare, but because aspects of the POW experience can also be generalised, the following articles would all be deemed necessary reading. Roger Absalom's article, *Hiding History: The Allies, the Resistance and the Others in Occupied Italy 1943 – 1945* is useful concerning issues such as the relationships between Italian peasants and British escapees and the role of Christianity in establishing those relationships, even though South African POWs are not specifically mentioned.³⁷ To gain insight into the frustrations of communication between POW and their families at home, Hatley-Broad's work on POW families and the British foreign office is essential.³⁸ For aspects that affected prisoner morale, Vourkoutiotis and David Shavit's work on the Red Cross and the importance of libraries in camps are

³³ Moore, B. 2006. 'Unwanted Guests in Troubled Times: German Prisoners of War in the Union of South Africa, 1942 – 43.' *The Journal of Military History*, 70(1):63 – 90.

³⁴ See for instance MacKenzie, S.P. 1994. 'The Treatment of Prisoners of War in World War II.' *Journal of Modern History*, 66(3):487 – 520; Mackenzie, S.P. 1995. 'The Shackling Crisis: A Case-Study in the Dynamics of Prisoner-of-War Diplomacy in the Second World War.' *The International History Review*, 17(1):78 – 98.

³⁵ Liddle, P. & I. Whitehead. 'Not the Image but Reality: British POW Experiences in Italian and German Camps.' The Second World War Experience Centre. Available at <http://www.war-experience.org/history/keyaspects/captivity/default.asp>. Accessed 22 October 2010.

³⁶ Cull, N.J. 2002. 'Great Escapes: "Englishness" and the Prisoner of War Genre.' *Film History*, 14:282 – 295.

³⁷ Absalom, R. 1995. 'Hiding History: The Allies, the Resistance and the Others in Occupied Italy 1943 – 1945.' *The Historical Journal*, 38(1):111 – 131.

³⁸ Hatley-Broad, B. 2002. "'Nobody would tell you anything": The War and Foreign Offices and British Prisoner of War Families During World War II.' *Journal of Family History*, 27(4):459 – 477.

important.³⁹ Beaumont's work is concerned with the discrepancies in treatment afforded to different ranks as prescribed by the Geneva Convention of 1929. She also underlines the point that the focus on officer's experience in POW camps is the reason that most of the historiography emphasises escape attempts, education in POW camps and sabotage against captors. Because very few historians have looked at the experiences of other ranks who lacked the privileges and position of higher ranks, a large part of the record of POW life is overshadowed by the almost idealised view of POW experience from the officer's point of view.⁴⁰ In a greater emphasis on escape attempts, Vance provides perceptions of the crucial role of skilled and more highly educated airmen who were most active in planning and carrying out escapes. Inevitably, it means that such a study is of more limited use for a work that focuses on rank-and-file prisoners who were less inclined to escape.⁴¹ In South African military history journals, articles may occasionally appear that recount personal narratives gained from interviews or memoirs by former POWs, such as Stanley Smollan's story of escape which was published by David Saks, and it is these articles that can prompt researchers to former POWs to conduct further interviews.⁴²

Other sources

The website of the National Ex-Prisoner of War Association, which is a member of the British Service and Ex-Service Organisations, is useful with regard to information on camp names as it includes a full list of all POW camps in all German occupied territories. The site also includes information on the POW medal and has a collection of photographs from various POW camps, although not all the men in the photographs are identified. The site also provides a list of published and unpublished books on and by POWs, as well as links to other websites, including websites for Stalag VIIA Moosburg and Stalag VIII B/344 Lamsdorf, both of which are relevant as they were used as base camps for POWs entering Germany following the Italian armistice.⁴³

³⁹ Vourkoutiotis, V. 2005. 'What the Angels Saw: Red Cross and Protecting Power Visits to Anglo-American POWs, 1939 – 45.' *Journal of Contemporary History*, 40(4):689 – 706; Shavit, D. 1999. "'The Greatest Morale Factor Next to the Red Army': Books and Libraries in American and British Prisoners of War Camps in Germany During World War II.' *Libraries and Culture*, 34(2):113 – 134.

⁴⁰ See for instance Beaumont, J. 1983. 'Rank, Privilege and Prisoners of War.' *War & society*, 1:67 – 94.

⁴¹ Vance, J.F. 1993. 'The War behind the Wire: The Battle to Escape from a German Prison Camp.' *Journal of Contemporary History* 28(4):675 – 693.

⁴² Saks, D. 2009. 'Long journey to Anzio a Springbok escapee story.' *Military History Journal*, 14(5):190 – 194.

⁴³ *The National Ex-Prisoner-of-War Association*. Available at http://www.prisonerofwar.org.uk/camp_list.htm. Accessed 14 September 2011. *POW Camp VIIA Moosburg*. Available at

Included in the Stalag VIIIIB/344 website are copies of *The Clarion*, the camp newspaper that appeared on a monthly basis between January 1943 and December 1944. Also useful are the video recordings of interviews with former Lamsdorf POWs, as well as the sections on hospital facilities in the camp, which is compiled from the memoirs of one of the POW medical staff who worked in the camp hospital. The website also provides useful links to related research on POW experience, including reviews of recently published books on the topic. The website for Stalag VIIA Moosburg contains valuable primary material in the form of transcriptions of letters sent from the camp to family members. The site also contains 104 narratives from former POWs who spent time at the Moosburg camp, as well as short biographies of the two German camp commanders, Otto Burger and Hans Nepf. Most of the narratives include photographs of prisoners while the website also includes aerial views and a map showing the layout of the camp.

<http://www.moosburg.org/info/stalag/indeng.html> Accessed 21 September 2011. *Lamsdorf: Stalag VIIIIB 344 Prisoner of War Camp 1940 – 1945*. Available at <http://www.lamsdorf.com/>. Accessed 21 September 2011.

Chapter 3: Background

Friends and enemies

On 15 November 1899, Winston Churchill became a prisoner-of-war (POW) of the Boer forces when the armoured train he was travelling in was captured on its way to Ladysmith.¹ When writing *My Early Life*, he described the experience of being a prisoner-of-war as ‘the least unfortunate kind of prisoner to be, but it is nevertheless a melancholy state [...] Hours crawl like paralytic centipedes. Nothing amuses you.’² At the time of Churchill’s captivity, J.C. Smuts had already made his debut into South African politics and filled the position of state attorney for the Transvaal Government. As a war general he was committed to the cause of uniting the Boer Republics and determined that Britain would not control the southern tip of Africa.³

However, the Anglo-Boer War also divided the region’s Afrikaners politically into three main factions, *hensoppers*, *joiners* and *bittereinders*. The extent to which Afrikaners were willing to submit or to cooperate with the Crown or to continue the conflict with the British determined their association with the groups. For those who were committed to fighting to the bitter end, the defeat in 1902 was very hard to accept, not only because the Boer Republics lost their independence, but also because the British had subjected Afrikaner women and children to severe hardships in concentration camps spread across the country. Resentment of the British lingered in many Afrikaner families as the hope of independence and the elusive concept of national freedom continued to be nurtured. In an ideological way, the Anglo-Boer War continued for many nationalist Afrikaners until 1948 when the National Party came to power, symbolising ‘a victory over British Imperialism.’⁴ Between 1902 and 1948, however, hope of any realisation of ideals such as Afrikaner ethnic national freedom was deferred as the Union became exposed to the realities of international conflict and involved nationally in the ordering of race-relations through the development of segregation.

¹ Pakenham, T. 1982. *The Boer War*: 166, 171.

² Churchill, W.S. 1973. *The Collected Works of Sir Winston Churchill I. My Early Life My African Journey*: 273.

³ Marks, S. Oxford Dictionary of National Biography; Smuts, Jan Christiaan (1870–1950). Available at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/36171?docPos=1> Accessed 1 November 2011.

⁴ Pretorius, F. (ed) 2001. *Scorched Earth*: 256.

When the First World War broke out, tenacity among the remnants of the *bittereinders* resulted in a rebellion against the governing South Africa Party under Smuts and Louis Botha, another erstwhile Boer general. By 1914, Smuts and Botha and their supporters had come to accept that the future of South Africa lay in its imperial ties as a British Dominion. When South Africa accepted Britain's request that it invade German South West Africa, many dissenting Afrikaners looked to J.B.M. Hertzog, leader of the National Party, for direction.⁵ Although many of the Anglo-Boer War veterans went on to fight in campaigns during World War One, in the process forming strong bonds of camaraderie between them, the war also divided those who remained behind as numbers became preoccupied with an idealised past, yearning to claim the opportunities of independence lost in 1902.⁶ Smuts, on the other hand, in a declaration made in 1917 made it clear that he believed South Africa's future was tied to Britain when, referring to the Anglo-Boer War, he stated that the 'simple human feelings of loyalty to your comrades and respect for your opponents on both sides have led to a new basis on which to build the larger South Africa we have to-day.'⁷

By 1934, Smuts seemed to be further convinced that the success of Scotland's 'grand compromise' with England would be repeated in South Africa's case, making clear the direction he believed South Africa should follow in the event of another war, as 'in the long run only the spirit of international comradeship can solve the problems of freedom and of peace.'⁸ By the time the war started Smuts and Churchill had become friends and the former Boer General and the former Anglo-Boer War POW and the two erstwhile enemies looked to each other for advice and support during World War Two.⁹ However, in a shared ambition with Churchill to defeat Fascism, Smuts' preoccupation with international affairs and close association with British imperial interests helped him to conveniently forget about the complexities of prevailing white South African politics.

The initial success in the East African campaigns and the electoral victory of May 1943 may have temporarily bolstered Smuts' confidence of domestic support, but he had dangerously underestimated the National Party's determination to advance the interests of the

⁵ Thompson, L. 1995. *A History of South Africa*: 159.

⁶ Grundlingh, A. & S. Swart. 2009. *Radelose Rebelle? Dinamika van die 1914 – 1915 Afrikanerrebelle*: 121.

⁷ Smuts, J.C. 1942. *Plans for a better world Speeches of Field-Marshal the Right Honourable J.C. Smuts, P.C., C.H., K.C., D.T.D.* The Commonwealth Conception: Speech to members of the House of Commons and the House of Lords on 15 May 1917: 33 – 34.

⁸ Smuts, J.C. 1942. *Plans for a better world Speeches of Field-Marshal the Right Honourable J.C. Smuts, P.C., C.H., K.C., D.T.D.* The Challenge to Freedom: Speech at St Andrews University on 17 October 1934: 86 & 99.

⁹ Gilbert, M. 1986. *Road to Victory Winston S. Churchill 1941 – 1945*: 5 & 159.

Afrikaners.¹⁰ Before South Africa entered the war, Afrikaner nationalists were once again looking towards the past in their effort to reach their dreams of independence outside of the British Empire. The Voortrekker Monument, the formation of bodies and movements such as the Afrikaner Broederbond and the *Ossewabrandwag* were tangible evidence of a *volkisch* Afrikaner Nationalism, inspired to a considerable degree by Nazi ideology and by the strong cultural links between many Afrikaners and their German ancestors.¹¹ The 1938 centennial celebrations of the Great Trek served to re-awaken many of those Afrikaners whose loyalties had been buried by the realities of poor white poverty and depression during the 1930s, and the outbreak of war in 1939 gave the Nationalists, and particularly the *Ossewabrandwag*, a ‘renewed identity’ with which to oppose Smuts’ war plans for South Africa. Following Hertzog’s narrow misjudgement of parliamentary sympathies at the time of Britain and France’s war declaration, South Africa committed itself to war against Germany under a new government led by Smuts, but as there was no pro-war national consensus, it lacked a truly popular mandate for hostilities. Hertzog’s resignation as Prime Minister, Malan’s formation of the Purified National Party and Smuts’ ‘solidarity with Great Britain’ emboldened radicals in extremist movements such as the *Ossewabrandwag* and made the Nationalists ‘impervious to arguments relat[ed] to world politics.’¹²

The Union Defence Forces

A year before the war started, South Africa’s military preparedness was still wholly inadequate, as Oswald Pirow, the Minister of Defence, was completely out of touch with what would be required of South Africa if the country entered into a war that would be fought on a global scale. The fact that Pirow was pro-German and had no intention of going to war against Nazi Germany did not help and, according to Smuts, Hitler found it very amusing when South Africa’s parliament voted in favour of declaring war on Germany. The significance of that vote was not only that it gave South Africa a new Prime Minister and

¹⁰ Marks, S. Oxford Dictionary of National Biography; Smuts, Jan Christiaan (1870–1950). Available at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/36171?docPos=1> Accessed 1 November 2011.

¹¹ Crwys-Williams, J. 1992. *A country at war 1939 – 1945 The Mood of a Nation: 2*.

¹² Marx, C. 2009. *Oxwagon Sentinel Radical Afrikaner Nationalism and the History of the Ossewabrandwag*: 281 & 292 – 295.

made it one of the belligerent countries, but that it widened the division between English and Afrikaans-speaking whites.¹³

In an effort to avoid any further hostilities from nationalist anti-war groups, Smuts relied on volunteers and did not impose conscription. Those who volunteered from March 1940 had to take an oath, thereby declaring that they would serve anywhere in Africa. The status of these volunteers was obvious as they had to wear red tabs on their uniforms. Many who had been part of the UDF or of the South African Police (SAP) before March 1940, refused to take the oath and were utilised on the home front.¹⁴ During the recruitment drives, Smuts' aim was to convince both Afrikaans and English-speaking men to volunteer and the message adopted by the authorities was that it was best to call upon men to fight a war, not to fight for or against a specific cause which might be found contentious in some quarters. The prime minister pursued this martial line by attracting the attention of Afrikaners through reminders to them of the 'High Adventure' of venerated Anglo-Boer War heroes, and then luring the attention of younger men with impressive displays of weaponry.¹⁵ With an estimated 50 per cent of all volunteers being Afrikaans-speaking, the strategy was obviously not without success, although in some instances volunteering Afrikaners subsequently felt deceived by the 'false pretences'¹⁶ of the recruitment officers.

The volunteers¹⁷

According to Wessel Oosthuizen, who was a constable in the SAP when the war started, he and others in the SAP was caught by surprise and had no choice but to take the oath. Oosthuizen was told by a recruitment officer that he had already shown, by joining the SAP, that he was loyal to the state and therefore had to wear the red tab worn by all volunteers who took the oath to fight anywhere in Africa. To make matters worse, Oosthuizen disliked his

¹³ Fedorowich, K. 2005. 'German Espionage and British Counter-Intelligence in South Africa and Mozambique, 1939 – 1944.' *The Historical Journal*, 48(1):212.

¹⁴ Nasson, B. Forthcoming 2012. *South Africa at War 1939 – 1945*: 5, 23 – 24, 55.

¹⁵ Grundlingh, A.M. 1999. "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: 354 – 359.

¹⁶ Wessel Oosthuizen interview: 4 December 2010, Hartenbos. 'valse voorwendsels'

¹⁷ The volunteers discussed in this section are those former POWs who were interviewed for this study. In Chapter 7 the same former POWs will be discussed in terms of their post-war experiences.

work in the police force and had only decided to join the SAP when it became clear to him that he would not be able to make a living on his farm in the Orange Free State.¹⁸

The touchy issue of SAP members being coerced into taking the oath was also hinted at by Fred Geldenhuis, who was a lance sergeant at the Police Depot in Pretoria at the outbreak of war. In an interview he asserted that in his experience some had gone voluntarily while others had taken the oath against their will.¹⁹ The issue was investigated by the National Party Government in 1950 when the Minister of Justice requested information regarding the taking of the oath by members of the police during the war. According to the Police Commissioner,



there were no written instructions on the taking of the oath with regard to the SAP. He explained that those SAP members between the ages of 21 and 24 were called to the Police College in June 1940 where some took the oath while others did not. The Commissioner concluded that those who did not take the oath were not pressured into doing so and were used as guards in Pretoria and later sent back to their different areas where they performed normal police duties. On 14 April 1941, the Recruitment Commission in Johannesburg issued an instruction that only those who had taken the oath were required to wear the red tab.²⁰

Figure 2: Fred Geldenhuis at the Police Training Depot, 1939.²¹

Many of the Afrikaans-speaking volunteers had volunteered in an effort to improve their economic circumstances, but when they were required to take the oath in 1940, refusal was widespread as it would mean they would be deployed in war operations outside South Africa.²² Many of these recruits viewed the UDF as a financial lifeline, an escape from

¹⁸ Wessel Oosthuizen interview: 4 December 2010, Hartenbos. ‘*hulle het my soort van oorrompel [...] toe het ek maar die eed gevat maar hulle het eintlik valse voorwendsels [gehad] toe sê hulle “jy werk vir die staat dit is net ’n bewys dat jy getrou is aan die staat se eed” dan kry jy ’n rooi lussie toe het hul my nou daar vasgetrek.*’

¹⁹ Fred Geldenhuis interview: 9 July 2010, Pretoria. ‘*Toe het ons vrywillig, baie vrywillig ander nie vrywillig.*’

²⁰ National Archives of South Africa (hereafter NASA) SAP.1/146/40/A. Commissioner of the South African Police to the Minister of Justice in Cape Town. 14 January 1950. Unfortunately no further archival evidence on this issue was found.

²¹ Geldenhuis, F.J.W. n.d. *A Soldier’s Scrapbook*: 34.

²² Grundlingh, A.M. 1999. “‘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: 11.; Roos, N. 2005. *Ordinary Springboks: White servicemen and Social Justice in South Africa 1939 – 1961*: 33.

extreme poverty or unemployment, and few necessarily viewed the Germans as an enemy or believed that Fascism was a tyrannous system.

For most white English-speaking men, the decision to volunteer was not a difficult one. Many were loyal to the British Empire and believed South Africa had a duty towards Britain. In response to the vote in favour of war, large numbers volunteered, their only considerations being personal issues, such as education, careers and family. Later many POWs blamed those who had stayed behind, especially when they received letters while they were still in captivity, giving news of promotions or marriages, as was the case with Edward (Dick) Dickinson, who received a letter from his mother informing him ‘of a wonderful job Keith Clarke has in Cape Town. I saw red when I saw that. There is only one job for a man in wartime.’²³

Moreover, the Government system of holding back skilled artisans, also known as ‘key men’, also gave rise to misunderstandings and negative perceptions of home front favouritism, as these individuals benefitted in safety from pay increases, promotions, formed relationships and married.²⁴ For POWs, on the other hand, there was a constant battle to ensure they received the correct payments while in captivity as captors were responsible to make payments to POWs in the local currency, causing many to suspect that they were being underpaid as a result of the fluctuation of the exchange rate.²⁵

Typically, the Brokensha brothers, Paul and David, grew up in Durban in a predominantly English home. David Brokensha remembers that his youth was ‘very provincial and really looking down on everybody.’ The eldest Brokensha brother, Guy, was a pilot in the South African Air Force and David especially wanted to follow in his brother’s footsteps, but he also volunteered because ‘there was a war on and I didn’t want to miss it, you know it was sort of this boy’s adventure story.’ That carefree attitude towards the war among some English-speaking South Africans at the end of the 1930s is illustrated well by an anecdote David heard from his father. Shortly after David and Paul volunteered, he told a friend at the elite Durban Club that he was ‘very worried because all three of my sons have joined up, and the other man said “I’m very worried because I have three sons and not one of them have volunteered.”’

²³ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo’burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by EB Dickinson*: 120.

²⁴ Roos, N. 2010. ‘The Springbok and the Skunk: War Veterans and the Politics of Whiteness in South Africa during the 1940s and 1950s.’ *Journal of Southern African Studies* 35(3):654.

²⁵ Department of Defence Archives (hereafter DOD) AG(POW) 1527/VII A. Stalag VII A Moosburg. Report No. 586. 12/14 October 1944.



Figure 3: David Brokensha shortly after he volunteered (1941)

David admitted that he knew very little of Afrikaners and that he had not met any Afrikaners until he joined the UDF. His lofty attitude towards Afrikaners changed, however, when he met Piet Pieterse:

who was completely different [from David]. He was a year older, I was 17 he was about 18, he'd spend some years at a reformatory, we kidded then that they hadn't worn shoes till they join the army, which may have been true, he was from you know, an *arme blanche* [poor white] background and yet he and I, he was my buddy, I mean...

Thereafter, he seemed to reserve his condescension for those who had been too slack to do their duty. Even though Guy Brokensha and Piet Pieterse both died in the war, and Paul and David Brokensha spent three years in POW camps, yet, 'even now I rather look down on those who didn't [volunteer].'²⁶

Bernard Schwikkard was another who was desperate to join the Air Force and despite his German surname, he 'had a very pro-British upbringing and could not wait to fight for "King and Country."' Both his brothers volunteered and Schwikkard was determined to do the same, but was told that at 16 he was too young for the Air Force. To his delight, however, he was able to join the 3rd Battalion, Transvaal Scottish as 'Colonel Walter Kirby had been instructed to bring the regiment up to regimental strength with all haste and was not too

²⁶ David Brokensha interview: 10 September 2010, Fish Hoek.

particular about asking questions about one's age [...] the officer said he would help me get enlisted provided I was prepared to bluff my age.'²⁷

The Air Force also played a part in Dick Dickinson's decision to volunteer. At the time, Dickinson was busy with his Honours year at the University of the Witwatersrand (WITS) and when a classmate and good friend of his was shot down in East Africa, it convinced Dickinson to enlist. With regard to ideological reasons, he believed that these were 'not anti-Germany so much as anti-Hitler [and] we were pro-British.'²⁸ With a similar attitude, Michael de Lisle volunteered because he 'had a pretty fair idea of right and wrong and we'd been recognising over the years that Hitler was a threat to peace [...] so I think we joined up out of principle, it was a duty to try and protect freedom.'²⁹

Just like Dickinson, De Lisle, a first year student at the University of Cape Town (UCT), also interrupted his studies to volunteer. It was during the first few weeks of training with the 2nd Anti-Aircraft Regiment that De Lisle and Fred van Alphen Stahl met, and they have remained friends ever since. Fred van Alphen Stahl's reasons for volunteering were very different though, as he did not feel that he was 'fighting for the king and country and glory, it was just something that was going on, so let's go.' Influenced personally by Smuts' vision of a united white South Africanism, he also viewed himself simply as a South African, not as an Afrikaner, although he grew up in the predominantly Afrikaans-speaking town of Malmesbury where

the war-friendly community [was] rather small [and] there were lots of fights particularly those on the *herstigters*, [Purified nationalists] some of the *verkramptes* [hard line conservatives] they wanted to pick fights because you were the *verraaier*, [traitor] or *rooi luis* [red louse] ... when you say Afrikaner I say *nee, ek is 'n Suid-Afrikaner*, because [no, I am South African] I don't want to be put in a [category] say, I'm an English speaking Afrikaner or I am an Afrikaans speaking South African or *wat ookal* [or whatever].³⁰

Another Afrikaans-speaking former POW, Matthys Beukes, also declared in oral recollections that he had grown up in a bilingual home in the Cape Province and did not view

²⁷ Schwikkard, B.E. 1999. *My life briefly told*: 19.

²⁸ E.B. (Dick) Dickinson interview: 4 December 2010, Mossel Bay.

²⁹ Michael de Lisle interview: 4 June 2010, Cape Town.

³⁰ Fred van Alphen Stahl interview: 25 May 2010, Cape Town. Red louse or red lice refers to the red tab worn by volunteers in the UDF.

himself as either Afrikaans or English. While working in the magistrate's office during 1938, the Department of Justice enquired among its staff who would volunteer in case of war, and Beukes was one of the first to indicate his willingness. However, he was held back and not allowed to enlist and it was only in 1940 that he was eventually able to volunteer. Things did not, however, go smoothly for Beukes and he developed a severe illness, thought to be meningitis, soon after joining the Regiment President Steyn (RPS) in Bloemfontein. While recuperating, Beukes heard that his regiment was on embarkation leave and he set off to join them in Durban. He boarded the ship, but as he was classified medically unfit for service, he was asked to go and see the Captain. Beukes manipulated his situation and only went to see the Captain after ten in the morning, when the ship had already set off. Despite his medical condition, Beukes remained with the regiment and was captured at Tobruk in June 1942.³¹

Another UCT student and articles clerk when the war started was Clive Luyt, who recalled not being much moved by what he called the 'rather dead war'³² or the first phase 'phoney war' when Britain and France took up a defensive attitude while building up their military capacity against Hitler's forces.³³ It was Germany's invasion of Belgium which motivated Luyt and his friends, all of whom were busy with examinations at the time, to volunteer 'and we went and had a couple of beers after writing our exam and we said "look what are we doing about the war" and we said "well we'd better go and join up", so after a couple of beers we joined up.'³⁴

In more than one case, peer pressure played a role in young men's decisions to volunteer. Stanley Smollan admitted that he volunteered because all his friends were doing the same, although he also added that 'we just thought we had to do it, so it was a voluntary thing and we joined in May 1940, the Transvaal Scottish, where I was a private soldier, not a conscript, a volunteer.' Being young and easily influenced also played a part, and this aspect was especially exploited by the recruitment campaigns, as Smollan admitted that they were 'easily roused by flag waving [but] then we came down to the real reality, that we were soldiers under strict discipline and committed, because we'd volunteered.' Smollan also felt that he had been influenced during his school days at Parktown Boys' High School in Johannesburg

³¹ Matthys Beukes interview: 2 February 2011, Bloemfontein.

³² Clive Luyt interview: 19 May 2010, Cape Town.

³³ Evans, R.J. 2008. *The Third Reich at War*: 112.

³⁴ Clive Luyt interview: 19 May 2010, Cape Town.

where he considered that the local regiments were already training recruits through the school cadets.³⁵

For Bill Hindshaw, volunteering was a wholly positive experience as he had already been inducted into army ways, having been a reservist in the Active Citizen Force (ACF) since the age of 16. He had by then also left school and had been doing various jobs and pursuing an apprenticeship as a bricklayer. Hindshaw also found the decision easy as he 'wasn't married and girlfriends were no hindrance, you see. So I enjoyed the army, I really enjoyed myself in the army, the peace time army and then war came and I was on.' Hindshaw's enjoyment of all things military may have been a consequence of the fact that he 'was brought up on the shooting range.'³⁶ But his fate was to be that of many others, that of being captured at Tobruk in June 1942.

³⁵ Stanley Smollan interview: 15 March 2010, Johannesburg.

³⁶ William Hindshaw interview: 19 March 2010, Johannesburg.

Chapter 4: Battle and capture in North Africa

Battle experiences

Former POWs interviewed and the memoirs used for this study constitute the record of South Africans who were captured either during the early phase of Operation Crusader under the command of General Sir Claude Auchinleck, Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East, at the Battle of Sidi Rezegh (5th South African Infantry Brigade) during 21 and 22 November 1941, or at the fall of Tobruk on 21 June 1942 (2nd South Africa Infantry Division). Although the Germans captured the Union troops, 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 and Benghazi, and Mersa Matruh.

Most camps were transit camps and most POWs ended up in Benghazi before being transported to Italy. While most enclosures were simply wire cages with Italian and Senussi guards posted around the camps, the Italians also improvised as they were not ready for the large numbers of POWs taken in North Africa. In Derna, for instance, a walled graveyard was used to temporarily accommodate POWs on their way to Benghazi. Furthermore, at this early stage of captivity, no Red Cross delegates inspected any of the camps in North Africa and the POWs were left to fend for themselves in disorganized and very trying circumstances. On the face of it, captors certainly did not give much if any thought to the 1929 Geneva Convention, which stipulated certain conditions regarding the rights of POWs, and basic needs for survival became a priority for POWs during their first few months of captivity.¹

The prisoners themselves were ill-prepared for captivity, because although they were issued during training with instructions should they become prisoners of war, this guidance was wholly inadequate to prepare anyone for what to expect, especially in the desert of North Africa. Furthermore, preparatory instructions were only issued to the European ranks of the UDF. Neither interviews with former POWs nor any of their memoirs suggest that men gave the prospect of becoming a POW a second thought. Apart from the flippant attitude regarding the instructions, the information leaflet was vague and non-specific. Its only clear instruction was that soldiers were responsible to provide solely their name, rank and service number. Beyond this, the document gave no practical guidelines regarding living conditions and

¹ Bennet, A. 2005. *The Geneva Convention the hidden origins of the Red Cross*: 212.

acceptable treatment by captors as it focused mainly on methods that the enemy may use to gather information from POWs. Soldiers were warned not to discuss, among other aspects, morale, arms and equipment, politics, food and liquor supplies. Troops were also warned that the enemy might use kind treatment, alcohol and bogus prisoners to gain information from them.²

Although no evidence could be found of prisoners acting as informers in North Africa, Germany did recruit a number of prisoners in an effort to influence POWs regarding the German cause, especially towards the end of the war. A number of treason cases were also instituted against South Africans following the war.³ However, the conditions in North Africa were probably too chaotic and the high number of prisoners taken by the Afrika Korps, under the command of Lieutenant General Erwin Rommel, probably hindered the Nazi indoctrination efforts this early on in the war. The message was more one of hardship and survival. For instance, Rommel was reported to have warned POWs captured following the Battle of Sidi Rezegh, that they ‘had a long way to go, and to be prepared for privation.’⁴ It is also striking to note that the men captured in North Africa were not only ill-prepared for captivity, but were in many cases also ill-prepared for battle. Most former POWs interviewed testified to the total chaos on the battlefield, and to confusion during the first months of captivity, both at Sidi Rezegh and at Tobruk.

² Ditsong National Museum of Military History (hereafter MMH) B.472. *Instructions to all European Ranks if taken prisoner-of-war.*

³ Instances of treason among South African POWs are discussed in a later chapter.

⁴ DOD Narep/ME/3. *Account of the adventures of the fellows taken at Sidi Rezegh. Statement by repatriated POW, ‘Mr W’.*



Figure 4: David Brokensha on his motorcycle in the Western Desert as part of the Second South African Division Signal Company.⁵

Sidi Rezegh

The 1st South African Infantry Division fought in the Battle of Sidi Rezegh, which was part of Operation Crusader that started on 17 November 1941. The aim of the operation was to relieve Tobruk and recapture Cyrenaica, but it came at a high cost as the entire 5th South African Infantry Brigade was lost, with 224 killed, 379 wounded and 3000 captured from the total force active at Sidi Rezegh.⁶ Previously in February 1941 it had been decided that the 1st SA Division would be sent to Egypt and Cyrenaica to serve with other formations on condition that the South Africans would not be utilized outside of Africa unless Smuts was informed. Of this Division, the Royal Natal Carabineers, the Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles, and the 1st Battalion Transvaal Scottish had been sent north in July 1940. On route northwards they were active in Kenya, Abyssinia, Eritrea and Egypt before they arrived in Cyrenaica. The 1st, 2nd and 5th Infantry Brigades were formed into the 1st SA Division and although they had previous battle experience, it was in very different circumstances against a tactically inferior enemy.⁷ The successes at the Battle of El Wak and at Sollum, for instance, showed that the South Africans were adept at mobile bush warfare. But it was also true that the Italian forces in East Africa were inadequately trained, badly equipped and disorderly, very unlike the formidable German forces that the South Africans were to face in the desert.

⁵ Brokensha, D. 2007. *Brokie's Way An Anthropologist's story. Love and Work in three Continents*: 65.

⁶ Somerville, C. 1998. *Our War How the British Commonwealth Fought the Second World War*: 94.

⁷ Agar-Hamilton, J.A.I. & L.C.F. Turner. 1957. *The Sidi Rezeg Battles 1941*: 73 – 74.

Most former POWs dismissed the East African Campaign, most probably because, compared to the North African Campaign, it was seen by them as effortless, resulting in many of them in all likelihood forming a false impression of warfare conditions. Clive Luyt, for instance, thought nothing of the entire East African Campaign, stating, ‘we moved up to East Africa, we chased the Italians out of East Africa and from East Africa we went by ship to Egypt, and from there into the Western Desert.’⁸

In the desert, however, the Allies came to be plagued by fuel supply problems, inadequate and out-dated equipment and the disruptions of constant changes in battle plans. Like most other battles in North Africa, this desert encounter was a battle in which tanks and airpower were supremely important. While some describe the offensive at Sidi Rezegh as successful, the victory came almost by chance and at very high cost. According to Harry Klein, higher command failed during tank battles as infantry were deployed before the tank battle was determined.⁹ Ambrose Brown believes that ‘[Norrie] had been compelled to leave the break-out troops of the Tobruk garrison to their own devices... [and] Cunningham¹⁰ ... had lost his nerve.’¹¹ Following the battle, Acting Lieutenant General Sir Charles Willoughby Moke Norrie¹² went so far as to give the credit to the South African 5th Brigade in his report, stating that their sacrifice resulted in the turning point of the battle, giving the Allies the upper hand in North Africa at that time. In the Allied balance sheet, the loss of the 5th Brigade was also considered insignificant in view of the fact that the Afrika Korps had lost half of all their tanks.¹³

Yet, regardless of the statistical importance of losses and gains, or the weight of tactical advances or setbacks, for those captured a new phase of the war was beginning and they were forced into making new mental shifts and practical and physical adaptations in order to survive. Bernard Schwikkard¹⁴ of the 3rd Transvaal Scottish was captured on 23 November

⁸ Clive Luyt interview: 19 May 2010, Cape Town.

⁹ Holland, J. 2006. *Together we stand Turning the Tide in the West: North Africa 1942 – 1943*: lxxiv; Klein, H. 1965. *Springboks in Armour. The South African Armoured Cars in World War II*: 171.

¹⁰ Sir Alan Gordon Cunningham, Commander of the Eighth Army. Strawson, J. Oxford Dictionary of National Biography; Cunningham, Sir Alan Gordon (1887 – 1983). Available at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/30991?docPos=7> Accessed 3 November 2011.

¹¹ Brown, J.A. 1991. *Retreat to Victory A Springbok's Diary in North Africa: Gazala to El Alamein 1942*: 36.

¹² Norrie became Major General of the Royal Armoured Corps in 1943. Howell, P.A. Australian Dictionary of Biography; Sir Charles Willoughby Moke Norrie (1893 – 1977). Available at <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/norrie-sir-charles-willoughby-moke-11254> Accessed 3 November 2011.

¹³ Agar-Hamilton, J.A.I. & L.C.F. Turner. 1957. *The Sidi Rezeg Battles 1941*: 271.

¹⁴ Bernard Schwikkard interview: 17 March 2010, Johannesburg.

1941, as was Newman Robinson who was part of the 10th South Africa Field Ambulance,¹⁵ and Aussie Hammond of the 1st Brigade Signal Corps.¹⁶ Cyril Crompton, in the 3rd Battery of the 1st South African Anti-Aircraft Regiment was one of only four men in his battery out of a total of eleven who survived the battle, all of whom were captured on 23 November 1941.¹⁷ The writer, Uys Krige, a war correspondent at the time, was also captured at Sidi Rezegh and he regarded the experience of that day as the most important event of his life.¹⁸ In his prose work entitled *Totensonntag*, he described the events of the day and how, while taking cover in a slit trench during the heavy bombing, the mad thought of plucking the bombs out of the air as if they were poppies entered his mind, perhaps illustrating the fantasy lengths to which the human mind can go to in order to cope with stressful circumstances.¹⁹

Although Krige's prose has been described as absolutely true to the known facts, his version of the battle and subsequent capture at Sidi Rezegh is that of a war correspondent, not that of a soldier, placing his account in the category of a professional author. Nevertheless, Krige experienced much the same treatment as that of most other POWs who were captured in North Africa, as he was also sent to Benghazi and from there to Italy, where, like thousands of others, he escaped when Italy capitulated.²⁰ To make things worse for Krige, as he had lost his rank card during the battle, and could therefore not benefit from his rank of Captain, the loss of status privileges pushed him down into the common pool of POWs. Officers were usually transported to Gazala and then to Benghazi by car, but Krige had to join the-rank-and-file and walk or endure uncomfortable trips in trucks with little or no food and water. His status as Captain was later restored in Italy, but his rough experience gave him a unique perspective on POW life.²¹

In his memoirs, Newman Robinson described the Germans he encountered during the Sidi Rezegh battle in robotic terms, as wearing 'grim set expression[s] as though [their] eyes were fixed on a vision of the Fuehrer beckoning [them] on to victory',²² underlining the stereotypical image held by many Allied soldiers of their German enemies. For Schwikkard, at another level, the methods employed during the battle at Sidi Rezegh resembled First

¹⁵ Ogilvy, P. & N. Robinson. 1975. *In the bag*: 12.

¹⁶ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over. The story of H.R. (Aussie) Hammond*: 7.

¹⁷ Crompton, C. & P. Johnson. 2010. *Luck's Favours Two South African Second World War Memoirs*: 16 – 17, 33.

¹⁸ Van Heyningen, C. 1966. *Uys Krige*: 37.

¹⁹ Krige, U. 1960. *Sout van die aarde*: 31.

²⁰ Van Heyningen, C. 1966. *Uys Krige*: 37 – 39.

²¹ Kannemeyer, J.C. 2002. *Die Goue Seun Die lewe en werk van Uys Krige*: 334.

²² Ogilvy, P. & N. Robinson. 1975. *In the bag*: 12.

World War tactics, involving the fixing of bayonets and being ready to charge an enemy that was ‘nowhere in sight.’²³ Schwikkard’s memoirs also reveal a sense of irritation at the bureaucratic inflexibility or incompetence of those in command. He describes how they were given ‘sticky bombs’ that they were supposed to attach to German tanks; however, they were not given the detonators as a certain Sergeant Major Hansen held them back for ‘safe custody’. Schwikkard and others were ordered to wait until the tanks were upon them before attaching the bombs, although most men were convinced that they would be blown up along with the tanks. Luckily, according to Schwikkard, ‘when the tanks eventually arrived, Sgt. Major Hansen was nowhere to be found.’²⁴

After the war, the South African authorities collected statements from soldiers who had been taken prisoner at Sidi Rezegh and these reveal similar opinions regarding risky or misguided tactics, poor defensive cover and battlefield chaos. A medical officer with the 5th South African Brigade who described fighting with inadequate tank and artillery support stated that his Brigade was devastated by a Panzer Division which ‘drove right through Brigade Headquarters.’²⁵ A letter, written by Lieutenant-Colonel B.P. Purchase, another medical officer, described events at Sidi Rezegh as ‘terrific’ (sic) and that ‘our fellows were shot down like dogs while attending to the wounded.’²⁶ Cyril Crompton described the battle as moving ‘tremendously fast [a] horrendous noise [and] most devastating was the heavy artillery barrage that descended upon us.’ For Crompton, the brutal reality of war and its deadly consequences became piercingly clear when in the midst of the battle he saw an old friend who had been separated from his regiment. As they jokingly shouted warnings and sarcastic comments about the battle at each other, his friend was hit and ‘fell dead into the sand.’ Later, as Crompton and the three other surviving members of the 3rd Battery gun crew attempted to reach South African lines, they instead drove straight into German lines and ‘were made to lie face down. And thus we were taken prisoner.’²⁷

While most of those who ended up as POWs captured at Sidi Rezegh were not in control of what was happening to them, not everyone sat back to await what seemed to be inevitable encirclement. In one case, a non-combatant auxiliary soldier simply referred to as Johannes

²³ Schwikkard, B.E. 1999. *My life briefly told*: 24.

²⁴ Schwikkard, B.E. 1999. *My life briefly told*: 25.

²⁵ DOD Narep/ME/3. *Account of the adventures of the fellows taken at Sidi Rezegh. Statement by repatriated POW, ‘Mr W’.*

²⁶ DOD UWH Narep/Me/1. *Baden’s letter to Joe after the Battle at Sidi Rezegh, 13.12.1941.*

²⁷ Crompton, C. & P. Johnson. 2010. *Luck’s Favours Two South African Second World War Memoirs*: 32 – 33, 37.

decided to take matters into his own hands. Johannes worked in the 5th Brigade field kitchen, and according to the Brigade diary, its Non-European auxiliary troops had been issued with captured Italian rifles and ammunition for self-protection before they had left Mersa Matruh. As German tanks approached the trenches around the field kitchen, Johannes used his rifle to shoot a German soldier emerging from a tank. The enemy dropped to the ground and the tank then seemed to have withdrawn from the area around the field kitchen. Johannes and Ambrose, another kitchen worker, then found a truck and escaped capture, re-joining the Brigade after the battle.²⁸

Otherwise, or more commonly, for those captured at Sidi Rezegh it did seem as if the Allies' use of inferior tactics resulted in many losses, notably the number of prisoners being taken. Indeed, at Sidi Rezegh, most men experienced a sense of resentment or helplessness as they believed that they were seen as dispensable by their commanders who appeared not to realise the precariousness of their situation regarding equipment and tactics.²⁹

Tobruk

With the fall of Tobruk to Axis forces on 21 June 1942, 33 000 Allied soldiers were captured, of whom 10 722 were South African.³⁰ All of the former POWs interviewed, except for Schwikkard, were captured during the Tobruk episode, as were most of the authors of the POW memoirs consulted for this study. During this time the active Eighth Army consisted of an Empire Army of troops from Britain, India, Australia, New Zealand and two South African divisions.

One of these, the 2nd SA Division, arrived in the Western Desert in October 1941 under the command of Major-General I.P. de Villiers. To the dismay of many in his command, they were ordered to dig defences in the unfavourable 30-mile bottleneck between the Mediterranean Sea and the Qattara Depression at El Alamein.³¹ The subsequent battle at Tobruk in June 1942 was no less chaotic than the battle at Sidi Rezegh the previous year and most former POWs interviewed described the fighting situation as frenzied and confused,

²⁸ DOD UWH Narep ME 1. *An episode at Sidi Rezegh by Johannes of 5 Bde*. An accompanying note to this document states that the extract concerning Johannes was cut from the official Brigade diary on the instructions of Major General Brink.

²⁹ Brown, J.A. 1991. *Retreat to Victory A Springbok's Diary in North Africa: Gazala to El Alamein 1942*: 34 – 36.

³⁰ Roos, N. 2005. *Ordinary Springboks: White servicemen and Social Justice in South Africa 1939 – 1961*: 34.

³¹ Klein, H. (ed) 1946. *Springbok Record*: 182 & 186.

mostly due to the fact that many of them were not aware of the full extent of the actions on the battlefield as these were spread out over a very wide area.

The men captured at Tobruk had even less or no experience of battle compared to those who were captured at Sidi Rezegh in 1941. Limited battle experience was gained by some during the Battle of Benghazi in January 1942, or in what became known among troops as the Benghazi Handicap and the Gazala Gallop, apt phrases for describing the to-and-fro nature of the North African battles.³² Equally, their experiences were dwarfed by larger factors beyond their control. Auchinleck wanted Brigades to operate independently from Divisions in an effort to ensure greater mobility, but when Rommel stopped east of Gazala, the Commander of the Eighth Army, Lieutenant-General N.M. Ritchie, created a system of defensive boxes along a line that ran from Gazala to Bir Hakeim, a stretch of 80 kilometres that became known as the Gazala line. This line was protected by defensive boxes and fixed infantry brigades linked to each other by minefields.

However, the defences around Tobruk were deficient. For instance, 'minefields had not been maintained and defensive positions had filled with sand'³³ according to Michael de Lisle who served with the 2nd Anti-Aircraft Regiment. A.J. Cremer, attached to the 2nd SA Division and a member of the Divisional Headquarters, also noted in his memoirs the bad state of the minefields and that the mines themselves were so old that they were completely ineffective. He records that both Klopper and De Villiers continually asked for new mines but were told there were no supplies. These two generals could also not use the new mines that were being stored in Tobruk as these were reportedly reserved for the Royal Engineers. When Tobruk fell, these mines were appropriated by the Germans.³⁴

At the time of creating the Gazala line, Ritchie believed that the system of minefields and defensive boxes over 80 kilometres would be sufficient to prevent Rommel from bypassing them if and when the Germans decided to move towards Tobruk. However, the two defensive boxes towards the south of the line were very far apart from each other and were therefore not able to effectively repel the Afrika Korps' advance.³⁵ When Rommel attacked, he did in fact bypass the Gazala line, which put the South Africans at a huge disadvantage as they had

³² Somerville, C. 1998. *Our War How the British Commonwealth Fought the Second World War*: 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.

³³ De Lisle, M. n.d. *Over the hills and far away my twenties in the forties*: 19.

³⁴ Cremer, A.J. n.d. *Oorlogsherinneringe*: 16.

³⁵ Holland, J. 2006. *Together we stand Turning the Tide in the West: North Africa 1942 – 1943*: 38 – 39.

their backs towards the Afrika Korps. Rommel also employed the full force of Stuka dive bombers and Mark III and IV tanks, and the use of superior German anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns. This armament, combined with highly effective tactics, put the Germans in an advantageous position to take Tobruk.³⁶ In a statement following the war, a Captain D.G. Fannin of the South African forces made the extraordinary allegation that a package containing Rommel's plan of attack had been dropped by an aircraft immediately following the cut-off of Tobruk, but this had not been acted upon. However, this bizarre episode was not mentioned in any other post-war statements.³⁷

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.'³⁸ Upon his return to South Africa in 1944, Gert Daniel van Zyl of the 1st South African Police Regiment emphasised the dire situation. In his official report of 19 January 1944 he said he heard the BBC announce that Tobruk was besieged and was no longer of strategic importance.

It may seem strange that the BBC would contradict the prime minister, Winston Churchill, who two weeks before the fall of Tobruk had stressed to Auchinleck that it had to remain in Allied hands as this was vital to prevent Axis forces from entering Egypt. But one can only assume that the BBC was attempting to prepare the minds of the British public for the eventuality of the Allies suffering a defeat in North Africa.³⁹ At the time of hearing the BBC announcement, Van Zyl did not even realise that Tobruk was in any danger.⁴⁰ But there was no doubting the state of muddled uncertainty in which soldiers found themselves. On 20 June 1942 the 1st SAP was ordered to hand in their equipment, but an hour later the same equipment was reissued to them. Then, during the evening of the same day, they were told to move towards the coast as the Navy would be coming to their rescue. However, there were no clear orders and without proper directions some men started to destroy their rifles while others simply walked away into the desert. Van Zyl described the troops as 'sheep without a shepherd.'⁴¹

³⁶ Pimlott, J. (ed). 1994. *Rommel in his own words*: 89.

³⁷ DOD UWH Narep ME 13. Notes on interview on 18 Nov 1946 with Capt D.G. Fannin ex-int offr 4 SA INF BDE.

³⁸ Rosmarin, I. 1999. *Inside Story*: 11.

³⁹ Kitchen, M. 2009. *Rommel's Desert War. Waging World War II in North Africa, 1941 – 1943*: 237.

⁴⁰ DOD UWH Narep ME 3. Statement by 196202(V) PTE. Gert Daniel van Zyl of C COY, 1 SAP.

⁴¹ DOD UWH Narep ME 3. Statement by 196202(V) PTE. Gert Daniel van Zyl of C COY, 1 SAP. '*Ons was soos 'n klomp skape sonder 'n herder.*'

According to Fannin, in the late afternoon of 20 June, the order of ‘every man for himself’ was given, but his statement reveals that after this order, sporadic 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...’⁴² The problems were compounded during the night of 20 June when Klopper and members of the High Command discussed the situation. As a result of disagreements in the group a tentative decision was reached to continue fighting but to permit commanding officers to surrender if they thought it necessary.⁴³

In this highly volatile atmosphere, the accuracy or consistency of many of these statements is also doubtful, as many of them do not correspond with other known positions. For instance, Klopper’s account of the events of 20 and 21 June contradicts that of other statements made after the war. According to Klopper, he ‘stressed to General Gott that he felt very uneasy at the prospect at being invested [in Tobruk] and understood from [Gott] that the higher command would make every effort to prevent this.’⁴⁴ In contrast, a 1946 interview with Colonel Richards paraphrased Klopper’s earlier remark that if the Australians could hold Tobruk, then so could the South Africans. It was as a result of this difference in opinion that Richards offered to be relieved of his command as he believed Klopper did not value nor trust his view of the situation.⁴⁵ Another disparity in perception concerned ammunition supply which, according to Klopper was ‘the fatal factor’ in his decision to surrender.⁴⁶ Many former POWs supported this view, for instance, Fred Geldenhuis said that they had no weapons whatsoever, and that not a single shot was fired where he was when the Germans came through.⁴⁷

Yet, in contrast with the widely-held opinion that there was a shortage of ammunition at Tobruk, Captain Fannin stated in an interview in 1946 that ‘there was plenty of amm [ammunition] in Tobruk, the only serious shortage was in shells for the medium arty

⁴² DOD UWH Narep ME 13. Notes on interview on 18 Nov 1946 with Capt D.G. Fannin ex-int offr 4 SA INF BDE.

⁴³ DOD UWH Narep ME 13. Notes on interview on 18 Nov 1946 with Capt D.G. Fannin ex-int offr 4 SA INF BDE.

⁴⁴ DOD UWH Narep ME 13. Report of Interview – General H.B. Klopper DSO – Major L.C.F. Turner – Chief Narrator (Land) 6 May 1946.

⁴⁵ DOD UWH Narep ME 13. Notes on interview on 23 Nov 46 with Col W. Mc A Richards CRA 2 SA DIV in Tobruk.

⁴⁶ DOD UWH Narep ME 13. Report of Interview – General H.B. Klopper DSO – Major L.C.F. Turner – Chief Narrator (Land) 6 May 1946.

⁴⁷ Fred Geldenhuis interview: 9 July 2010, Pretoria.

[artillery].⁴⁸ This view was supported by Major Wessels who, in another 1946 interview, stated that the ammunition supply was adequate.⁴⁹ The matter of the perceived shortage of ammunition may to some extent be explained by Colonel Richards, who reported that one officer responsible for issuing ammunition insisted on authority to do so from Headquarters, even though the German tanks were visible by that time.⁵⁰

Such confusion regarding orders may be explained in part by a statement in Jack Mortlock's memoirs. According to Mortlock, the Germans advanced at such speed that by the time information and orders reached them, they were inaccurate or no longer relevant.⁵¹

Mortlock's memoirs also provide some insight into the confusion regarding Klopper's decision to surrender or to fight on. Mortlock refers to a rumour, namely:

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!⁵²

For many South Africans, a thick cloud of smoke, symbolic of the confusion of the preceding days, signified the end of the battle, such as recalled by De Lisle in his oral testimony and in memoirs by H.L. Wood, stationed with the H.Q. Company of the Umvoti Mounted Rifles. Dennis Mugglestone described the smoke cloud as the 'approach of death and destruction'.⁵³ Cremer also mentioned the smoke clouds which blotted out the sun late that afternoon.⁵⁴ William (Bill) Hindshaw, of the Rand Light Infantry, saw the cloud of smoke and described the fall of Tobruk as one where:

the conditions were terrible, there was no communication, there was nothing, nothing, nothing. No ammunition, nothing, nothing, [...] I was 2 k's away and we sat and

⁴⁸ DOD UWH Narep ME 13. Notes on interview on 18 Nov 1946 with Capt D.G. Fannin ex-int offr 4 SA INF BDE.

⁴⁹ DOD UWH Narep ME 13. Notes on interview on 20 Nov 46 with Maj Wessels 2/c South Africa 2 LAA REGT in Tobruk.

⁵⁰ DOD UWH Narep ME 13. Notes on interview on 23 Nov 46 with Col W. Mc A Richards CRA 2 SA DIV in Tobruk.

⁵¹ Mortlock, J. 1956. *The endless years Reminiscences of the 2nd World War*: 28.

⁵² Mortlock, J. 1956. *The endless years Reminiscences of the 2nd World War*: 25.

⁵³ Wood, H.L. n.d. *Memoirs of a Prisoner of War*: 1; Mugglestone, D.I.H. n.d. *Destination Unknown*: 20.

⁵⁴ Cremer, A.J. n.d. *Oorlogsherinneringe*: 17.

watched, we sat there and watched those stupid bombs, and the next minute the harbour of Tobruk was on fire.⁵⁵

The indecision and disagreements between those in command affected everyone at Tobruk - for instance, the Cape Town Highlanders received an order stating, 'If anyone leaves Tobruk now, they'll be classified as a deserter.' One of those Highlanders, Gordon Fry, believed that had an order of 'every man for himself' been given, he would have been able to escape capture, something that troubled him deeply throughout his time as a POW.⁵⁶ On the other hand, Wood simply took it for granted that it was a case of every man for himself and attempted to escape, as did many others. The order of 'every man for himself' is cited in some post-war statements as well by former POWs, both in oral recollections and in documented memoirs. However, the order seems to never have been officially given, as none of the men could say reliably where the order originated from, for example, in this statement from 1943, Colonel du Plessis declared that 'we who were at Divisional H.Q. were told that H.Q. staff were clearing out, and that it was "every man for himself."' ⁵⁷

Adrian Gilbert suggests 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 to appear cowardly, as the lack of ammunition provided them with a valid and justifiable reason for surrender.⁵⁸ Although large numbers were taken prisoner as German forces took over large formations, some Allied soldiers took matters into their own hands and as the German tanks advanced from one Allied regiment to the next, they made a desperate attempt to escape, some acting on the rumoured order that it was 'every man for himself' while others simply took the initiative. Van Zyl, for example, reported that many men 'dispersed in all directions' before they were even aware that Tobruk had fallen, and that by the time the German tanks arrived at their position, there were only about 50 men left who were then informed by the Germans that Klopper had surrendered.⁵⁹

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 Lieutenant A.N. Goldman and Sergeant C.H. Spear of the Royal Durban Light Infantry, who, after a few close encounters with

⁵⁵ William Hindshaw interview: 19 March 2010, Johannesburg.

⁵⁶ Somerville, C. 1998. *Our War How the British Commonwealth Fought the Second World War*: 139.

⁵⁷ DOD UWH Narep ME 1. *Western Desert Campaign Statement by Col. Du Plessis on the fall of Tobruk*.

⁵⁸ Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*: 24.

⁵⁹ DOD UWH Narep ME 3. Statement by 196202(V) PTE. Gert Daniel van Zyl of C COY, 1 SAP.

German forces, reached Allied lines on 29 June 1942.⁶⁰ In a letter to his family, John Davidson told of a Guards Major who refused to surrender and escaped with a ‘crowd of men.’ In the same correspondence he also depicted Allan Bird, who ‘just dashed through a mine field path’ with an ambulance and a truck. When the ambulance was blown up, he returned to clear the track for others who may have had to use the same route to escape.

According to Davidson, it was actually possible to drive through camps where more disorganised Italians were in control for, if ‘you just drive through and wave and cheer – the Ites [Italians] are usually so surprised that they just wave back.’⁶¹ Other successful escapes from Tobruk included, among others, Lieutenant C.R. Featherstone of Die Middelandse Regiment who escaped with forty-six men, and Sergeant Woodley and nine others who escaped by hiding in caves and living on abandoned German rations.⁶² Dick Dickinson’s escape attempt, on the other hand, was less successful. Dickinson and his friend, Rollo van der Burg, came across an injured member of the Non-European Army Services (NEAS) and then convinced a German soldier that they had to take the man to hospital in his truck. Inexplicably, the German agreed and Dickinson, van der Burg and the injured soldier set off. From the start, though, their attempt was doomed as they had no idea in which direction to go or where the minefields were. As they proceeded, others 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 stopped by Germans their humanitarian story did not hold any water. At first, Dickinson thought they would be shot by an enraged German commander, but they were later taken into a POW camp.⁶³ In many more cases, men found themselves lost in the desert with diminishing food and water supplies, walking in circles searching for the Allies. When the Germans eventually caught up with them, they were mostly relieved, as they had come to realise that the desert was a far more deadly enemy than any Axis force could be.

Rommel considered the fall of Tobruk on 21 June 1941 as the high point of the war in North Africa and he was rewarded by Hitler who promoted him to Field Marshal.⁶⁴ For South Africa and the Allies, the fall of Tobruk was disastrous and rumours about South African incompetence threatened to further sour military relations between South Africa and

⁶⁰ DOD UWH Narep ME 1. *Tobruk. Account by Lt. A.N. Goldman, DCM and Sgt. C.H. Spear, MM.*

⁶¹ DOD UWH Narep ME 1. *Western Desert Campaigns A letter by John Davidson 5399 7 Field BTY 3rd Regt (25 VI 42) to his family re fall of Tobruk.*

⁶² Tungay, W.R. 1948. *The Fighting Third*: 205 – 221.

⁶³ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo’burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by EB Dickinson*: 67 – 77.

⁶⁴ Pimlott, J. (ed). 1994. *Rommel in his own words*: 113.

Britain.⁶⁵ Relations between the two countries had already become strained before the war, not least as a consequence 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 1942.⁶⁶ The SDF and the Union neutrality crisis of 1938 and 1939 were evidence of a growing sense of nationalism that was not unique to South Africa, but was also gaining momentum in all wartime Dominions as they sought a greater sense of independence from their erstwhile colonial masters.⁶⁷

The impact of the surrender would have far-reaching consequences as Auchinleck's subsequent report further complicated matters as it contained references to the Tobruk garrison that the Union government found unacceptable.⁶⁸ On 9 July 1942, the High Commissioner in London wrote to the Minister of External Affairs in Pretoria informing him that all correspondence containing unformed speculation and criticism about the events at Tobruk would be censored. According to the High Commissioner, Churchill's remarks to Parliament and other comments made in the House of Lords were fuelling damaging rumours and that the Germans were using the information to further their efforts to undermine Allied morale. In order to turn public opinion away from what he termed 'uninformed criticism' towards a less critical view of the situation, the High Commissioner suggested that 'authentic' accounts from survivors be made public in South Africa and in Britain, but only if these accounts exonerated Klopper, as 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.'⁶⁹

The following day, the Ministerial Secretary replied that a Court of Inquiry would be appointed as it was believed that it would be the most effective way to put an end to the rumours. In the same telegram, he also ventured that in his opinion the reason for the fall of Tobruk was the 'decision to hold Tobruk against the whole force of Rommel while Eighth

⁶⁵ Stewart, A. 2006. "'The Klopper Affair': Anglo-South African Relations and the Surrender of the Tobruk Garrison.' *Twentieth Century British History*, 17(4):517.

⁶⁶ Van der Waag, I. "'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.

⁶⁷ Stewart, A. 2008. 'The British Government and the South African Neutrality Crisis, 1938 – 39.' *English Historical Review* CXXIII (503): 947 – 972.

⁶⁸ Stewart, A. 2008. '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):78.

⁶⁹ NASA BTS 1/54/12.

Army disappeared eastwards into the blue and thus unable to assist the defence...'⁷⁰ That opinion may have been a fair argument against the negative Tobruk rumours, but it also pointed towards the growing opinion in South Africa that Klopper had been abandoned by British forces, a feeling echoed in many POWs' statements and memoirs. A week later, the *Rand Daily Mail* reported that harmful reports of South African conduct at Tobruk were the result of Axis propaganda, and then sought to counteract it with its own morale-boosting efforts by insisting that the conduct of the South Africans during the battle had inspired their fellow soldiers as well as all who were fighting for freedom.⁷¹

Naturally, those captured at Tobruk did not see nor hear any of the immediate political, press or public reaction to the events of the battle, nor the various South African attempts to paint a more positive picture, but they did form their own opinion. And it seems that in most cases, it was a negative opinion of Klopper. 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.⁷²

Through it all, rumours about South Africa's conduct persisted to some degree and many South African POWs would later experience hostility from British and Australian POWs in Italian and German prison camps as a result of perceptions of their alleged cowardice, and in the belief that Klopper was an incompetent General who had made bad decisions.⁷³

Making sense of capture

Understandably, the memoirs and spoken testimony of former POWs all revealed a sense of exasperation at having become POWs at Sidi Rezegh and especially at Tobruk. Some men believed it very unfair to have become prisoners as they were not doing any fighting at the time of their capture, while others blamed the leadership of the South African forces, for

⁷⁰ NASA BTS 1/54/12.

⁷¹ *Rand Daily Mail*: 17 July 1942.

⁷² Rosmarin, I. 1999. *Inside Story*: 17.

⁷³ Examples of hostility, especially by British and Australian POWs towards South African POWs are discussed in a following chapter.

example, Clive Luyt, who believed that General Klopper was a bad choice as he was ‘was straight from a desk in Pretoria’.⁷⁴ Seen from another point of view, Wood, in his memoirs, described the disappointment of Captain De Jager of the Umvoti Mounted Rifles, who ‘with tear-filled eyes’ conveyed the order to surrender.⁷⁵ On the other hand, Fred van Alphen Stahl felt aggrieved at becoming a prisoner because he was not fighting at the time of his capture. As he described his low experience:

... of course your first feelings as a prisoner 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 rear guard coming back, and they said right now you are all moving into [...] a particular point, we didn’t even realise it was Tobruk [...] and the next morning we were ..., getting ready, getting our guns in order again, and a signal just came in and they said destroy your guns, destroy your vehicles, Tobruk has fallen... You are now prisoners of war.⁷⁶

Lieutenant Goldman of the Royal Durban Light Infantry recalled that when he was told that ‘they have surrendered’, he thought *they* were the German forces. When he realised that it was in fact the Allies who had surrendered, 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.’⁷⁷ Stanley Smollan was unfortunate enough to have returned to Tobruk the day before it fell to the Germans after recovering from an injury in Cairo,⁷⁸ while David Brokensha was literally captured with his pants down. He was 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.’⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Clive Luyt interview: 19 May 2010. Cape Town.

⁷⁵ Wood, H.L. n.d. *Memoirs of a Prisoner of War*: 1.

⁷⁶ Fred van Alphen Stahl interview: 25 May 2010, Cape Town.

⁷⁷ DOD UWH Narep ME 1. *Tobruk. Account by Lt. A.N. Goldman, DCM and Sgt. C.H. Spear, MM.*

⁷⁸ Stanley Smollan interview: 15 March 2010, Johannesburg.

⁷⁹ Brokensha, D. 2007. *Brokie’s Way An Anthropologist’s story. Love and Work in three Continents*: 72.

After experiencing heavy fighting in the week before the fall of Tobruk at Point 209, also known as Commonwealth Keep, Jack Mortlock simply stated that ‘continued resistance appeared hopeless’, and he and others obeyed the order to destroy their weapons and documents.⁸⁰ Surrender was synonymous with the destruction of weapons, and for everyone this was a difficult task to carry out, remembered starkly. Thus, interviewed former POWs had no difficulty in describing in detail the process of destroying guns, while at other times they could not remember seemingly simple things, such as the names of the camps where they were held later in the war. Fred van Alphen Stahl’s way of describing the destruction of their guns clearly illustrates his emotions:

our trucks had to be destroyed and our guns, so we destroyed our gun first, that we had lovingly been cleaning it all these years, and now we had to shoot down the barrel and a shot in the bridge and fire and blow the barrels to pieces and that was sort of bad enough and you are still just a youngster, umm, eighteen, nineteen years old, well, prisoner of war...⁸¹

The Second Anti-Aircraft Regiment had trouble destroying their guns as described by Michael de Lisle, for the ‘breech mechanism of beautifully engineered stainless steel was undamaged’ after they fired at the muzzle into which they had placed a round. They were then forced to take the guns apart and bury the components in different places.⁸² The shock of becoming a prisoner was followed by days of mental and physical hardship under Italian captors. Newman Robinson’s description of being captured at Sidi Rezegh conveys the utter chaos following the battle as well as an almost childlike lament at the unfairness of the situation in which he found himself:

somewhere in the middle of this confusion I discern myself, in very much the same way as a man sometimes stands outside himself in a nightmare, and looks on with helpless horror at what is happening to him... with a plate of porridge in one hand and a mug of coffee in the other, wondering what on earth had gone wrong, and feeling mildly resentful that it should have done so at breakfast time.⁸³

His surprise at being captured was aggravated by the fact that the 10th Field Ambulance had been assured of ample British tank protection, whereas Crusaders turned out to be little match

⁸⁰ Mortlock, J. 1956. *The endless years Reminiscences of the 2nd World War*: 30.

⁸¹ Fred van Alphen Stahl interview: 25 May 2010, Cape Town.

⁸² De Lisle, M. n.d. *Over the hills and far away my twenties in the forties*: 19.

⁸³ Ogilvy, P. & N. Robinson. 1975. *In the bag*: 12 – 13.

for the German Panzers.⁸⁴ According to Schwikkard, they were totally overrun by German tanks and it was a case of ‘every man for himself’ when the order came to surrender. He felt a sense of humiliation and apprehension as the idea of becoming a POW had never crossed his mind. Thus capture ‘came, as you can imagine, as an enormous, enormous shock.’⁸⁵

Meeting the enemy

Before the events at Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk, some South Africans came across German and Italian prisoners of war and formed initial impressions of their adversaries. Jack Mortlock described Italian POWs as behaving like animals while he thought the Germans ‘carried themselves [in POW camp] with that characteristic air of superiority that seemed second nature to the German Army at that time.’⁸⁶ Derogatory 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’ as they often found women’s clothing and condoms in the dug-outs, supporting the allegation that prostitutes travelled with the Italian troops to the front.⁸⁷ Fred van Alphen Stahl also attested to finding condoms in Italian quarters in Abyssinia, but to him the hygiene of the Italians was of greater concern as they ‘would rather cover themselves with scent and powder, than to use soap to wash [...] so they were probably used to being lousy from time to time.’⁸⁸

The distinction between their Italian and German enemy did not change much when the South Africans found themselves in POW camps. In most cases, the South Africans were captured by Germans uttering the famous phrase, “*handen hoch*” [hands up / surrender] for you the war is over.⁸⁹ When David Brokensha was captured, the Germans admitted that they considered the South Africans, like themselves, to be good soldiers, but that the Italians were not, and therefore they felt obliged to apologise as they had orders to hand them over to their inferior allies.⁹⁰ Apologies such as these were not limited to Tobruk, but also took place at Sidi Rezegh where Schwikkard was captured:

⁸⁴ Holland, J. 2006. *Together we stand Turning the Tide in the West: North Africa 1942 – 1943*: lxvi.

⁸⁵ Schwikkard, B.E. 1999. *My life briefly told*: 25.

⁸⁶ Mortlock, J. 1956. *The endless years Reminiscences of the 2nd World War*: 19.

⁸⁷ Rosmarin, I. 1999. *Inside Story*: 8.

⁸⁸ Fred van Alphen Stahl interview: 25 May 2010, Cape Town.

⁸⁹ Fred van Alphen Stahl interview: 25 May 2010, Cape Town.

⁹⁰ David Brokensha interview: 10 September 2010, Fish Hoek.

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.⁹¹

Rommel was known as someone who was seemingly unable to cooperate agreeably not only with the Italians but also German high command. His initial frustration at being placed under Italian command while in Africa obviously also influenced his opinion of the Italian forces, in a similar way that the respect for Rommel by South Africans influenced their opinion of German soldiers in general. Furthermore, the opinions that some Allied soldiers held of Rommel may have helped in the creation of the superhuman myth surrounding him, as he became known widely as the *Desert Fox*, implying cunning and intelligence.⁹²

Accordingly, for David Brokensha, who experienced no fighting before he was captured at Tobruk, Rommel ‘was our favourite General, I won’t say our only favourite German General, but for some reason we all, he had a very good name as a proper soldier, and very efficient.’⁹³ James Holland confirms that the Eighth Army viewed Rommel and the Afrika Korps with a sense of awe and even goes so far as to suggest that the Eighth Army developed an inferiority complex regarding the Germans,⁹⁴ a view supported by the memoirs of Rosmarin and Flederman, with Rosmarin concluding that ‘Eighth Army Command was simply out of its depth when faced with the quirky genius of the “Desert Fox.”’⁹⁵ Equally, from Brokensha’s point of view, at least, there were no such illusions, given the sense of a necessary cause. Any apparent respect which he may have held for Rommel did not temper his convictions in the slightest as he firmly believed that ‘we were the British, the Allies, we were going to defeat the bastards.’⁹⁶

Many English-speaking South Africans found the German apology regarding the Italians mildly ironic. Yet, between some Afrikaans-speaking South Africans and Germans there was even a distinct chance of some mutual association as many white Afrikaans-speakers had German ancestry, and Union inhabitants had gone to Germany before the war to study or to work. Shortly after his capture, Cremer noticed a German soldier speaking Afrikaans to a group of South African POWs. The soldier had been a South African student in Germany

⁹¹ Schwikkard, B.E. 1999. *My life briefly told*: 25.

⁹² Battistelli, P.P. 2010. *Erwin Rommel: The background, strategies, tactics and battlefield experiences of the greatest commanders of history*: 55 – 56.

⁹³ David Brokensha interview: 10 September 2010, Fish Hoek.

⁹⁴ Holland, J. 2006. *Together we stand Turning the Tide in the West: North Africa 1942 – 1943*: 37.

⁹⁵ Rosmarin, I. 1999. *Inside Story*: v.; Flederman, A. 2005. *And Direction was given*: xv.

⁹⁶ David Brokensha interview: 10 September 2010, Fish Hoek.

before the war and had 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 Cremer, whose surname is of Dutch and North German origin, although he did not seem to question the soldier's loyalty or feelings about nationality.⁹⁷

Mugglestone also remembered recognising two South Africans, Van der Westhuizen and Le Roux, among the German guards. He regarded them as traitors, and was offended when they tried to enter into conversation with him.⁹⁸ Fred van Alphen Stahl whose name is also of German origin, pointedly did not identify with Germans in any way, dismissing them as 'Germans were bastards, but they were just bastards.'⁹⁹ In complete contrast, Wessel Oosthuizen of the Police Brigade regarded the Germans as a proud nation and shared the German view of Italian soldiers, as did many other South Africans, that the Italians were not a worthy enemy.¹⁰⁰

While POWs had different opinions on German soldiers and Nazi sympathisers, for some white South Africans, Germany held a greater significance as many of them identified with the Nazi ideology. It was especially among the Afrikaners such as Robey Leibbrandt and Oswald Pirow that the Nazis saw an opportunity to create disunity in South African as well as within the British Empire. While Leibbrandt's assassination attempt on Smuts ended in his arrest in December 1941, other German agents had contact with Dr J.F.J. van Rensburg, the commandant-general of the *Ossewabrandwag* from 1941, all of which contributed towards the so-called 'Fifth Column' in the country. Pirow, however, had a far greater potential impact on South Africa's war effort as he was the minister of defence before Smuts and was accused of having actively tried to sabotage the work of the internal security of the country.¹⁰¹ Added to this was the Nazi radio broadcasts in the form of Radio Zeesen, which not only countered Union pro-war propaganda, but also had a substantial listenership among fascist-oriented white South Africans.¹⁰²

Many of those captured at Sidi Rezegh were marched to prison camps in what became known as the thirst marches. Newman Robinson was part of a group of about 2000 who marched for

⁹⁷ Cremer, A.J. n.d. *Oorlogsherinneringe*: 18.

⁹⁸ Mugglestone, D.I.H. n.d. *Destination Unknown*: 23.

⁹⁹ Fred van Alphen Stahl interview: 25 May 2010, Cape Town.

¹⁰⁰ Wessel Oosthuizen interview: 4 December 2010, Hartenbos.

¹⁰¹ Fedorowich, K. 2005. 'German Espionage and British Counter-Intelligence in South Africa and Mozambique, 1939 – 1944.' *The Historical Journal*, 48(1):211 – 222.

¹⁰² Furlong, P. 2005. 'Allies at War? Britain and the 'Southern African Front' in the Second World War.' *South African Historical Journal*, 54(1):18, 26.

three days across the desert with almost no water or food. On the first day of the march, Germans were in control, but at the day's end they were handed over to Italians. Robinson thought that the Germans treated them with 'cold efficiency', and that when the Italians took over, they 'introduced a more human element of slapdash and muddle.'¹⁰³ Throughout the march the prisoners were told they would receive water and food if they could continue for one more kilometre. After each kilometre the Italians would say they had to go one more, and so on until men started fainting from dehydration. When a truck with a water tank did stop, scuffles to reach the water further delayed opportunities to drink.

The Italians would try to impose order, which inevitably would mean coloured Cape Corps and African soldiers being kept back while Europeans were given preference in the distribution of water. More often than not, the water would run out before these men could get any of it.¹⁰⁴ The thirst of white troops was attended to at the expense of non-European servicemen. While these thirst marches were effective in making men generally aware of the hard reality of their new conditions as POWs, many also had to endure other physical hardship and humiliation at the hands of their captors. In such cases, the perception of Italians as inferior often made the acceptance of POW status harder to deal with. The refusal to accept Italian authority can be seen in a few cases of blatant defiance of Italian guards.

The Italians also used recruits from the local population to guard the POW camps, and these guards seemed to have displayed little mercy or humanity towards the prisoners. None of the available POW accounts reveal any signs of goodwill between the Senussi guards and their 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.'¹⁰⁵ This description probably reflects the general state of relations between POWs and Italy's local collaborators. For Rosmarin, the Senussi guards at Benghazi were 'raw desert natives' whose behaviour only increased the tension between the captives and captors.¹⁰⁶ In Jack Mortlock's portrayal, the Senussi guards were further dehumanised, as their behaviour was compared to that of animals. According to Mortlock, the Senussi:

¹⁰³ Ogilvy, P. & N. Robinson. 1975. *In the bag*: 21.

¹⁰⁴ Ogilvy, P. & N. Robinson. 1975. *In the bag*: 22 – 23.

¹⁰⁵ MMH, File B.472: Memoirs of LG Tupper.

¹⁰⁶ Rosmarin, I. 1999. *Inside Story*: 16.

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 1942.¹⁰⁷

In a letter following his capture at Sidi Rezegh, Lieutenant-Colonel Purchase's view of the Italians as actually subordinate to the POWs becomes clear as he described how the POWs laughed at the Italian guards when Allied artillery started firing at them, 'we stood and laughed at them. We were their prisoners, but we ordered them out of our shellslits, and they obeyed. They're funny.'¹⁰⁸ Cremer's memoirs reveal a similar encounter of contemptuous resentment of Italian guards who could seemingly be overshadowed by their prisoners. While being transported on a truck, the POWs 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 prisoners grabbed his rifle and threw it into bushes next to the road. The terrified guard banged on the roof to alert the driver but either he was ignored or the driver was too frightened himself to stop the truck. When the POWs arrived at their destination, they disappeared into the already crowded camp and no action was taken against them.¹⁰⁹

In some other cases, however, confronting the enemy or mocking them after capture led to potentially dangerous situations, as with Fred van Alphen Stahl who, together with Michael de Lisle, was transported by truck towards the transit camp near Derna. Van Alphen Stahl felt a sense of frustration and was offended by the Italians who had the audacity, he recalled, to jeer at the prisoners. He described them 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 that he put his rifle up and he was going to fire at us and one of the others came and knocked the rifle and he fired two shots in the air, or one shot in the air – and I just

¹⁰⁷ Mortlock, J. 1956. *The endless years Reminiscences of the 2nd World War*: 31.

¹⁰⁸ DOD UWH Narep/Me/1. *Baden's letter to Joe after the Battle at Sidi Rezegh, 13.12.1941*.

¹⁰⁹ Cremer, A.J. n.d. *Oorlogsherinneringe*: 20.

wondered whether my big mouth could have got us into trouble there could have got somebody shot that day.¹¹⁰

On another occasion, Van Alphen Stahl used reverse psychology against the Italians in an effort to protect prisoners' rights. When a bombardier had his watch taken by a guard, Van Alphen Stahl flattered 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.¹¹¹

There were exceptions to these encounters, as for example, in the case of Uys Krige who was struck by the humanity displayed by one of the Italian guards who warned him that it would be harmful to drink too much water after he had gone without it during the long march from Sidi Rezegh to Gazala.¹¹² In some other instances, Germans even sided with the South Africans against the Italians, as in an incident when a South African exchanged his watch for a helmet filled with water to revive a friend during a thirst march. A German soldier who witnessed the incident intervened by punching the Italian, replacing the brackish water with clean water from his own water can, and by finally returning the watch to the POW.¹¹³

On another occasion, G.H. Collet, a soldier in Die Middelandse Regiment who was captured at Tobruk, witnessed an Italian guard offering bread in exchange for watches or fountain pens. When a German saw this, he took the bag of loot from the Italian and threw it over the fence, humiliating the Italian to the enjoyment of the POWs. Collet notes in his memoirs that ‘this incident epitomized the difference in the German and Italian behaviour to us a prisoners-of-war.’¹¹⁴ Another difference between the Italians and Germans was the fact that most German guards demanded respect from the prisoners. By and large, German soldiers exhibited admirable discipline and self-discipline, something that those South Africans with a stiff Calvinist upbringing could probably identify with.

On the other hand, the capricious conduct of most of the Italian guards put them in a position where they could hardly command respect and they were therefore forced to continue using

¹¹⁰ Fred van Alphen Stahl interview: 25 May 2010, Cape Town.

¹¹¹ Fred van Alphen Stahl interview: 25 May 2010, Cape Town.

¹¹² Kannemeyer, J.C. 2002. *Die Goue Seun Die lewe en werk van Uys Krige*: 334.

¹¹³ Leigh, M. 1992. *Captives Courageous. South African prisoners of war World War II*: 24.

¹¹⁴ MMH, File B.472: Memoirs of G.H. Collet.

callous and demeaning methods to maintain order among prisoners. A classic example of German insistence on respect was observed by Newman Robinson while in a transit camp following his capture at Sidi Rezegh. As a German officer was explaining to the prisoners why they were being handed over to the Italians, a South African POW, lying on the floor, asked the officer, 'Hey, you, what's the news?' Robinson was convinced that the German was going to shoot the man as he believed 'Germans invariably did that sort of thing.' However, the officer explained, tight-lipped, that:

in your army, [...] you do not address officers while you are sprawling on the ground. Now that you are a prisoner you will keep up the tradition of respect and self-respect which your army expects of you. I am nobody in particular, I am not as you English say, a "big shot", but I am an officer, and you will treat me as such.¹¹⁵

Whatever their opinion of the Italian guards, many South Africans were deprived of water and food during the first few days in transit camps, and this more often than not led to POWs having to lower themselves into an inferior position towards their captors for the sake of survival. In Derna, the POWs were kept in a graveyard where there was virtually no water or food available. According to Cremer, most of the guards there were Syrian and as the water taps were on the outside of the graveyard, the prisoners were reduced to begging for water. Apparently the guards became irritated by constant begging and started shouting insults at the prisoners, something which one of the captives could not stand and returned an insult. The guard reacted by shooting into the crowd, killing one of the prisoners. In response, the POWs stormed the fence and the guard fled. When the Italian officer asked the prisoners to bury the man, they refused as they felt that they had not been responsible for his death.¹¹⁶

In the Tobruk camp, POWs also died at the hands of more wilful Italians who seemed quick to take advantage of their position of power. Private Connelly was shot by an Italian commandant who ordered him to move away from the fence. Although Connelly obeyed, the commandant still shot him in the back. On another occasion, also at the Tobruk camp, Private Myles was severely injured while looking for a toilet when an Italian guard threw a bomb

¹¹⁵ Ogilvy, P. & N. Robinson. 1975. *In the bag*: 25 – 26.

¹¹⁶ Cremer, A.J. n.d. *Oorlogsherinneringe*: 19.

into the camp.¹¹⁷ David Brokensha felt pent-up resentment of coarse guards at Derna where he was kept in crowded army barracks. Eventually, this could be bottled-up no longer.

As prisoners were being counted, he and a friend became very impatient towards guards who seemed incapable of counting the captives without making mistakes. Brokensha and his friend ‘flinched away from [the guard’s] grubby paw’ as he slapped his hand on their shoulders while counting them. 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 across their faces as punishment for their behaviour during the counting process. According to Brokensha ‘the slaps didn’t really hurt, what was hurt was our youthful pride. I was furious – and powerless.’¹¹⁸

For many, the blatant disregard of POW rights in medical and other provision increased their dislike of the Italians. Michael de Lisle described how POWs could buy two small loaves of bread for a watch and 20 cigarettes for £1. In his memoirs, De Lisle also pointed out how the Italian doctor at Benghazi spent most of his time debating prices for loot taken from POWs by an Italian corporal instead of paying attention to their medical requirements.¹¹⁹ Equally, some other POWs also realised that the terrible conditions in the camps in North Africa were a result of the unexpectedly large numbers of prisoners taken and they even seemed to excuse the Italians as a result. Thus, Stanley Smollan was shocked when he noticed the poor state that Italians were in, especially with regard to their uniforms, equipment, transport and rations. He was especially horrified when he realised that the Italian soldiers did not have 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.’¹²⁰ Michael de Lisle expressed similar views in his memoirs, declaring that their Italian captors ‘proved inefficient, capricious, and unable to provide us with the necessities of life because they had very little for themselves.’¹²¹

¹¹⁷ NASA BTS 9/55/1 Vol 2: South Africa House, London, to Secretary of External Affairs, Pretoria. 8 October 1942.

¹¹⁸ Brokensha, D. 2007. *Brokie’s Way An Anthropologist’s story. Love and Work in three Continents*: 75.

¹¹⁹ De Lisle, M. n.d. *Over the hills and far away my twenties in the forties*: 25.

¹²⁰ Stanley Smollan interview: 15 March 2010, Johannesburg.

¹²¹ De Lisle, M. n.d. *Over the hills and far away my twenties in the forties*: 19.

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 empathetic view of the Italians in Africa may therefore have become clouded by their subsequent experiences in Italy. For others though, it was simply a question of skin colour or complexion. For Schwikkard, the Italian behaviour towards the POWs was related to how dark or light the Italians were. According to him, the Italian guards would take watches 'and anything of value' from their prisoners; if prisoners were lucky enough not to have their watches stolen, they were anyway forced to trade them for water. In Schwikkard's view, the Italians were:

a miserable lot. We disrespected them and the result is that frankly they... well, I never regained respect for them, except the fact that I realised afterwards that most of these people that we came in contact with 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...¹²²

Accepting each other

In a similar way, African South African soldiers belonging to the Native Military Corps of the Non-European Army Services and Coloured servicemen of the Cape Corps were seen by many white soldiers, as well as by the Union government, as inferior to white soldiers.¹²³

The superior racial attitude of white soldiers towards others can often be detected in the negative manner in which they compared the behaviour of the Italians to that of South African blacks, indicating that they viewed both Italians and Non-Europeans as inferior and second class, or even as interchangeable. 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!'¹²⁴ Still, although most South African POWs looked down on their Italian captors, not all of them compared Italians to African or Coloured South Africans.

At another level, while many white POWs expressed either paternalistic or blatantly racist views towards other races, genuinely decent and respectful relationships did exist, such as

¹²² Bernard Schwikkard interview: 17 March 2010, Johannesburg.

¹²³ Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*: 207 – 208.

¹²⁴ Cremer, A.J. n.d. *Oorlogsherinneringe*: 21. '... asof hulle minstens 50 tree van mekaar verwyder was – net soos ons Bantoes gewoond was om vir mekaar te skree!'

that between Harry Klein and his batman, Nelson Koza, who became a prisoner at Sidi Rezegh in 1941.¹²⁵ Oosthuizen, on the other hand, described lying next to black patients in the Alexandria hospital as a very strange experience, as ‘the black head and the white sheets, it just didn’t fit, you know.’¹²⁶ Even before many POWs were captured, the ‘South African racial attitudes became apparent [and] a good deal of *donnering* took place’ as some of the local population in Alexandria courted trouble by selling ‘Turkish delight and bottles of whiskey, which were in fact bottles filled with cold tea.’¹²⁷

At the same time, it is arguable that the relationship that existed between South Africans of different race groups cannot be generalised in any monolithic manner as some expressed racist attitudes in their memoirs while others emphasised the good relationships that existed between different races. Undeniably, though, the fact that no memoirs of former African or Coloured POWs could be located, provides a very partial view of the wartime race relations situation. That said, we do know that German and Italian treatment of black Allied soldiers was for the most part dreadful, as neither the Germans nor the Italians seemed to regard the Geneva Convention as having any bearing on the rights of black forces as they did not view them as *Regular* forces.

African and Coloured POWs were therefore in the worst possible position and had possibly to rely on each other more so than other POWs. Many Non-European soldiers from different parts of the Commonwealth endured bad treatment from their captors, and several were shot if they were seen to be too much trouble.¹²⁸ In his memoirs, Mugglestone recalled how inebriated black soldiers were shot by German guards while being marched on the way to the POW camp following the fall of Tobruk. According to him, the black 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.’¹²⁹ Furthermore, black servicemen could also not always rely on sympathy or assistance from fellow South Africans either, as illustrated by Cremer, who saw a black man shooting at Stukas using a small Italian gun in the chaos during the fall of Tobruk. Cremer made no effort to help him nor to take him to the headquarters, towards which he was heading. The black soldier was left in the desert, a

¹²⁵ Crwys-Williams, J. 1992. *A country at war 1939 – 1945 The Mood of a Nation*: 384.

¹²⁶ Wessel Oosthuizen interview: 4 December 2010, Hartenbos.

¹²⁷ Crompton, C. & P. Johnson. 2010. *Luck’s Favours Two South African Second World War Memoirs*: 26.

¹²⁸ Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*: 208.

¹²⁹ Mugglestone, D.I.H. n.d. *Destination Unknown*: 22.

solitary figure shooting up at the dive bombers, while Cremer ‘could only laugh’ at the absurdity of the situation.¹³⁰

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.¹³¹ Another report also stated that Indians and South African black prisoners at Tobruk were not allowed to take cover in shelters when the town was being bombed by the RAF and US Air Force. Their food was also totally inadequate as 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 enforced war work they were doing.¹³²

Still, in the common anxiety to evade capture, it would seem as if the border between different races diminished at times, and there were a number of instances when black South Africans attempted to escape along with whites from the perimeters of Tobruk as it was about to fall. For instance, Lieutenant Featherstone’s escape party of 46 included six non-Europeans.¹³³ In most cases though, good relations between the races depended on the nature of personal contact, as between a medical officer and his trusted batman, as was the case with Harry Klein and Nelson Koza. Another example of a medical officer and his batman was that of Ben Hermer, a medical officer with the 17th Field Ambulance, and his batman July Monaremi, who supported him throughout the battles in North Africa. When the two were captured at Tobruk, they were split into separate POW camps, with Hermer describing 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 never see him again and I didn’t.’¹³⁴

Elsewhere, some loyal black soldiers showed surprising loyalty towards their white superior fellow soldiers and country 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.’¹³⁵

¹³⁰ Cremer, A.J. n.d. *Oorlogsherinneringe*: 18. ‘*Ek kon maar net lag.*’

¹³¹ NASA BTS 9/55/1 Vol 2: South Africa House, London, to Secretary of External Affairs, Pretoria. 8 October 1942.

¹³² DOD UWH Narep ME 4. Axis cruelty to native prisoners.

¹³³ Tungay, W.R. 1948. *The Fighting Third*: 214.

¹³⁴ Friedman, G. 2003. *The Piano War*: 158.

¹³⁵ DOD UWH Narep ME 2. Statement by No 4448 L/CPL Job Maseko alleging to have sunk a boat in Tobruk harbour about 21 July ’42.

Maseko was one of the soldiers who were off-loading military equipment in Tobruk harbour and as he had experience of working with explosives, he put it to use in assembling a bomb using jerry cans, straw and petrol. As he was the last to leave the hold of the ship, two of his friends distracted the guard and Maseko lit a fuse. Later that evening Maseko saw smoke rising from the harbour as the vessel burned and sank. The next day, the POWs were questioned about smoking while on board ship, to which all answered that cigarettes were not included in their rations, an answer which their captors could not dispute.¹³⁶

The fact that African and Coloured troops were being used to do war work on the docks also held an advantage as they occasionally had the opportunity to steal food, something white prisoners in camps could not do. This could turn white POWs into the supplicants of their black counterparts. De Lisle recalled how these prisoners would return from the harbour with haversacks filled with maize and other foodstuffs, and ‘the unfortunate consequence was that hungry English and even S. Africans would lay siege to their tents at night to beg the crumbs of their charity.’¹³⁷ This situation must have been especially ironic for white South African POWs with so many sharing the widely-held view that these servicemen were inferior.

Acceptance and rejection of POW status

Extreme privations and harsh treatment in North Africa undoubtedly ensured that most POWs in North Africa developed very strong hostilities towards their Italian captors. Yet, regardless of how POWs felt about them, they had to find ways to survive in the dire North African camps, most of which were temporary and hastily constructed. For POWs here, it became a daily struggle to maintain their human dignity in what most of them referred to as the ‘cages’.¹³⁸ As the Red Cross did not visit any of the camps in North Africa, there are no official reports on living conditions and information has had to be obtained from interviews, memoirs, diaries and, to a lesser extent, from *The Benghazi Forum*, a camp wall newspaper edited by Eric Hurst, a British POW.¹³⁹

Most camps were simply fenced enclosures with tents as accommodation. In some, especially in Benghazi, some POWs were lucky enough to sleep in converted barracks which were

¹³⁶ DOD UWH Narep ME 2. Statement by No 4448 L/CPL Job Maseko alleging to have sunk a boat in Tobruk harbour about 21 July '42.

¹³⁷ De Lisle, M. n.d. *Over the hills and far away my twenties in the forties*: 30.

¹³⁸ Leigh, M. 1992. *Captives Courageous. South African prisoners of war World War II*: 14 - 31.

¹³⁹ Friedman, G. 2003. *The Piano War*: 200.

equipped with electricity. Hygiene, though, was a major problem in all North African camps and POWs quickly became infested with lice and succumbed to dysentery. Toilet facilities were hopelessly inadequate and at some camps POWs were not allowed to go the toilets at night, and had to use small tins that were placed outside of the barracks. With dysentery, these tins were obviously entirely useless. The Benghazi camp, for instance, only had one toilet which was supposed to serve 400 men. However, there were about 4000 prisoners in the camp and in an attempt to solve the toilet facility problem, a trench of about four meters was dug and a box with holes was placed over the trench. Toilet paper was non-existent and POWs sometimes found paper, in which an occasional lemon issue was wrapped, but this was a luxury reserved for POWs suffering from dysentery. In many cases, POWs resorted to digging extra trenches in an effort to alleviate the unhygienic conditions caused by the lack of adequate toilet facilities.¹⁴⁰

In contrast to memoirs and interviews, *The Benghazi Forum* painted a different picture of life in the Benghazi camp. In the first edition of 4 November 1942, the editor recorded 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...’¹⁴¹ For the most part, the newspaper focused on organizational aspects of the camps, biographies of inmates and reports of concerts or sporting events. The tone of the articles was pointedly optimistic and even humorous and was clearly aimed at keeping up the morale of the prisoners – in that sense, *The Benghazi Forum* shared the witty and mocking tone of Allied trench newspapers of the First World War.

Conditions in most North African camps were similar, with the most significant aspect that of a lack of food, causing POWs to lose on average between 20 and 30 kilograms. Because there were so many prisoners, the distribution of food was a long process and after queuing for hours, the POWs were always disappointed when they received their rations. In Derna, hard biscuits were issued and when Reverend Major Patrick J. Nolan was unable to bite into his biscuit, he asked an Italian guard to break the biscuit with his bayonet. The guard instructed Nolan to soak it in water, but as he soon discovered the water supply had run out.¹⁴² At times POWs also received tins of bully beef, but these had to be shared between two or three of

¹⁴⁰ DOD UWH Narep ME 4. Enemy treatment of prisoners in Cyrenaica after Sidi Rezegh, extracts from a report by a SA officer, Major HW Boardman, 1 SA Irish.

¹⁴¹ MMH, Pam B.472 PRI: *Reproductions from Prisoners of War Newspapers, The Benghazi Forum & Tutturano Times.*

¹⁴² DOD UWH Narep Me 2. Statement by Rev Maj Patrick J Nolan.

them.¹⁴³ The chronic shortage of food compelled prisoners to look for food elsewhere and on one occasion Collet was lucky and desperate enough to catch and eat a mole.¹⁴⁴ Dickinson's diary account of the time in North Africa probably gives the most accurate description of the food which 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.¹⁴⁵

For Dickinson, the lack of food was an indication of the poor state of the enemy forces, a view shared by Brokensha who emphasized that the Italians were not ready to accommodate the huge numbers of POWs as they had no food, water or facilities.¹⁴⁶ At the same time, though, Brokensha did not see the shortage of food and bad treatment emanating solely from a lack of organizational skill or logistics. He retained a defiant personal stance, on occasion refusing to accept water from an Italian guard who had slapped him earlier as punishment for acting in a scornful manner. For Brokensha, his treatment by the guard was the result of animosity towards South Africans. Brokensha's older brother, Paul, however, alerted him to the needs of others in their group, in that they could all benefit from an offer of water. His youthful pride protesting, Brokensha then grudgingly accepted water and shared it.¹⁴⁷

Although pilfering what was available was accepted and even celebrated, strict codes of morality governed conduct among POWs themselves. Prisoners caught stealing from within their own ranks were severely punished by fellow POWs, as was the case with two British POWs who stole food in the Benghazi camp. They were chained to a gate for 24 hours without food or water.¹⁴⁸ It was probably during this time in the North African camps that POWs established friendships that would last throughout their imprisonment as all of them had to learn to share resources, especially food and water.

POWs had also to learn to trust each other as food rations often had to be shared and as food was so scarce, each grain of food became very important. Van Alphen Stahl and De Lisle

¹⁴³ DOD UWH Narep ME 4. Enemy treatment of prisoners in Cyrenaica after Sidi Rezegh, extracts from a report by a SA officer, Major HW Boardman, 1 SA Irish.

¹⁴⁴ MMH, File B.472: Memoirs of G.H. Collet.

¹⁴⁵ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo'burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by EB Dickinson*: 69.

¹⁴⁶ David Brokensha interview: 10 September 2010, Fish Hoek.

¹⁴⁷ Brokensha, D. 2007. *Brokie's Way An Anthropologist's story. Love and Work in three Continents*: 76.

¹⁴⁸ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo'burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by EB Dickinson*: 69.

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 particularly close friendships, but that the ‘need for mutual support’ in POW camps made such friendships a necessity.¹⁴⁹

Indeed, the experience of imprisonment could come to shape consciousness of what army life meant for individuals. For many, the Army may have become a place where firm friendships were formed, but not all men in the Army experienced that sense of camaraderie. For Dickinson, the Army was a place where, although he learnt to appreciate the value of ‘good and simple things’, he became embittered, especially towards those in positions of authority. Thus, Dickinson viewed the Army as a ‘dictatorship’ as he believed that an ‘NCO should lead and set an example, not drive and give orders all day.’¹⁵⁰ When strong-minded men such as these entered POW camps in North Africa they were struck by the fact that officers and men suddenly became equal as the Italians only separated the officers from the men when they reached permanent camps. The transit camps therefore forced men of all ranks to live together and to undergo the same privations. For some on the battlefield it may have been a situation of ‘every man for himself’, but in the camp it became ‘dog-eat-dog’, regardless of rank, as they struggled to stay alive.¹⁵¹ 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.’¹⁵² It was in circumstances such as these that the morale boosts provided by close friends and by trust became the most important factors in survival.

Escape in North Africa

While the prisoners in Benghazi tried to make the best of their situation, the Allied forces were ordered to continuously bomb Benghazi harbour as it was an important supply line for the Axis forces in the desert.¹⁵³ It was ironic that while the Allied harbour bombings worsened the situation for POWs with regard to food supplies, it also kept their hopes up as they believed that the Allies would liberate them. In reality, the Axis forces were preparing for a complete conquest of the Eighth Army and as the POWs were marching West towards

¹⁴⁹ De Lisle, M. n.d. *Over the hills and far away my twenties in the forties*: 21.

¹⁵⁰ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo'burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by EB Dickinson*: 60 – 61.

¹⁵¹ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo'burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by EB Dickinson*: 69.

¹⁵² Rosmarin, I. 1999. *Inside Story*: 14.

¹⁵³ Gilbert, M. 1986. *Road to Victory Winston S. Churchill 1941 – 1945*: 145.

Benghazi, Rommel's forces were making quick progress towards Egypt, taking Sollum and Mersa Matruh on their way to El Alamein.¹⁵⁴ Rumours in the camp were almost as frequent as the bombs in the harbour and in most cases only served to confuse prisoners. As L.G. Tupper recalled:

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.¹⁵⁵

De Lisle also remembered the rumours in Benghazi with mixed emotions as he recalled only one incident when the rumours were not false 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.¹⁵⁶

As the toilet facilities afforded no privacy and as they were in constant use due to the dysentery epidemic, they became centres of information and rumour, as Mortlock remembers in his memoirs that the 'rumours or "latrineograms" ... dogged our footsteps for as long as we were prisoners of war.'¹⁵⁷ As most POWs were in a state of confusion, it was very difficult for them to determine the veracity of the rumours, and while the optimists hoped they were true, others remained pessimistic as they were reminded daily of the fall of Tobruk by the large numbers of POWs in the camps. 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.'¹⁵⁸ Many POWs believed, therefore, 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 delay their departure, hoping to be liberated before they found themselves in Europe.¹⁵⁹

According to De Lisle, he was transported to Italy in October 1942, only four days before the Allies reached Benghazi. On the other hand, Tupper also stated that he narrowly missed being liberated as 'on the 12th November we embarked for Italy... little did we realize how close

¹⁵⁴ Holland, J. 2006. *Together we stand Turning the Tide in the West: North Africa 1942 – 1943*: 165, 180.

¹⁵⁵ MMH, File B.472: Memoirs of LG Tupper.

¹⁵⁶ Michael de Lisle interview: 4 June 2010, Cape Town.

¹⁵⁷ Mortlock, J. 1956. *The endless years Reminiscences of the 2nd World War*: 34.

¹⁵⁸ Mortlock, J. 1956. *The endless years Reminiscences of the 2nd World War*: 34.

¹⁵⁹ Leigh, M. 1992. *Captives Courageous. South African prisoners of war World War II*: 29.

our troops were because they reached Benghazi on the 20th November.’¹⁶⁰ Although De Lisle and Tupper left Benghazi at different times, their belief that they were transported just as the Allies were advancing on Benghazi indicates their desperate optimism during the first phase of their confinement. The same could be true for Wood, as he also believed he missed being liberated by five days when he was transported to Tripoli, and again narrowly missed the Allies when he was sent from Tripoli to Italy two weeks later.¹⁶¹ While the POWs were optimistically waiting for liberation, the Allied forces in North Africa were however concentrating on strengthening the morale of the Eighth Army and preparing for the El Alamein battles which took place between 23 October and 5 November 1942.¹⁶² The POWs in Benghazi and other temporary camps in North Africa were certainly not the priority for the Eighth Army.

Others who disbelieved rumours that the Allies were approaching Benghazi could not wait to get to Italy as they believed that the camp conditions there would be better. In the meantime, Lieutenant-General Bernard Montgomery had taken over command of the Eighth Army and over the next few months started to drive the Axis forces back towards the west and by 20 November 1942 the Eighth Army had taken Benghazi.¹⁶³

However, five months was a long time to live on rumour, hard biscuits and bully beef, and some POWs decided to escape and to take their chances in the desert. None of the former POWs interviewed attempted such escapes as all pointed out that it would have been too dangerous as they did not have sufficient water or food. Furthermore, escaping in an area where one was not sure of the local population’s loyalties seemed too great a risk for most POWs. Failed prior attempts at escaping also served to convince most of them not to make an effort. Their Italian guards, always eager to demonstrate their positions of power over the prisoners, used excessive force when dealing with escape attempts, as was the case with one POW who was shot at close range as he tried to cut through the wire fence. The guard left the dead prisoner hanging on the fence as a warning to others.¹⁶⁴

Still, there were other strategies to be exploited. Taking advantage of the Italians’ lack of proper clothing, for example, afforded two South Africans, Sergeant Dawie van der Merwe

¹⁶⁰ MMH, File B.472: Memoirs of LG Tupper.

¹⁶¹ Michael de Lisle interview: 4 June 2010, Cape Town; Wood, H.L. n.d. *Memoirs of a Prisoner of War*: 7.

¹⁶² Fennell, J. 2011. *Combat and Morale in the North African Campaign: the Eighth Army and the path to El Alamein*: 282 – 286.

¹⁶³ Holland, J. 2006. *Together we stand Turning the Tide in the West: North Africa 1942 – 1943*: 249, 442 – 446.

¹⁶⁴ Leigh, M. 1992. *Captives Courageous. South African prisoners of war World War II*: 29.

and Gunner Louw, an opportunity to escape. These cunning accomplices offered to exchange a pair of boots for cigarettes and first threw one boot over the fence, received their cigarettes, then threw the second boot in between the multiple fences. This distracted the guards who ran into the fenced enclosure to retrieve the boot, while at the same time Louw and Van der Merwe made their escape. Following a few days in the desert, the two were, however, apparently betrayed by a Senussi tribesman and they found themselves back in camp, and being shackled as punishment for escaping.¹⁶⁵

Other attempts, however, were more successful and some who escaped from POW camps met up with those who had escaped during the fall of Tobruk. Lieutenant L.H. Bailie and Sergeant “Toys” Norton of the Kaffrarian Rifles had escaped capture with some others during the battle at Tobruk, and a few days later were discovered by two men of the Second Battalion, Transvaal Scottish, who had escaped from the POW camp at Tobruk. The escapees were lucky as they had used up their food and water the previous day and might well have died had they not come across Bailie and Norton. In this case, the group was fortunate, too, to meet sympathetic Senussi travellers who were friendly towards the Allied forces and they were given food and water and information about the whereabouts of the Eighth Army. Bailie and his group managed to reach the position of a New Zealand battalion at Ruweisat Ridge. Bailie’s experience of the generosity of the Senussi prompted him to become quite philosophical when he told his story to the East London *Daily Dispatch* some time later:

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 civilized races of this world, would do much to put an end to avarice.¹⁶⁶

Another successful escape was from a temporary camp at Mersa Matruh. Reuben Maloyi was captured with the 15 Field Ambulance at Tobruk and was then taken to various camps where he and other African soldiers were instructed to unload ammunition while the white prisoners were expected to provide medical care to soldiers. When the Allies bombed Mersa Matruh, the prisoners were moved to a camp surrounded by a minefield on its outskirts. Maloyi and a friend, Shaw, escaped through a weak point in the fence, leaving behind a cautious fellow countryman as they believed the man’s fear of escaping would delay their progress. After

¹⁶⁵ De Lisle, M. n.d. *Over the hills and far away my twenties in the forties*: 27.

¹⁶⁶ MMH. Pam B.472 BAI: *Escape from Tobruk by Lieut LH Bailie*.

successfully negotiating the minefield, Maloyi and his friend parted ways because they wanted to follow different routes.

Maloyi was assisted by an Arab who provided him with water and directions to the Allied forces at El Alamein. On his way, he was confronted on two occasions by enemy forces, but in both cases he managed to escape. Following 17 nights in the desert living on Italian biscuits and water found in abandoned vehicles, Maloyi eventually reached Allied forces in Alexandria.¹⁶⁷ In the case of Ben Hermer, escape and braving the desert was motivated by love as well as the desire for liberty. Following his capture at Tobruk, he also found himself in one of the infamous Benghazi camps. At first, Hermer tried to settle into camp life by petitioning the camp commander to provide better facilities in order to improve hygiene, but as the relationship between him and the commander deteriorated, he started to become involved in other camp activities, primarily using his medical knowledge in an attempt to ease prisoners' suffering. As a devout Jew, he also organised religious services on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

It was in Hermer's camp that Eric Hurst started *The Benghazi Forum*, and the Union soldier became firm friends with all those involved with the newspaper. When the transports to Italy began, Hurst prepared a copy of its various editions for Hermer as a memento of the Benghazi camp. None of the POWs knew if they would ever see each other again as they did not know if they would be transported to the same camps or to different locations across Italy. Hermer's newspaper associates left for Italy a day before he was due to leave, but he was desperate to remain in Africa as he believed that it would give him a better chance of getting back to South Africa. Another contributing factor to Hermer's decision to try to escape was the fact that his fiancé, Olda Mehr, was somewhere in Germany and he was extremely concerned about her safety.

While he was eating bread in the officer's mess the evening before he was to be shipped to Italy, Hermer's anxiety got the better of him and he asked to see the camp commander, saying that one of the POWs had contracted typhoid. The commander, although impatient with Hermer, was obliged to investigate as a typhoid outbreak would be disastrous. As the alarmed Italians went looking for the non-existent patient, Hermer simply slipped out of the camp. Making his way to the Allied lines, his fortunes, like that of other POW escapees,

¹⁶⁷ DOD UWH Narep ME 2. *Western Desert Campaign. Statement by no. 14051 Reuben Maloyi escaped POW from Mersa Matruh.*

depended on the goodwill of the local population. In his case, Hermer spent several days with an accommodating Senussi family, recovering from dysentery and waiting for news of Allied advances. Eventually, news reached the Senussi who were sheltering him that the area once again belonged to the Allies and Hermer went to the Benghazi road once he had seen Allied vehicles travelling along it in both directions. Astonishingly, John Baird, a friend of his family, recognised him as he was passing and took him to Tmimi, from where he flew to Cairo. There, by another extraordinary coincidence, he came across Olda, who had fled Nazi Germany with her mother.¹⁶⁸ Random chance and unexpected opportunity often played a large role in POW escapes of this kind, as was the sense of Italian deficiencies which could be exploited.

As POWs in North Africa had relatively little contact with Germans apart from the initial legendary declaration that 'for you the war is over', it is probable that for many the general awe of German tactics and appreciation of Rommel remained in UDF soldiers' consciousness. However, negative attitudes towards Italians and the niggling issue of POW status under their authority would remain throughout their internment in North Africa. Disparaging sentiment would only lessen somewhat when these POWs arrived in Italy and witnessed the devastation caused by Allied bombing of cities such as Foggia, or as they settled into permanent Italian camps and established an orderly routine in less makeshift conditions.

Following the Italian Armistice in 1943, POW attitudes towards their Mediterranean enemy again shifted, but mostly only if a successful escape was possible as POWs then became dependant on the aid of Italian peasants for their survival while on the run towards Allied lines or towards Switzerland. However, before POWs could adapt to life in Italian camps, they first had to cross the Mediterranean, which generally entailed a voyage in the hold of a cargo ship, with the knowledge that Allied forces were very active in the sea arena, bombing and torpedoing Axis ships.

¹⁶⁸ Friedman, G. 2003. *The Piano War*: 185, 190 – 192, 208 – 209, 240, 247.

Chapter 5: Daily life in Italy

A 'Mediterranean cruise'¹

Most prisoners captured at Sidi Rezegh were transported to Italy from December 1941, usually from Benghazi to either Patras in Greece or to Brindisi on the Italian east coast. The following year, the Italians started to move the Tobruk POWs to Italy, mostly from Benghazi to Tripoli and from there either to Naples or to Palermo. The majority of POWs were transported across the Mediterranean by boat, but officers and those POWs who were considered valuable for negotiating reasons arrived in Italy either by aeroplane or by submarine.² For men of other ranks, the journey across the Mediterranean was nightmarish, confirming the expectations of pessimists and crushing the hopes of optimists alike. All were forced to endure utterly miserable conditions. Although the journey only lasted between five and ten days, the POWs blamed the Italians for intentionally poor conditions and for what they regarded as the inflicting of deliberate torment. Cargo spaces were packed to capacity with men, and movement was severely limited. The lack of toilet facilities below deck was a severe problem to which the Italians responded by providing buckets, but as most POWs were by now afflicted by dysentery, this provision was utterly inadequate and men found themselves lying or sitting in bodily waste.

In some instances, men were allowed to go on deck to use the toilet facilities there, but most dysentery cases were too weak to climb the ropes or rope ladders that were lowered into the hold. In any event, toilets on deck were not necessarily much better, as in some examples it meant nothing more than a bucket system requiring men to balance on a pole suspended over the container.³ At night, hatches over the holds were closed, which resulted in at least one death as a result of suffocation on the *Rosalina Pilo*, a ship that transported POWs from Benghazi to Tripoli in August 1942.⁴

As Ike Rosmarin recalled, tins of horse meat and dog biscuits were dropped through hatch openings and the POWs directly below hatches were responsible for the distribution of food. This was an inflammatory situation that could easily have led to fighting among prisoners

¹ Brokensha, D. 2007. *Brokie's Way An Anthropologist's story. Love and Work in three Continents*: 81.

² Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*: 48.

³ Leigh, M. 1992. *Captives Courageous. South African prisoners of war World War II*: 36 – 37.

⁴ Mugglestone, D.I.H. n.d. *Destination Unknown*: 25.

when one considers how POWs fought for food while in transit camps in North Africa. Nonetheless, fighting among POWs on board ships is not mentioned, not by Rosmarin nor by any other POW, in memoirs or in oral interviews. Perhaps an equality of misery in acutely cramped conditions imposed its own form of restraint or self-discipline. Whatever any hypothetical explanation of conduct on board, boarding ships was a step into extreme disorder and mess. As noted by Whittaker of the South African Medical Corps, rations sufficient for three days were handed out in orderly fashion to POWs as they boarded the ships.⁵ Receiving food individually at the time of boarding seems to have been the most common method, and those who travelled on the *San Sebastian* also received bread, biscuits and bully beef as they arrived at the docks.⁶

Depending on the mood of guards, individual freedom to move around on deck was allowed to some or other extent. Thus, David Brokensha and his friends were allowed to go on deck during daylight hours and to use the 'over the side privy', although this was stopped when the ship was attacked by RAF aircraft, injuring some Italians as the POWs cheered in support of the attackers.⁷ While a more stoic Brokensha sarcastically referred to this crossing in his memoirs as a 'Mediterranean cruise', his brother, Paul, suffered what was probably the lowest spiritual point of his POW experience while on the ship, as he apparently once exclaimed, 'God? There is no God.'⁸

As had been the case with the bombing by Allied forces of Benghazi harbour, crippling supplies including to POWs, yet providing hope of liberation, the Allied attacks on Axis ships in the Mediterranean produced a similar mix of hope and fear within soldiers. In Brokensha's instance, the POWs cheered the RAF during an attack, even though it also placed their own lives in danger. Other POWs were, however, not so light-hearted at the thought of Allied attacks as most men realised all too well that being in the hold of a ship would afford them little chance of survival should they be hit. Many chose to deal with their constant fear by trusting in luck, simply believing that they would not be faced with such a deadly event, as Dickinson declared in his diary, 'we make up our minds that this [attack] won't happen.'⁹ A more pessimistic Oosthuizen, however, was resigned to the possibility of attack and morbidly

⁵ DOD UWH Narep ME 3. Mr Whittaker Sidi Rezegh and captivity afterwards (Greece and Italy) related to Mrs G.R. de Wit by Mr Whittaker.

⁶ Crwys-Williams, J. 1992. *A country at war 1939 – 1945 The Mood of a Nation*: 197.

⁷ Brokensha, D. 2007. *Brokie's Way*: 82.

⁸ Brokensha, D. 2007. *Brokie's Way*: 81 – 82.

⁹ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo'burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by EB Dickinson*: 70.

compared the hold of the ship to a coffin.¹⁰ Fears of attack were realised by those who were unlucky enough to be aboard the *San Sebastian*¹¹ in December 1941, which was torpedoed by *HMS Porpoise*, resulting in the deaths of between 350 and 450 men.¹² In August 1942, the *Nino Bixio*, also packed with POWs, was torpedoed by *HMS Turbulent* and 432 men lost their lives in the blast, after which the ship was steered to Navarino on the Greek coast.¹³

None of the respondents interviewed or the available memoirs reveal any contemporary knowledge by South African POWs of the disaster of the *Nino Bixio*. Nonetheless, memoirs and statements from Newman Robinson, Vivian Rees-Bevan, Cyril Crompton, Herbert Rhodes (Aussie) Hammond and Whittaker all provide first-hand accounts of South Africans who were on board the *San Sebastian*.¹⁴ Bernard Schwikkard's recollections and his memoirs also provide insight into the events of that night. The pandemonium that resulted following the attack on the ship and the Italians' panicky response to it once again served to further dent the POWs' opinion of their Italian captors. Both Whittaker and Schwikkard insisted that the ship's captain and most of the officers used the lifeboats to save themselves while many of the POWs were being sucked underwater by the ship's propellers as they tried to swim to shore.¹⁵ Both Mason and Gilbert corroborate the abandonment of the ship by the captain and crew and both record that a German naval engineer then took command.¹⁶ Yet the available historical record is not certain in its details.

In contrast to Whittaker and Schwikkard, Hammond's memoirs have the ships' crew under the command of a German Captain, who 'from the moment of disaster [the captain] had kept to his post, and [he] did his best to inspire the crew to remain on board.'¹⁷ In his account,

¹⁰ Wessel Oosthuizen interview: 4 December 2010, Hartenbos.

¹¹ The ship, originally known as the *Jason* was also referred to as the *Sebastian Venier* and the *Bastiano Veneri*. See Leigh, M. 1992. *Captives Courageous*: 39; and DOD UWH Narep ME 3. Mr Whittaker Sidi Rezegh and captivity afterwards (Greece and Italy) related to Mrs G.R. de Wit by Mr Whittaker.

¹² Leigh, M. 1992. *Captives Courageous*: 39. The details regarding number of those on board and those who died do not correspond between different sources. Leigh states 2200 men boarded, while Whittaker stated the number as 2100. Bernard Schwikkard, one of the POWs onboard, estimated the number of prisoners at 2500, while Crwys-Williams put the number at 'over two thousand'.

¹³ Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW*: 51.

¹⁴ Ogilvy, P. & N. Robinson. 1975. *In the bag*: 31 – 37; Crwys-Williams, J. 1992. *A country at war 1939 – 1945*: 194 – 199; Bernard Schwikkard interview: 17 March 2010, Johannesburg; Crompton, C. & P. Johnson. 2010. *Luck's Favours Two South African Second World War Memoirs*: 43 – 46; Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over. The story of H.R. (Aussie) Hammond*: 17 - 21; DOD UWH Narep ME 3. Mr Whittaker Sidi Rezegh and captivity afterwards (Greece and Italy) related to Mrs G.R. de Wit by Mr Whittaker.

¹⁵ Schwikkard, B.E. 1999. *My life briefly told*: 26; DOD UWH Narep ME 3. Mr Whittaker Sidi Rezegh and captivity afterwards (Greece and Italy) related to Mrs G.R. de Wit by Mr Whittaker.

¹⁶ Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW*: 49. Mason, W.W. 1954. *Prisoners of War Official History Prisoners of war New Zealand in the Second World War 1939 – 45*: 111.

¹⁷ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over The Story of Herbert Rhodes (Aussie) Hammond*: 16 & 18.

Schwikkard believes that a German captain took control of the situation when the Italian crew had abandoned their posts, ordering the men to remain calm as he steered the ship towards the shoreline.¹⁸ Robinson, on the other hand, stipulated in his memoirs that German engineers took control of the situation,¹⁹ while Whittaker, however, stated that a South African, Sergeant Tillard of the 1st South African Irish, had taken over once the captain and his officers had gone.²⁰

These large discrepancies in the different accounts concerning control of the ship are most probably an indication of the immense confusion following the submarine attack. In all likelihood, there would have been different persons seizing control in different areas of the ship, as some tried to restore order while others tried merely to save themselves. At the same time, other responses to the crisis at sea were not uniform. Therefore, while most responded to the events as a life-threatening disaster, others actually experienced a rush of freedom and looked upon the incident as an adventure. This was the case with Aussie Hammond, whose description does not convey anything of the same sense of horror or urgency as in other accounts. For instance, unlike Robinson who went on a ‘marauding expedition [for] blankets, coats and curtains for cover, and towels and pillowslips for bandages, and got to work splinting broken limbs’,²¹ Hammond took time to deliver cognac to the medical orderlies, and then ‘dashed back to join the feast in the galley.’²² Once it was realised that the ship was not in danger of sinking, a number of POWs took the opportunity to raid the ship’s galley, where they found fresh bread which they washed down with alcohol from the cellar.²³

For POWs, taking chances on their ship remaining afloat or risking the sea were tight decisions. Robinson recalled that some who jumped overboard tried to swim towards two escorting Italian destroyers, but that the POWs were ignored by the Italian crews.²⁴ These destroyers were also dropping depth charges in an effort to sink the British submarine, and many POWs were killed by these explosions while others died as waves smashed them against rocks. Crompton, however, viewed the depth charging as a life-saving eventuality, as it deterred the British attacker from closing in again with another torpedo.²⁵ All the while, the

¹⁸ Bernard Schwikkard interview: 17 March 2010, Johannesburg.

¹⁹ Ogilvy, P. & N. Robinson. 1975. *In the bag*: 31.

²⁰ DOD UWH Narep ME 3. Mr Whittaker Sidi Rezegh and captivity afterwards (Greece and Italy) related to Mrs G.R. de Wit by Mr Whittaker.

²¹ Ogilvy, P. & N. Robinson. 1975. *In the bag*: 33.

²² Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over*: 19.

²³ Bernard Schwikkard interview: 17 March 2010, Johannesburg.

²⁴ Ogilvy, P. & N. Robinson. 1975. *In the bag*: 31.

²⁵ Crompton, C. & P. Johnson. 2010. *Luck's Favours*: 44.

inability of the remaining Italians to take control of the deteriorating situation, ‘running all over the place, shouting and cursing’, seemed to heighten POWs hatred of their enemy, and a number of guards were thrown overboard by prisoners, ‘without any qualms at all.’²⁶ Even in the midst of mounting chaos and panic, Italian guards appeared to find it difficult to break their routine habit of demanding an exchange of goods for services. Therefore, Whittaker was forced to trade a pair of riding gloves for a lifebelt from one of the remaining guards who had hidden them away.²⁷ In this depiction, an unidentified South African POW swam to shore with a rope still attached to the ship, allowing many others to reach safety. Schwikkard, though, knew the man as Bernie Friedlander, who:

took a long rope from the deck, and bravely lowered himself into the sea. He was able to attach the rope onto some rocks below, and this enabled the rest of us to slide down the rope, wait for an incoming wave, drop in front of it, and get carried to the shore by the wave. I got ashore in this way...²⁸

The fact that Friedlander was recommended after the war for a George Medal with the support of a German officer may also provide some verification of Schwikkard and Robinson’s claims that a German officer or engineer had taken control when the Italian crew abandoned their ship.²⁹ That aside, it would also seem that Friedlander was not the only POW who swam to shore in an effort to secure a system of ropes with which to save others. Crompton describes how he, being a strong swimmer as a result of his childhood river swimming experience in Natal, volunteered for the job. Securing his rope to a rock, it ‘became part of a network of other ropes down which the men could climb and swing ashore.’³⁰

Whichever German had taken command had probably also saved lives as he steered the ship towards the shore, preventing it from sinking in the deeper waters where it had been first hit by the torpedo.³¹ On the other hand, according to Crompton, many POWs who were in the water at that time were killed by the ship’s churning propellers.³² Once ashore, the POWs were faced once again with Italian soldiers who searched the drenched survivors and

²⁶ Crwys-Williams, J. 1992. *A country at war 1939 – 1945*: 198.

²⁷ DOD UWH Narep ME 3. Mr Whittaker Sidi Rezegh and captivity afterwards (Greece and Italy) related to Mrs G.R. de Wit by Mr Whittaker.

²⁸ Schwikkard, B.E. 1999. *My life briefly told*: 27.

²⁹ <http://www.jocks.co.za/> Accessed 27 April 2011.

³⁰ Crompton, C. & P. Johnson. 2010. *Luck’s Favours*: 3, 45.

³¹ Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW*: 49.

³² Crompton, C. & P. Johnson. 2010. *Luck’s Favours*: 45.

confiscated personal effects, a loss that embittered Schwikkard as his pocket watch, a gift from his mother, was taken at this time. When those still on the ship saw what was happening to the survivors on shore, they decided to remain aboard, perhaps hoping somehow to avoid recapture and extend their brief period of freedom. Schwikkard's brother was one of those who remained behind, choosing the food and drink in the galley over the Italian looting on the beach.³³

When Robinson started thinking about leaving the ship it was dark and raining, so he decided to remain on board as he believed that he would drown, whether he stayed on board or tried to go ashore by the 'precarious contraption of ropes.'³⁴ During the night he gave medical assistance to the wounded and in an effort to comfort them, invented a story that the Italians had radioed for a hospital ship and that it was on its way to collect them.³⁵ In reality, according to Whittaker, a hospital ship did indeed come for the wounded.³⁶ An Italian doctor boarded the ship the day after it was torpedoed and made arrangements for them to be removed. Robinson himself remained on the ship until the last of the wounded were removed.³⁷ Once all were on their way, the rest of the POWs were forcibly removed from the ship by Italian soldiers.³⁸

The experience of relief for those injured appears to have softened the common view of the Italian adversary. Typically, Sergeant [Sgt] Salomon Lutz wrote from the Military Hospital at Caserta in Naples in January 1942 that together with other wounded POWs, he was 'picked up by a hospital boat and received excellent treatment.'³⁹ The letters of other wounded POWs sent from the Caserta Military Hospital revealed that most POWs there were starting to view their captors in a more positive light, if only as a result of relatively good treatment received at that specific facility. In correspondence during February 1942, a South African POW notes 'treatment by Italians good, enough food', while another writes that 'although it is cold, [have] a nice warm bed, Italians alright...'⁴⁰ Red Cross food parcels sent to the Caserta hospital certainly also helped to improve the patients' morale, as did the arrival of three British medical officers and a few British medical orderlies. Nevertheless, it still seems that

³³ Bernard Schwikkard interview: 17 March 2010, Johannesburg.

³⁴ Ogilvy, P. & N. Robinson. 1975. *In the bag*: 35

³⁵ Ogilvy, P. & N. Robinson. 1975. *In the bag*: 34

³⁶ DOD UWH Narep ME 3. Mr Whittaker Sidi Rezegh and captivity afterwards (Greece and Italy) related to Mrs G.R. de Wit by Mr Whittaker.

³⁷ Ogilvy, P. & N. Robinson. 1975. *In the bag*: 36.

³⁸ Schwikkard, B.E. 1999. *My life briefly told*: 27.

³⁹ DOD CE 4/15. Union of South Africa Censorship. Correspondence suspected to require special attention.

⁴⁰ DOD CE 4/15. Union of South Africa Censorship. Correspondence suspected to require special attention.

Caserta may have been an exception, for POWs treated at Bari endured ‘considerable neglect [and] shortage of food.’⁴¹

On the other hand, for those not wounded and who safely reached the shore, it would be some time before their opinions of the Italian forces would alter in any perceptible way. These prisoners now found themselves in Greece, in weather considerably colder than in North Africa, with most men still dressed in their desert uniforms, which largely consisted of shorts and short-sleeved shirts. Some of those who had raided the galley for food had also found blankets, which they brought ashore with them. The shared severity of common experiences, now worsened by cold, had an unexpected social consequence as it brought POWs together across the customary racial boundaries. Acute needs led to new forms of fraternisation. Thus, Schwikkard’s recollections included one of a:

coloured from Cape Town who had a blanket, so we smooched up to him, and said look, come on man, let us share, and he was very kind, he agreed, but provided that he had the middle, and so four of us had a blanket...⁴²

Others had got rid of their clothes while still on the ship as they prepared to swim ashore, leaving them with only the bare minimum.⁴³ In Rees-Bevan’s case, the ship’s oil which covered him following his swim to shore is what he believed saved him from contracting pneumonia.⁴⁴ From the shoreline, the POWs were taken to a barn near a submarine base, and they were then marched to Pylos Castle where they were kept in its dungeons. The next destinations were Kalamatiria and then Aixia, where they were put into a wire enclosure, similar to the transit camps in North Africa.⁴⁵

As the POWs were marched to their varying destinations, local Greeks lined the streets attempting to hand food, wine or cigarettes to the prisoners. Rees-Bevan encountered two Greek women who tried to give him currants and raisins, but this was stopped when the Italian guards shot at the women.⁴⁶ In other instances, the Italians kept the locals away from

⁴¹ Mason, W.W. 1954. *Prisoners of War Official History Prisoners of war New Zealand in the Second World War 1939 – 45*: 124.

⁴² Bernard Schwikkard interview: 17 March 2010, Johannesburg.

⁴³ Ogilvy, P. & N. Robinson. 1975. *In the bag*: 36.

⁴⁴ Crwys-Williams, J. 1992. *A country at war 1939 – 1945*: 199.

⁴⁵ DOD UWH Narep ME 3. Mr Whittaker Sidi Rezegh and captivity afterwards (Greece and Italy) related to Mrs G.R. de Wit by Mr Whittaker.

⁴⁶ Crwys-Williams, J. 1992. *A country at war 1939 – 1945*: 199.

the prisoners by using their bayonets and rifle butts.⁴⁷ Once again, the behaviour of the Italians reinforced the POWs contempt for their captors. When Robinson saw Italian guards throwing stones at a Greek boy who was trying to hand cigarettes to the POWs, he lost all respect for what he sarcastically referred to as the 'Second Roman Empire'. Yet, in a simultaneous reflection he seemed also to lay some blame at the feet of the Germans for leaving the policing of occupied Greece to Italian forces.⁴⁸

At Aixia the POWs were given small blankets, but conditions in the camp were so unhygienic that it soon became known among prisoners as 'Dysentery Acre'.⁴⁹ When they were moved to warehouses near the Patras harbour, a severe lice plague forced them all to spend their days 'like monkeys catching fleas'.⁵⁰ A 45-gallon drum served as a toilet in each warehouse that housed approximately 300 men. The sheds were so crowded that the men had to take turns to fetch their food when it arrived, as the floor space was too small to occupy all of them simultaneously.⁵¹

In contrast to the extremities of experiences on the *San Sebastian*, Michael de Lisle and those who travelled with him to Italy in October 1942 were placed on a ship that brought Christmas parcels to Italian soldiers. The prisoners boarded the ship at Benghazi and then went to Tripoli where these treats were to be delivered. However, once on board, the POWs discovered the food, which included sugar and sweets and helped themselves to it. By the time the vessel arrived in Tripoli, the POWs were 'drunk on sugar', and had tied their trouser legs at the ankles and filled them up with confectionaries. When the Italians discovered this, they 'went wild ... tried to search us and take away the food we'd discovered. Shooting left and right and threatening us with all sorts of terrible tortures.'⁵² De Lisle's adventurous journey came to an abrupt end, however, when he was placed in the hold of the ship for the journey to Palermo. During this Sicily trip, POWs also experienced a near-miss when a British submarine torpedoed the Italian destroyer escort, resulting in overloading of the POW ship with survivors from the sunken warship. Even here, though, there were some unexpected distractions. As the POWs were permitted short periods on deck, De Lisle, an anti-aircraft gunner, used the opportunity to compare notes with German anti-aircraft gunners who were

⁴⁷ DOD UWH Narep ME 3. Mr Whittaker Sidi Rezegh and captivity afterwards (Greece and Italy) related to Mrs G.R. de Wit by Mr Whittaker; Schwikkard, B.E. 1999. *My life briefly told*: 28.

⁴⁸ Ogilvy, P. & N. Robinson. 1975. *In the bag*: 38.

⁴⁹ Schwikkard, B.E. 1999. *My life briefly told*: 28.

⁵⁰ Schwikkard, B.E. 1999. *My life briefly told*: 29.

⁵¹ Schwikkard, B.E. 1999. *My life briefly told*: 29.

⁵² Michael de Lisle interview: 4 June 2010, Cape Town.

also aboard.⁵³

For some others, the trip to Italy brought escape opportunities and when Fred Geldenhuis' POW ship was re-routed to Patras in Greece, he decided to take his chance. Captured at Tobruk, held in Benghazi and then shipped to Tripoli, Geldenhuis had heard of ships being torpedoed while he was boarding a second ship in Tripoli, and concluded that the vessel transporting them had been forced off its original route to Italy to end up in Patras.⁵⁴ There, he and fellow POWs found themselves in an improvised and far from secure prison camp in the grounds of a castle. When Geldenhuis noticed the guards sitting under canvas sheets to protect themselves against the rain, he climbed over the wall and escaped.

Thanks to the assistance of a sympathetic Greek family, whose daughter could speak English, Geldenhuis enjoyed a good meal on the first night of his escape. The next day, he left the town and managed to survive in Greece for two to three months, helped by gaining a basic knowledge of the language and by the support of a helpful local population. Becoming over-confident in his linguistic ability, however, led to Geldenhuis being detected and recaptured in Athens, from where he was despatched to join the rest of the South African POWs in Italy. In Geldenhuis' view, his reputation as a determined escapee had preceded him and he was in Italy for less than a week when he was approached by Royal Marines, asking him to join them in an escape attempt.

Geldenhuis and the Marines planned to escape by cutting through the camp fences and stealing a boat with which they were going to sail to Greece. However, most of their group was captured while still within the perimeter of the camp while Geldenhuis and a Royal Marines officer, Captain Nixon, were apprehended later. As punishment, Geldenhuis was placed in solitary confinement for 12 days. This was followed by a semi-comic interview with the camp commander who asked him very politely and with some humour not to attempt any further escapes. Geldenhuis described the Italian commander as 'alright' and was impressed by the fact that he had come to see him while he was in a punishment cell. This respectful view of Italian command may perhaps represent an initial hint in POW experience of improved interactions between POWs and their Italian captors, other than the experiences of the wounded or the sick in hospital camps.⁵⁵ Possibly no less noteworthy is that

⁵³ Michael de Lisle interview: 4 June 2010, Cape Town.

⁵⁴ Geldenhuis, F.J.W. n.d. *A Soldier's Scrap Book. The memoirs of Frederik Jacobus Wagenaar Geldenhuis*: 102.

⁵⁵ Fred Geldenhuis interview: 9 July 2010, Pretoria.

Geldenhuis' attempt at escape in Greece was a rare undertaking by a UDF POW, as no other such evidence of attempts on route to Italy have been located. Nonetheless, throughout the war, POWs from various other Commonwealth countries were regularly on the run in Greece, often aided by the local underground resistance. They either sought to exist in the guise of Greek civilians or else tried to make their way out to re-join Allied forces in North Africa or in Turkey.⁵⁶

Camp conditions

Although many POWs considered circumstances in Italian camps to be greatly improved in comparison to North Africa, in reality conditions in Italy were far from good. For a start, although the reports of Red Cross camp inspectors could only reflect certain elements of camp conditions, these were in themselves critical to the point of being damning. Red Cross inspection reports revealed many instances of Italian camps not conforming to the Geneva Convention, even though historians in general would agree that POWs in European theatres were in a much better situation than the plight of those in the Pacific, for instance.⁵⁷

Most POWs faced more or less similar experiences once they had arrived in Italy. At this stage of their journey, many were still suffering from dysentery and virtually all were fighting a losing battle against a severe lice epidemic. The majority of South Africans arrived at Brindisi and were sent to Camp 85 in Tukurano or Camp 75 near Bari where they were deloused, had their hair shaved, received additional clothing and had their first hot showers in months before arrangements were made to transport them to permanent camps.⁵⁸ The hot showers, intended to rid POWs of lice, were not always effective, and in some instances clothing was not disinfected and left in a large heap for naked prisoners to sort out once they emerged from the water.⁵⁹ As Mortlock remembered, the soap that they were given was also ineffective in ridding them of lice as 'it was more of a scouring compound closely resembling "Monkeybrand."⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Mason, W.W. 1954. *Prisoners of War Official History Prisoners of war New Zealand in the Second World War 1939 – 45*: 228.

⁵⁷ Beaumont, J. 'Protecting Prisoners of War 1939 – 95.' in Fedorowich, K. & Moore, B. 1996. *Prisoners of War and their Captors in World War Two*: 279.

⁵⁸ Leigh, M. 1992. *Captives Courageous*: 60.

⁵⁹ William Hindshaw interview: 19 March 2010, Johannesburg.

⁶⁰ Mortlock, J. 1956. *The endless years Reminiscences of the 2nd World War*: 37.

Naturally, many POWs hoped that conditions would improve once they reached permanent camps as they expected to be housed in barracks instead of in tents. Moreover, they all looked forward to receiving Red Cross parcels as at that stage of their captivity they had not received any parcels at all. However, by the time POWs arrived at camps most were disheartened by what awaited them, as the building of many holding sites in Italy had not been completed. In many cases, transit camps were hastily converted to permanent camps as more and more POWs arrived from North Africa, as was the case with Camp 85, which was listed as a transit camp in the third issue of the list of prison camps,⁶¹ but described as a permanent camp by the Red Cross inspector when writing a report only a month later. Camp 85 later had 13 smaller work-camps under its control when reported on by Red Cross inspection.⁶²

Despite the comparatively better European facilities of Camp 85 for POWs arriving from Africa, living conditions were clearly still arduous. While for De Lisle, Camp 85 was 'fairly well organized', life there in the winter of 1942 and 1943 was particularly harsh as the barracks were insufficient to accommodate all the POWs and many were forced to live in tents pitched in mud and snow.⁶³ The report on the camp also noted that many POWs who had arrived from North Africa had to make do with only 'a pair of shorts, a pair of boots, and sometimes a shirt.'⁶⁴ Most POWs who arrived from North Africa had done so wearing desert uniforms, with many supplementing their clothing on the journey. Geldenhuis, for instance, arrived in Italy with a pair of trousers made from two blankets.⁶⁵

As many warm-climate South African POWs had not previously experienced European winters, the sudden impact of the cold was made more severe by their not being adequately equipped with clothes or blankets. As Hindshaw remembered, for the extreme weather and the constant hunger there was little by way of comfort at Camp 65 once 'winter had set in. Very few of us had enough warm clothing, and the blankets were also very thin ... We were cold and very hungry and the Red Cross food parcels were very irregular.'⁶⁶ To make matters worse, lice soon reappeared and continued to make life a misery, not least because of the

⁶¹ DOD AG(POW) 1504B/6 Vol.I. UDF PW. Camp locations by areas (Italy) including strengths.

⁶² DOD AG (POW) 1527/85. UDF POW. Italian POW Camp No 85. Report by Rudolph I Iselin on Camp No 85. 8 March 1943.

⁶³ Michael de Lisle interview: 4 June 2010, Cape Town.

⁶⁴ DOD AG (POW) 1527/85. UDF POW. Italian POW Camp No 85. Report by Rudolph I Iselin on Camp No 85. 8 March 1943.

⁶⁵ Geldenhuis, F.J.W. n.d. *A Soldier's Scrap Book. The memoirs of Frederik Jacobus Wagenaar Geldenhuis*: 100 -101.

⁶⁶ Hindshaw, W. n.d. *An account of my experience as a prisoner-of-war and escapee in the Italian Alps during the Second World War*: 20.

personal stigma of uncleanness with which it was associated. Therefore, finding lice was a cause for deep mortification. In Jack Mortlock's description, his was a 'face...hot with shame, I had lice, and how could I face the rest of the tent? I need not have worried. It was only a day or two later that most of the others also confessed that they had also found lice.'⁶⁷

The act of removing lice from clothing was referred to as 'reading', as POWs meticulously inspected every inch of clothing, especially the seams, and removed lice and nits.⁶⁸ Although they were self-consciously repelled by becoming infested with lice, as a common plight it could not be a dirty secret. Thus, open removal of lice from their clothing became a daily routine and provided opportunity for discussions of countless topics, as men congregated in sunny spots, slaughtering 'thousands upon thousands of lice.'⁶⁹ In some camps, the lice plague was worsened by the lack of water which spread infestation. Thus, in Camp 54 (Fara Sabina) for example, Dickinson recorded that on the few occasions when there was water for the showers, 'the showers [could] become so full that one [was] never quite sure whether you [were] scrubbing yourself or the man standing next to you.'⁷⁰

POWs such as Uys Krige, Stanley Smollan and Michael de Lisle in particular became aware of the poor condition of rank-and-file Italian soldiers while they were still in North Africa. Few if any histories of the desert war fail to mention the enormous gap between the comforts enjoyed by officers and the rough circumstances endured by other ranks, stuck with poor food and living conditions. It is probably no wonder that many camp guards displaced their privations on to their prisoners. By the time that POWs journeyed across the Mediterranean and had come to encounter the civilian Italian population, most were aware that Italy was in poor condition, although this obviously did not check criticism of harsh conditions in the country's POW camps.

In due course, too, as South African authorities started receiving reports from the Protecting Power, they also became aware that Italy was unable to provide sufficient clothing for all its POWs as its own army also lacked adequate uniforms. The Union's Secretary for External Affairs believed there was little that could be done about this state of affairs, as he admitted to the High Commissioner in 1943, 'as regards clothing we would I think [we are] able to claim with justification that the Italians are not carrying out the terms of the Convention, but

⁶⁷ Mortlock, J. 1956. *The endless years Reminiscences of the 2nd World War*: 43.

⁶⁸ Brokensha, D. 2007. *Brokie's Way*: 89. Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over. The story of H.R. (Aussie) Hammond*: 43.

⁶⁹ Mortlock, J. 1956. *The endless years Reminiscences of the 2nd World War*: 43.

⁷⁰ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo'burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by EB Dickinson*: 85.

the pity of it is that they would be able to return the compliment.’⁷¹ The main responsibility for improving matters fell once again on the Red Cross and in December 1942, when the two Brokensha brothers arrived at Camp 54 near Fara Sabina, conditions there had changed to a considerable extent. It was certainly sufficient for Brokensha to be able to state in his memoirs that they were now impressed by the, ‘well-organised camp, with beds, blankets, new uniforms, showers, reasonable food and our first mail, as well as our first Red Cross parcels.’⁷² A month later, Camp 82, where Mugglestone found himself, also received winter battle dress uniforms which provided considerable relief as many of them were still housed in tents at that time.⁷³

At the same time, it should be emphasised that such improvements did not necessarily mean a general easing of conditions everywhere. For example, in some places the actual location of a camp could influence POW experience adversely, as was the case with those located near borders of non-Axis countries. There, Italian command became obsessed with preventing any escapes – at a camp near Bergamo close to the Swiss border, POWs’ trousers and boots were confiscated at night, regardless of the temperature. Also at Bergamo, POWs were constantly searched, a chance for guards to confiscate clothes, blankets and anything of value, such as befell Hindshaw.⁷⁴

Then there were the very different burdens brought by captors’ unpreparedness. For those POWs who were captured at Sidi Rezegh and arrived in Italy during the first few months of 1942, conditions were invariably unpredictable as most camps were not yet organised for occupation. When Jack Mortlock arrived in Camp 54 in August 1942, he and others had to drag in their own sleeping bunks from a nearby camp, sleep in tents and received rations insufficient for basic nutrition. Issued with a blanket, Mortlock dismissed it as ‘suitable for short miserable Italians, but...certainly far too small for the average South African.’⁷⁵ Obviously, Camp 54 had undergone considerable changes between August and December 1942 when Brokensha arrived there.

⁷¹ NASA BTS 9/55/1 C Vol.I. Correspondence from Secretary for External Affairs to High Commissioner, London. 1 March 1943.

⁷² Brokensha, D. 2007. *Brokie’s Way*: 83.

⁷³ Mugglestone, D.I.H. n.d. *Destination Unknown*: 30. Mugglestone was moved to a bungalow on 19 January 1943.

⁷⁴ Hindshaw, W. n.d. *An account of my experience as a prisoner-of-war and escapee in the Italian Alps during the Second World War*: 22 – 23.

⁷⁵ Mortlock, J. 1956. *The endless years Reminiscences of the 2nd World War*: 38.

Although the Pretoria authorities tried to ensure that UDF prisoners were treated according to the Geneva Convention, they were mostly powerless to act diplomatically as a national interest, as any Dominion representations were made through British authorities. Another factor that impeded South Africa's ability to do anything about conditions was the fact that by the time it had received Red Cross reports, the increasingly unstable Italian political situation had changed to such a degree that representations concerning camp conditions would have had little practical force.

Meanwhile, on day-to-day terms, the morale of the Union's imprisoned troops was obviously linked closely to conditions experienced in camps. The state of food, clothing, sleeping arrangements, hygiene, medical treatment, work detachments and other elements was often all dependent on the attitude of the camp commander and his relationship with the camp leader. Besides, the Red Cross could ease physical discomfort by providing food parcels, clothing and other commodities that brought a sense of normality and eased the long hours of boredom. These included musical instruments, sports equipment and books of all kinds, including scholarly and fictional works, which provided POWs with a way to broaden their horizons beyond the confines of a prison camp.

Families could also contribute to easing conditions for POWs by sending letters and parcels, but these relied naturally on various postal services in wartime. When deliveries failed, it could cause great distress for POWs who often believed that their families were not concerned about them. Equally, letters from uninformed or tactless family and friends could produce either great anguish or humour, depending on the nature of messages. One such letter, of a brusque kind, was received by Hammond. Having written to thank a woman in Cape Town for hand-knitted socks, she replied that they were 'meant for a brave boy fighting at the front, not for a prisoner.'⁷⁶

Many POWs realised early on in their captivity that they themselves would be largely responsible for any improvement of their camp conditions. While some of the work done in this regard was through official instruction from the camp commandant, such as with the building of barracks or the laying of brick lanes, other improvements were innovations often improvised without the approval of camp authorities. Once such example was the use of bed planks for firewood, while another was the 'blower', a stove made of Klim milk powder tins used to heat food and drink.

⁷⁶ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over. The story of H.R. (Aussie) Hammond*: 60.

Predictably, the nature of camp conditions also affected the relationship between captives and captors, POW attitudes towards authority, and to an extent also relationships between POWs. With respect to the Geneva Convention, stipulations on food served in most cases only as a guideline, as the ability of an enemy government to adhere to the Convention often depended on contingent circumstances, such as the state of war conditions and the functioning of transport infrastructure.

For POWs themselves, it was difficult to determine the extent to which the Italians adhered to the Convention, as most captives only became properly informed of its stipulations when they arrived in German camps following the Italian armistice in September 1943. The terms of the Geneva Convention did not form part of training in the Union and nor did the Italians seem to provide any information to the POWs regarding prescribed legal treatment when at war.⁷⁷ Nonetheless, at times POWs obtained fragmentary knowledge of the Convention. Michael de Lisle, for instance, was able to surreptitiously read parts of it when he saw a copy in the camp commander's office while acting as the camp's Italian interpreter. Thereafter, De Lisle was able to provide his fellow POWs with a rudimentary knowledge of the Geneva Convention.⁷⁸

Hunger

As a result of early reports by the Protecting Power on Italian camps, the South African Government became very concerned about the provision of food and clothing to South African POWs in Italian camps. As early as December 1942 a report by the Senior Dietician stated that the Italian rations to POWs were 'grossly deficient in all respects.'⁷⁹ The amount of calories allocated to each prisoner was of great concern as the Italian rations provided less than half of the daily requirement. According to a Red Cross report, the basic rations in Italy were as follows:

⁷⁷ Michael de Lisle interview: 4 June 2010, Cape Town. David Brokensha interview: 10 September 2010, Fish Hoek.

⁷⁸ De Lisle, M. n.d. *Over the hills and far away my twenties in the forties*: 42.

⁷⁹ DOD AG(POW) 1537 Vol. I. Correspondence from Director General of Medical Services to Adjutant-General. 4 December 1942.

Bread	150	Gr.	Per day
Pastas (such as macaroni etc. or rice)	66	"	"
Oil or fat	6	"	"
Sugar	15	"	"
Dry vegetables (peas, broad beans etc)	30	"	"
Concentrated puree of tomatoes	6	"	"
Coffee substitute	7	"	"
Cheese for grating (cooking)	8	"	"
Cheese for eating raw at table	30	"	5 times per week, on days when meat is not served
Meat	120	Gr.	Twice a week ⁸⁰

In January 1943, arrangements were made for the local packing of South African Red Cross food parcels and examples of their contents were sent to the Red Cross. By April of that year, however, it emerged that the British Red Cross preferred cash from South Africa to fund parcels packed in Britain and the Red Cross in South Africa was advised to ‘discontinue the preparations’ for the packing of food.⁸¹ For most South African POWs, the fact that the Union did not dispatch relief packages was of little concern, except for the smokers among them, as prized Springbok cigarettes were considered to be of better quality than English and American products.

Most parcels packed in Canada, England, Scotland and New Zealand, contained similar foodstuffs. The Canadian version, for instance contained 14,000 Calories, 400 grams protein, 5000 milligram calcium, 30 milligram iron, and sufficient levels of Vitamin A, B and C. The Red Cross was also advised of foodstuffs that were popular among prisoners, and these included dried eggs, oatmeal, sweets, salt, mustard, pepper, pancake batter and vegetable seeds. The South Africa Red Cross was also asked to send Springbok cigarettes to supplement British cigarettes.⁸² For some POWs these foodstuffs were not only favourites, but also life-savers, as oatmeal, for instance, was used at the POW hospital at Bari in an effort

⁸⁰ DOD AG(POW) 1537 Vol. I. UDF PW. Rations. Report by Italian Red Cross Delegation. July 1943.

⁸¹ DOD AG(POW) 1582 Vol. I. Correspondence from South African Red Cross Society to the Secretary for External Affairs. 7 April 1943.

⁸² DOD AG(POW) 1537 Vol. I. Food Parcels for South African prisoners-of-war in Italy and Germany. 26 January 1943.

to cure dysentery. When Clive Luyt arrived at the Bari camp where, according to him, 'conditions were bad there, the food was bad, my, everything was rotten and disorganised' he contracted dysentery and spent a month in the camp hospital. His condition did not improve until Carl van Heerden, a doctor with Die Middelandse Regiment [DMR], started treating him with 'special oats' which had arrived in Red Cross parcels. Luyt survived and was discharged from the camp hospital ten days later.⁸³

On the other hand, a few mouthfuls of uncooked oats swallowed with spoonfuls of condensed milk almost caused Bernard Schwikkard's death when he received his first Red Cross parcel at the camp near Brindisi. Feeling full for the first time in months, Schwikkard went to sleep after his meal but woke up a few hours later with a swollen stomach. As the size of his stomach grew and his pain increased, fellow POWs gave advice on how to solve the problem, including sticking his finger down his throat in order to vomit. When sentries refused to call a doctor, Van der Westhuizen, a farmer from the Orange Free State, offered to stick a knife into Schwikkard's stomach to let the air out, just as his father used to do with cows that ate too much maize. When Schwikkard saw him approach with a rusty knife, 'the sight of this chap with his knife, I thank God, I vomited and crapped, I did everything. And afterwards, I was so sorry I had lost all those wonderful foods, gone to waste. I learned a lesson.'⁸⁴

As POWs received more Red Cross parcels, they became expert at dividing the food between them and at pacing themselves in consumption of the contents. The way in which POWs approached food also indicated something of their self-image and pride in appearance and conduct. When Van Alphen Stahl noticed that American POWs did not bother to cook their oats, to wash their hair or shave, he regarded them as having been spoilt by the American Army and as having grown psychologically too weak to cope in camp conditions.⁸⁵ In war, when notions of honour and shame had a powerful impact, personal sloppiness also came to signify an absence of shame.

Regardless of the Red Cross' contribution to food rations, the South African authorities believed that it was important for the Italians to increase the provisioning of POWs as the transport of parcels could be delayed or stopped as a result of deteriorating European war conditions. In the view of Pretoria, its POWs in Italy would endure 'great hardship owing to lack of adequate food and clothing if anything should happen to cause a serious dislocation of

⁸³ Clive Luyt interview: 27 August 2010, Cape Town.

⁸⁴ Bernard Schwikkard interview: 17 March 2010, Johannesburg.

⁸⁵ Fred van Alphen Stahl interview: 15 June 2010, Cape Town.

Red Cross parcel supplies [and] that it be established beyond doubt that Italian Government are in fact carrying out their obligations under the Prisoners of War Convention.’⁸⁶ The vulnerability of the Union’s POWs was underlined by comparison of their circumstances with that of Italian POWs in South Africa who were, according to Squadron Leader Keeling of the British Red Cross Society, ‘receiving, quantitatively, three times as much food as our men in Italy are receiving.’⁸⁷

A further factor which impacted on the value of Red Cross packs, and one which the authorities may not have been aware of at the time, was the fact that parcels had often to be shared between a number of men, diluting their nutritional value as that was based on the formula of single use. Thus, the joy of receiving the first food parcel in Italy was soon replaced by extreme disappointment when Hindshaw and his fellow POWs were told that each parcel had to be shared between ten men.⁸⁸ According to Mugglestone, the first Red Cross parcels that arrived at Camp 82 had to be shared between 18 men. Nevertheless, the prisoners were so happy to receive their consignments that their applause caused those guards who were unaware of the arrival of parcels to assume that the war had ended, for ‘they slung their rifles away and started dancing and cheering with the prisoners.’⁸⁹

At other times, cheering died away. Although the Red Cross packed a week’s provisions, when the Italians handed them out they punctured tins to prevent POWs from storing food in preparation for escape. This meant that tinned food had to be eaten sooner than otherwise. To avoid eating contaminated food, Geldenhuis would always eat tinned salmon on the day of issue, leaving the canned sardines for up to three days before eating them, with ‘no ill effects of poisoning as we had been told as children.’⁹⁰ When, in December 1942, Christmas parcels arrived in the Bari camp, famished POWs could not contain their excitement and consumed the entire parcel in one sitting, causing many to become ill. The joy of receiving these items was not even tempered by the fact that most of the food ended up in the toilets. As one POW

⁸⁶ DOD AG(POW) Vol. I. Telegram from Secretary for External Affairs, Cape Town to High Commissioner, London. 22 March 1943.

⁸⁷ DOD AG(POW) 1537 Vol. I. Correspondence Secretary for External Affairs to the Adjutant-General. 18 February 1943.

⁸⁸ Hindshaw, W. n.d. *An account of my experience as a prisoner-of-war and escapee in the Italian Alps during the Second World War*: 14 – 15.

⁸⁹ Mugglestone, D.I.H. n.d. *Destination Unknown*: 28, 31.

⁹⁰ Geldenhuis, F.J.W. n.d. *A Soldier’s Scrapbook*: 111.

told Geldenhuis, ‘hell Gellie! when that pudding went out it tasted just as nice as when it went in.’⁹¹

Although the Red Cross food parcels saved many POWs from emaciation, it was not the case for all of them. In Camp 52, one disturbed man became so obsessed with the idea of starving should Red Cross distribution not reach the camps, that he stored all of his food instead of eating it. As the rest of the POWs in the barracks were unaware of what he was doing, they assumed that he was lying on his bed, depressed, as he was ‘loafing or lost in melancholy.’ It was only later that they realised that he was ill, and when he was moved to hospital, they found six Red Cross parcels hidden with his kit. He died of malnutrition a few days later.⁹²

A similar incident took place in Camp 65, where a South African POW became convinced that ‘a Higher Power’ had ordered him to give his rations to others. As he wasted away, he seemed to become more delusional and tried to climb the high fences surrounding the camp. When placed in the infirmary, Peter Ogilvy was asked to convince him to eat, but he replied that he wanted ‘strength to resist the temptation of this devil’s disciple ... climb the fences and be saved!’⁹³ Ogilvy was among the first group of POWs to be placed in Camp 65, and although they received rations, most POWs there came near to starvation during their first two months as their arrival coincided with a 50 percent cut in camp food. Although the camp commander tried to supplement their rations with dandelion leaves and turnip tops, there was not much that could be done as the food situation in Italy deteriorated; between 1939 and 1942, food prices had risen from an index of 100 to that of 172, and by April 1943, even Mussolini had serious doubts that Italy would be able to continue to feed its army.⁹⁴

Given this situation, it is small wonder that POWs all over Italy depended absolutely on Red Cross parcels for survival, but it would be a further two months before Camp 65 received anything, and until then its POWs survived on scraps. Unsurprisingly, Ogilvy’s description of hunger in Camp 65 is among the most terrible of all POW memoirs. As a consequence of the severe hunger, Ogilvy observed, ‘the British were becoming quarrelsome; the South Africans lethargic and morbid; the New Zealanders whined.’⁹⁵ Matters turned explosive when a group of Palestinian and Cypriot POWs started to accost the vegetable cart, depriving the rest of the camp of the food.

⁹¹ Geldenhuis, F.J.W. n.d. *A Soldier’s Scrapbook*: 111.

⁹² Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over. The story of H.R. (Aussie) Hammond*: 62.

⁹³ Ogilvy, P. & N. Robinson. 1975. *In the bag*: 56.

⁹⁴ Deakin, F.W. 1966. *The Brutal Friendship: Mussolini, Hitler, and the Fall of Italian Fascism*: 249 & 293.

⁹⁵ Ogilvy, P. & N. Robinson. 1975. *In the bag*: 53.

When the Italian interpreter announced, ‘tomorrow you eat better than we do’ he seemed genuinely pleased to inform his captives that from the following day Red Cross parcels would arrive, bringing relief to starving POWs. Their issue was, however, beset by bureaucracy as the Italians first deliberately awaited orders from Rome, and then delayed the process further by inspecting everything for, as Ogilvy wrote sarcastically, ‘hand grenades or Spitfire parts.’ Frustration reached a high point when one POW tried to commit suicide before parcels were eventually handed out.⁹⁶ Thinking about food constantly occupied the thoughts of captives day and night and many consoled themselves in fantasies, absorbed in visualizations of the food they planned to consume once free. For De Lisle, this coping mechanism kept him optimistic, as boredom was relieved by, ‘food, collecting recipes, it was a popular game. Talking about food. Thinking about lovely food after the war.’⁹⁷ In a similar way, thoughts of food helped Dickinson to cope with extreme nutritional deficiency and the consequential mental adaptation required of POWs as the importance of sex and female companionship diminished and was replaced by feverish thoughts of food. Neither women nor adequate food were available to POWs, yet Dickinson and his friend Frank chose to ‘torture [themselves] by recording each day an item of food that we would like, and we are determined to eat through the list when we get out! Some examples: fried eggs; Castle ale; fried kidneys on toast; koeksusters; fish and chips...’⁹⁸

The Adjutant-General agreed with the High Commissioner in London that there was enough cause to make representations to the Italian Government regarding the provision of food and clothing to South Africans, but also reminded him:

it is true our men are badly fed in Italy and without the Red Cross parcels they would be in dire circumstances. But then, according to our information, the Italian depot troops are not fed any better and that will be the reply [from the Italians]. We are feeding the Italian prisoners of war here on a princely scale in comparison with what our prisoners of war are getting in Italy, but we have to do that in terms of the Convention, so long as we apply a like measure towards our depot troops.⁹⁹

He added that the matter should be dealt with by the ‘Imperial Prisoners of War Committee

⁹⁶ Ogilvy, P. & N. Robinson. 1975. *In the bag*: 51 – 58.

⁹⁷ Michael de Lisle interview: 15 June 2010, Cape Town.

⁹⁸ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo’burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by EB Dickinson*: 77.

⁹⁹ NASA BTS 9/55/1 C Vol.I. Correspondence from Secretary for External Affairs to High Commissioner, London. 1 March 1943.

“A” in which all the Dominions are represented’ and to ask the Protecting Power for a report on camp conditions in Italy.¹⁰⁰ Article 11 of chapter two of the Geneva Convention states that ‘food ration of prisoners of war shall be equivalent in quantity and quality to that of the depot troops’¹⁰¹ and as it was impossible for any outside authority to determine the veracity of the situation in Italy, the South Africa authorities had to accept the Italian response. In this way, the Geneva Convention, despite its humanitarian intentions towards the treatment of POWs, placed the South Africa authorities in an impossible position. They were unable to protest about the level of food provision to POWs as the Italians were adhering to the Convention in that they were providing the same rations to their own troops. South African concern was, of course, well-founded as all POWs testified to the grim prospects of starvation. Still, on the other hand, it is also interesting to note a POW view that the Italians had at least tried to adhere to the Geneva Convention.¹⁰²

POWs’ growing awareness of the lack of food for Italian guards and civilians also produced some shift in attitude towards their captors. While still in North Africa, most POWs blamed guards for their terrible conditions and shortages, and open aggression and physical conflict between POWs and guards appears to have been fairly common. In Italy, however, many POWs came to regard Italians merely as weaklings and unable to ‘organise three beans in a row.’¹⁰³ Equally, while on the surface relations between POWs and captors seemed to have improved somewhat in Italy, animosity and contempt were still the dominant emotions of POWs before the armistice. Still, some South African POWs, felt that the Italians were trying to adhere to the Geneva Convention despite common hardships, as ‘they had no food for themselves, let alone us but in the camps, in Fara Sabina in Camp 54, there were Red Cross parcels, everything was okay, they observed the Convention.’¹⁰⁴

In this respect, much depended on uneven circumstances. De Lisle, for instance, was convinced that POWs were fed worse than Italian troops, a view shared by Oosthuizen’s testimony to the infliction of hunger.¹⁰⁵ In Fara Sabina, he saw men sifting through straw intended for bedding in an effort to find a few grains of wheat, while others waited at

¹⁰⁰ BTS 9/55/1 C Vol.I. Correspondence from Secretary for External Affairs to High Commissioner, London. 1 March 1943.

¹⁰¹ ICRC International Humanitarian Law, Treaties and Documents. Convention relative to the treatment of Prisoners-of-War, Geneva, 27 July 1929. Available at <http://www.icrc.org>.

¹⁰² Stanley Smollan interview: 15 March 2010, Johannesburg.

¹⁰³ Clive Luyt interview: 19 May 2010, Cape Town.

¹⁰⁴ Stanley Smollan interview: 15 March 2010, Johannesburg.

¹⁰⁵ Michael de Lisle interview: 4 June 2010, Cape Town.

kitchens for cooking water to be thrown out as sometimes a cabbage leaf could be found in this way.¹⁰⁶ Waiting for scraps of food at the kitchen door was also a feature of life at Camp 82 near Laterina, where Mugglestone remembered food being delivered by cart, and men storming the kitchen once it had been off-loaded, hoping to find leaves that had fallen on the ground. Even the horse pulling the wagon became a victim of POW desperation, as Mugglestone once witnessed a prisoner pulling a head of celery from its mouth.¹⁰⁷

At Camp 52, meanwhile, prisoners found a unique way to bulk up their soup, by adding a roll of toilet paper to each pot which made them feel fuller.¹⁰⁸ For some, hunger gained greater significance than that of any physical condition, as was the case with Oosthuizen who believed it changed his mental outlook. When missing home, he did not miss the people as much as he missed his mother's Sunday roast, something which remains a difficult guilty memory today.¹⁰⁹ For Beukes, the way in which men dealt with constant hunger, causing some to become too weak to stand up, was also an indication of will-power and an indication of character. Hunger caused some POWs to steal boots and other essential items from each other to sell to the Italians for extra food. Although Beukes, who was twenty-six when he was captured, believed that older POWs fared better than younger captives, it was will-power which kept many going in the months before the first Red Cross parcels arrived. A young English POW had a particularly poignant effect on Beukes, who watched him ritually licking the last of his food from the container with the words, 'now that's my breakfast, lunch and dinner and God help me.'¹¹⁰ The crucial importance of food and some sense of the effect it had, is apparent from a sardonic extract from Dickinson's diary, written in one of his many philosophical moods:

The man who professes principles of virtue is quietly regarded sometimes as the fool. The man without scruples, without pride, without dignity, lives superficially better than the man possessing those attributes. His conscience or lack of it, allows him to scrounge, to hang around the Italians or the cooks, to barter, to make a bit on the side, to steal. And what is the loss of a little pride or dignity compared with a full stomach or smoke-filled lungs?¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ Wessel Oosthuizen interview: 4 December 2010, Hartenbos.

¹⁰⁷ Mugglestone, D.I.H. n.d. *Destination Unknown*: 28.

¹⁰⁸ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over. The story of H.R. (Aussie) Hammond*: 52 – 53.

¹⁰⁹ Wessel Oosthuizen interview: 4 December 2010, Hartenbos.

¹¹⁰ Matthys Beukes interview: 2 February 2011, Bloemfontein.

¹¹¹ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo'burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by EB Dickinson*: 76.

By then, smoke-filled lungs had already begun to play a major role in daily existence. In North Africa, cigarettes had become an important camp commodity, as they not only relieved hunger pains, but also became a currency for trading. Red Cross parcels contained foodstuffs and cigarettes that were scarce in Italy, and as soon as POWs started receiving these, they were in a superior position to their guards. To Smollan, the POWs 'were the wealthy ones with Red Cross parcels and the Italians were the really poor ones because they had very little to feed themselves.'¹¹² In January 1943, the British Red Cross was able to supply fifty cigarettes per week to each prisoner, and as it wanted to make an effort to supply familiar brands to each nationality, the South Africa Red Cross was asked to supply Springbok cigarettes for camps containing South Africa POWs.¹¹³ Cigarettes were, naturally, as popular among the Italians and accusations of theft were made by POWs. In his memoirs, for instance, Cremer recalled how they had to wait four months for their first Red Cross issue, from which the cigarettes were missing. The Italian claim of ignorance confirmed suspicion that guards had pilfered the entire supply.¹¹⁴

As POWs were receiving cigarettes, they could use this commodity to trade in all kinds of goods with their Italian captors. Schwikkard recalls how some POWs regarded trading with the enemy as disloyal to the Allied cause, but that he and others regarded trading as doing their bit in the war, especially as they were exchanging non-nutritious goods [cigarettes, as well as tea and coffee] for nutritious food. Moreover, he and others also soon realised that trading with civilians would be more profitable and they made it a priority to get selected for work parties which would allow them outside of the main camp and provide more opportunity for exchanges.¹¹⁵

One such deal took place between Hammond and a young woman, who was going to provide Hammond with cheese in exchange for a watch. Although keen to conclude the transaction with extra benefits, as the girl 'proved to be a hot little number', he was deflated when he realised that months of malnutrition had taken its toll on his body. The girl was no less disappointed as she quickly realised the watch was also faulty.¹¹⁶ In other more routine cases

¹¹² Stanley Smollan interview: 15 March 2010, Johannesburg.

¹¹³ DOD AG(POW) 1537 Vol. I. Food Parcels for South African prisoners-of-war in Italy and Germany. Cigarettes and tobacco for South African prisoner of war. note by Squadron Leader Keeling, British Red Cross Society. 26 January 1943.

¹¹⁴ Cremer, A.J. n.d. *Oorlogsherinneringe*: 23.

¹¹⁵ Bernard Schwikkard interview: 17 March 2010, Johannesburg.

¹¹⁶ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over. The story of H.R. (Aussie) Hammond*: 36 – 37.

of cigarettes being used for trade, because tobacco was so valuable most of it would be removed and replaced with dried tea leaves, after which cigarettes would be bartered for food.¹¹⁷ In Camp 54 in Fara Sabina, tea was also used as a trading currency, but only after it had been brewed, dried in the sun and repacked. It was claimed that guards never realised that they were trading bread for tea that had been used two or three times.¹¹⁸

In general, dependant smokers suffered more physically than others as many of them would trade Red Cross foods for cigarettes, something which non-smokers found incomprehensible. Luyt, a non-smoker, would store up his cigarettes and when he had twenty or thirty, depending on the price, he would trade them for a tin of bully beef. Springbok cigarettes were evidently very popular, with one Springbok equalling ten Italian cigarettes.¹¹⁹ Brokensha's memory concurs that Springbok cigarettes were by far the most popular and ingeniously compared the use of cigarettes with Gresham's law in economics, that of bad money [Italian cigarettes] driving out good money [Springbok cigarettes].¹²⁰ Obtaining Union cigarettes was therefore a high value acquisition, and when Brokensha won a pack of Springbok in a bridge tournament, 'it was like a gold bar.'¹²¹

POWs mostly relied on friends and on trade between themselves and guards to gather sufficient food and other necessities, as it seems that those who stole for sustenance were a small minority. Evidence points overwhelmingly to the fact that trying circumstances deepened bonds of trust and fostered friendly exchange.

Boredom

Coping with long hours of boredom was a challenge of another magnitude for POWs as from dealing with hunger. In this instance, it would seem as if officers were worse off than other ranks, especially during the first few years of the war, as they were not employed in work camps. Once conditions stabilised, the Red Cross and the YMCA started providing sports equipment, indoor games, musical instruments and books.¹²² Although many rank-and-file POWs were kept busy on work detachments, others in the main camps had to find ways to

¹¹⁷ Fred van Alphen Stahl interview: 15 June 2010, Cape Town.

¹¹⁸ Stanley Smollan interview: 15 March 2010, Johannesburg.

¹¹⁹ Clive Luyt interview: 19 May 2010, Cape Town.

¹²⁰ Rolnick, A.J. & W.E. Weber. 1986. 'Gresham's Law or Gresham's Fallacy?' *Journal of Political Economy*, 94(1):185.

¹²¹ David Brokensha interview: 10 September 2010, Fish Hoek.

¹²² Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*: 160 – 161.

keep their minds and bodies occupied. As Hindshaw's memoirs recorded, these could include pastimes which drew in the interest of their enemy captors:

Perhaps the biggest bugbear of being a POW was trying to kill time. Trying to instil some enthusiasm, the camp leaders decided to have an exhibition in one of the bungalows of what anyone wished to show. This involved the whole camp. It was amazing. One person had actually made a working clock from empty jam tins, etc. Others had carved in stone or modelled clay. The drawings were in some cases exceptional. Many of these were purchased by the guards. In spite of this brief respite, life was too awful for words.¹²³

At first, conditions were such that POWs were mostly obsessed with aspects concerning food and activities to relieve boredom were limited. De Lisle remembered that they did not play any sport while at Camp 85 near Tukurano and that 'walking around the camp that was about all the exercise we got [...]we didn't play games like football or anything like that.'¹²⁴ A report of March 1943 by the Protecting Power confirmed these circumstances in that Camp 85 'covers such a big area that there is plenty of space inside the fences for taking exercise,' but that it was in need of all manner of sports equipment, and especially educational books. Nevertheless, in due course there were some other diversions. These included a band whose members consisted mostly of members of the South African police band which entertained POWs in a makeshift theatre.¹²⁵ In May 1943, the *Tukurano Times* reported that in Camp 85 'food, though important, is no longer the be all and end all of our existence' and that POWs were pursuing other interests such as sport, literature, education and music. In some instances, performances by camp bands were even attended by senior Italian officers, such as a Colonel Pallotta, who attended a concert in March 1943.¹²⁶

Whatever De Lisle's grumpy experience, few individual aspects of POW recreational experience can be wholly generalised, as it was up to each captive to decide on the extent of his participation. In De Lisle's case he obviously preferred to improve his knowledge of the

¹²³ Hindshaw, W. n.d. *An account of my experience as a prisoner-of-war and escapee in the Italian Alps during the Second World War*: 21.

¹²⁴ Michael de Lisle interview: 4 June 2010, Cape Town.

¹²⁵ DOD AG(POW) 1527/85. UDF POW. Italian POW Camp No 85. Report by Rudolph I Iselin on Camp No 85. 8 March 1943.

¹²⁶ National Museum of Military History, Pam B.472 PRI: *Reproductions from Prisoners of War Newspapers, The Benghazi Forum & Tukurano Times*.

Italian language rather than to play sport or try music.¹²⁷ De Lisle also spent time in Camp 82 near Laterina in the few months before the Armistice, and here the Protecting Power report noted that prisoners wanted permission to remove vines and fruit trees as these were growing on the only available land that would be suitable for games such as rugby and soccer. While advising against their removal, the inspectorate remarked on the camp's 'no lack of intellectual entertainment [...] and instruction is given in various subjects.'¹²⁸ In this case, De Lisle probably participated as he was 'teaching [Italian] to other prisoners ineffably, [...] I just realised I was good with language and I enjoyed teaching and so that set me off on my career as a teacher.'¹²⁹

Camp newspapers, as noted earlier in this study, were also a form of entertainment and kept many busy with reporting especially on sports meetings, a popular pastime between different nationalities. Rugby and cricket were popular among most POWs and there were regular games between different British Commonwealth nations, with those between Australia and South Africa reportedly being of particular interest as there was always competitive national rivalry.¹³⁰ In Camp 54, cricket and soccer seemed to have been the games of choice and 'as part of keeping us from going gaga' five short games of cricket were played almost daily.¹³¹ Camp 52 near Chiavari seemed to have been where the performing arts proliferated, with theatre productions that included *Pygmalion*, *Charley's Aunt*, *the Importance of Being Earnest* and *Of Mice and Men*, a play some believed should have been entitled, '*Of Lice and Men*.'¹³²

Although inspectors of the Protecting Power reported on leisure activities in each of their reports, it seems as if bureaucracy in the Red Cross system and, in some cases, the unsympathetic attitude of the Italians, delayed delivery of leisure and entertainment apparatus to camps. At Camp 122, on his first October 1942 visit, the inspector noted that 'little opportunity is offered for sport [...] it is the intention of the camp commander to procure footballs, the game which the inmates of the camp prefer.'¹³³ By April 1943, a further report showed that POWs were still asking for sporting equipment as 'the censor destroyed many of

¹²⁷ Michael de Lisle interview: 4 June 2010, Cape Town.

¹²⁸ DOD AG(POW) 1527/82. UDF POW. Italian POW Camp No 82. Report No.3 on Prisoner of War camp No. 82 and the hospital at Arezzo visited on 24 and 25 February 1943 by Captain L. Trippi.

¹²⁹ Michael de Lisle interview: 4 June 2010, Cape Town.

¹³⁰ David Brokensha interview: 10 September 2010, Fish Hoek.

¹³¹ Clive Luyt interview: 27 August 2010, Cape Town.

¹³² Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over. The story of H.R. (Aussie) Hammond*: 49.

¹³³ DOD AG(POW) 1527/122. Report on prisoners of war camp no. 122 visited on October 2, 1942 by Captain L. Trippi.

the articles which were intended for use in sports.’¹³⁴ The destruction of Red Cross equipment may be explained by the fact that Italians viewed these items as possible escape aids. The employees of Waddingtons, the manufacturer of the Monopoly game, helped to make and conceal maps of Italy or Germany in playing pieces, which were then sent to POW camps in Red Cross parcels. Other escape aids also reached POWs as a MI9 operative, Christopher Hutton, developed many tiny devices that could help POWs in escapes, although British intelligence did not use Red Cross cover but fictitious charity organisations as a front.¹³⁵

Requests for reading material were similarly ignored by both the Red Cross and the camp command, which was of the opinion that only a third of prisoners in Camp 122 were literate, even though POWs asked for books in English, Afrikaans and Sesotho as early as October 1942.¹³⁶ With leisure equipment arriving slowly and with the censors destroying much of it, it seems improbable that camps were properly equipped before the Italian Armistice. Accordingly, most Camp 122 POWs had to devise their own entertainment and many kept busy with what the camp inspectors referred to as ‘national games’, most probably variants of *Morabaraba*, which is similar to Nine Men's Morris, a game played in the British Isles.¹³⁷ In contrast to Camp 122, which significantly contained mostly African prisoners, reports on Camp 75, an officers’ transit camp, show that although a request for 2000 additional books was made in March 1943, the library still only had 500 volumes by June 1943, a month before the convulsion that led to the Armistice in September of that year. Nonetheless, it was far better equipped for recreation than Camp 122 as it had workshops for a variety of trade occupations, a theatre, an orchestra and a canteen.¹³⁸

Work detachments

For the most part, working detachments in Italy involved working on farms and this afforded prisoners the opportunity to obtain extra food and a sense of freedom, as Hindshaw found

¹³⁴ DOD AG(POW) 1527/122. Prisoners of war camp no. 122 visited by Dr de Salis on the 11th April 1943.

¹³⁵ Dean, C. & M. Dean. 2009. ‘Games and pastimes helped POWs escape.’ *Krygshistoriese Tydskrif*, 14(5):194 – 195.

¹³⁶ DOD AG(POW) 1527/122. Prisoners of war camp no. 122 visited the 14th October 1942 by Dr de Salis. At the time the Italian censors did not allow books in isiZulu, most probably because they did not yet have censors who were educated in the language.

¹³⁷ Spitz, H.H. 1978. ‘The Universal Nature of Human Intelligence: Evidence from Games.’ *Intelligence* 2(4):377.

¹³⁸ DOD AG(POW) 1527/75. Report on Camp 75, date of visit: 4th March 1943. DOD AG(POW) 1527/75. Copy of Telegram 0103/4023/P.W.2. 25 June 1943.

when he was sent to work on a farm near Tuteurano. While he and fellow POWs got the opportunity to mix with local Italian men and women, they also used the chance to have their subtle revenge on their captors when they involved the accompanying guards in a game of *bok-bok*, always making sure that the Italians ‘were bucked down first!’¹³⁹ The experience of having fun and of acting in a free manner while on farms was something that had become a remote dream for many since capture. This, as well as easier access to greater quantities of food, would have earned the South Africans the envy of other POWs. Indeed, Hindshaw considered himself very lucky, ‘as we went out working, which was actually a Godsend, [be]cause in the prisoner of war camps, the food was too ghastly.’¹⁴⁰ For Brokensha, too, the opportunity to volunteer for farm work held two advantages, not only that of more food, but also of getting away from boredom. While guards slept on a pile of their clothes to prevent escape, the POWs swam in the Tiber River, an experience which Brokensha described as ‘among the happier memories of my captivity.’¹⁴¹ For others, though, farm work became boring after a while and in at least one case, a relieved POW was ‘given temporary sack from farming work’.¹⁴²

Although ‘farming’ was common work, there is data that shows Italian authorities may have used this screen to cover the controversial employment of POWs in war labour. This was prohibited by Article 31 of Chapter Three in the Geneva Convention that ‘work done by prisoners of war shall have no direct connection with the operations of the war.’¹⁴³ On 17 August 1943, Clara Urquhart of the South Africa Red Cross Society wrote to the Prisoner of War Directorate in Pretoria asking for advice on how to deal with information received from repatriated POWs that prisoners from Camp 85 were made to work on Aero Porto 456 in the Italian south. The Red Cross believed that the lack of letters from this camp to family in the Union confirmed the fact that POWs were doing war work and that their letters were being confiscated or censored by the Italian authorities. In a reply from the Border Centre, Urquhart was informed that a repatriated POW had confirmed ‘a previous statement that prisoners-of-

¹³⁹ William Hindshaw interview: 19 March 2010, Johannesburg. The rules of the game, in English referred to as Bucca Bucca, is described in Brewster, P.G. 1944. ‘Some African variants of Bucca Bucca.’ *The Classical Journal*, 39(5):293 – 296.

¹⁴⁰ William Hindshaw interview: 19 March 2010, Johannesburg.

¹⁴¹ Brokensha, D. 2007. *Brokie’s Way*: 89.

¹⁴² Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo’burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by EB Dickinson*: 77.

¹⁴³ International Humanitarian Law – Treaties and Documents. Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War. Geneva, 27 July 1929. Available at <http://www.icrc.org> Accessed 30 May 2011.

war from Camps 75 and 85 were definitely taken to work on an aerodrome near these two camps.¹⁴⁴

In fact, the authorities were already quite aware of the work on the airfield as they had been sent secret information in July 1943 which had gone to British and American authorities, as well as to South Africa House in London, on ‘South Africans made to make Foggia aerodrome.’¹⁴⁵ Sensitive to danger, cautious Union authorities treated the entire matter with complete secrecy, even warning that repatriated POWs could be court-martialled if they spoke openly about the issue. It was believed that if it became known to Italian authorities that repatriated soldiers were revealing such information, it could have had punitive consequences for vulnerable POWs still in camps.¹⁴⁶

Michael de Lisle and Fred van Alphen Stahl were both at Camp 85, which was near Tutturano, from where they were sent to work on an aerodrome in the heel of Italy. There were, recalls De Lisle, ‘enormous amounts of sabotage there, there were eight hundred of us in that camp, working for the Germans, the Italians were in charge of us but we were working for the Germans.’ In his own way, De Lisle, acting as interpreter between the Germans and Italians, tried to sabotage the efforts of his captors by causing confusion through his translations, something that brought him great pleasure, as he remembered the ‘Germans scorned the Italians and the Italians hated the German arrogance and yet they still had to treat each other politely, it was such fun watching them.’¹⁴⁷ In his memoirs, De Lisle mentioned that the aerodrome was ‘roughly between Taranto and Lecce.’¹⁴⁸ As the distance between Taranto and Foggia is about 180 kilometres, it is difficult to determine if they worked on the same airfield mentioned in the Red Cross correspondence of 17 August, although most other facts correspond.¹⁴⁹ De Lisle also recorded that RAF bombing of San Pancrazio meant that neither the Italians nor the Germans would have been able to use the aerodrome, something that provided him with huge satisfaction.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁴ DOD AG(POW) 1527 Vol. 1. Copy of letter received from South African Red Cross Society. Undated.

¹⁴⁵ DOD AG(POW) 1527 Vol. 1. PSM Report. 23 July 1943.

¹⁴⁶ DOD AG(POW) 1527 Vol. 1. Copy of letter received from South African Red Cross Society. Undated.

¹⁴⁷ Michael de Lisle interview: 4 June 2010, Cape Town.

¹⁴⁸ De Lisle, M. n.d. *Over the hills and far away my twenties in the forties*: 42.

¹⁴⁹ <http://distancecalculator.globefeed.com> Accessed 16 June 2011.

¹⁵⁰ De Lisle, M. n.d. *Over the hills and far away my twenties in the forties*: 43; Michael de Lisle interview: 4 June 2010, Cape Town.

Letters from home

Here, the record is somewhat contradictory. In a June 1943 telegraph from the London Committee of the South African Red Cross, a reference was made that contrasts with most South African POW experience of receiving letters and parcels from home. This communication consisted of extracts from a report by Monsieur Zollinger, the Head of Prisoner of War Parcels Department in the International Red Cross, and contained the following statement on Camp 82:

Confidentially: However much South African Prisoners may complain that they have not got this or that, for propaganda reasons they, both white and native, are treated better than any of the other Prisoners. When parcels are marked from South Africa, or for South African Prisoners of War, they are pushed forward first.¹⁵¹

For all the Red Cross picture of preferential treatment of South African consignments, many POWs evidently received no or very few parcels and letters from the Union. Some, like Hammond, did not have any relations in wartime South Africa, while others received letters they did not care for, such as the so-called 'Dear John' letters written by wives and girlfriends who no longer wanted to wait for their husbands and boyfriends to return. Many of these letters from civilians clearly showed that they were not only ill-informed about conditions in POW camps, but also of the war, and in some cases even why and how their husbands, brothers or friends had become POWs. One such obvious example was a letter which Hammond received from an acquaintance in Durban, expecting him to make a few business deals while in Italy. Another indicated the view of those writers who considered POWs to be cowards and unworthy of any sympathy, such as the correspondence Hammond received from the patriotic lady who knitted socks for 'brave boy[s]' only.¹⁵² When he returned home after the Armistice, Uys Krige pleaded with the families of POWs to write often, as they considered letters as their most important link to domestic normality. Although rejection letters from girlfriends and fiancés could cause such extreme depression that in some cases former POWs would not even relate the event in their memoirs, others viewed these more with dark humour, pinning rejections on notice boards for all to read.¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ DOD AG(POW) 1527 Vol. 1. An airgraph received from the London Committee of the South African Red Cross Society. 9 June 1943.

¹⁵² Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over. The story of H.R. (Aussie) Hammond*: 59 – 60.

¹⁵³ Leigh, M. 1992. *Captives Courageous. South African prisoners of war World War II*: 88 – 89.

Hindshaw expressed well the crucial importance of home communication, perhaps especially for soldiers who were thousands of miles away from their country:

I cannot recall whether I received anything, although I am certain that those at home would have made every possible effort! The point I want to make is the contrast in the joy of the lucky ones and the sadness of those who didn't receive anything. The feeling was unbearable. The lucky ones soon came to realise the situation and in many instances tried to buck up the others — even sharing the good news as best they could.¹⁵⁴

POWs were naturally aware of the fact that letters to their families were strictly controlled to prevent enemy countries from obtaining information, but many were determined to bypass the censors. Some, like Newman Robinson, contrived to let their families know in coded ways about the shortages of food by referring to images that they knew the Italians would not understand. Thus, on 17 April 1943, Ogilvy wrote 'we are very fit and the rations keep us in the condition of trek oxen in August' implying obviously that they were starving.¹⁵⁵ Others used the Afrikaans language to indicate their state of affairs, with examples which included, 'give my regards to *Ons Lyhonger* [We are starving]'; 'Our best friend is *Uys Koud* [Ice Cold]'; and 'don't forget to remember me to *Niksti Vreet* [Nothing to Eat].'¹⁵⁶ The Cape Town branch of the Prisoners-of-War Association published such quotes in the local press, as it believed that their sardonic tone would help to raise the morale of the families and friends of POWs. However, the Adjutant-General was not amused and warned that the Italians might stop all mail between South Africa and POW camps if they became aware that captives were hoodwinking censors in this way.¹⁵⁷

Medical treatment

Article 14 of the Geneva Convention stipulates that '[e]ach camp shall possess an infirmary, where prisoners of war shall receive attention of any kind of which they may be in need.'¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ Hindshaw, W. n.d. *An account of my experience as a prisoner-of-war and escapee in the Italian Alps during the Second World War*: 21.

¹⁵⁵ Ogilvy, P. & N. Robinson. 1975. *In the bag*: 56.

¹⁵⁶ DOD AG(POW)1527 Vol. 1. Correspondence between Defence Headquarters and Adjutant-General, Pretoria. 11 May 1943.

¹⁵⁷ DOD AG(POW)1527 Vol. 1. Correspondence between Defence Headquarters and Adjutant-General, Pretoria. 11 May 1943.

¹⁵⁸ International Humanitarian Law – Treaties and Documents. Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War. Geneva, 27 July 1929. Available at <http://www.icrc.org> Accessed 30 May 2011.

While it was clear that the intention of the Convention was to ensure humanitarian treatment for POWs, given the circumstances of the war and the practicalities involved, the provision seemed to be at odds with stark realities, especially when one considers the experience of POWs who saw friends die needlessly or who themselves required medical treatment. So, while those prisoners at the Caserta hospital viewed their treatment in a positive light, most other POWs did not experience such good treatment at Italian hospital camps.¹⁵⁹

Indeed, there were so many cost complaints regarding Italian POW hospitals that the Directorate of Prisoners of War formally protested against the ‘financial exactions in Italian hospitals, on dental treatment, and confiscations of shirts and of shoes.’¹⁶⁰ This protest was entirely justified, because according to Article 14 of the Geneva Convention, the Detaining Power was responsible for all expenses related to the medical treatment and the provision of remedial equipment. The Geneva Convention also declared that medical inspections by mixed medical commissions would take place on a monthly basis,¹⁶¹ and while these visits did occur, inspectors could most often only reach camps every three or four months.¹⁶²

Although most independent reports considered medical treatment to be reasonably adequate, many referred to a less than ideal situation, primarily as a result of the difficult circumstances brought about by the war in Italy as well as the seasonal droughts experienced during the summer of 1943. For instance, in a report on the Military Hospitals of Giuliano and Monteluca at Perugia, the inspector, George Bonnant, wrote, ‘treatment of the prisoners is very good [...] the general complaint was been the lack of Red Cross parcels [...] these defects are naturally accentuated at the moment by the difficulties of communication.’¹⁶³ If one takes into consideration how much the Red Cross contributed to the wellbeing of POWs in other ordinary camps, the lack of sufficient food in hospitals must have been devastating. The fact that the inspection was done on 4 September 1943 explained the ‘difficulties in

¹⁵⁹ DOD CE 4/15. Union of South Africa Censorship. Correspondence suspected to require special attention.

¹⁶⁰ DOD CE 8/5/1. Directorate of Prisoners of War Monthly Directorate Letter. October 1942.

¹⁶¹ Article 69 of the Geneva Convention states ‘These [medical] commissions shall consist of three members, two of whom shall belong to a neutral country and one appointed by the detaining Power; one of the medical officers of the neutral country shall preside. These mixed medical commissions shall proceed to the examination of sick or wounded prisoners and shall make all appropriate decisions with regard to them. The decisions of these commissions shall be decided by majority and shall be carried into effect as soon as possible.’ International Humanitarian Law – Treaties and Documents. Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War. Geneva, 27 July 1929. Available at <http://www.icrc.org> Accessed 30 May 2011.

¹⁶² The report on the Military Hospital at Perugia states that it was visited on 25 May and then again on 4 September 1943. DOD AG(POW) 1527/Misc. Report No. 2. On British prisoners of war undergoing treatment at the Military Hospital, Perugia.

¹⁶³ DOD AG(POW) 1527/Misc. Report No. 2. On British prisoners of war undergoing treatment at the Military Hospital, Perugia.

communication', but also meant that promised representation to improve conditions was most probably dashed by the Armistice, leaving the patients in a perilous position.

Following the peace agreement between Italy and the Allies, some of the hospitals in Italy remained under Italian administration, such as the one at Celio, which was visited by Captain L. Trippi on 21 January 1944. At the time of his visit, there were ten South African POWs along with five English and one Indian POW. The rest of the more than 1500 patients included Italian soldiers and civilians who were victims of bombing raids. Although the report states that none of the POWs died while in hospital, it also mentions that three of the men were eligible for repatriation as a result of their illness, but that the Armistice prevented this. The Trippi inspection concluded that the 'prisoners of war are very appreciative of their treatment they receive.'¹⁶⁴ It is unlikely that warm statements such as these conveyed the actual state of affairs in POW hospitals. For statements by repatriated POWs and recollections in memoirs and in oral interviews reveal a completely different picture of the hospital treatment which POWs received.

When Lt Col J.S. Alexander returned to South Africa from the Moriji hospital Camp at Piacenza, his impression of the medical commission which visited the camp illustrated how bureaucracy and an unsympathetic attitude affected the lives of patients. Alexander's view also made it clear that Italian authorities interfered to such an extent that their actions resulted in contravening the Geneva Convention. For instance, he mentioned that the authorities 'were continually pressing to send the less severe cases [of paralysis and circulatory disturbances] to camp.'¹⁶⁵ According to the Geneva Convention, POWs who suffered from paralysis and 'grave chronic affections of the circulatory organs', among others, were eligible for repatriation.¹⁶⁶ While it is obviously impossible to know the severity of their illnesses, that fact that the commission also did not see patients with serious wounds, which could later result in septicaemia and cause permanent disabilities, shows that the method by which it functioned was largely ineffective.

Moreover, Alexander observed that the commission declined to see cases other than those listed by the Italian medical officers, making the appointment of 'neutral officers' to serve on these bodies futile. The reality for many POW patients was that they were overlooked for

¹⁶⁴ DOD AG(POW) 1527/Misc. Report No. 2. On hospital Celio in Rome visited on January 21, 1944.

¹⁶⁵ DOD AG(POW) 1527 Vol. 1. Report by Lt. Col. J.S. Alexander on return from POW hospital for British at Piacenza, Italy on the subject of medical commission for repatriation of the disabled: International Red Cross.

¹⁶⁶ International Humanitarian Law – Treaties and Documents. Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War. Geneva, 27 July 1929. Available at <http://www.icrc.org> Accessed 30 May 2011.

repatriation, and then, as was the case at the Moriji hospital, had to wait many months for another inspection, hoping that the Italian medical officer would place them on the list. In many instances, repatriation at an opportune time could save a limb or prevent a long term illness, and here Alexander's assessment showed that officers had a significant status advantage over other ranks. Thus, as 'the senior member of the commission [...] refused to see any other cases as it was outside his instructions [but] amongst the cases repatriated with the last batch were a number of officers seen at their own request.'¹⁶⁷ Although reports such as that by Alexander are rare archival finds, recollections of former POWs support the general tone and convey the same message.

Equally, vulnerable POWs were not passive, adopting a posture of medical helplessness. As soon as men realised that they could not rely on Italian medical care, they accepted responsibility for their own health as far as possible, something that started even before they reached Italy. In Benghazi, for instance, De Lisle recalled that one of the first camp rules made by POWs was that no one was allowed to use any medical supplies for trading purposes, not even to obtain extra food.¹⁶⁸ It was also at Benghazi that POWs realised that individual arrangements would sometimes have to be made so that many could benefit, as was the case when De Lisle grasped that despite the bad treatment, a trip to the dentist could bring certain advantages. His first visit to the camp dentist was as a result of a legitimately severe tooth ache. Yet once the tooth was pulled without anaesthesia, De Lisle spotted fence poles along the way back, and collected firewood. The next time he and his friends needed firewood, 'another tooth started giving trouble [...] but this time I knew that I could take the pain, and I got another fence pole.'¹⁶⁹

After arrival in Italy, medical treatment from local doctors and dentists showed little improvement. For example, Van Alphen Stahl, who suffered from recurring bouts of malaria and pneumonia, experienced medical treatment first hand. For him, Italians, in addition to lacking medical supplies, showed little sympathy towards POWs. As he remembered, in 'Italy, they would let you die, because they would say *Domani* [tomorrow] but they didn't have doctors they didn't have medicine themselves. Or they couldn't really be bothered. We were working on a farm on one occasion [...] out of the five of us who got malaria, two of

¹⁶⁷ DOD AG(POW) 1527 Vol. 1. Report by Lt. Col. J.S. Alexander on return from POW hospital for British at Piacenza, Italy on the subject of medical commission for repatriation of the disabled: International Red Cross.

¹⁶⁸ Michael de Lisle interview: 4 June 2010, Cape Town.

¹⁶⁹ Michael de Lisle interview: 4 June 2010, Cape Town.

them went to hospital and they both died.’¹⁷⁰ Dickinson’s diary reveals a similar situation when he recorded that ‘Pvte [private] J (Jim) Maddocks died on 23 February. He had pneumonia and a weak heart. The last we saw of him was being taken away on a donkey cart. He didn’t make it.’¹⁷¹ Dickinson’s phlegmatic tone showed no outrage at the ill POW being carted away and the shrug at his ‘not making it’ reflected that death was probably not an unusual occurrence in the camp, with POWs accepting medical mortality as routine.

While efforts at medical relief were clearly limited, some improvisations were not entirely without some beneficial impact. As early as March 1941, belligerents agreed that medical personnel and army chaplains could remain in POW camps to assist in medical and spiritual matters on a voluntary basis.¹⁷² While a large number of medical officers volunteered to remain with the rank-and-file, their work was hampered by insufficient medical supplies and they were often forced to improvise when treating patients,¹⁷³ such as in the case of Dr van Heerden treating Luyt ingeniously with ‘special oats.’¹⁷⁴ In other cases, the fact that the doctor was South African and could speak Afrikaans to fellow Afrikaans-speaking POWs provided social and cultural comfort, as when Beukes became ill and had a conversation with an Afrikaans-speaking doctor about the end of the war.¹⁷⁵

Beyond the search for bodily health there was another crucial dimension of soldiers’ captivity, that of maintaining psychological equilibrium or mental balance. This is one of the issues to be explored in the next chapter on POW fortunes under the Italians.

¹⁷⁰ Fred van Alphen Stahl interview: 25 May 2010, Cape Town.

¹⁷¹ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo’burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by EB Dickinson*: 70.

¹⁷² NASA BTS 9/55/1/B Vol. 1: Copy of correspondence between British Foreign Office and United States Embassy during March 1941 on the subject of application of the Prisoners-of-war Convention, 1929. 7 April 1941.

¹⁷³ Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*: 219.

¹⁷⁴ Clive Luyt interview: 27 August 2010, Cape Town.

¹⁷⁵ Matthys Beukes interview: 2 February 2011, Bloemfontein. ‘*hy het my moed ingepraat, en die eerste ding wat hy vir my sê is – hy praat Afrikaans – en hy sê “wanneer is die oorlog oor?” ek sê “more”, hy sê “dis ’n bietjie optimisties”, ek sê vir hom “kaptein, waar ons laas in sekondes gelewe het, hierso leef ons net vir ’n dag, as jy die dag oorleef het dan het jy goed gedoen.”*’

Chapter 6: Confinement and lost liberty

Adapting to life in Italian prison camps seemed, at least on the surface, a fairly straightforward matter for most POWs. In general their living conditions improved and a sense of routine helped many to adapt. However, it was also in Italy that the POWs had to accept the fact that rescue by Allied compatriots now became a more remote possibility. The relative comfort of the Italian camps also allowed POWs to focus less on pure survival and this allowed them more time to deal with the emotional aspects of their situation, leading in some cases to complete acceptance and in others to renewed energy to gain liberty.

Dealing with captivity

Viktor Frankl, an Auschwitz survivor and psychiatrist, believed that prisoners experienced three mental phases during captivity, the first being that of consignment to prison and the resultant shock, the second stage including acceptance of camp routine and, finally, that of liberation.¹ In the case of POWs, similar phases may be identified, that of capture and dealing with its shock, secondly, adaption to camp routine and, lastly, liberation. For those POWs captured at Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk, North Africa may be viewed as representing capture and shock, while Italy represented the second phase, although accepting the routine of imprisonment in the knowledge that these were not death camps, may also have meant a greater self-acceptance and grasp of survival rights on the part of each POW. Frankl noted that during the second phase, in order to survive mentally, concentration camp prisoners became insensitive and uncaring towards themselves and fellow victims as a result of extreme experiences². By contrast, although some POWs developed what may be viewed as apathy or alienation, it often took the form of what would be inappropriate humour in normal circumstances or an abandonment of personal hygiene and sense of self-worth.

British Commonwealth POWs were, as we know, protected by the Geneva Convention and experienced varying camp conditions depending on circumstances. Theirs was not the fate of concentration camps, least of all in Germany itself. Still, their mental experiences of shock, fear and humiliation should not be discounted as insignificant merely because POWs

¹ Frankl, V.E. 1962. *Man's Search for Meaning an introduction to logotherapy from Death-camp to Existentialism*: 6.

² Frankl, V.E. 1962. *Man's Search for Meaning an introduction to logotherapy from Death-camp to Existentialism*: 21.

generally suffered less physical hardship than others in the hands of Axis forces. Thus, in Frankl's experience, the extreme loss of hope often preceded camp suicides, and in an effort to prevent hopelessness he attempted to provide his fellow prisoners with something to look forward to, '[I] reminded that life still waited for him.'³ Frankl's view was echoed by Schwikkard's consideration of how to cope with POW life. For him, age was a conditioning factor:

You see when you are young there's a lot of life to look forward to [...] you've never had sex, you've never eaten caviar, there's a lot of things you've never had, and experienced, you never travelled, [...] and I found that frankly the older men didn't stand up to the hardships, they have lived, they've experienced many of these things, they didn't have so much to look forward to as we youngsters had to still see and experience, so to me there was a stronger will to see it through, but never, never would I like to go through it again, once was enough, because it was extreme, I went through some extreme conditions mainly due to hunger, to hunger.⁴

Accepting captivity

Getting along with others was critical to all POWs, but similarly each POW had also to learn to get along with himself if he was to have any hope of emerging from his experience in a reasonably intact psychological state. This meant that each POW had to accept his new captive identity as well as craft a way in which to respond to his externally-imposed circumstances. The extent to which POWs maintained morale reflected the extent to which they were able to place their experiences in context. While high morale and optimism was a positive characteristic, it was difficult to maintain without support from close friends and active participation in activities in the camp. In a number of memoirs, former POWs describe how many were subject to mood swings and short tempers, demystifying to a degree the myth of unflappability perpetuated by romantic representations of POW life in film and literature.⁵

For those who found it difficult to accept their situation, it also became difficult to control their depression and many isolated themselves as a result. Among POWs the common term

³ Frankl, V.E. 1962. *Man's Search for Meaning an introduction to logotherapy from Death-camp to Existentialism*: 92.

⁴ Bernard Schwikkard interview: 17 March 2010, Johannesburg.

⁵ Liddle, POW & I. Whitehead. n.d. 'Not the Image but Reality: British POW Experiences in Italian and German Camps.' *The Second World War Experience Centre*. <http://www.war-experience.org/history/keyaspects/captivity/default.asp>. accessed on 22 October 2010.

for this state of mind was ‘wire happy’ and in some cases the behaviour bordered on the abnormal, as was the case with those who were ‘given to delusions of grandeur [...] and would only speak to their fellows in an effort to convince them that they were none other than Alexander, Churchill, or Montgomery in disguise.’⁶ Descriptions such as these concur with Ursano’s findings that psychiatric and unstable mental-health effects remain prevalent among former POWs, especially those who were subjected to extreme deprivation and other acute experiences during captivity, including malnutrition, isolation, lack of medical care and humiliation.⁷ Hammond, however, did not express any sympathy for such men and his description of their behaviour even conveys revulsion:

Having so degenerated, men of this particular type thought nothing of urinating in their bunks, irrespective of their unfortunate companions below. During the cold weather they defecated on the floor rather than go outside, and some could not be bothered to go even as far as the floor but simply messed in their own beds [...] nor would these miserable specimens of humanity wash themselves at all unless forced to do so – a point which was only reached when their long suffering hut-mates exchanged threats for actual physical violence.⁸

Long hours of boredom led some to re-evaluate their place in life, and to consider philosophical aspects that previously they may have dismissed as insignificant. For many prisoners, boredom itself became an enemy and often led to periods of severe depression. For Dickinson, for instance, who considered himself as an intellectual figure, the lack of books added to his frustration and he regarded ‘the cost of [his] experience too great in time.’⁹ He was aware of the impact of his depressive moods on his friends, but was unable to prevent himself from succumbing to them. It was made all the harder as POWs often made considerable efforts to cheer one another up, as Brokensha typically testified.¹⁰ Within all of this, there were also high-minded reflections on what captivity meant. Thus, in June 1943, Eric Hurst, editor of the *Tuturano Times*, wrote of the personal changes experienced during the first year of captivity which perhaps sums up best how some more discriminating POWs were transformed by their experience:

⁶ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over. The story of H.R. (Aussie) Hammond*: 60.

⁷ Ursano, R.J. 2003. ‘Prisoners-of-war: long-term health outcomes.’ *The Lancet Extreme Medicine* 362:22-23.

⁸ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over. The story of H.R. (Aussie) Hammond*: 61.

⁹ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo’burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by EB Dickinson*: 82.

¹⁰ David Brokensha interview: 10 September 2010, Fish Hoek.

We have seen a disorderly mob [of POWs in North Africa] grow into a civilized community [in Italian permanent camps], and we know how much civilisation is worth and how it needs to be protected. And most of all we have learned how we ourselves change according to the external factors bearing on us. For me, who freely confess to having gone through the whole gamut of consciousness from that of a monk to a monkey, the result of it, I like to think, has been an increased perception and understanding, a new humility and tolerance; a real faith, despite the side issues of politics, in our way of life, our laws, and customs [...] it has yielded a more proper understanding of the teachings of the great philosophers: Among all the peoples of the earth there is so much in common...¹¹

National idiosyncrasies

In camps, Men of Confidence, or camp leaders, were elected by POWs to act as representatives with whom Red Cross inspectors could discuss camp conditions and POW grievances. Camp leaders were also responsible for communicating with camp commanders regarding living conditions and other related matters that arose periodically. The election of camp leaders put in place a system which helped to establish order and a united front against captors. In camps for men of other ranks, leaders were elected based on their popularity, leadership qualities and linguistic ability, as being able to communicate with camp commanders in their own language often determined the outcome of negotiations. In officers' camps, those with the highest rank most often assumed leadership, but in some cases animosity towards them as a result of incidents on the battlefield led to others being elected, thereby changing the military hierarchical structure.¹²

The role of the camp leader was crucial to ensuring good morale and harmony between men of many different nationalities. One such leader was Regimental Sergeant Major [RSM] B.R. Cockcroft, of the Second Transvaal Scottish, also known as Snakebite Cockcroft. 'Snakebite' is mentioned in interviews and memoirs of almost all POWs who spent time at Laterina, Camp 82. Mugglestone, for instance, held Cockcroft in very high regard and viewed his leadership as 'super efficient.'¹³ According to De Lisle, it was Cockcroft's 'harsh discipline' that saw to it that 46 nationalities lived together in an amicable way. Yet, as he often had to

¹¹ National Museum of Military History, Pam B.472 PRI: *Reproductions from Prisoners of War Newspapers, The Benghazi Forum & Tukurano Times*.

¹² Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW*: 122 – 123.

¹³ Mugglestone, D.I.H. n.d. *Destination Unknown*: 28.

act as interpreter between Cockcroft and the camp commander, his leader's short temper often made life difficult when he insisted on everything being translated, including telling the Italian officer that he was 'a bloody Itie bastard!'¹⁴

Similarly, Cockcroft did not tolerate any opposition from POWs, and on an occasion when Australian POWs tried to replace him, he quickly stared down the challenge by climbing on a table, exclaiming, 'if any of you bloody Australians think you can do the job better than I can, get up here and put yourself forward, and see whether the men think you are soldiers or rabble.'¹⁵ No one put themselves up after Cockcroft's outburst. It was clear that his bluff leadership style was imposingly effective, yet no one seemed to mind that he was dictatorial. All who recalled Cockcroft seemed to have great respect for him, perhaps suggesting that a well-run camp was more important than a democratically-run camp.

When taking controversial historical events into consideration, it may be expected of Afrikaans-speaking POWs to have held stereotypically negative views of British POWs, yet this was by no means the case and the views of each Afrikaans-speaking POW should be considered individually. Beukes, for instance, who looked down at British soldiers because of an encounter with some who were not fully literate, was the same man who felt pity for a hungry young British soldier.¹⁶ Despite the fact that Cremer, another Afrikaans-speaking POW, was greeted by a group of British POWs with the words, 'Goodness, chum, I thought all South Africans were black', his opinion of them was positive, describing them as 'friendly'.¹⁷

Oosthuizen, on the other hand, found it very difficult to fight alongside the British, as he had listened to childhood stories of Anglo-Boer War concentration camps and how his grandmother had died there. When obliged to live in a POW camp with British soldiers, his experience was that South Africans stayed together while the British stayed together, yet he also believed that they were all in the same position and that no one nationality dealt with the hardships of POW life any better way than another.¹⁸ Hammond also noticed how different nationalities 'tended naturally to segregate on a racial and national basis' when he arrived at

¹⁴ De Lisle, M. n.d. *Over the hills and far away my twenties in the forties*: 50.

¹⁵ Bernard Schwikkard interview: 17 March 2010, Johannesburg.

¹⁶ Matthys Beukes interview: 2 February 2011, Bloemfontein.

¹⁷ Cremer, A.J. n.d. *Oorlogsherinneringe*: 27.

¹⁸ Wessel Oosthuizen interview: 4 December 2010, Hartenbos. 'ag Suid-Afrikaners het maar meer bymekaar gebly, die Engelse het bymekaar gebly, soort soek soort jy weet.'

Camp 52 which contained Britons, New Zealanders, Australians, South Africans and a few batmen from the Union's NEAS forces.¹⁹

Patchy dislike of British soldiers was not limited to Afrikaners, as some English-speaking South African POWs also held less than favourable views of their allies in captivity. Class was one issue. Dickinson, for instance, during his interview admitted that he was very critical of British POWs because they 'were mostly lower class people, and they use the f-word far, far more than we did, every other word was f...'²⁰ At the same time, some observations in his camp diary reflected more favourable sentiments. While in Fara Sabina, he shared in the joy of a young British POW devouring his entire Red Cross parcel in one sitting. On another occasion, he applauded Corporal Jock Spencer for raising morale as well as for his 'attractive Scottish accent, and the big smile across his face.'²¹

In Gilbert's view, British and American POWs stuck together in Italian camps were able to make common cause.²² Here, however, the term British for all Dominion forces was not straightforward, as there were South African POWs as well as British prisoners who were not necessarily well-disposed towards their American counterparts. Arguably, the arrival of American POWs disturbed relations. Many British and South African captives were reluctant to embrace the Americans, with some even viewing their conduct as confrontational. When Hammond and fellow POWs were faced with five American soldiers, they found the Americans' behaviour so strange that they 'began to wonder if they had not been brought [to Camp 52] for the sole purpose of stirring up anti-American sentiments among British prisoners.'²³ When one insisted on moving to the front of the food queue, a fist-fight broke out and the Americans were shortly removed to another camp.²⁴

Initially, Brokensha, too, was also very critical of Americans in his camp, as in his opinion most of them did not seem able to cope with the stresses of POW life, and were too inclined, in a sense, to let themselves go, 'they didn't immediately leap into the showers for instance.'²⁵ Hygiene was a matter of obsessive pride for South African POWs, and Van Alphen Stahl was similarly appalled by Americans' apparent disregard for personal cleanliness. In his opinion, the Americans did not cope well in captivity because while still in

¹⁹ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over. The story of H.R. (Aussie) Hammond*: 41.

²⁰ E.B. (Dick) Dickinson interview: 4 December 2010, Mossel Bay.

²¹ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo'burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by EB Dickinson*: 79 – 80.

²² Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*: 200.

²³ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over. The story of H.R. (Aussie) Hammond*: 53.

²⁴ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over. The story of H.R. (Aussie) Hammond*: 53 – 54.

²⁵ David Brokensha interview: 10 September 2010, Fish Hoek.

fighting units they had been pampered too much. Faced with the difficulties of POW camp adaptation, hygiene was the first thing to be neglected.

For Van Alphen Stahl, it was a point of pride that most British POWs tried to shave and to wash as often as possible, even if they had to do so using their tin hats. Americans, on the other hand, had to be ordered to visit the camp barber, who would send them away to wash their hair before consenting to cut it.²⁶ Conversely, though, George Tewkesbury from the Black Watch Regiment, 'loved' the Americans, even though they were 'full of shit', and regarded the GI habit of boasting about the large size of all things American very entertaining. It was especially so when a soldier from London's East End challenged one of the Americans to prove his boasting by parading his masculinity, saying, 'well if that's so, show me your willy and I'll show you mine!'²⁷

Something of the nature of the relations between POWs of different nationalities also emerges from the camp inspectorate reports of the Protecting Power. For instance, reports on Camp 85 noted that only South Africans POWs were being sent to work camps and that 'English prisoners in a way resented this because they think they are just as good for working on farms as the South Africans.'²⁸ South Africans may well have been selected due to Italian perceptions that they were better able to do farm work. Schwikkard certainly believed that South Africans were more proficient in a rural work environment, as they:

were well experienced and we knew our way around [the farm], and we felt that the English chaps were seeing that. Because we were better than them, and we started being friendly with the Italians, and we were able to find our way, and extra food.²⁹

The improved relationship that developed between Schwikkard's fellow prisoners and their guards went far enough for two South African POWs to convince their captors to share their marijuana seeds with them. Smoking enabled POWs to 'get through the work, almost ten times quicker' than most others. However, the euphoria ended when the POWs realised that they were in fact digging a tank trench, and not an irrigation trench. When they complained about doing war work, they were all sent to Camp 82 near Milan where Sergeant Major

²⁶ Fred van Alphen Stahl interview: 15 June 2010, Cape Town.

²⁷ George Tewkesbury interview: 28 May 2010, Cape Town.

²⁸ DOD AG (POW) 1527/85. UDF POW. Italian POW Camp No 85. Report by Rudolph I Iselin on Camp No 85. 8 March 1943.

²⁹ Bernard Schwikkard interview: 17 March 2010, Johannesburg.

Snakebite Cockcroft was camp leader.³⁰ Most POWs seem to have been aware of the Geneva Convention's stipulations on war work and the fact that the enemy could not impose it, but that they could volunteer for acceptable labour.³¹

According to some testimony, South Africans were dissuaded from mixing with other nationalities, and were kept separate from British, Australian and New Zealand POWs owing to anti-South African attitudes following the military disasters in North Africa. South African POWs found themselves being blamed by other Commonwealth nationals especially for the fall of Tobruk – indeed, according to Hindshaw, this general perception persisted regardless of whether South Africans had been captured at Tobruk or not.³² Ill-feeling between different nationalities over blame for lost battles could sour relationships, with Brokensha recalling that other POWs would often ‘make snide remarks [about Tobruk] and it often led to fights when we were a bit stronger.’³³

In Rosmarin's perception, accusations against South Africans increased at times when camp conditions worsened, suggesting that rage at their loss of Tobruk could have served as an outlet for POW frustrations. It was easier to turn on their own than to vent anger against their captors.³⁴ For others, facing expected animosity compelled them to make a greater effort to get along, as was the case when thousands of South African POWs arrived at a camp near Milan.³⁵ In his recollections, Schwikkard was unable to remember its name, but he nevertheless remembered how they were:

lined up and they said to us, “We might as well tell you South Africans, that you might not find yourself very popular, because of the Tobruk saga. Behave yourselves and you'll be treated as soldiers, just be conscious of the fact that you're not liked”. See that drove us, into immediately consolidating ourselves with them, and we found

³⁰ Bernard Schwikkard interview: 17 March 2010, Johannesburg.

³¹ Section III, chapter 1, Article 27 of the Geneva Convention states: Belligerents may employ as workmen prisoners of war who are physically fit, other than officers and persons of equivalent status, according to their rank and their ability. Nevertheless, if officers or persons of equivalent status ask for suitable work, this shall be found for them as far as possible. Non-commissioned officers who are prisoners of war may be compelled to undertake only supervisory work, unless they expressly request remunerative occupation. International Humanitarian Law – Treaties and Documents. Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War. Geneva, 27 July 1929. Available at <http://www.icrc.org> Accessed 30 May 2011.

³² William Hindshaw interview: 19 March 2010, Johannesburg.

³³ David Brokensha interview: 10 September 2010, Fish Hoek.

³⁴ Rosmarin, I. 1999. *Inside Story*: 17.

³⁵ The camp was most likely camp 82 near Laterina.

that the New Zealanders and the Australians in turn, also felt for us, and had empathy for us, and really stood by us.³⁶

In Mugglestone's time at Camp 82, however, there was less impulsive fraternisation between POW differing groups. Thus, he recalled unhappiness at what he believed was an unfair distinction between Imperial POWs and South Africans. All those who dealt with Red Cross parcels were on double rations, and all of them were Imperial 'RSMs, SCMs, Sgts and Corporals, all of whom got the jobs on the "jobs-for-pals" basis [...] we, as South Africans, were good enough to volunteer to fight for them, and when anything like this cropped up, we had to take a back seat and this will always be a bone of contention – the distinction that was always made between South African and Imperial.'³⁷

Equally, Mugglestone's bone of contention may well not have been well-founded in its perception of differences in the treatment of officers and men. In October 1942, Camp 82 had two British officers and two South African officers; 135 British NCOs and 94 South African NCOs. Rank and file POWs numbered 1 283 British and 1 084 South African.³⁸ By February 1943 the camp still had two British and two South African officers, 139 British NCOs and 101 South African NCOs, as well as 1 368 British rank and file and 840 South African rank and file.³⁹ According to a February 1943 inspectorate report, all officers received the same food as the camp's Italian officers, but were expected to pay some Lire for their portion.⁴⁰ No independent reports on Camp 82 cited any POW group tensions, although these cannot be regarded as definitive as representatives mostly received information from the camp leader and the camp commandant. Again, experience seems rarely to have been uniform, or of one mind. Another inmate, Van Alphen Stahl, was emphatic that there was no Tobruk animosity between different POWs. References between POWs to events that took place during fighting were always made jokingly, and by and large 'there were no specific animosities.'⁴¹

³⁶ Bernard Schwikkard interview: 17 March 2010, Johannesburg.

³⁷ Mugglestone, D.I.H. n.d. *Destination Unknown*: 29.

³⁸ DOD AG(POW) 1527/82. UDF POW. Report No 1. On the camp for British prisoners of war in Italian hands No. 82. 8 October 1942.

³⁹ DOD AG(POW) 1527/82. UDF POW. Report No. 3 on the prisoner of war camp no. 82 and the hospital at Arezzo. 25 February 1943.

⁴⁰ DOD AG(POW) 1527/82. UDF POW. Report No. 3 on the prisoner of war camp no. 82 and the hospital at Arezzo. 25 February 1943.

⁴¹ Fred van Alphen Stahl interview: 25 May 2010, Cape Town.

Although the Geneva Convention declared that ‘belligerents shall as far as possible avoid bringing together in the same camp prisoners of different races or nationalities’⁴², different races were often not separated until they reached permanent camps in Italy.⁴³ In response to the mix in North Africa, the British Directorate of Prisoners of War took up the matter in December 1942, when ‘protests and representations were made to the Protecting Power against the continued detention of Imperial prisoners of war with prisoners of war of other nationalities.’⁴⁴ White Commonwealth soldiers of different nationalities were, however, not separated as all were classified as British forces. As Britain also viewed such Commonwealth soldiers as British, the POW directorate protest was in all likelihood aimed at preventing different races being grouped together in the same camps, or to prevent British POWs being detained in camps with POWs from countries who were not signatories to the Geneva Convention, such as Russia. The exclusionary attitude towards black soldiers was not limited to British and South African authorities, but was also evident in reports by the Protecting Power. On Camp 82 in October 1942, one report noted that most of its 2 612 POWs were British or South African, but there was ‘one nigger in the camp, probably sent by mistake: his transfer had already been requested.’⁴⁵ Italian authorities invariably separated POWs according to race once they were allocated to permanent camps, while officers were separated from men to check them from taking control and trying to organise escapes.

POWs and captors

Once POWs arrived in permanent camps they were able to establish a daily routine and experienced largely improved living conditions. One reason for this was the fact that the Swiss Protecting Power and the Swiss-funded International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) had access to camps. It was the responsibility of Switzerland, acting as the Protecting Power, to ensure that the Geneva Convention was upheld in all prison camps. This undoubtedly helped to improve conditions and also ensured that prisoners in Western Europe received generally better treatment than those in the Pacific and in Eastern and Central

⁴² International Humanitarian Law – Treaties and Documents. Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War. Geneva, 27 July 1929. Available at <http://www.icrc.org> Accessed 30 May 2011.

⁴³ Killingray, D. ‘Africans and African Americans in Enemy Hands.’ in Fedorowich, K. & Moore, B. 1996. *Prisoners of War and their Captors in World War Two*: 191.

⁴⁴ DOD CE8/5/1. Directorate of Prisoners of War Monthly Directorate Letter. December 1942.

⁴⁵ DOD AG(POW) 1527/82. UDF POW. Report No 1. On the camp for British prisoners of war in Italian hands No. 82. 8 October 1942. The man in question was the South African Private Samuel Maclan; 7125.

Europe.⁴⁶ Switzerland was also responsible for representing South African interests in enemy and enemy-occupied countries.⁴⁷ Because all agreements regarding POWs were of a reciprocal nature, on paper Italy and Germany were mostly careful to adhere to the Geneva Convention with regard to the circumstances of all prisoners.

The nature of relationships between POWs and their captors was also heavily dependent on the attitude of camp commanders, some of whom were committed Fascists, although others were not unsympathetic towards the position of prisoners. While in most cases POWs had to make do on two meals a day and insufficient clothing, living conditions in Italy were in stark contrast to the grim circumstances they faced in North Africa. Accordingly, for those POWs who considered conditions in Italy to be good, their estimation should probably be measured against prior time in North Africa. Moreover, treatment of South African POWs could also depend on what kind of South Africans they were. The race-conscious Fascist ideology of some camp commanders thus resulted in treatment of black POWs that blatantly violated the stipulations of the Geneva Convention. Many became victims of the propaganda campaigns of Fascist ideology, stigmatised as racially inferior, while others were simply treated as less than human, as Italian and German fascists did not regard the Geneva Convention as applying to POWs who were not of European ancestry.⁴⁸

An example of deliberate Italian disregard of Geneva Convention provisions when it came to black South African POWs emerged from Private Andrews Dlamini, who wrote from Camp 85, that ‘we got no food. Only three potatoes [...] we suffering very bad.’⁴⁹ Belligerent countries monitored letters from POWs in an effort to make sure that the Protecting Power was aware of cases where the Geneva Convention was not being adhered to, and in May 1943 the Union Adjutant General received an incriminating document containing extracts from the letters of repatriated POWs.⁵⁰ These revealed an even more stark picture of conditions and treatment than those sent from POW camps as they were not censored by the Italian authorities. Extracts showed that ill treatment was not limited to black POWs and even

⁴⁶ Beaumont, J. ‘Protecting Prisoners of War 1939 – 95.’ in Fedorowich, K. & Moore, B. 1996. *Prisoners of War and their Captors in World War Two*: 278 – 279.

⁴⁷ Schamberger, P. 2001. *Interlude in Switzerland: The story of the South African refugee-soldiers in the Alps during the Second World War*: 1.

⁴⁸ Killingray, D. ‘Africans and African Americans in Enemy Hands.’ in Fedorowich, K. & Moore, B. 1996. *Prisoners of War and their Captors in World War Two*: 195 & 199.

⁴⁹ DOD AG(POW) 1527/85. UDF POW. Italian POW Camp No 85. CE 15/8/150. Extract from letter by No. 11711 Pte. Andrews Dlamini sent to Adjutant-General, Pretoria from Deputy Chief of Staff, Defence Headquarters.

⁵⁰ DOD CE 4/15. Union of South Africa Censorship. Correspondence suspected to require special attention.

included claimed incidents of murder. A Captain Crofts, for instance, wrote to C.R. Colville that although the accounts of returning POWs were conflicting, it was clear that without Red Cross parcels they would not survive. He added that ‘discipline is severe, and when opportunity occurs the guards are ruthless [...] the Itos (sic) are getting windy about our invasion but say they will fight to the end. There are I expect Mussolini’s 6 million bayonets and only a smell of garlick (sic) behind them.’⁵¹ In another description, Crofts depicted an Italian officer who killed a POW by pushing him against a wall and stabbing his bayonet into his stomach.⁵²

As an inmate at Camp 65 near Gravina, Beukes believed that the Italians were unnecessarily ruthless in their treatment of POWs, but that as the war progressed and as conditions became worse in Italy, guards softened their attitudes towards captives and would not report as many incidents to commanders as before in an effort to be more lenient.⁵³ Camp commanders and guards adopted an even milder attitude when the Allies invaded Sicily in July 1943, and they could see the writing on the wall. Captain Theunissen wrote of his conversation with a repatriated POW, Cpl. Jack Thring, who had informed him that, ‘the Italians are very considerate towards prisoners now, as they firmly believe that they shall be beaten soon by the Allied Forces.’⁵⁴

The principal arrangements regarding POWs were made between the ICRC and Britain, which meant that although the South African authorities were kept informed, it did delay the country’s response to anything affecting UDF POWs. For instance, the British Political Secretary replied to a protest over poor camp conditions in Camp 85 and Camp 65 in October 1943, weeks after the Italian armistice. Nevertheless, the South African authorities were assured that the ‘Protecting Power achieve[d] their object in ameliorating conditions.’⁵⁵ South Africa was also assured that London would protest strongly if it felt that the Protecting Power did not act with ‘sufficient vigour,’⁵⁶ as happened in February 1943 when the Directorate of Prisoners of War protested in its newsletter sent to the Protecting Power ‘against the ill-

⁵¹ DOD AG(POW) 1527 Vol. 1. D.C.S. (D.M.I.) Defence Headquarters to D.A.G. (P.O.W.), Pretoria. 27 May 1943.

⁵² DOD AG(POW) 1527 Vol. 1. D.C.S. (D.M.I.) Defence Headquarters to D.A.G. (P.O.W.), Pretoria. 27 May 1943.

⁵³ Matthys Beukes interview: 2 February 2011, Bloemfontein.

⁵⁴ DOD AG(POW) 1527 Vol. 1. D.C.S. (D.M.I.) Defence Headquarters to D.A.G. (P.O.W.), Pretoria. 27 May 1943.

⁵⁵ DOD AG(POW) 1527/85. UDF POW. Italian POW Camp No 85. R. Jones (Political Secretary) to Secretary for External Affairs, Pretoria. 12 October 1943.

⁵⁶ DOD AG(POW) 1527/85. UDF POW. Italian POW Camp No 85. R. Jones (Political Secretary) to Secretary for External Affairs, Pretoria. 12 October 1943.

treatment of prisoners of war in Libya in 1942, and the Protecting Power was requested to demand the punishment of officers and other ranks who were responsible for the outrages at Benghazi camp.’⁵⁷

Again, POW attitudes towards Italians remain a prominent and recurring theme. In many cases, impressions formed in North Africa were confirmed by incidents or observations as they were moved from coastal transit camps to permanent sites inland. For Cremer, whose views were not favourable on arrival in Italy, the sarcastically mocking conclusion of his memoirs was that all Italians must have been fly farmers, given how many flies there were in the camp at Bari.⁵⁸ When Mugglestone and his fellow POWs disembarked from the *Rosalino Pilo*, they were filthy, but in his view they were ‘nevertheless a picture of cleanliness in comparison to some of the civilians of Naples.’⁵⁹ After his arrival at Camp 82, his opinion of its commander was equally sneering, describing him as a ‘big stout man, with so many ribbons on his bioscope commissionaire uniform, that it made Goering look like an amateur.’⁶⁰

Relations between POWs and guards became more stable as men settled into their routines in permanent camps, but for many this barely altered opinions of the enemy formed while in North Africa. At first, POWs were in an obviously low position as they depended utterly on their captors for food and shelter. When Red Cross parcels started to arrive and as the war turned increasingly against Italy, captors now found themselves in a more vulnerable position. Interestingly, before the 1943 Armistice, prisoners seemed to make few distinctions between Italian forces and Italian civilians. Beyond generally abusive descriptions of all Italians, some contempt took on an emphatically racist tone. While still in North Africa, Schwikkard, for example, judged Italians according to how dark-complexioned they were, and this thinking thrived in Italy among other POWs. One of those was Dickinson, whose diary recorded a friendship that developed between him and a guard from:

Bologna in the north [who had] the intelligence of the northern Italian and doesn’t look at you blankly when you talk about Michelangelo [...] in the northern Italian it is

⁵⁷ DOD CE8/5/1. Directorate of Prisoners of War Monthly Directorate Letter. February 1943.

⁵⁸ Cremer, A.J. n.d. *Oorlogsherinneringe*: 22.

⁵⁹ Mugglestone, D.I.H. n.d. *Destination Unknown*: 27.

⁶⁰ Mugglestone, D.I.H. n.d. *Destination Unknown*: 27.

not difficult to see the past power and glory of Italy. The southerners are very different – smaller, very much darker-skinned and more the peasant type.’⁶¹

Ironically, the view held by POWs that the north was superior to the south, was shared by many Italians, especially during the inter-war period when the north became known as ‘civilized’ while the south was seen as ‘barbarous.’⁶²

Because POWs had so dim a view of their captors, the order to salute Italian officers was something that grated. For Beukes, the only reason why POWs saluted Italian officers was because they were soldiers, and in any army privates were expected to salute officers. In the Italian context, however, this reflex was not based upon respect for any authority of rank. What he found particularly humiliating was the fact that when POWs jumped up to salute, they could faint because of their weakened state, causing Italian officers to burst out laughing.⁶³ While most POWs seemed to respect military rules, it was not always the same with camp rules. One such example concerned Sergeant-Major Snyman, camp leader at Camp 54 at Fara Sabina. When Snyman wanted to discuss a matter with the camp commander, he would simply walk out of the camp to the office, causing the guards to run after him as they were not allowed to let a POW out without an escort. He also had a physical advantage as he was very tall compared to the guards and the camp commander. Snyman often exploited his height to upstage his enemy, standing very close to the commander to force him to look up to his captive.⁶⁴

Contact between POWs and Italian civilians was not entirely devoid of humour and at times provided entertainment for POWs, although not necessarily for the Italians concerned. When local women were sent to cut camp grass, Hammond and his fellow POWs delighted in a betting game they devised while watching the women bending over and working with their scythes. Hammond described how ‘three “spotters” were immediately elected, their role being to take up position as soon as the women arrived, lying flat on the ground near the fence; meanwhile, bookies wasted no time in taking bets on what colour knickers each woman would be wearing.’⁶⁵ Despite loud cheers from the POWs, especially when a woman was spotted wearing nothing under her dress, the humiliated grass cutters evidently remained aloof.

⁶¹ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo’burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by EB Dickinson*: 93.

⁶² Bosworth, R.J.B. 2005. *Mussolini’s Italy Life under the Dictatorship 1915 – 1945*: 5.

⁶³ Matthys Beukes interview: 2 February 2011, Bloemfontein.

⁶⁴ Mortlock, J. 1956. *The endless years Reminiscences of the 2nd World War*: 39.

⁶⁵ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over. The story of H.R. (Aussie) Hammond*: 57.

Liberty

For a POW, liberty could come as a result of repatriation, escape or liberation by Allied forces. Repatriation agreements between Italy and the Allies were beset by bureaucratic wrangling, delaying freedom for many and bypassing others entirely. For the majority, the idea of freedom seemed unattainable until the Italian Armistice took place and most camps were left abandoned by captors. Equally, the opportunity presented by the Armistice did not mean freedom for all POWs as confusion and indecision caused many of them to again become prisoners of the Germans, against the stipulations of the Armistice agreement.

Repatriation

Shortly after the fall of Tobruk, the Union attempted to secure the repatriation of some of those who were captured. However, its efforts were fruitless as bureaucracy and perceived competition between Commonwealth nations got the upper hand. When the Secretary for External Affairs approached the High Commissioner in London regarding repatriation of POWs captured in North Africa, he was informed that the British authorities disapproved of 'uncoordinated action', as they did not want one part of the Commonwealth 'profiting at the expenses of others'. This was something they considered 'especially likely in relation to the Italians, whose inefficiency might lead them to hasten notifications in response to pressure from one quarter, while ignoring equal claims from other quarters merely because they were not represented.'⁶⁶

For POWs, the only other option, apart from escape, was medical repatriation. To qualify for this, a POW's medical condition had to be such that he would not be able to return to the front as a fighting soldier.⁶⁷ The selection process was, however, arbitrary and inconsistent and ordinary POWs did not seem to seriously consider this option of liberty, although they could always hope. To be considered for medical repatriation, POWs had to be selected, or could claim to be examined within six months of capture. Once examined, men were either placed in Category A, which meant direct repatriation, or Category B, which meant that they would be repatriated to a neutral country. Within Category B, POWs could be classed, firstly, as never to be fit again for combat; secondly, those whose cure within one year could not be

⁶⁶ NASA BTS 9/55/1A Vol.I. Correspondence from D.D. Forsyth [Secretary for External Affairs] to South African Red Cross. 28 September 1942.

⁶⁷ Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*: 224.

medically foreseen and who would be re-examined again in six months. If they were not expected to be cured in one year they would be transferred to Category A; and, thirdly, if a POW's application failed they had to be examined again after six months.⁶⁸

The Red Cross, though, viewed this complex and cumbersome system as impractical as its view was that there was insufficient accommodation in neutral countries. It therefore proposed that all POWs in Category B should be repatriated directly, and that no distinction should be made between Categories A or B. To further complicate affairs, repatriation agreements between belligerents depended on reciprocity, and if no suitable accommodation was available in a neutral country, exchanges of POWs could not take place. Repatriations between Italy and South Africa were rare as it was generally accepted that 'Italian POWs in South Africa live under more ideal climatic conditions and receive better treatment than they would in a neutral country.'⁶⁹

Repatriations could, furthermore, not occur if conditions in the POWs home country were not acceptable, and following the Armistice those POWs still in Italy lost all hope of repatriation when the 'Swiss Legation in London was informed that no examination of Italian internees in the United Kingdom by the Mixed Medical commission will take place for the present time as there is under the present conditions in Italy no prospect of repatriations.'⁷⁰

Escapes before Armistice

While UDF volunteers were not provided with any information on the Geneva Convention during their training, they were given a 'standing instruction'⁷¹ that it was their duty to escape if taken prisoner. However, for many such an instruction lost any meaning as circumstances changed in Italy. Successful escapes were rare before the Armistice, with Brokensha voicing the common view that it was easier for officers to get out as they were better organised and their camps were easier to escape from.⁷² Officers' escapes have featured prominently in both popular and academic literature, where ease of escape, skill and education or higher levels of motivation have counted as major factors.

⁶⁸ NASA BTS 9/55/1 D Vol. I. Directorate of Prisoners of War. 2 January 1942. These were in fact guidelines proposed by the United Kingdom authorities as the stipulations in the Geneva Convention did not consider POWs who deteriorated after an initial medical examination or who in fact improved following an examination.

⁶⁹ NASA BTS 9/55/1 D Vol.I. Letter from Adjutant General to Secretary for External Affairs regarding repatriation proposals by the International Red Cross Committee.

⁷⁰ NASA BTS 9/55/1 D Vol.I. Correspondence; Swiss Legation. 5 January 1944.

⁷¹ Michael de Lisle interview: 4 June 2010, Cape Town.

⁷² David Brokensha interview: 10 September 2010, Fish Hoek.

Whatever the case, the highest percentage of escapes came from the ranks of the Royal Air Force (RAF) who were kept in officers' camps.⁷³ Unlike other ranks who were often accommodated in tents or in hastily built barracks, many officers were imprisoned in established buildings, such as old castles, and it was from one of these, Camp 12, that six POWs escaped before the Armistice. All of brigadier rank or above, they escaped through a tunnel in March 1943. Four were recaptured, one died in Spain and although the sixth reached Britain, he died in battle year later.⁷⁴ Successful escapes in pre-Armistice Italy by other ranks were exceptional, possibly as a result of improved conditions in permanent camps and resigned acceptance of status and subsequent acquiescence to a camp existence. Although tedious and defined by constant hunger, lice, rumour and longing for home, set daily routines and more liveable conditions helped to habituate men to POW status and some abandoned any escape plans – realistic or otherwise – that they may have had. As one Sidi Rezegh POW concluded from Camp 52 at Chiavari in March 1942, 'I have had enough of war, and am now sitting back critically, while the others do the dirty work.'⁷⁵

Escape, on the other hand, demanded energy, and for those who had escape plans these had to be put aside until the first Red Cross parcels arrived to improve their physical condition. Equally, Red Cross rations could also have the effect of dissuading soldiers from thoughts of escape because camp life assured them of some food. Other POWs thought it more secure to stay put as any successful escape would involve a passable knowledge of Italian and reliance on the local population for food and shelter, a risky requirement as they were unsure of civilian attitudes.

Ruthless action towards recaptured men also put off POWs from trying to escape, as Hindshaw witnessed in Camp 60, near Lucca. During the first three weeks of his stay, he witnessed two failed attempts, one by a South African who lost his nerve and, while running back to his tent was shot by guards, and another by a British POW who was shot and killed while climbing the fence. After these two costly incidents, an Italian priest warned assembled POWs that to escape in Italy would be pointless.⁷⁶ External developments also played a part in POWs calculations. Before the fall of Mussolini, the Allies made numerous efforts at establishing peace with Rome, and news of these would often reach camps, creating rumours

⁷³ Vance, J.F. 1993. 'The War behind the wire: the Battle to escape from a German Prison Camp.' *Journal of Contemporary History*, 28(4):677.

⁷⁴ Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*: 280 – 282.

⁷⁵ DOD CE 4/15. Union of South Africa Censorship. Correspondence suspected to require special attention.

⁷⁶ Hindshaw, W. n.d. *An account of my experience as a prisoner-of-war and escapee in the Italian Alps during the Second World War*: 18.

and raising premature hopes of liberation. When Churchill and Roosevelt attempted to convince the civilian population of the benefits of peace by writing an open letter explaining that surrender was their only option,⁷⁷ it created a particular stir. De Lisle, on an agricultural work camp near Foggia at the time, remembers that the newspapers containing this message cost two cakes of soap, instead of the usual cigarette or two. As camp translator, he carefully translated Churchill and Roosevelt's message to be read out to all POWs, helping to raise morale.⁷⁸ News from registered readers and rumours of Allied landings in Italy also combined to create diverse reactions. Some POWs, like the Brokensha brothers, decided to wait for the advancing Allies to liberate them, while others took it upon themselves to try to secure their freedom, prompting escape attempts before the Armistice.

When the coup d'état eventually took place on 25 July 1943, the Allies demanded unconditional surrender from Marshal Pietro Badoglio's new government, although it would not be until 3 September 1943 for the Armistice to be settled.⁷⁹ It was during this period, between the fall of Mussolini and the Armistice, that the already troubled Axis relationship between the Italians and the Germans worsened, with many Italian soldiers expressing hostility towards their new enemy.⁸⁰ At the same time, as experienced by Beukes and Thring, many guards became more sympathetic towards their captives. Equally, few POWs fancied their prospects in trying to escape at this time as they remained unsure of civilian attitudes. Following the coup d'état, Luyt remembers being told, 'don't go running around the countryside, because certainly in Italy you don't know who is a fascist, or who was not a fascist.'⁸¹

Caution was also the message conveyed by an order sent by Brigadier Richard Crockatt of Military Intelligence to POW camps in early June, in an effort to prevent reprisals should mass escapes take place, and also to prevent escaped POWs from forming guerrilla fighting units.⁸² This coded MI9 instruction was read by registered readers, and included a warning of 'disciplinary action to prevent individual prisoners-of-war attempting to rejoin their own

⁷⁷ Linsenmeyer, W.S. 1981. 'Italian Peace Feelers before the Fall of Mussolini.' *Journal of Contemporary History*, 16(4):651.

⁷⁸ Michael de Lisle interview: 4 June 2010, Cape Town.

⁷⁹ Linsenmeyer, W.S. 1981. 'Italian Peace Feelers before the Fall of Mussolini.' *Journal of Contemporary History*, 16(4):649, 650, 659.

⁸⁰ Wiskemann, E. 1946. 'The Breaking of the Axis.' *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944 -)*, 22(2):234.

⁸¹ Clive Luyt interview: 27 August 2010, Cape Town.

⁸² Lamb, R. 1993. *War in Italy 1943 – 1945 A Brutal Story*: 160. Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*: 282.

units.’⁸³ De Lisle recalls the message from registered camp readers advising all POWs to remain in their camps when British forces took over, although obeying the order was not ‘as easy as that [as there were] tremendous rumours of landing[s] up the coasts of Italy on both sides.’⁸⁴

Such rumours sowed uncertainty among POWs, with some attempting escape while others were content to wait in the belief that the Allies were on their way to liberate them. Some attempts at breaking out also proved to be abortive. While in Camp 75 near Bari, Clive Luyt knew of a group of POWs who were digging a tunnel in order to escape, but never considered joining it. The escape proved unsuccessful as the diggers misjudged the distance and their tunnel came up directly underneath the guard room, providing endless opportunity for discussion and humour among other inmates.⁸⁵ When Fred Geldenhuis arrived at Camp 54, he immediately joined an escape committee which had already started on a tunnel. However, the peace talks between the Allies and Italy following Mussolini’s fall progressed at a faster pace than the Fara Sabina tunnel and Geldenhuis and his committee never used it.⁸⁶ The more circumspect Dickinson, also there at the time, was completely unaware of the escape activity and considered plans as ‘more talk than action [...] there has to be outside contact and knowledge of the language. Then, too, there is always the uncertainty of reprisal or of being re-captured.’⁸⁷

Considering their bruising imprisonment experiences in North-Africa, many POWs accepted that the enemy would resort to some sort of punishment for escapees; in fact, recaptured POWs were usually placed in solitary confinement or in specific punishment camps for persistent escapers, such as Camp 5 at Gavi.⁸⁸ David and Paul Brokensha, along with Dickinson at Camp 54, seemed to have been unaware of escape committees and tunnels. That notwithstanding, in their case news of the death of an elder brother overshadowed their first weeks at the camp and later rumours of Allied landings in Sicily and of Allied military advances made escape plans seem irrelevant as they believed that it would not be long before they would be liberated.⁸⁹

⁸³ Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*: 283.

⁸⁴ Michael de Lisle interview: 4 June 2010, Cape Town.

⁸⁵ Clive Luyt interview: 27 August 2010, Cape Town.

⁸⁶ Geldenhuis, F.J.W. n.d. *A Soldier’s Scrap Book. The memoirs of Frederik Jacobus Wagenaar Geldenhuis*: 112 – 113.

⁸⁷ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo’burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by EB Dickinson*: 75.

⁸⁸ Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*: 284.

⁸⁹ Brokensha, D. 2007. *Brokie’s Way*: 83 – 89.

Others lacked such patience. Crompton's memoirs recall how POWs near Padua tried to escape from camp by pretending to be part of the work parties, while others looked for exit routes through sewers or over roofs. But the majority of those who escaped before the Armistice were recaptured and this discouraged others. Crompton also found guards were very zealous sentries as any mistakes on their part could result in them being sent to the frontline as punishment, 'and that was a death warrant, they believed.'⁹⁰ In many instances, even though only a small minority of rank-and-file POWs put their escape plans into action, the elaborate plans and endless discussions about escape provided intellectual stimulation that alleviated boredom and even improved morale.⁹¹

All the while, there were more impulsive POWs who were determined to try to escape at any opportunity and at any cost, such as in the case of Geldenhuis' earlier escape in Greece. Others repeatedly refused to accept being held against their will, as with Peter Johnson, who was one of the few UDF POWs who escaped several times before the Armistice. While working in a cement factory in Taranto in March 1943, Johnson recalled that 'speculation was rife that Italy, as soon as it was invaded, would probably surrender and we would be free, for our guards were all Italian and would disappear overnight.'⁹² Invasion rumours and assumptions about the fragility of enemy forces convinced Johnson and a friend to escape as soon as they heard that the Allies were making their way up Italy. They also feared that POWs would be handed over to the Germans and this was something they wanted to avoid at any cost.⁹³ Johnson's fear of being transported to Germany was well justified as Berlin had been moving Allied POWs from North Africa from Italy on to Germany since 1941.⁹⁴ In July 1943, for instance, a British POW wrote from Stalag IVB in Germany to the YMCA in Geneva, declaring that he was one of 2500 POWs who had been transported from Italy to Germany. In his communication to the South African Red Cross, the Adjutant General in Pretoria commented that 'it would appear [...] that the above [transfer to Germany] was planned and probably carried out before Mussolini's fall [...] I consider for the present the less publicity given to the question of transfers from Italy the better.'⁹⁵ On the same day, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs contacted the Swiss Minister in Rome to express indignation at Churchill's message to the King of Italy regarding the transfer of POWs from

⁹⁰ Crompton, C. & P. Johnson. 2010. *Luck's Favours*: 52.

⁹¹ Leigh, M. 1992. *Captives Courageous. South African prisoners of war World War II*: 217 – 218.

⁹² Crompton, C. & P. Johnson. 2010. *Luck's Favours*: 153.

⁹³ Crompton, C. & P. Johnson. 2010. *Luck's Favours*: 153.

⁹⁴ Schamberger, P. 2001. *Interlude in Switzerland. The story of the South African refugee-soldiers in the Alps during the Second World War*: 11.

⁹⁵ DOD AG(POW) 1527 Vol. 1. Adjutant-General to General Secretary C. Urquhart. 18 August 1943.

Italy to Germany. The Rome Ministry stated that Italy they had no intention of transferring POWs to Germany and added that the transfer of 2400 POWs from Italy to Germany between 20 and 22 July had been carried out by military authorities before they had received communication from Britain that no prisoners be transferred to Germany ‘in present circumstances’⁹⁶, referring no doubt to the coup d’état and negotiations between the Badoglio Government and the Allies.

Although Johnson’s friend lost his nerve, eventually leaving him alone, his flight included a few close shaves with enemy forces, and injuries from running into barbed wire while under fire. Eventually recaptured when physically unable to carry on, Johnson was taken to Tuteurano for interrogation about his escape methods, as Italian command was puzzled as to how he had been able to evade hundreds of troops. As he left the interrogation room, an officer ‘touched [him] on the arm, and from a large grin, exclaimed, “it won’t be long now.”’⁹⁷ Johnson understood the reference to the Allied invasion and pending liberation of Allied POWs. He now knew, too, of the officers’ opinion of Italy’s fate, which could not be revealed openly. One of his guards probably surprised him even more by suggesting that they escape together as he had plans to emigrate to South Africa.

Johnson was taken to Tuteurano and placed in a punishment cell along with other failed escapees with whom he immediately bonded and their sharing of escape stories had the effect of motivating them to try again.⁹⁸ Meanwhile, according to an agreement between the Allies and the Badoglio Government, the Italians were supposed to prevent German forces from taking control of Allied POW camps during the Armistice negotiations,⁹⁹ and all inmates were to be handed over to the Allies once the Armistice had been signed.¹⁰⁰ But there is evidence pointing to Germans taking control of POW camps and evacuating prisoners to Germany between the date of the coup d’état and the Armistice agreement, to which Johnson’s escape attempt observations from Camp 82 provide vivid testimony.

Johnson and a friend had been working on an escape tunnel when their camp commander informed POWs that Mussolini had been deposed and that guards would probably ‘no longer take seriously their duties of guarding [and] would probably desert their posts and go

⁹⁶ DOD AG(POW) 1527 Vol. 1. Political Secretary to Secretary for External Affairs, Pretoria. 30 August 1943.

⁹⁷ Crompton, C. & P. Johnson. 2010. *Luck’s Favours*: 167.

⁹⁸ Crompton, C. & P. Johnson. 2010. *Luck’s Favours*: 167 – 169.

⁹⁹ Lamb, R. 1993. *War in Italy 1943 – 1945 A Brutal Story*: 162.

¹⁰⁰ Schamberger, P. 2001. *Interlude in Switzerland. The story of the South African refugee-soldiers in the Alps during the Second World War*: 11.

home’,¹⁰¹ confirming Johnson’s belief that Italian forces had lost faith in the war. When informed of the coup d’état, POWs were instructed to remain in their camp to be provided with food and shelter while they awaited the Allies’ arrival, but he nevertheless decided to break out again. Escape was now much easier, as Johnson and two other South Africans found that they could simply walk out past smiling Italian guards.¹⁰² That effortlessness may have made the fleeing POWs too confident, and they were soon betrayed to fascist forces by a ‘middle-aged gentleman who spoke a little broken English.’¹⁰³

This time, however, Johnson’s recapture did not bring him into contact with friendly Italian officers, but with German police officers. These he assumed to be Gestapo. Despite his fear of the alleged ‘brutal tactics’ used by Germans, the escapees spent a restful night in a jail cell and were then transported back to their camp, which was now under German control. As soon as Johnson arrived, he swiftly joined an escape committee and in July 1943 escaped again through a hole in the fence, along with a larger group of prisoners. Observing the camp from a distance the next morning, he spotted how its entire population was being removed, ‘destined, no doubt, for another prison camp in Germany.’¹⁰⁴ Being near Arezzo, this removal was most probably from Camp 38 near Poppi. If Johnson’s eyewitness account is to be relied on, this suggests that in the pre-armistice period, there were more transfers of POWs than the listed removal of the 2400 men which took place between 20 and 22 July 1943.¹⁰⁵ Johnson managed to evade capture by the Germans and spent the next year living in caves, helping the partisans, falling in love, and working as a lumberjack while trying to make his way to the Allied lines. He managed this finally in June 1944 when he reached L’Aquila along with a British reconnaissance party.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰¹ Crompton, C. & P. Johnson. 2010. *Luck’s Favours*: 175 – 179.

¹⁰² Crompton, C. & P. Johnson. 2010. *Luck’s Favours*: 175 – 180.

¹⁰³ Crompton, C. & P. Johnson. 2010. *Luck’s Favours*: 182.

¹⁰⁴ Crompton, C. & P. Johnson. 2010. *Luck’s Favours*: 184 – 186, 189 – 191.

¹⁰⁵ DOD AG(POW) 1527 Vol. 2. *Present information on prisoners-of-war in Italy*. 31 July 1943. This list gives information on camp locations, strengths, nationalities, how many POWs were liberated and how many ‘probably’ transferred to Germany, how many POWs in Switzerland as at 31 July 1943. No information about Camp 38 appears on this list. DOD AG(POW) 1527 Vol. 2. *Summary of present information concerning prisoners-of-war in Italy*. This document was compiled after the armistice and provides information on the number of POWs who were liberated, escaped, recaptured and transferred to Germany. The list does not mention specific camps but only regions in Italy.

¹⁰⁶ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over. The story of H.R. (Aussie) Hammond*: 277.

Armistice and mass escapes

POWs mostly heard of Mussolini's fall from guards, but prior to this they relied on rumours, pamphlets and hidden radios for news of Allied landings in Italy. Many camps were also near cities and intensifying RAF activity and anti-aircraft fire enabled some fairly accurate assumptions to be made. In Dickinson's camp, a pamphlet drop informed POWs of Allied victories in North Africa. Shortly after a bombing raid on Rome in July 1943, Allied aircraft dropped more pamphlets into camps which guards scrambled to collect and to sell for soap and cigarettes, illustrating the state of shortages in Italy by that stage. Propaganda pamphlets also stressed the deterioration of the relationship between Italy and Germany since the overthrow of Mussolini. Thus, as Dickinson noted, 'the other [pamphlet] tells the Italians that Rome is going to be bombed by daylight so that the Ities can see we are not bombing their valuable antiques – a thing Germany would do at night and blame it on us.'¹⁰⁷

Camp 52 prisoners had access to a hidden radio. News was then written down which specially appointed readers would carry to different huts. Readers carried lecture notes as cover, to which they could switch should any guards make an appearance.¹⁰⁸ When camp command prohibited newspapers, which POWs had been exchanging for cigarettes, it seemed to confirm to that Italy was losing its battle against the Allies. Rumours abounded in the pre-armistice period, with it even being predicted in Camp 54 that Berlin itself would fall within weeks. The phase between Mussolini's toppling and the Armistice was one of widening optimism for POWs, with conversation centred increasingly on Allied victories. Inevitably, a favourite pastime became betting, usually cigarettes, on how long Italy would be able to hold out.

The prospect of imminent Italian collapse was greeted with oddly mixed feelings on the part of some individual POWs. Towards the end of July 1943, Dickinson, for one, observed that he agreed with the Badoglio Government about continuing with the war. By not giving in immediately to Allied demands of unconditional surrender, Italy would be able to emerge from hostilities with some honour intact. On this, a self-consciously 'colonial' Dickinson sought to distinguish British views from a more romanticised colonial view. Distinguishing turn-coats from upstanding nationalists, he suggested that:

¹⁰⁷ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo'burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by EB Dickinson*: 90.

¹⁰⁸ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over. The story of H.R. (Aussie) Hammond*: 58.

On a question like this the colonial sees things differently from the Englishman; the latter seems to lose sight of the fact that a great number of Italian scum have turned pro-British and there are still decent Italians who are proud and pro-Italian.¹⁰⁹

That opinion did not, however, last long. With Italy still failing to capitulate following the fall of Sicily and the bombing of Rome, Dickinson's views deteriorated markedly:

the fall of Sicily has been claimed by Italy as a military victory! [...] they say that from Addis Ababa to Messina the Italians have met with numerically superior forces and tremendous odds! God, what tripe! The stupidity of these Italians is unbelievable!¹¹⁰

By then, he had grown so impatient about the expected peace agreement that his criticisms extended to the Allies. As his diary noted on 1 September, 'Churchill makes a waffling speech and the Pope blabbers about world peace. Every single bloody Itie wants peace, and we do nothing about it. I am really brownd off.'¹¹¹ While Dickinson seemed to have been well informed about the developing peace process, others elsewhere seemed to have been oblivious, being startled by sudden camp commander announcements of Italy's capitulation.¹¹²

On the other hand, in some camps the circulation of news was so advanced that it was the POWs who were able to inform their guards reliably that Italy had fallen, as experienced by Aussie Hammond, 'our guards laughed when we gave them the news first, but they accepted the official confirmation shortly afterwards with their usual shrug of the shoulders.'¹¹³ At Armistice, of the thousands of Allied POWs in Italy, all could have had a chance at liberty had negotiations between the Badoglio Government and the Allies reached a swift conclusion and had orders from the London War Office and MI9 not been so confusing for captives. While the Middle East Defence Committee in Cairo believed that mass escapes would aid the Allied advance as these would create difficulties for the German Army, Lieutenant-Colonel Simonds had already devised escape instructions that involved POWs to be aided and

¹⁰⁹ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo'burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by EB Dickinson*: 93.

¹¹⁰ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo'burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by EB Dickinson*: 95.

¹¹¹ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo'burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by EB Dickinson*: 95.

¹¹² Cremer, A.J. n.d. *Oorlogsherinneringe*: 28. 'Een oggend was al die wagte om die kamp skoonveld. Hulle het hul gewere weggegooi en laat spaander. Die kommandant het toe sy verskyning gemaak en ons vertel dat Italië oorgegee het en dat ons kan doen wat ons wil...'

¹¹³ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over. The story of H.R. (Aussie) Hammond*: 63.

evacuated by invading Allied forces. Crockatt, however, believed that any mass escapes would cause organizational problems and would slow down the Allies in Italy.

These disagreements over Italian POWs resulted in Simonds being left with one American officer and three British officers who were supposed to coordinate assistance of the thousands of POWs following Armistice.¹¹⁴ On 6 September, the Italian authorities attempted to honour their agreement that Allied POWs be protected from German control and instructed commandants to defend camps, failing which, all white prisoners were to be released while black POWs were to remain interned. To the end, a racial pecking order was adhered to. The camp order also required, rather impractically, that freed POWs be given ‘reserve rations’ and helped to reach either Switzerland or the Adriatic coast.¹¹⁵

The commandant of Camp 49, an officers’ camp near Reggio Fontanello, apparently obeyed the order to assist POWs to attain freedom, but at Villa Orsini, where General Klopper was held, his counterpart refused, although Klopper and those with him decided on leaving as they rejected the War Office ‘stay put’ order.¹¹⁶ When he returned to South Africa, Klopper featured in a radio broadcast in which he related his experiences in North Africa and in POW camps. All POWs, Klopper reported, had had high hopes of escape following the armistice, but ‘it soon became apparent that any organised large-scale escape of prisoners of war was out of the question due to lack of supplies, transport, arms and assistance [...] the only chance of getting away would have to be through individual effort.’ He stressed that Allied forces were ‘up against a determined enemy [and] over-optimism among the POWs was cleverly exploited by the Nazis, who let false information trickle to the prisoners.’¹¹⁷

At other camps containing rank-and-file POWs, commandants appeared to have responded generally to the Armistice and to the order to protect POWs against Germans, but according to their political inclinations. Therefore, committed Fascist commandants held POWs back until German forces arrived, while those who had become disillusioned with Mussolini’s cause often assisted POWs to flee or simply abandoned their positions, leaving camps with no control structure. Ordinary guards reacted in a similar way, and most seemed relieved to be freed of their military duties. Hindshaw remembered that at first guards became very

¹¹⁴ Lamb, R. 1993. *War in Italy 1943 – 1945 A Brutal Story*: 161 – 163.

¹¹⁵ Lamb, R. 1993. *War in Italy 1943 – 1945 A Brutal Story*: 163.

¹¹⁶ Lamb, R. 1993. *War in Italy 1943 – 1945 A Brutal Story*: 166.

¹¹⁷ DOD CE 8/1/3. Prisoners of War. Released or Escaped POWs. Broadcasts by released POWs. Broadcast by Major-General Klopper. 18 October 1943. It is interesting to note that the broadcast was edited and all references to ‘fascism’ and ‘the fall of Mussolini’ was replaced by ‘armistice’.

friendly when they heard of Mussolini's toppling, and then, when Armistice was finally agreed, 'every sentry bar one changed into civvies and destroyed his rifle.'¹¹⁸ At the Armistice, Hindshaw was working on a farm with fifty other POWs, all of whom escaped, although as far as he could ascertain subsequently, only three reached Allied lines while the rest were recaptured by Germans.¹¹⁹

Likewise, Clive Luyt's main motivation in escaping was to avoid being captured by Germans, as he warned companions:

those Germans fought a war in North Africa to catch guys like you and me, they're not going to give up, [...] give them just a couple of days to reorganise and we'll be in a truck and off to Germany, which is exactly what happened to a lot of chaps, I said let's get out while we can.¹²⁰

Still, he did not rush. Only when guards had thrown away their rifles on 11 September and left POWs to their own devices in Camp 54 did Luyt and a companion decide to leave, ignoring instructions from senior NCOs' that all POWs remain in the camp.¹²¹ Another yet more stubborn escapee was Fred Geldenhuis, who absconded twice while in Italy, joined a partisan group and participated in several actions against the Germans, but was recaptured and taken back to Camp 54 which had been turned into a transit facility for recaptured POWs. Escapees' clothes were marked with yellow paint and the letters KGF, which stood for *Kriegsgefangenen* [prisoner-of-war], which some recaptured POWs turned into an irresistible joke, in that it stood for 'Kouldn't Get Frough (sic)' to the Allied lines.¹²²

Others, like Brokensha, did not consider their short-lived freedom following the Armistice as 'escapes', for camps were not guarded and they could walk out at any time. Walking free also often led POWs straight into German patrols and many were recaptured, as with David and Paul Brokensha and Jack Mortlock, all of whom were apprehended just over a week after leaving Camp 54.¹²³ This interlude was clearly a phase of uncertainty and confusion for

¹¹⁸ Hindshaw, W. n.d. *An account of my experience as a prisoner-of-war and escapee in the Italian Alps during the Second World War*: 27.

¹¹⁹ William Hindshaw interview: 19 March 2010, Johannesburg.

¹²⁰ Clive Luyt interview: 19 May 2010, Cape Town.

¹²¹ Luyt, C., Barclay, J. & R. Andrews. n.d. "Escape" to Monte Gennaro Survival in the Mountains during WWII. While on the run in Italy, Luyt kept a diary which he and Barclay edited after the war to serve as their memoirs of their time as escaped POWs.

¹²² Geldenhuis, F.J.W. n.d. *A Soldier's Scrap Book. The memoirs of Frederik Jacobus Wagenaar Geldenhuis*: 160 – 161.

¹²³ David Brokensha interview: 10 September 2010, Fish Hoek.

POWs. Peter Ogilvy and Newman Robinson blamed the Italians for the War Office order which they considered to be a hoax. Robinson believed that the Italians invented the stay put instruction to punish POWs for having handing out spare tins of food to local civilians. As they carried anti-Fascist messages, POWs were punished by being deprived of Red Cross parcels for three weeks. It was shortly thereafter that Armistice took place and they were ordered to remain in their camp. With no one escaping, the Germans arrived. It was believed that the order had been a lie to punish them further.¹²⁴ At the same time, for some others the decision to flee or to remain was out of their hands, as with a weakened Van Alphen Stahl who was in hospital with malaria.¹²⁵ Transported to Germany by train and by truck, he was in no state to attempt any kind of escape.

Successful Union POW escapees included William Hindshaw who met up with the Allies in Belvedere, France in January 1945 with the help of Italian partisans.¹²⁶ Michael de Lisle escaped while being marched to a train which was to have taken him and others to Germany. He was at first recaptured by the Germans, but escaped again to reach the Allies near Lucca in November 1944. His first night of freedom was, however, spent with the enemy in a POW camp as a British officer would not believe that he was South African, having no papers to prove his status as an Allied POW. Two weeks later he was interrogated by a South African unit which then established De Lisle's identity.¹²⁷

Stanley Smollan's escape and his arrival with three companions at the Anzio beachhead, where the Allies were engaged in a battle against the Germans, made headlines in the *Rand Daily Mail* in February 1944.¹²⁸ Like many other escapees, he had depended on the charity and goodwill of Italian peasants while on the run. The son of one of those families, Tammaso de Lellis, was a POW in South Africa. On his return to the union, an indebted Smollan contacted the Zonderwater prison camp and the Adjutant-General to try to arrange early repatriation for De Lellis. However, fearful of humiliation and the reactions of his fellow POWs, he declined to co-operate, ending what might otherwise have been a poignant story of humanitarianism in war.¹²⁹

¹²⁴ Ogilvy, P. & N. Robinson. 1975. *In the bag*: 78 – 79.

¹²⁵ Fred van Alphen Stahl interview: 25 May 2010, Cape Town.

¹²⁶ Hindshaw, W. n.d. *An account of my experience as a prisoner-of-war and escapee in the Italian Alps during the Second World War*: 62.

¹²⁷ Michael de Lisle interview: 4 June 2010, Cape Town.

¹²⁸ *Rand Daily Mail*, February 1944. *Stirring story of Springboks' escape*.

¹²⁹ Stanley Smollan: private letters; 1944 – 1946.

Matthys Beukes, an escapee like Smollan, fled from his camp near Gravina and at first decided to make his way south before being cautioned by other escapees that he was more likely to come across Fascists there. Joining them, he reached Switzerland,¹³⁰ becoming one of the 886 South Africans who reached refuge there.¹³¹ Clive Luyt, an escapee from Camp 54, also managed to stay on the run, and after living in caves and hiding out with Italian families, found himself on the Allied side of the fighting in the town of Campitello di Fassa or Campobello di Licata.¹³²

All POWs had a natural desire for freedom, but not all were prepared to take risks to acquire it. Many remained unsure of civilian attitudes and were later fearful of what might happen to them should they be caught by Germans. Others considered the war in Italy to be soon over, not an unrealistic supposition considering conditions in the country and the expectant rumours which circulated in camps, and believed that an extra month or two in a POW camp would be better than roaming around in a hostile foreign country.¹³³

In her classic account, Wiskemann concludes that ‘the forty-five days from Mussolini’s fall until the Italian armistice were tragic indeed: never can so much decent human hope have been disappointed in so short a time.’¹³⁴ Possibly as a result of conflicting orders from MI9 to POWs to remain in camps and those from Rome to camp commandants to assist POWs to leave, confusion checked many from acting. Other probable factors included poor health and poor intelligence about practical circumstances outside camp fences. Accordingly, thousands of POWs simply remained immobilised to see incoming German troops surrounding and taking control of POW camps. For South African POWs among them, the six weeks of uncertainty and rumour between the coup d’état and the Armistice was indeed a lost opportunity to obtain freedom. Had the Badoglio administration agreed to an immediate surrender, prisoners would in all likelihood have been liberated en masse. However, difficulties in negotiations and delays in reaching an agreement allowed German forces to establish a strong presence, and to take control of numerous POW camps.

¹³⁰ Matthys Beukes interview: 2 February 2011, Bloemfontein.

¹³¹ Schamberger, P. 2001. *Interlude in Switzerland: The story of the South African refugee-soldiers in the Alps during the Second World War*: 6.

¹³² Luyt, C., Barclay, J. & R. Andrews. n.d. “Escape” to Monte Gennaro Survival in the Mountains during WWII: 61. In his memoirs Luyt used the spelling of ‘Campotello’, which can indicate either of the two towns mentioned above.

¹³³ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over. The story of H.R. (Aussie) Hammond*: 69.

¹³⁴ Wiskemann, E. 1946. ‘The Breaking of the Axis.’ *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944 -)*, 22(2):233.

Chapter 7: Confronting German discipline

Nazi ideology and Allied POW frame of mind

South Africans captured at Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk formed generally favourable first impressions of their German captors while still in North Africa. This attitude, however ironic, seems to have been shaped by the German habit of apologising for the fact that they had to be handed over to the Italians. Their subsequent treatment and poor conditions in Italian North African and mainland camps confirmed for many that the Germans were the more honourable of the two enemies. In due course, nonetheless, South African, British, Australian and New Zealand POWs found themselves being treated harshly, similar to their experience under Italians in North Africa. Guards sometimes shot POWs who could not keep up with forced marches, and they were housed in open air camps with insufficient food.¹ Similarly, Allied POWs captured in France were forced to march to camps without food or water, while guards requisitioned food donated by civilians for POWs.²

The particular ruthlessness with which Germany prosecuted the war was evident from the beginning. On the eve of the Polish invasion, Hitler emphasised ‘that the aim of the war lies not in reaching particular lines but in the physical annihilation of the enemy.’³ Education officers and frontline newspapers helped to disseminate Nazi ideology among ordinary German soldiers, many of whom had already been exposed to fascist ideals through the Hitler Youth movement whose emphasis on sacrifice, endurance, obedience and loyalty was underpinned by the sense of Aryan race supremacy.⁴ The first years of war were marked, as is well known, by Nazi military successes. By June 1940, French had yielded to the German offensive, splitting into an occupied zone and the self-ruling Vichy Government. Across Europe, German invasions were characterised by civilian panic as populations tried to flee oncoming forces, some driven by memories of the previous world war, with others now experiencing atrocities at first hand. Following their initial victories, the Nazis now

¹ Evans, R.J. 2008. *The Third Reich at War*: 26.

² Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*: 45.

³ Evans, R.J. 2008. *The Third Reich at War*: 11.

⁴ Fritz, S.G. 1995. *Frontsoldaten The German Soldier in World War II*: 163, 199.

anticipated the taking of Russia and in 1941 launched the Operation Barbarossa offensive of Hitlerian ‘annihilation’.⁵

But the Eastern Front campaign went badly, driving German forces to ‘commit actions [against the enemy] that under less trying circumstances would have revolted them.’⁶ Among these were the routine shooting of Russian POWs caught taking food from the bodies of German soldiers they were made to bury.⁷ The Soviet Union was not a signatory to the Geneva Convention and Nazi command in any event regarded Russian POWs as an unnecessary burden. While many were simply shot as they surrendered, others who made it to camps encountered exceptionally brutal living conditions.⁸ It is estimated that over than three million captives died through maltreatment and neglect.⁹

Towards the mid-1940s, German forces were losing their grip in Europe and in the Middle East, with the Allies having defeated Rommel’s forces at El Alamein towards the end of 1942. Also ground down in the Soviet Union, eventually in February 1943 the German Army surrendered in Stalingrad. As if this were not enough, Mussolini lost power in Italy and by September of that year the Germans had to take over the fighting in Italy, stretching their campaigning resources even further and eroding morale among both soldiers and citizens.¹⁰ Hitler however, remained unwavering in pursuit of German military goals. In warfare, the position of ‘inferior’ enemy POWs became precarious, with the Fuehrer classifying them as a problem along with Jews, ‘in the POW camps many are dying. It’s not my fault. I didn’t want either the war or the POW camps. Why did the Jew provoke this war?’¹¹ He perceived Jews and Russian POWs to be equally inferior, with neither deserving of humane treatment.

Granted, the fact that other Allied POWs were protected by the Geneva Convention counted for something, although that did not mean that its terms were not liable to be manipulated. Thus, in September 1942, Berlin announced that as Germany held many more POWs than the Allies, placing the balance of power regarding reciprocal agreements and retaliatory acts rested in its hands. Nazi propaganda also asserted that as the Allies were ‘indifferent’ towards

⁵ Evans, R.J. 2008. *The Third Reich at War*: 124, 133, 175.

⁶ Fritz, S.G. 1995. *Frontsoldaten The German Soldier in World War II*: 54.

⁷ Fritz, S.G. 1995. *Frontsoldaten The German Soldier in World War II*: 55.

⁸ MacKenzie, S.P. 1994. “The Treatment of prisoners in World War II.” *The Journal of Modern History*, 66(3):505 – 507.

⁹ Beaumont, J. 1996. ‘Protecting Prisoners of War, 1939 – 95.’ *Prisoners of War and Their Captors in World War II*: 279.

¹⁰ Evans, R.J. 2008. *The Third Reich at War*: 418, 467 – 469.

¹¹ Trevor-Roper, H. 1953. *Hitler’s Table Talk 1941 – 1944 His Private Conversations*: 236.

their rank-and-file soldiers, all Allied POWs would be housed with Russians, where Geneva Convention guidelines did not apply. In that calculation, Germany need not have feared Allied retaliation as the only measure that they could take was to make German POWs reside with Italian POWs, with both their countries being signatories to the convention.

Inevitably, though, as Germany's fighting fortunes fluctuated increasingly, increasing numbers of its soldiers fell into Allied hands. In the Mediterranean, for instance, 500 000 Italians and a 'significant number' of German soldiers had been taken prisoner by the middle of 1943. The consequence was two-fold. On the one hand, German command became more desperate to secure military victories, but on the other, it was also pushed into a weaker negotiating position on POW matters as the political issue of reciprocity regarding their treatment became an issue of greater concern.¹² Those POWs who did not escape following the Italian Armistice would soon find themselves caught up in the struggles of a dictatorship increasingly desperate to prevail. Yet, for all the critical situation in Western Europe, few Union POWs recalled having been fearful of the conduct of German soldiers or of German treatment of their enemy, based on desert war experience. However, when Germans arrived at Italian camps, it brought a rude awakening to harsh realities.

Further north

Following Italy's Armistice, as we have seen, POWs seemed to suffer from what Aussie Hammond referred to as an 'uneasy inertia.'¹³ While a few made concerted efforts to escape, most remained in camp or left just to explore the surrounding countryside, returning at night. Many clung to misplaced optimism of imminent liberation and never considered the possibility that Germans would arrive before the Allies. In a way, this mentality resembled the hopes of those POWs who anticipated liberation before they were shipped from North Africa to Italy. When the Germans did arrive to assume control of prison camps, POWs were crushed. Some of their frustration was aimed at the failure of the Allies to act faster, and there was self-recrimination that they had failed to exploit an opportunity to escape, with the consequence that their imprisonment had now been extended indefinitely.

¹² Moore, B. & K. Fedorowich. 1996. 'Prisoners of War in the Second World War: An Overview.' *Prisoners of War and Their Captors in World War II*: 1.

¹³ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over The Story of Herbert Rhodes (Aussie) Hammond*: 65.

From his Laterina camp, a downcast De Lisle reflected that, ‘our disappointment was acute, on our own account and also for the failure of what had seemed such an obvious design for the capture of peninsular Italy.’¹⁴ Up to the eve of the Germans’ arrival at Camp 52, Ike Rosmarin and others had been experiencing an ‘air of expectancy and excitement [for the POWs] it would not be long; freedom was a possibility, no longer an improbability.’ Yet, the next day, prisoners were ‘rudely awakened at dawn by young SS troops¹⁵ who had replaced the Italian guards along the wire.’¹⁶ The celebrated Snakebite Cockcroft of Camp 82 had ordered Bernard Schwikkard and others to remain in camp, leaving Schwikkard blaming himself for not having taken the initiative, ‘my only excuse was that I was an ignorant but obedient soldier.’¹⁷

It was only then, faced with German soldiers for the first time since their capture in North Africa, that POWs became gripped by real apprehension of the enemy, and in describing their takeover of camps it is the emotion of fear that becomes a core part of experience. Prisoners who had grown accustomed to Italian carelessness now encountered more unflinchingly disciplined Germans. That sobering shock is captured well by Hammond’s memoirs, in his description of reactions following the first German orders that POWs remain indoors:

Stupefied and resentful, the prisoners began ambling towards their huts, all talking at once [...] such leisurely and half-hearted compliance with orders may have been good enough for our easy going Italian guards, but it certainly was not good enough for the Germans. Accustomed to instant obedience, they shook up their ideas by firing an overhead burst from their Bredas [machine guns]. We scattered like rabbits.¹⁸

Equally, when confronted by hostile civilians while being transported from Stalag VIIIA to a work camp, Hammond experienced a more respectful attitude from German soldiers, who seemed intent on protecting their status as soldiers, even if the enemy. So, when a truck driver shouted insults at Hammond’s group, an accompanying officer with them intervened:

¹⁴ De Lisle, M. n.d. *Over the hills and far away my twenties in the forties*: 53.

¹⁵ Although it is possible that SS troops were used in the takeover of POW camps, the supervision of all POW matters were transferred to the SS in September 1944 following an order by Hitler. As from 1 October 1944 SS Lieutenant General, Gottlob Berger, took control of all POW matters, while the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (OKW) remained responsible for German POWs in Allied hands. AG (POW) 1527 Vol. III. National Socialist German Workers’ Party Circular Letter 288/44. 30 September 1944.

¹⁶ Rosmarin, I. 1999. *Inside Story*: 39 – 40.

¹⁷ Schwikkard, B.E. 1999. *My life briefly told*: 38.

¹⁸ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over The Story of Herbert Rhodes (Aussie) Hammond*: 65.

Many civilians, we were to find, seemed to feel guilty if they did not shout at prisoners of war, because they were afraid they might be suspected of being insufficiently patriotic. But this time, to my surprise, the *unteroffizier* in charge of our party stepped forward and interrupted the truck driver curtly. ‘Be silent *dumkopf!*’ he ordered. ‘It is not your place to shout at these men – they are not your usual gangs of scum! *Kriegsgefangenen*, yes – but soldiers to you!’¹⁹

For Rosmarin, the thought of going to Germany was especially frightening as he was Jewish and ‘scared stiff.’²⁰ Others, most notably Van Alphen Stahl, had encountered German conduct even before the Armistice. As he was being moved to a camp in the north of Italy, his group came across retreating Germans and in an impulsive moment of bravado, he shouted ‘*arivideci dedesci*’ [goodbye Germans], whereupon a sergeant and:

two of his *handlangers* [henchmen] pulled me out of the ranks and they started pistol-whipping me, hitting me with their pistols and fists and I dropped and I dropped my bag and they kicked me and as I got up they beat me with the pistol again and having this malaria I was in a pretty poor state and finally I thought no – people say, or some people say they know the moment of truth and I was at peace with the world and I said “alright I’m going I’m going” and I got up to face them for the last time and that chap gave me another crack across the face and I dropped... and that was the end of it, I was unconscious.²¹

Following this brutal experience, Van Alphen Stahl tried to escape on the journey to Germany, leaping from a train with others, but this attempt was unsuccessful as malaria prevented him from keeping up with the rest of his escape group.²² The sudden realisation that their captivity would be continued under a more onerous and severe German regime seemed to unnerve numerous POWs and spurred desperate and dangerous escape attempts from trains and cattle trucks transporting men to Germany.

But their initial German fate was not necessarily to be entirely harrowing, as the experience of Brokensha and Dickinson illustrates. Just before they were transported, Dickinson recorded ‘there was plenty of *vino* [wine] in the camp last night, and we also had a parcel

¹⁹ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over The Story of Herbert Rhodes (Aussie) Hammond*: 83.

²⁰ Rosmarin, I. 1999. *Inside Story*: 41.

²¹ Fred van Alphen Stahl interview: 25 May 2010, Cape Town.

²² Fred van Alphen Stahl interview: 25 May 2010, Cape Town.

between four.’²³ Brokensha’s memoirs furnish a more exact depiction. While awaiting their transport from Frascati, a German officer informed the POWs that he would make sure that their last Italian meal would be good, as he could not tell what lay ahead for them:

Sure enough, a lavish dinner was produced [...] that was my first taste of Frascati wine, which has remained one of my favourite Italian wines. Paul, Jake and I were seated at a long table of about twenty-five POWs, including Australians and British as well as South Africans. As it was a warm evening in late September we removed our shirts. Towards the end of the dinner, we were joined by a group of friendly young German soldiers who also took off their shirts because of the heat; I have tipsy memories of a jolly evening with loud conversations and much singing and not being sure who was friend and who was foe: for a brief interlude, it did not seem to matter. It was good that we had that merry evening because grim times lay ahead.²⁴

Those times awaited a large number of oral respondents and writers of memoirs whose experiences form part of this study, including Harry Rose-Innes, Fred Geldenhuis, Fred van Alphen Stahl, David Brokensha, Dick Dickinson, Bernard Schwikkard, Wessel Oosthuizen, Jack Mortlock, Ike Rosmarin, Cyril Crompton, ‘Aussie’ Hammond, Dennis Mugglestone, A.J. Cremer, H.L. Wood, Peter Ogilvy, James Chutter and Jack Spencer²⁵. All were transported by train to Germany across the Brenner Pass. For some, the journey resembled the terrible experiences endured on the sea voyage from North Africa to Italy, while for others it was more one of expectation.

In the case of Rose-Innes, transport meant a hospital train as he had been in the POW hospital in Lucca. Conditions seemed to have been quite bearable, but for overcrowding, with rations for 200 men having to be shared between 580. Rose-Innes was fit enough to jump from the train with a couple of companions. They managed to survive in Italy for a month before being recaptured and kept in the German Headquarters in Florence. Rose-Innes himself managed to escape again but was caught once more and interrogated by a German officer in Padua who, interestingly, was curious to know why the Union was fighting against Germany, as, ‘this

²³ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo’burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by E.B. Dickinson*: 96.

²⁴ Brokensha, D. 2007. *Brokie’s Way An Anthropologist’s story. Love and Work in three Continents*: 94.

²⁵ Jack Spencer was a pilot in No. 1 Squadron SAAF and captured on 27 June 1944. As an officer, he was sent to Stalag Luft III where he stayed until the end of the war. His experiences in an officers’ camp highlights the different treatment that the other ranks received in ordinary Stalags in German occupied territories. Spencer, J. n.d. *No. 1 Squadron SAAF*.

was not [South Africa's] war.'²⁶ During these short interludes of freedom, many POWs' perceptions of Italians softened as they became dependant on the rural population for survival. For Dickinson, 'the poverty of these people is terrible, but still they are proud and want nothing from us. We, the English, are their friends. [...] Any malice I have borne the Italians is gone.'²⁷ It was a far cry from his pre-Armistice contempt for Italians as 'scum [and] cowardly.'²⁸ Additionally, during this time escaped POWs started to distinguish increasingly between Italians who did not support Mussolini and those who were Fascists.²⁹

As growing numbers of captives were transported, the Germans took more precautions against train escapes. When Fred Geldenhuis boarded a train in Laterina, he found guards on the roof and constant inspections of cattle trucks as the enemy suspected that POWs were removing floorboards to escape. To a cynical Geldenhuis, German warnings that one out of every five POWs would be shot if it was found that one had escaped, it was 'just another way to kill some of us.'³⁰

Journeys were repeatedly interrupted as tracks were damaged during Allied air raids with trains also stopped frequently for guards to take shelter in nearby fields, leaving POWs in their enclosed cattle trucks exposed to the danger of bombing. With train trips to Germany delayed, sanitary conditions on board deteriorated alarmingly.³¹ With the Allies targeting transport infrastructure, the bombing of POW trains was always a feared possibility. A.B. Smith, transported from Fara Sabina with some 800 other POWs, wrote of how their train was bombed, left intentionally vulnerable by their captors, as 'Jerry knew damn well that the bridge was going to be bombed. The Itys [Italians] knew and he knew. It was the tenth time it had been bombed and as always the recce plane had been over the day before. Yet as soon as the planes came in sight they shunted the train squarely on to the bridge [...] and left us.' Later, Captain D.S. Harrison investigated and concluded that he was 'satisfied that the account of the bombing as given by Pte Smith [...] is incorrect in that the train was not deliberately left on the bridge at the mercy of our bombers. [...] I have ascertained from three independent sources that the bridgehead had been damaged by previous raids and that the

²⁶ Rose-Innes was sent to Germany but unfortunately he did not include these experiences in his memoirs. Rose-Innes, H. 1976. *The Po Valley Break*: 19, 202 – 203.

²⁷ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo'burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by E.B. Dickinson*: 97.

²⁸ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo'burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by E.B. Dickinson*: 93.

²⁹ Rose-Innes, H. 1976. *The Po Valley Break*: 185.

³⁰ Geldenhuis, F.J.W. n.d. *A Soldier's Scrap Book. The memoirs of Frederik Jacobus Wagenaar Geldenhuis*: 167.

³¹ Geldenhuis, F.J.W. n.d. *A Soldier's Scrap Book. The memoirs of Frederik Jacobus Wagenaar Geldenhuis*: 167.

Germans were forced to manhandle trucks across the damaged spans one by one in order to minimise the risk of total collapse of the bridge. [...] many Germans and Italians were also injured in the bombing and they as well as Allied PWs [prisoners-of-war] received treatment in the Orvieto hospital.’³²

By contrast, H.L. Wood and others transported from Laterina seemed almost to enjoy their untroubled trip, a form of war tourism as they ‘lived and laughed our way to Europe’s citadel of culture.’ For Wood, the national differences between Italy and Germany could be spotted in the natural environment, as ‘the Teuton’s (sic) love of symmetry was shown in his unconscious regimentation of the countryside – no bushes or trees dared dot the green fields.’³³ But in other respects, it was not all roses. As in North Africa and in the transit camps of Italy, there was dysentery as a consequence of poor hygiene conditions. In some cases, men were locked into trains for several days with little more than a small bread ration, stale drinking water and a latrine bucket.³⁴

Camp conditions

The German *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (OKW) was responsible for the system of prison camps. All POWs were first sent to large transit camps, also known as *Durchgangslager* or *Dulag*, before they were sent to smaller work camps, known as *Arbeitskommandos*. *Stammlagers*, also known as *Stalags*, were permanent camps used to house non-commissioned officers and privates. Officers were accommodated in an officer’s camp, known as *Offizierlager* or *Oflags*, while British and American airmen were held in camps known as *Stalag Luft*. Separate camps for naval and merchant marine POWs were also set up.³⁵ While transit camps such as Stalag IVB at Muhlberg could accommodate as many as 7000 prisoners at one time, work camps could consist of fewer than 100 prisoners, depending on the specific work they were sent to do.³⁶

³² DOD Div Docs. PW Interrogation Documents Vol. 1. Bombing of train carrying Allied PW. 21 June 1944.

³³ Wood, H.L. n.d. *Memoirs of a prisoner of war*: 16.

³⁴ Cremer, A.J. n.d. *Oorlogsherinneringe*: 28.

³⁵ Kochavi, A.J. 2005. *Confronting Captivity: Britain and the United States and their POWs in Nazi Germany*: 10. Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*: 44.

³⁶ In November 1943, the ICRC inspector reported that Stalag IVB had a total of 7092 prisoners. DOD AG(POW) 1527/IVB. UDF POW in Germany. ICRC Report on Stalag IVB by Drs O. Lehner and P. Ruggli on 13 November 1943.

Transit camps

As in North Africa and Italy, early experiences in transit camps were grim. Camp commanders mostly blamed the influx of large numbers of POWs from Italy and the difficulties in making reception arrangements. When Italy surrendered, the OKW was faced with 600 000 Italian POWs and 50 000 Allied POWs, all of whom had to be accommodated, forcing the construction of additional camps as captives streamed in.³⁷ Protecting Power and Red Cross inspections again produced numerous reports on conditions experienced by POWs, although the ratings used by inspectors were often inconsistent and open to differing interpretations, depending on what circumstances made up ‘excellent’, ‘satisfactory’ or ‘wholly inadequate’. In their reports, some inspectors also seemed to have taken into consideration the effects of the general deterioration in Germany as a result of the war, and judged camp conditions at uneven or lower standards. In effect, some specific conditions may have been described as ‘unsatisfactory’ early in the war, but could be described as ‘good’ by 1945.³⁸

If this suggests anything, it is that if conditions were seen generally as ‘poor’ during 1943 when most of the South Africans arrived in Germany, circumstances must have been trying. With inspectors despatched to each camp several times a year and copies of their reports sent to all the relevant countries, the result was a massive amount of camp documentation for analysis.³⁹ While around 130 Stalags accommodated British and American POWs, our focus now turns to those which housed South African prisoners.⁴⁰

Stalag IVB (Muhlberg)

A report by the ICRC in November 1943 described Stalag IVB as a ‘poor camp’ and while its hygiene arrangements were described as ‘satisfactory’, the medical attention to POWs was deemed ‘no longer adequate.’⁴¹ Dick Dickinson and David Brokensha found themselves here, while the memoirs of Jack Mortlock and Dennis Mugglestone indicate that they were also sent to this camp on arrival in Germany. By February 1944, Stalag IVB was still

³⁷ Initially Germany had 31 POW camps at the beginning of the war, but by the end of the war there were 248 camps. Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*: 65 – 66.

³⁸ Vourkoutiotis, V. 2005. ‘What the Angels Saw: Red Cross and Protecting Power Visits to Anglo-American POWs, 1939 – 45.’ *Journal of Contemporary History*, 40(4):690 – 691.

³⁹ Vourkoutiotis, V. 2005. ‘What the Angels Saw: Red Cross and Protecting Power Visits to Anglo-American POWs, 1939 – 45.’ *Journal of Contemporary History*, 40(4):691.

⁴⁰ Gilbert points out that due to the influx of POWs and changes in policy, the exact number of camps is difficult to determine. Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*: 66.

⁴¹ DOD AG(POW) 1527/IVB. UDF POW in Germany. ICRC Report on Stalag IVB by Drs O. Lehner and P. Ruggli on 13 November 1943.

accommodating many different nationalities who were not segregated into different compounds as was the case with most other Stalags. Camp authority also allowed POWs of different ranks to remain together, although officers informed the Red Cross inspector that they expected to be moved to officers' camps, while ordinary enlisted men were under the impression that they would be sent to work camps. NCOs interviewed viewed Stalag IVB as a permanent camp and expected to remain there for the duration of the war.⁴² In that sense, opinion of the camp seemed to differ by rank.

Stalag XVIII A (Wolfsberg)

Wessel Oosthuizen was among the over 11000 POWs sent to Stalag XVIII A in Wolfsberg, where conditions were described mostly as 'adequate' by an ICRC inspector in November 1943, although on clothing his report observed that, 'except for the men from Italy the clothing position is satisfactory.' The main inspection criticism was that the medical officer cleared men for work when they were obviously unfit for labour.⁴³ Although representations were made, it was not until April 1944 that camp medical officers were instructed to 'grade prisoners of war according to the work they are able to perform by taking into consideration the general state of health and the sickness established.'⁴⁴

Stalag VIII A (Gorlitz)

Aussie Hammond and A.J. Cremer were among 697 South Africans who arrived at Stalag VIII A in September 1943. A delegate of the Protecting Power who visited the camp in October of that year pointed out that it was 'badly overcrowded', with a severe shortage of beds and blankets. Other aspects of the camp were described as 'normal' (bathing and washing facilities), 'satisfactory' (toilet facilities), and 'rather poor' (food and cooking facilities).⁴⁵ When most of the POWs arrived from Italy, the camp contained 1064 New Zealanders, 697 South Africans and 681 from Britain, among other nationalities.⁴⁶ Thereafter, by May 1944 the majority of POWs in Stalag VIII A were confirmed as South Africans. An interrogation report on a repatriated POW noted the view that the South African camp leader,

⁴² DOD CE4/15. Office of Censorship United States of America. Record no 98/5. From South African POWs in Stalag IVB, Germany, to Residents in South Africa. February 1944.

⁴³ DOD AG(POW) 1527/XVIII A. UDF (POW). Stalag XVIII A Wolfsberg. 26 November 1943.

⁴⁴ DOD AG(POW) 1527/XVIII. UDF (POW). Despatch 9309, 5 January 1944; DOD AG(POW) 1527/XVIII. UDF (POW). Military High Command to Swiss Legation in Germany; Foreign Interests Division; List No. 126. 13 April 1944.

⁴⁵ DOD AG (POW) 1527/VIII A. UDF PW. Report by Gabriel Naville of the Protecting Power on 28 October 1943.

⁴⁶ The total number of POWs in the camp was 3486 on 28 October 1943. DOD AG(POW) 1527/VIII A Report 277 on Stalag VIII A on 28 October 1944.

R.S.M. Rossouw, showed favouritism towards South Africans and that British POWs ‘suffer[ed] in consequence’ by being overlooked. The cited reason for biased treatment was said to be the ‘fact that many South Africans talk (sic) German [and this] results in the Camp leader obtaining support for his actions’ from German command.⁴⁷

Although favouritism was not included in 1944 camp inspection reports, with ‘no complaints...put to the Delegate of the Protecting Power’, the influential role of Rossouw was noted. One report noted his effectiveness as camp leader in putting forward POW complaints over overcrowding in the discipline barracks, the wearing of clothing marked with red paint to indicate punishment, and the fact that men in punishment barracks were not allowed to participate in sports activities.⁴⁸ In March 1945, the Adjutant General, seemingly anxious to dispel any notion of special favouritism between South African POWs, quoted approvingly from the November 1944 Protecting Power report:

Conditions at this camp remain to be very good. The man of confidence, R.S.M. Rossouw, indefatigably carries on with his fights for the betterment of the conditions of his fellow-prisoners both here at the camp and on the various working detachments and in all fairness it must be said, that he receives all support from German authorities.⁴⁹

Neither Cremer nor Hammond were aware of tensions between British and South African POWs over preferential treatment. Indeed, for Hammond, he and other South Africans were ‘British’, minimising any Commonwealth national distinctions. His memoir does, however, remember how South Africans were befriended by non-English-speaking Belgian prisoners, with whom conversations were usually conducted in Afrikaans, a language close to Flemish.⁵⁰ It is possible that some British POWs may have assumed that they were speaking German, and that Rossouw had some Germanic affinity.

Stalag VIII B (Lamsdorf)

Fred van Alphen Stahl, Ike Rosmarin⁵¹ and Peter Ogilvy all found themselves at Stalag VIII B near Lamsdorf, where conditions at the time of their arrival were grim. Lamsdorf was the

⁴⁷ DOD AG(POW) 1527 Vol 2. General correspondence Political Secretary to Secretary of External Affairs, Pretoria. *Interrogation of Repatriates ex S.S. Gripsholm*. 5 July 1944.

⁴⁸ DOD AG(POW) 1527/VIIIA Report 541 on Stalag VIII A on 27 July 1944.

⁴⁹ DOD AG(POW) 1527/VIIIA. DCS (DMI) No. 3144 WOI J.J. Rossouw (PW No. 82360): Stalag VIIIA.

⁵⁰ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over The Story of Herbert Rhodes (Aussie) Hammond*: 76.

⁵¹ Ike Rosmarin’s first transit camp was Stalag IVA (indicated in his memoirs as being near Moosburg, but actually near Hohnstein. Stalag VIIA is near Moosburg. It is possible that Rosmarin either made a mistake on

largest, holding 10 000 POWs at its peak and controlling 235 work camps with 9000 men. It was also the oldest POW camp, dating from World War One.⁵² The South African authorities became aware of wretched conditions there as early as May 1943, before the arrival of Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk prisoners, when a letter from a POW to his family reached the Adjutant General. Drawing on a familiar image of South African deprivation, Stalag VIIIIB barracks were described as, ‘filthy [and that] the kaffirs on the mines in South Africa have better living conditions than we have here, [...] the kaffirs get better food in the Union than we get here.’⁵³ By October 1943 the Protecting Power was emphasising that the large number of POWs from Italy had ‘disastrous results on general conditions’ in the camp and in the following month warned again of the effect that the Italian POW influx would have on all camps, the main concern being that of adequate food, clothing and accommodation.⁵⁴

Confronted by such bleak accounts, A.C. Randall acting on behalf of the Union’s Adjutant General, informed Clara Urquhart of the local Red Cross that he was assuming ‘that appropriate representations were submitted by the Protecting Power to the German High Command in July [1943].’⁵⁵ While aware that conditions had deteriorated between March and June 1943, Randall still believed that prisoners in the work camps attached to Stalag VIIIIB were experiencing better conditions. However, a November 1943 report from the Protecting Power revealed that circumstances in the work camps were little better, with food, hygiene, medical treatment and overcrowding the main concerns. In work camp E276 for instance, it was found that ‘clothing conditions [were] bad especially of prisoners recently arrived from Italy’, while in work camp E22 the quality of food was deteriorating and there was a ‘poor’ provision of medical supplies.⁵⁶

Another aspect that caused great concern, at least for the South African Red Cross, was news that Jewish POWs in Stalag VIIIIB were being separated into Jewish labour camps. The Adjutant General, however, believed that the information was ‘misleading’ and that it referred to Palestinian POWs and not to British or Commonwealth POWs of the Jewish religion. He ascribed the separation of the Jews to Article 9 of the Geneva Convention which

the camp number or on the name of the nearest town.) Rosmarin was sent to Stalag VIIIIB Lamsdorf a week after his arrival at Stalag VIIA or IVA. Rosmarin, I. 1999. *Inside Story*: 43 – 44.

⁵² Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*: 83.

⁵³ DOD AG(POW) 1527/VIIIIB. UDF PW Vol I. Union of South Africa Censorship: Correspondence suspected to require special attention. Hendrik Erasmus, No. 25698; 23 May 1943.

⁵⁴ DOD AG(POW) 1527/VIIIIB. UDF PW Vol I. R. Jones to Adjutant General 10 November 1943.

⁵⁵ DOD AG(POW) 1527/VIIIIB. UDF PW Vol I. Randall to Urquhart; 10 November 1943

⁵⁶ DOD AG(POW) 1527/VIIIIB. UDF PW Vol I. 0103/3969(P.W.2.a.) 22. 11. 1943. Departmental No.1. 15 November 1943.

stated that ‘Belligerents shall as far as possible avoid bringing together in the same camp prisoners of different races or nationalities.’⁵⁷ Randall emphasised to Urquhart that the Union would not take any action unless it received confirmation that South African Jews were being separated.⁵⁸

The Stalag VIII B memoirs of Ike Rosmarin provide no indication of any directed maltreatment or separation of Jews in the camp, and even include an episode in which the commander agreed to a request from Jewish prisoners that the tombstone of a Jewish grave be embellished with the Star of David.⁵⁹ Similarly, Fred van Alphen Stahl, testified to the equitable treatment of a fellow POW who ‘had sinus, which is not a killer, but they sent him across Germany with a guard to one of the clinics in the Alps, to have his sinuses attended to.’⁶⁰ In at least these known cases, German camp command did not treat Jewish POWs differently from others.

Registration and adaptation

As each new group of POWs, also known as a *purge*, arrived, they found themselves increasingly disadvantaged in camp communities as newcomers had to be accommodated in already crowded barracks, making an already difficult POW life even harder for those who had already established a routine and a culture in the camps.⁶¹ In Brokensha’s case, he had to sleep on the floor while at Stalag IV B as no beds were available.⁶² It was also at transit camps that new arrivals from Italy were ‘processed in a brutally efficient manner.’ While all POWs described similar experiences of this process, Brokensha’s description reveals how frightening some found this experience. Given meticulous German record-keeping, all POWs were brusquely registered. Giving their names, rank, army and POW number, they were then sent to barbers who sheared their heads with sheep clippers. Next, naked men were sent into shower rooms to be deloused ‘by a Russian prisoner [who] sat in front of a bucket smelling of creosote [and who] applied the mixture with a mop on our armpits and on the groin area.’

⁵⁷ ICRC International Humanitarian Law, Treaties and Documents. Convention relative to the treatment of Prisoners-of-War, Geneva, 27 July 1929. Available at <http://www.icrc.org>. Accessed 30 May 2011.

⁵⁸ DOD AG(POW) 1527/VIII B. UDF PW Vol I. T.B. Clapham to Urquhart; 15 November 1943.

⁵⁹ Rosmarin, I. 1999. *Inside Story*: 44.

⁶⁰ Fred van Alphen Stahl interview: 25 May 2010, Cape Town.

⁶¹ Aschmann, H.H. 1948. ‘Kriegie talk.’ *American Speech* 23(3/4):212.

⁶² Brokensha, D. 2007. *Brokie’s Way An Anthropologist’s story. Love and Work in three Continents*: 97.

At no point were POWs informed of what was to happen to them, being simply herded along from one thing to the next. The most terrifying part of the process came with rough inoculation at the end; in Brokensha's example, this happened at three in the morning and he fainted twice while queuing. He fainted a third time as a doctor struggled to inject him with a blunt needle, leaving him with a life-long fear of injections.⁶³ But there were also small acts of subversive resistance. For those at Stalag VIIA, POW registration was grasped as an opportunity to disrupt the German 'preoccupation with bureaucratic record keeping [by] swap[ping] names with friends' while being photographed. Unfortunately, this backfired as POWs then found themselves receiving each other's letters once they were settled in permanent camps. Meanwhile, at Stalag VIIIA, Hammond and his friends made the most of manipulating the registration procedure when some decided to promote themselves, having heard that NCOs could not be forced to participate in work camps.

When questioned about civilian occupations, some, like Hammond himself, claimed to be farmers, possibly hoping for easier placement in rural labour. To mock the recording process, others gave occupations such as 'pickpocket', 'lion tamer', and 'acrobat.' These were evidently recorded and, in one apocryphal account, when a POW declared himself to have been a 'sorter', his interrogator wanted more details. The answer was, 'I used to work in a grocery store, sorting fly shit out of pepper', which failed to amuse his questioner.⁶⁴

The Moosburg transit camp was also where a Russian captive escaped from the Soviet compound and joined the South Africans. To help him to blend in, he was given an alias, 'Jan van der Walt', and taught to say '*Ek praat net Afrikaans.*'⁶⁵ From Moosburg he was transported with his fictive countrymen to Stalag VIIIB near Lamsdorf, where he avoided an encounter with a female interrogator by leaving UDF POWs to claim that he could only speak Afrikaans.⁶⁶ Records suggest that this may have been a semi-legendary POW tale, for there is more than one version. Ike Rosmarin's memoirs supply a different camp number⁶⁷ and give the alias as 'Johannes van der Merwe'.⁶⁸ Chutter, also at Stalag VIIA, recalls that a Russian POW entered their hut following a failed escape attempt in which he had been

⁶³ Brokensha, D. 2007. *Brokie's Way An Anthropologist's story. Love and Work in three Continents*: 96 – 97.

⁶⁴ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over The Story of Herbert Rhodes (Aussie) Hammond*: 74 – 75.

⁶⁵ 'I only speak Afrikaans.'

⁶⁶ Ogilvy, P. & N. Robinson. 1975. *In the bag*: 84 – 86.

⁶⁷ Stalag IVA is in fact near Hohnstein and it is very possible that either Rosmarin or Robinson made an error regarding the camp number. Stalag VIIA is in fact near Moosburg and this is where, according to Ogilvy and Robinson, the Russian POW joined them.

⁶⁸ Rosmarin, I. 1999. *Inside Story*: 41 – 43.

seriously beaten by his captors. By concealing him under the floorboards, the Union soldiers were able to help him to recover, thereafter adopting a ‘bogus British identification to pass muster if any questions were asked.’⁶⁹ Whatever the discrepancies over language, identity, and injury, it is likely that these stories of outwitting the enemy all refer to the same Russian POW.

Officers camps

The difference between officers camps, Oflags, and Stalags, camps for other ranks, were evident not only in their living conditions and in the daily activities of men, but also in their average age, education and to some degree, attitudes towards their captors. Yet, there were also underlying commonalities, one of which was the tendency to allocate nicknames to German guards, and another the development of a distinctive POW jargon, although certain terms were different in Oflags and in Stalags. One example was the use of ‘Goons’⁷⁰ when referring to Germans. Both Chutter and Jack Spencer used it in memoirs, whereas POWs interned in Stalags preferred to resort to ‘Nazi’⁷¹ or ‘Jerry’.⁷²

One characteristic experience was that of Chutter. In December 1943, he was sent from Stalag VIIA to Oflag VIIIIF near Mährisch Trübau in what was the then Sudetenland. He described camp conditions as ‘good’ and as POWs settled into their new environment with relative ease, they were able to initiate education programmes, sports and entertainment very soon after their arrival.⁷³ As officers were not required to work and could spend their hours as they wished, many seemed to devote considerable time to devising plans for escape. The price of many failed attempts could be higher than just rigorous interrogation and punishment. In one case it was execution, when two men, ‘whose escape had the nature of a special mission [were arrested and] shunted off to the Gestapo prison in Prague for questioning. Some months later [...] their remains, a “handful of grey ashes”, in a most efficient-looking metal cylinder, were handed over for burial by our chaplains.’⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Chutter, J.B. *Captivity Captive*: 109 – 110.

⁷⁰ Spencer, J. n.d *No. 1 Squadron SAAF*: 5. Chutter, J.B. *Captivity Captive*: 128.

⁷¹ Rosmarin, I. 1999. *Inside Story*: 76.

⁷² Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo’burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by E.B. Dickinson*: 102.

⁷³ Chutter, J.B. *Captivity Captive*: 115 – 116.

⁷⁴ Chutter, J.B. *Captivity Captive*: 118.

Work camps

Officers were allowed to work according to the Geneva Convention, but little evidence exists to indicate that any of them actually volunteered for any working parties.⁷⁵ NCOs were permitted to undertake supervisory duties if they wished, while rank-and-file men had no real choice. As non-commissioned officers had the right to refuse work, the Stalags became their permanent camp while the rest were moved to *Arbeitskommandos*.⁷⁶ Others who remained in the Stalags were those who were unfit for labour, like Fred van Alphen Stahl.⁷⁷ Each Stalag had satellite work camps that fell in the same administrative area. While still in Italy, many POWs had, as already noted, worked on farms in accordance with the Geneva Convention stipulation that ‘work done by prisoners of war shall have no direct connection with the operations of the war.’⁷⁸

Of course, with the conflict having long assumed the nature of a ‘total war’, virtually any work, including agricultural work, was in aid of the war effort. The post-war 1949 revision of the Convention identified six categories in which POWs were allowed to work, these being agriculture, production or extraction of raw materials and manufacturing, but not metallurgical, machinery or chemical industries, public works and buildings, commercial business and arts and crafts, domestic service, and public utility services.⁷⁹ While many wartime captives had reservations about the type of work that they were required to do, in Germany most appeared to welcome work as this was a means of dealing with long hours of boredom. Being part of a work camp also held other advantages, most of all the prospect of getting more food.

Most of those individual POWs whose lives constitute part of this study were assigned to work camps after registration at transit sites. Fred van Alphen Stahl, Ike Rosmarin and Peter Ogilvy all remained in Stalag VIII B until the end of the war. This camp became known as Stalag 344 in January 1944 when it was divided into two, with Stalag 344 being put in control

⁷⁵ The Geneva Convention states the following: ‘Art. 27. Belligerents may employ as workmen prisoners of war who are physically fit, other than officers and persons of equivalent status, according to their rank and their ability. Nevertheless, if officers or persons of equivalent status ask for suitable work, this shall be found for them as far as possible.’ International Humanitarian Law – Treaties and Documents. Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War. Geneva, 27 July 1929. Available at <http://www.icrc.org> Accessed 30 May 2011.

⁷⁶ Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*: 82, 144.

⁷⁷ Fred van Alphen Stahl interview: 25 May 2010, Cape Town.

⁷⁸ International Humanitarian Law – Treaties and Documents. Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War. Geneva, 27 July 1929. Available at <http://www.icrc.org> Accessed 30 May 2011.

⁷⁹ Beaumont, J. ‘Protecting Prisoners of War 1939 – 95.’ in Fedorowich, K. & Moore, B. 1996. *Prisoners of War and their Captors in World War Two*: 281 & 293.

of work camps to the west and Stalag VIII B administering those to the east. It also seems that the camp division was to separate British POWs from American POWs.⁸⁰

While Ogilvy was not allocated to a work camp for some unknown reason, Van Alphen Stahl was continuously stricken with malaria, remaining in Stalag VIII B/344 as he was moved in and out of the camp hospital about every three to four weeks.⁸¹ Although he spent most of his time in Stalag VIII B/344, Rosmarin did get an opportunity to work as translator for a group who worked at a nearby training camp for German officers.⁸² David and Paul Brokensha, together with Dick Dickinson, Jack Mortlock and possibly also Dennis Mugglestone, were all sent to work camp 1169 near Dresden where they worked in the post office. Mugglestone was later transferred to Lauszig near Leipzig to work in a cement factory in October 1943.⁸³

Aussie Hammond, H.L. Wood, Cyril Crompton and Bernard Schwikkard all found themselves at different work camps in the vicinity of Breslau where they worked in sugar factories, with Schwikkard later being transferred to a coal mine near Waldenburg in Upper Silesia. Wood, registered at Stalag VIII C at Sagan, also worked on a work camp in Poland, a coal mine in Fellhammer and a textile factory in Oberaltstadt.⁸⁴ Wessel Oosthuizen, registered at Stalag XVIII A, initially worked on a wine farm on the border between Austria and Yugoslavia, but was later transferred to Graz in Austria where he joined other South Africans in a work party employed in filling in bomb craters.⁸⁵ Fred Geldenhuis, chief of Barracks 29 – 32 at Stalag VII A Moosburg, obtained the unique position of overseeing a group of black POWs in the camp's South Lager. This also allowed Geldenhuis to move relatively freely between the different sections of the camp.⁸⁶ A.J. Cremer remained in Stalag VIIIA near Gorkitz in Lower Silesia until the end of the war, free of any labouring duties.⁸⁷

⁸⁰ DOD AG (POW) 1527/VIII B/344. Vol 1. UDF PW. Report of inspection on 7 – 8 February 1944.

⁸¹ Fred van Alphen Stahl interview: 25 May 2010, Cape Town.

⁸² Rosmarin, I. 1999. *Inside Story*: 58.

⁸³ Mugglestone, D.I.H. n.d. *Destination Unknown*: 35.

⁸⁴ Wood, H.L. n.d. *Memoirs of a prisoner of war*: 16 – 17.

⁸⁵ Wessel Oosthuizen interview: 4 December 2010, Hartenbos.

⁸⁶ Geldenhuis, F.J.W. n.d. *A Soldier's Scrap Book. The memoirs of Frederik Jacobus Wagenaar Geldenhuis*: 174.

⁸⁷ Cremer, A.J. n.d. *Oorlogsherinneringe*: 29 – 32.

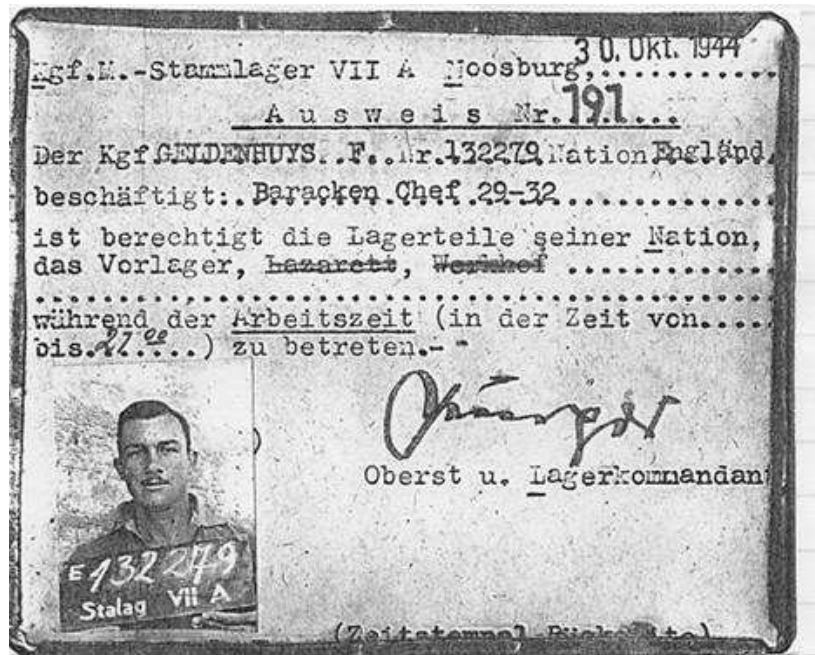


Figure 5: Geldenhuis' permit to move between camps.

Food

Food in the Stalags was again provided in accordance with the Geneva Convention requirement that rations 'of prisoners of war shall be equivalent in quantity and quality to that of the depot troops.'⁸⁸ In Italy, many POWs had come to realise that this did not mean adequate food, given chronic shortages for Mussolini's troops, leaving them underfed while their captors could still claim that they were adhering to the Convention. When it came to Germany, complaints from Allied POWs and from German soldiers regarding the quality and quantity of food was remarkably similar. Thus, in August 1943, German front-line troops complained of cabbage and potato soup that had a 'gluey' consistency, with some descriptions of it as as 'nauseating but effective.'⁸⁹ Allied POWs also found the soup to have a consistency much like glue, and some even used it as glue to make model aeroplanes. Prisoners mixed their soup with sugar and corned beef to try to improve the taste, leaving barley bugs in the concoction in the belief that they contained vitamins.⁹⁰

South African POWs found the food to be of better quality than any Italian rations, while Van Alphen Stahl was happy to receive any food at all after the continuous empty promises of

⁸⁸ ICRC International Humanitarian Law, Treaties and Documents. Convention relative to the treatment of Prisoners-of-War, Geneva, 27 July 1929. Available at <http://www.icrc.org>. Accessed 30 May 2011.

⁸⁹ Fritz, S.G. 1995. *Frontsoldaten The German Soldier in World War II*: 116.

⁹⁰ Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*: 98.

domani [tomorrow].⁹¹ Dickinson conceded that while the food was not always digestible, most men in his camp were putting on weight.⁹² The type and variety of food in work camps depended largely on the nature of the work done by POWs, and in some cases they were actually fed very well. As the Geneva Convention had no conditions for food in work camps, merely stating that ‘conditions governing labour detachments shall be similar to those of prisoners-of-war camps’, it meant that POWs received Red Cross food parcels as well as extra food provided by an employer.⁹³

Moreover, in most work camps, food from employers seemed to have been far more and of better quality than any of the rations provided in the main camps. Cyril Crompton and others who were assigned to a sugar beet farm in Breslau, received ‘a big stew at midday, and in the morning a chunk of dry bread and ersatz jam which we would eat on the job.’⁹⁴ For his part, Aussie Hammond first became aware of the advantage of work camps when he met Belgian POWs who were labouring nearby. The Belgians would bring food back to the main camp and explained to Hammond that without the extra sustenance, they could starve as the rations there were wholly insufficient. Later, Hammond became the leader of work camp 4008, employed at a sugar factory, where he described the food as ‘dull, but plentiful at last.’⁹⁵

At the same time, the fact that POWs found conditions in work camp more congenial did not mean that they became complacent or passive. Once Hammond and his men were well established in the factory, they began stealing and trading with the sugar, as their German guards were also feeling the effects of food shortages and participated in a ‘lucrative’ black market as ‘soldiers not factory workers.’⁹⁶ Trading in sugar helped to augment POW food rations, something that became increasingly essential as German scarcities grew with the war entering its fourth year. Schwikkard also worked in a Breslau sugar factory, where successful traders in sugar were, ‘the chaps who used to steal sugar there and put it down their trouser legs in a stocking or whatever and take it into camp.’

Endlessly creative, when they realised that the factory would not operate in summer, they started storing sugar in coal bags in order to continue with their trade. However, once the town’s coal supplies began to dwindle, the factory’s coal store became needed, leading to the

⁹¹ Fred van Alphen Stahl interview: 25 May 2010, Cape Town.

⁹² Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo’burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by E.B. Dickinson*: 115.

⁹³ ICRC International Humanitarian Law, Treaties and Documents. Convention relative to the treatment of Prisoners-of-War, Geneva, 27 July 1929. Available at <http://www.icrc.org>. Accessed 30 May 2011.

⁹⁴ Crompton, C. & P. Johnson. 2010. *Luck’s Favours Two South African Second World War Memoirs*: 66.

⁹⁵ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over The Story of Herbert Rhodes (Aussie) Hammond*: 77 & 87.

⁹⁶ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over The Story of Herbert Rhodes (Aussie) Hammond*: 100 – 101.

discovery of sugar in coal bags. As punishment, Schwikkard and three others were sent to heavier labour on a coal mine in Oldenburg, far less appealing as a work camp than the sugar factory. He detected another punitive element, believing that, 'Jews were sent to work in the coalmines because they were Jews.'⁹⁷

Elsewhere, in work camp 1169 in Gorbitz, Dresden, beneficial trade was also taking place between POWs, guards and German civilians, which meant that Paul Brokensha could arrange for a birthday feast for his brother David. On 23 May 1944, David Brokensha's 21st birthday, he was treated to 'Breakfast: porridge, followed by fried sardines in tomato sauce with marmalade and white bread; Lunch: [...] a meat roll in batter; Afternoon tea: two real cakes, baked in the neighbouring bakery, made from: 2 heaped Klim tins of flour; ½ cocoa tin of sugar; ½ tin Klim; 1 packet of prunes, 1 packet of raisins; 1 tin egg powder; yeast; baking powder; the kernels of the prune pits; – plus extra ingredients for the icing.'⁹⁸ The Brokensha brothers and others with them in 1169⁹⁹ were fortunate in that they worked in a post office where they soon realised that many of the parcels contained food. Mugglestone admitted that they supplemented their food by pilfering from parcels. On one occasion, for instance, POWs apparently found one that 'contained a roasted fowl and another parcel a set of dentures. The fowl was eaten on the spot and the dentures then wrapped up with the fowl bones and sent on its way.'¹⁰⁰

Dick Dickinson's diary record, however, contains a version of a more serious incident, when a POW was caught stealing biscuits from a package. If caught, the consequences of theft from post office parcels were severe and sweeping:

One of the English fellows was caught pinching biscuits today. There was a hell of a stink. Theft in Germany is, I should say, twice as bad as an offence as in any other country, and on top of it all, the theft was from a parcel to a German POW in America. The culprit is taken away and our camp commandant, a *Feldwebel* [sergeant], takes it out on the rest of us. There were plenty of moans and squeals.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Bernard Schwikkard interview: 17 March 2010, Johannesburg.

⁹⁸ Brokensha, D. 2007. *Brokie's Way An Anthropologist's story. Love and Work in three Continents*: 105.

⁹⁹ David Brokensha, Paul Brokensha (camp leader), Dick Dickinson and Jack Mortlock were all in work camp 1169 near Dresden. It is also very likely that Dennis Mugglestone spent part of his time at work camp 1169 although he was transferred to a work camp near Laussig, possibly as a result of Paul Brokensha's selection of camp inmates.

¹⁰⁰ Mortlock, J. 1956. *The endless years Reminiscences of the 2nd World War*: 68.

¹⁰¹ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo'burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by E.B. Dickinson*: 104.

Medical matters and repatriation

As with numerous other aspects of captivity, South African POWs found German medical treatment and repatriation matters to be handled in a more effective and fair manner than had been the case with Italians. The German camp system was better organised and its command was able to overcome organisational difficulties following the initial 1943 Armistice chaos. The Germans also appeared more cooperative than the Italians and even permitted a Berlin conference to be held where British medical officers in captivity were able to discuss medical issues in German camps. The fact that this took place in March 1945 may, however, be seen as a belated attempt to placate the advancing Allies. Still, it provided a window on medical issues in German camps.

Indeed, the concerns of the Berlin conference report were similar to those of the independent inspectorate which had been visiting camps regularly since the start of the war. That aside, its 1945 recommendations looked to be entirely unrealistic given German incapacity through a continuing loss of infrastructure and supplies. For instance, a recommendation was that the POW diet 'should be kept at a sufficiently high level to prevent epidemics', at a time when Berlin was barely able to feed its own, let alone the POWs in its control. Other unfeasible recommendations included the building of new barracks in camps to alleviate overcrowding, allowing doctors communication with all camps in respective areas, and the conducting of a survey of all camp medical facilities, which 'would be most helpful to German and British medical liaison-officers.' One practical outcome was the appointment of a British Medical Liaison Officer who would, among other things, 'have a small central store of valuable drugs for emergency distribution to British camps.'¹⁰² This emerged at a crisis time when Hammond witnessed German soldiers being treated with bandages made of crepe paper to treat horrific wounds sustained in fighting on the eastern front.¹⁰³

In the second part of our examination of POW fortunes in Germany, we move on to explore further aspects of the fabric of camp existence and the social relationships generated by varied kinds of interactions among captives and between captives and groups of their German enemy.

¹⁰² DOD AG(POW) 1533 A. UDF POW Medical. Report on the Conference of British Medical Officers in Captivity held at Schwanenwerder: Berlin; 18th to the 22nd March 1945.

¹⁰³ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over The Story of Herbert Rhodes (Aussie) Hammond*: 172.

Chapter 8: Conflict and compassion in Germany

Camp activities

‘*Alles verrückt*’ [all mad] is how a German guard described POWs who pretended they were going on a day trip to Bournemouth in England by forming a human train, complete with a conductor and the passengers holding on to each other to form wagons.¹ Boredom in many officers’ camps led to the invention of fantasy games such as these as men were not involved in labour and had to rely on their imagination to keep themselves diverted. Free hours in work camps mostly involved rest, letter writing and the usual endless speculation about the end of the war. But many prisoners also became consumed by organised activities.

German camps were generally better-equipped than their Italian versions to provide for POW entertainment, sports and educational needs, not only because Germany seemed to adhere more closely to the terms of the Geneva Convention, but also because its camps were well-established prior to the arrival of most South African POWs. In 1943, for instance, while most of the Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk POWs were still in Italy, the Red Cross and the YMCA sent ‘10 000 soccer balls, 6 900 pairs of boxing gloves, 8 000 soft balls, 400 baseballs, 650 American footballs and 25 000 tennis balls’ to various camps across Germany, while in Italy prisoners had to improvise and produce their own games and sports equipment.²

A ‘small city on a tiny piece of ground’³

Initially a transit facility, Lamsdorf became one of the largest camps in Germany, housing POWs from many different countries, including Australia, Belgium, Britain, Canada, France, Greece, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Poland, South Africa, the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and the United States.⁴ Those not classified for work were accommodated in the large hospital complex, as were RAF officers who were unable to be accommodated in officers’ camps. By 1944, the main camp held about 10 000 British prisoners, while in its 235 work

¹ Roger Coward, a British POW at Blechhammer quoted in Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*: 169.

² Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*: 161 & 167.

³ Rosmarin, I. 1999. *Inside Story*: 47. Rosmarin’s description of Stalag VIIIIB/344 Lamsdorf.

⁴ Lamsdorf: Stalag VIIIIB 344 Prisoner of War Camp 1940 – 1945. Available at <http://www.lamsdorf.com/history.html> Accessed 10 October 2011.

camps there were a further 9 000 POWs.⁵ Although Lamsdorf consisted of separate compounds, memoirs like those of Rosmarin confirm that POWs were able to move relatively freely between sections. This was, therefore, a camp where prisoners were mixed across ranks and nationalities, requiring greater socialization than in work camps. Because of its size and holding of men from many different walks of life, it also housed an immense range of sports, education or arts activities. While the degree of participation was a personal choice, many continued with activities they had followed in peace time. Others grasped new interests and opportunities, education being the most prominent. For many of working class backgrounds, education in camps came as a bonus, brought by having volunteered for war and by having been captured.

The more that POWs were able to alleviate boredom, the more they were able to sustain morale. For some, being a spectator was sufficient but for others, participation was vital and they took up pastimes that would never have been pursued in peace-time circumstances. Some were highly idiosyncratic. Lieutenant- General Sir Philip Neame, a big-game hunter before the war, became an expert at needlework.⁶ Peter Ogilvy used his time more conventionally to develop his artistic ability and, as his memoirs show, was kept busy with illustrations of camp life. Unsurprisingly, artists were popular as many POWs wanted pencil sketches of themselves to send to their families. Ogilvy, moreover, also used his creative talent to help the escape committee of Stalag VIII B / 344 by falsifying rubber stamps and passports.⁷

As recalled by Rosmarin, that tight and secretive committee also kept POWs busy with the digging of as many as four tunnels at any one time. For the construction of such underground shafts, the work and planning expertise of South African POWs from the Witwatersrand and other heavy industrial areas were at a premium, as escape organisers assembled ‘engineers, carpenters, miners and artisans [to which the] South African coal and gold miners contributed’ significantly. However, this escape committee seems not to have been very successful, as only two POWs managed to get out. Ironically, although both reached England, they were recaptured at the Anzio landings and ended up back in Stalag VIII B / 344.⁸ Camp command obviously nurtured POW participation in legitimate activities as this provided

⁵ Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*: 66 & 83.

⁶ Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*: 167.

⁷ Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*:171; Ogilvy, P. & N. Robinson. 1975. *In the bag*: 88.

⁸ Rosmarin, I. 1999. *Inside Story*: 64 & 67.

guards with a control mechanism where they could withdraw privileges if POWs were suspected of any unauthorised activity. Acceptability extended to sport of all kinds, with rugby and cricket being especially popular with Commonwealth and British prisoners.⁹ Thus, rugby ‘test matches between Scotland, Wales, England, Ireland and the Royal Air Force were most popular.’¹⁰ There were even novel national contests, as Van Alphen Stahl remembered, when he ‘even played hockey for South Africa in the camp, against the Indians which we won.’¹¹



Figure 6: The South African rugby team at Stalag VIIA, Moosburg. Fred Geldenhuis is fourth from the right in the back row.

Apart from games like rugby, Rosmarin recorded how POWs busied themselves on educational courses presented by an Oxford University lecturer, devised a theatre group which ‘often toured other less-privileged prison camps’, produced military bands, played indoor games such as monopoly, and encouraged knitters ‘who unravelled anything they could find, re-wound the wool into skeins and then washed it to produce beautiful articles.’ Rosmarin evidently participated in almost all activities and ‘was busy almost round the clock with welfare and entertainment committee duties which took a large slice of daylight hours.’ Moreover, according to his account, the Lamsdorf POWs also organised a hobbies fair in aid of the Red Cross, and at another time the camp’s welfare committee sent clothing, soap, cigarettes and food to the concentration camp at Auschwitz.¹² By complete contrast, Ogilvy’s

⁹ Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*: 161.

¹⁰ Rosmarin, I. 1999. *Inside Story*: 55.

¹¹ Fred van Alphen Stahl interview: 25 May 2010, Cape Town.

¹² Rosmarin, I. 1999. *Inside Story*: 47, 49, 52, 53, 57 & 61.

memoirs contain no record of sports or leisure activities in Stalag VIIIIB / 344, their tone being mostly bleak and cynical about the entire camp experience.

In general, the activities in which POWs participated resembled ordinary peace-time leisure and entertainment pursuits, although with more time on their hands and in need to combat low morale, they often developed talents or participated in activities more intensely than might otherwise have been the case. Prison camp sport, music, art, books and other pastimes were pursued in an effort to make their conditions more tolerable and to try to ward off the notion that they were not making a significant contribution to the war effort, or to their own personal development. This was a realisation made worse by the shortages of food, loss of freedom, loneliness and uncertainty about the length of their POW confinement.¹³

Temptation, stress and tolerance

As in the case of Italy, the nature of POW contact with fellow prisoners, captors and civilians, could all enhance or worsen efforts to deal with prison life. While still in Italy, most soldiers probably had time to come to terms with the fact that they were excluded from fighting, although acceptance of that neutralised status may have been lifted briefly before the setback of POW failure to escape en masse following the Armistice. Meanwhile, improved conditions in Germany probably helped many to cope more easily in conditions associated with capture and subsequent continued imprisonment.

While numerous POWs seemed to have enjoyed Italian agricultural work, many more also found conditions in Germany so much better than those in North Africa and in Italy, that they even expressed positive sentiment about their captivity, either in earlier memoirs or in more recent oral reminiscences. Such emotions were not limited to the inmates of work camps or of larger transit camps, but depended heavily on how individual POWs reacted to their circumstances. Those who pushed to improve their conditions seemed to have been more positive about their lot, while those who were inward-looking and more prone to dissension seemed to have had a more bleak experience. For instance, a more pushy Ike Rosmarin, characterised by some of his fellow POWs as being a racketeer, found that, 'strange as it may seem, I was getting a kick out of POW life!' By then, he had become involved in the escape committee at Stalag VIIIIB Lamsdorf, and had established a good relationship with the

¹³ Davison, B.J. 2006. 'Forechecking in Captivity: Sport in the lives of Canadian prisoners of war at three German camps during the second world War.' Master's thesis: 17.

German officer in charge which allowed him a certain amount of freedom to explore the 'empty offices searching for things to steal.'¹⁴

Dick Dickinson, on the other hand, had a more withdrawn response to being a POW and there are numerous diary references to depression and homesickness. Yet, even for Dickinson, postal work at work Camp 1169 and an entire group's attempts to sabotage the postal system, encouraged him to be somewhat less depressive about his captivity. For instance, by the time of arrival at the Dresden work camp, 'maybe Germany (was) not such a bad place after all.'¹⁵ In comparing the Italian experience with that of Germany, he reflected on how the 'Latin temperament' negatively affected the way they were treated, adding that, 'the Germans leave us in no doubt as to who is running the show and we know where we are. I think most of us prefer this.'¹⁶

On balance, it seems arguable that POWs in large camps such as Lamsdorf or Muhlberg may have been at greater risk of isolating depression if they failed to participate in common activities or took personal initiatives to alleviate their circumstances. On the other hand, those on work camps, as a result of employment and the experience of a sense of working normality, may have been less at risk of becoming depressed. Keeping up morale could therefore be attributed to many factors beyond any individual psychological state. Healthy camaraderie, taking action to improve conditions, whether individually or in groups, and establishing good functional relationships with captors and enemy civilians all aided in establishing and maintaining optimism.

POW camaraderie and conflict

The difference in size and in the number of POWs in work camps and in Stalags influenced the way in which POWs lived together. It seems that in smaller work camps, POWs were able to form more harmonious bonds between one other, while the far larger numbers in Stalags could lead to conflict, especially between servicemen of different nationalities or ranks. In some instances, POWs were not immediately separated according to race and nationality following their arrival at big Stalags, exposing men to unfamiliar cultures and customs. Informal, easy-going segregationist practices would sometimes develop their own rhythms, maintaining sociability across hierarchies. At Stalag VIIA, for example, Chutter found

¹⁴ Rosmarin, I. 1999. *Inside Story*: 58 – 59.

¹⁵ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo'burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by E.B. Dickinson*: 102.

¹⁶ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo'burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by E.B. Dickinson*: 115.

himself in close contact with American and British airmen, black South Africans and Palestinian labourers all allocated the same hut, an episode which he described as ‘a great experience of racial harmony. Natural courtesy was the outstanding feature. Without any conscious management, racial “toilet hours” [were] observed’, and when forced to the toilets by dysentery, he was met with surprised greetings of “*hou umfundisi*” [greetings pastor] [by] my old flock from the Sunday afternoon gatherings in Tobruk.’¹⁷

In much smaller work camps, POWs could participate to a greater extent in their overall organization, taking greater responsibility for their own well-being. As in Italy, highest rank POWs became camp leaders, while in places of more equal rank, leaders were elected by fellow POWs. These men were responsible for communication with commanders, as well as for discipline and general organisational matters.¹⁸ It was in Germany that camp leaders gained greater knowledge of Geneva stipulations through regular contact with Red Cross camp inspectors, and German authorities were also more punctilious in supplying copies of the Geneva Convention than were the Italians. In Italy, many POWs had clearly been unaware of the Convention and its terms. David Brokensha, for instance, only became aware of the Convention when his brother Paul became leader at their German work camp in Gorbitz.¹⁹ Appointed camp leader on rank, he could have gone to another centre, but chose to remain with his brother as they had promised their father that they would stay together throughout the war.²⁰ Hammond, in work camp 4008, was another example of a South African camp leader chosen on rank.²¹

Regardless of how these positions were obtained, there were always POWs who did not agree with the choice, such as in cases where there were allegations of leaders abusing their positions. Mugglestone, for instance, was unhappy about the the leader of his work camp, possibly work camp 1169 in Dresden, where Paul Brokensha would have been camp leader. He regarded him as virtually a racketeer and felt that he was unfit as ‘the WO who would be in charge of the postal staff, was the same one who was buried in clothing and footwear in Italy and he could not even say “*Ja*” or “*Nein*” [yes or no]’²² Mortlock, on the other hand, was more forgiving, regarding Brokensha as ‘rather young and inexperienced for this

¹⁷ Chutter, J.B. *Captivity Captive*: 107 – 108.

¹⁸ Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*: 123.

¹⁹ David Brokensha interview: 10 September 2010, Fish Hoek.

²⁰ David Brokensha interview: 10 September 2010, Fish Hoek.

²¹ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over The Story of Herbert Rhodes (Aussie) Hammond*: 74 & 79.

²² Mugglestone, D.I.H. n.d. *Destination Unknown*: 35.

unenviable task [of camp leader]. Perhaps an older man would have been better. As it was he was the only one who held the rank of sergeant, and on the whole he did not do too badly.’²³

The fact that rank-and-file POWs in any one camp could vary so widely in background and character could aid ways of learning to adapt and to live together. Thus, for Fred van Alphen Stahl, the skills of ‘forgers and crooks and pickpockets’ were an advantage to escape committees, as they would be the ones to prepare the false papers a POW would need to escape successfully in Germany.²⁴ Equally, highly diverse groups and individuals also meant that prejudices one would find in any society were represented in camp and although on a smaller scale, emotions and reactions to situations were often more intense as prisoners lived together in close proximity and in difficult circumstances that required great circumspection and sensible behaviour in complex situations.

The reality of confinement was that most POWs were young men under stress, and who needed to curb more aggressive instincts. Burdens were made worse by food shortages, but were also relieved somewhat at the same time by the realisation by most POWs that they had to rely for basic comforts and support on a small friendly circle. It was also important to maintain a steady temperament, of not being perturbed by personal crises. Following their capture and the sense of humiliation associated with it, it was especially important for POWs to maintain some dignity. In order to do this, it was often necessary to resort to a ‘passive courage, [and] a stoic endurance’²⁵ which came to define soldiers’ experience of fear, allowing them to cope in extreme situations and prevented them from being branded as cowards. Not expressing their fears and remaining unemotional in the face of death and hardship not only allowed POWs to cope psychologically, but also helped them fight against becoming helpless victims of their circumstances.²⁶

Van Alphen Stahl’s description of how POWs’ comforted one other in the hospital camp near Lamsdorf echoes much of the scholarly literature on the world wars, in which combatants distanced themselves emotionally in order to cope with grief:

well I’d think if you really felt, what would I say, sad, you couldn’t show it, if you knew somebody lost his buddy, you wouldn’t go moping and shake his hand, you’d

²³ Mortlock, J. 1956. *The endless years Reminiscences of the 2nd World War*: 67.

²⁴ Fred van Alphen Stahl interview: 15 June 2010, Cape Town.

²⁵ Hynes, S. 1997. *The Soldiers’ Tale Bearing Witness to Modern War*: 58.

²⁶ Hynes, S. 1997. *The Soldiers’ Tale Bearing Witness to Modern War*: 323 – 236.

just go up to him and say “hi cocky” and probably give him a punch, you know you’d say “now you’re short of a bridge partner.”²⁷

Despite the deliberate suppression of vulnerable emotions, some POWs had a need to communicate with someone on a deeper level and this could sometimes lead to confusion over sexuality. Dick Dickinson was often philosophically reflective over issues such as faith and virtue, especially during times of homesickness, depression and hunger. He was very careful not to make known his uncertainties about the nature of male friendship and homosexual attractions to his fellow POWs, although in hindsight he recalled a ‘personal, personal friend, but I was friendly with half a dozen guys as a POW, you know, I was very fond of quite a few people there, but there was certainly no sexual attraction apart from this one Englishman. But you know, you needed to talk.’²⁸

When a close friend left a ‘small mascot teddy bear’ on Dickinson’s bed after transfer to another camp, his reaction to the loss revealed his feelings on friendship, on the need for some emotional closeness and awareness of how in a POW camp these impulses could be constructed as homosexual in inclination:

I keep my feelings to myself in case they are misconstrued, but in this all-male life that we lead there are times when feelings and emotions become gentle and soft. One wonders whether this can be regarded as ‘normal’. It is normal to have women in one’s life – not for sex, but for that deeper relationship and love and understanding that nourishes a little bit of femininity in a man and makes a better person of him. A life without women is certainly not normal. If I were to say that it is a queer life, the pun would be a bad joke and very much out of line.²⁹

In soldiering life, such close male friendships were, of course, not exclusive to POW experience, and ties had developed between some men while they were still undergoing training. As depicted by Brokensha, these relationships were characterised by ‘intense affection and occasional homoerotic undertones [and] such mates would be emotionally extremely close, and mutually dependent.’³⁰

²⁷ Fred van Alphen Stahl interview: 15 June 2010, Cape Town.

²⁸ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo’burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by E.B. Dickinson*: 76. Dick Dickinson interview: 4 December 2010, Mossel Bay.

²⁹ Dick Dickinson interview: 4 December 2010, Mossel Bay.

³⁰ Brokensha, D. 2007. *Brokie’s Way An Anthropologist’s story. Love and Work in three Continents*: 57.

At another level, for Gilbert extreme hunger diverted male attention away from thinking about sex, something echoed by Geldenhuis among others. When acutely short, POWs would only talk of food, but when it became more available, POWs would talk only of women.³¹ In a further amusing yet also perceptive recollection, Van Alphen Stahl even suggested that one could determine the state of food in any POW camp by listening to what its men were talking about; if they were talking about women, it could be assumed that the camp had sufficient food supplies.³² With food and general living conditions better in Germany than in Italy, the charged minds of emotionally deprived Stalag POWs may perhaps have been more often occupied with thoughts of sex. While some struggled with homosexuality, others had the opportunity, especially those in work camps, to have sexual liaisons with civilian German women, as in the case of Paul Brokensha and Aussie Hammond.

Another key aspect of camp friendships were those often formed between members of differing nationalities, although language played an obvious role in grouping POWs, especially those whose first language was not English. A British journalist in Oflag XIIB noted that the use of Afrikaans by South Africans irritated others unable to understand them, separating Union POWs from the rest, as the 'South African members of the camp certainly tended to stick together rather on their own in a way which the Australians and New Zealanders never did.'³³ Nonetheless, wider friendships did develop as with Fred Geldenhuis who 'made friends with the French and in particular two who became of my best friends.'³⁴ Within the context of a POW camp, such intentional friendships often had ulterior practical motives, an example being Geldenhuis' friendship with French POWs. Although a genuine relationship emerged, when he first befriended them it was because he recognised that their knowledge of camp life would assist him in his work as barrack leader.

³¹ Fred Geldenhuis interview: 9 July 2010, Pretoria.

³² Fred van Alphen Stahl interview: 15 June 2010, Cape Town.

³³ Edward Ward quoted in Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*: 204.

³⁴ Geldenhuis, F.J.W. n.d. *A Soldier's Scrap Book. The memoirs of Frederik Jacobus Wagenaar Geldenhuis*: 173.



Figure 7: Staff at Barracks 29 - 30. Geldenhuis is in the back row, left.

Geldenhuis only arrived in Stalag VIIA in October 1944, by which time its experienced French captives had established a strong routine and ran a well-organised camp system that allowed them relatively more freedom than others. With France having been invaded, the Germans assumed that French POWs would be less likely to try to escape. Here, the French had also set up a trading system with guards and civilians, Geldenhuis used them, also exploiting their contacts to procure parts for a radio that he was repairing.³⁵ Trading with guards depended naturally on easy relations, that being one of the reasons why beneficial links developed between captors and captives.

Conditions could often differ from camp to camp. In Stalag IVB near Muhlberg, a Red Cross inspector noted in November 1943 that ‘discipline is rather difficult to maintain in this camp on account of the presence of prisoners of some many different nationalities.’³⁶ Here, Dickinson’s record, amongst others, underlines the degree to which men continued to attach specific ‘national’ characteristics to specific nationalities in camp. Accordingly, the Dutch were the ‘most civil fellows’ while the English ‘squeal and cry quicker than us.’³⁷ For all that, memories mostly confirm that differences were tolerable, and that organised sport was an outlet for group rivalries and antagonisms.

³⁵ Geldenhuis, F.J.W. n.d. *A Soldier’s Scrap Book. The memoirs of Frederik Jacobus Wagenaar Geldenhuis*: 171 – 172.

³⁶ DOD AG(POW) 1527/IVB. UDF POW in Germany. ICRC Report on Stalag IVB by Drs O. Lehner and P. Ruggli on 13 November 1943.

³⁷ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo’burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by E.B. Dickinson*: 102 – 103.

Outlets to relieve various pressures were, however, not always available. In Stalag IVB, for instance, conditions did not undergo much improvement and by July 1944 its Red Cross inspector was again reporting on overcrowding, while conceding that ‘this is an assembly camp [and] conditions are normal.’³⁸ Excessively crowded barracks invariably worsened POW relationships as it affected sleeping arrangements and food provision. As a result of Germany’s decline towards the end of the war, the deteriorating situation in Stalag IVB became even more severe, ‘due to influx of American prisoners following German Ardennes offensive causing excessive overcrowding.’³⁹

POWs and German guards

Large camps, such as Lamsdorf and Muhlberg, which were used for registration and transit, were more prone to open conflict between guards and POWs, while smaller numbers of men in work camps meant that a larger percentage of prisoners came into direct contact with guards, in some cases leading to fraternisation. Whatever their location, the quality of POWs’ daily life depended largely on their prison overseers, making it endurable or unbearable. In Stalag IVB, Dickinson described a German sergeant as ‘hard, harsh and uncooperative [and] a guard struck one of our chaps with the butt of his rifle for no reason.’⁴⁰ Some tensions lay in German perceptions of insolence. As early as November 1943, a Red Cross report on this camp noted that British NCOs ‘have not behaved respectfully to the German authorities’ because they refused to salute their NCOs.⁴¹ British NCOs insisted that they need not salute one another as they were of equal rank. The German view, however, was that Article 18 of the Geneva Convention stipulated that ‘prisoners of war shall be required to salute all officers of the detaining Power [and] Officer prisoners of war shall be required to salute only officers of that Power who are their superiors or equals in rank’.⁴² Excessive force from guards was likely to have had the consent of the camp commandant. The brittle situation at Stalag IVB improved, however, under a camp leader from Stalag IVA who understood the ‘art of being a

³⁸ DOD AG(POW) 1527/IVB. UDF POW in Germany. ICRC Report on Stalag IVB by Dr Rossel on 3 July 1944.

³⁹ DOD AG(POW) 1527/IVB. UDF POW in Germany. From Berne to Foreign Office. 0103/5777. (P.W.2.) 8 March 1945.

⁴⁰ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo’burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by E.B. Dickinson*: 108.

⁴¹ DOD AG(POW) 1527/IVB. UDF POW in Germany. ICRC Report on Stalag IVB by Drs O. Lehner and P. Ruggli on 13 November 1943.

⁴² ICRC International Humanitarian Law, Treaties and Documents. Convention relative to the treatment of Prisoners-of-War, Geneva, 27 July 1929. Available at <http://www.icrc.org>. Accessed 30 May 2011.

POW' – fluent in German and thus at negotiating, he tended to give orders rather than only take them from prison officers.⁴³

When Dickinson arrived at the work camp in Dresden, he was not only surprised by its cleanliness but also by the welcome from its commander. Because he had a POW son in the United States, he apparently wanted to ensure that men in his camp would be treated as decently as his son was being treated in America.⁴⁴ On arrival at work camp 1169, Dickinson, the Brokenshas and Mortlock all viewed its commandant, Horst Mainz, positively, with David Brokensha describing him as 'fair minded [and] even as early as October 1943, when we arrived at this camp, Horst was convinced that Germany would lose the war and he was concerned [...] that we were treated as well as possible.'⁴⁵ For a more reserved Mortlock, Mainz and his sentries were a 'decent lot.'⁴⁶ As camp leader, Paul Brokensha had a close working relationship with the commandant and they both seemed to have agreed on a number of matters. POWs were advised against escape, not only because they were very likely to be recaptured, but also because any escapes would have meant punitive repercussions for both prisoners and for the commandant. By co-operating, the group managed to improve their own living conditions and enjoyed access to a commandant who was amenable to many reasonable requests, secure in the knowledge that he could rely on his prisoners not to attempt to escape.

To ease pressure as the official capacity of the camp was 100 POWs, Mainz asked Paul Brokensha confidentially to see to the composition of the group 'so that all of us have as good a war as possible in the circumstances.' Although the Brokenshas duly selected mostly South Africans, they excluded some UDF servicemen for being 'troublemakers, given to quarrelling, or those whose morale was low.' Some British POWs also made it onto their list, but highly selectively, as Brokensha remained convinced that 'British POWs still harboured resentment against us as South Africans, whom they blamed for the fall of Tobruk.'⁴⁷ This selection appears to have been done in complete secrecy, as camp transfers occurred without reasons being provided. One such example was Mugglestone, moved to a camp near Leipzig to work in a cement factory. He could have been seen as a 'troublemaker' as he had made his

⁴³ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo'burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by E.B. Dickinson*: 108.

⁴⁴ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo'burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by E.B. Dickinson*: 102 – 103.

⁴⁵ Brokensha, D. 2007. *Brokie's Way An Anthropologist's story. Love and Work in three Continents*: 98.

⁴⁶ Mortlock, J. 1956. *The endless years Reminiscences of the 2nd World War*: 65.

⁴⁷ Brokensha, D. 2007. *Brokie's Way An Anthropologist's story. Love and Work in three Continents*: 100 – 101.

feelings about the camp leader clear.⁴⁸ Even Mortlock, who seems to have been friends with the Brokensha brothers, was ignorant of the stealthy selection procedure, and assumed that the Germans were responsible for moving ‘all British soldiers and left only South Africans at 1169. Other South Africans were brought in to take their places. We were very sorry to see the “chums” go. We had made some good friends amongst them and a few of our countrymen that replaced them were below standard.’⁴⁹

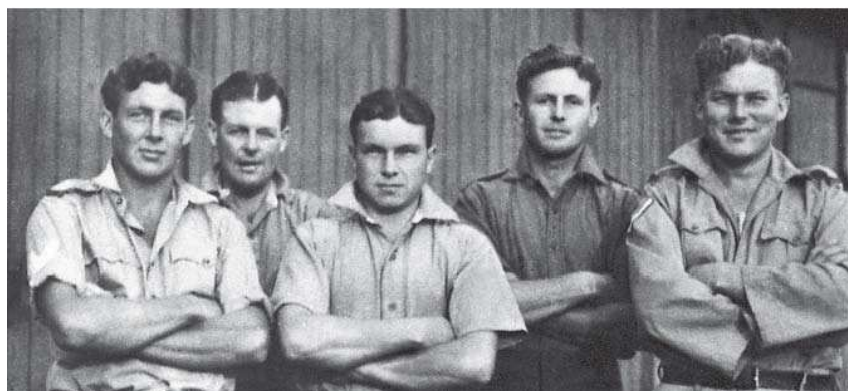


Figure 8: Paul Brokensha, Jack Mortlock, David Brokensha, Harry Mortlock and ‘Jake’ in work camp 1169 near Dresden.⁵⁰

Relations elsewhere between POW work camp leaders and commandants were not as close as that between Paul Brokensha and Horst Mainz, but for the most part both parties agreed on some level of mutually beneficial cooperation. Aussie Hammond, camp leader at a sugar factory near Klettendorf, soon realised that he would have to act assertively if he wanted to get anywhere with claims. The Germans, he gathered, respected rank, ‘British or otherwise [...] and I was not slow to play on this advantage whenever occasion arose.’⁵¹ The fact that Hammond had by this time acquired a copy of the Geneva Convention helped him further to assert his terms. Aside from rank, he also discovered that more junior sentries were vulnerable to pressure, for ‘you could do almost anything with the German guards by threatening to make trouble, they were so dead-scared of being sent to the Russian front.’⁵²

Hammond’s relationships with guards and commandants were evidently based on a combination of veiled hostility and a precarious balance between controlled aggression and mocking humour. Men in his work group were amused by resorting to nick-names when referring to their enemy captors, with Fish-Eyes and Snapperguts being the two most

⁴⁸ Mugglestone, D.I.H. n.d. *Destination Unknown*: 35.

⁴⁹ Mortlock, J. 1956. *The endless years Reminiscences of the 2nd World War*: 72.

⁵⁰ Brokensha, D. 2007. *Brokie’s Way An Anthropologist’s story. Love and Work in three Continents*: 100.

⁵¹ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over The Story of Herbert Rhodes (Aussie) Hammond*: 85.

⁵² Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over The Story of Herbert Rhodes (Aussie) Hammond*: 85.

prominent. Fish-Eyes was described as ‘blustering’, but also as one who treated POWs with ‘genuine kindness’. This, however, did not prevent prisoners from humiliating him when he attempted to learn English from them. Hammond first heard about these language lessons when Fish-Eyes greeted him with, ‘I kiss your arse.’⁵³ Snapperguts was the foreman at one of the factories where the POW work party regularly stole sugar. When it became clear that sugar was disappearing, guards were assigned to searches, but as they were also implicated in the sugar trade, their smuggling alliance with the POWs left Snapperguts powerless in maintaining control over the factory.⁵⁴

Relationships between ordinary sentries and ordinary POWs also developed and in some cases even formed friendships that outlasted the war. Just as POWs sometimes formed fellow-friendships for mutual benefit, so did common friendships form between POWs and German guards. In many cases, captives traded ‘treat’ goods from their Red Cross parcels, such as chocolate and cigarettes, for more nutritious and filling foodstuffs. Typically, when Rosmarin became the translator for working parties employed to clean a sergeant’s training facility near Stalag VIIIIB, he realised that his position would provide opportunities to trade Red Cross chocolate, soap and cigarettes for potatoes and bread. In a sense, he drew the sergeant in through their illicit trade and left him vulnerable as he was liable to being exposed for accepting contraband from a prisoner. The guard, ‘fell hook line and sinker for [Rosmarin’s] plan and [they] became great buddies. His relationship with the guard was portrayed as a ‘unique association [the guard] was unhappy with the Hitler regime and often passed derogatory remarks about the Nazis. He was a fine gentleman who restored my faith in human dignity and the German race.’⁵⁵

Near Dresden, work camp POWs also offered their guards goods, which, once accepted, put prisoners in what amounted to a powerful blackmailing position. One such German features in Mortlock’s memoirs simply as Nelson, who ‘was completely in our power. He no longer carried much weight. If he tried to show his authority he was reminded that he had accepted stolen property.’⁵⁶ Ironically, at times this captor was also protected by his captives. When Nelson became involved with a female who worked at the Dresden station, he asked POWs to look out for officers while he and the woman enjoyed an assignation. When they arrived,

⁵³ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over The Story of Herbert Rhodes (Aussie) Hammond*: 101.

⁵⁴ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over The Story of Herbert Rhodes (Aussie) Hammond*: 92.

⁵⁵ Rosmarin, I. 1999. *Inside Story*: 58 – 59.

⁵⁶ Nelson had previously accepted a new uniform from the POWs who had put it together from various parcels they pilfered at the post office. Nelson also accepted stolen gramophone records from the POWs. Mortlock, J. 1956. *The endless years Reminiscences of the 2nd World War*: 68.

‘prisoners were hunting furtively all over the station for Nelson, one even carrying Nelson’s rifle [.he) was eventually found, armed, and sent in the direction of the officer to report, and the girl sneaked back to her job on the belt.’⁵⁷

Brokensha, perhaps more naïve and less calculating in forging friendships, formed an emotional relationship with a young guard who was sent to work camp 1169 late in 1944 after being wounded on the Russian front. His friendship with Wolfgang was evoked as ‘love [...] yet there were no conscious homoerotic aspects’, and ‘there was no criticism from other POWs.’ In that depiction, it seems as if Wolfgang was himself as innocently distracted as Brokensha. On one occasion, while on their way to the tram in Dresden, a fellow POW took the guard’s rifle, slung it over his shoulder and started shouting orders at prisoners in broken German while Brokensha and Wolfgang talked about what they would do after the war.⁵⁸

Another instance of a personal relationship was formed between Cremer, an ordinary POW and a German sergeant-major. Cremer and a companion, Joe, played chess every evening and when his partner fell ill, the German officer, an older man who had been wounded on the Russian front, insisted on replacing him. Neither had sufficient linguistic skills to communicate properly with each other, but nevertheless a friendly understanding formed between them.⁵⁹ For others, friendship with Germans was never simple and relationships bore underlying tensions, not least as both captor and captive were always aware of possible adverse consequences should any regulations be broken. Indeed, that awareness may have motivated them towards mutuality and cooperation, and to overcome animosities because of personal, cultural or ideological differences or disputes.

Such supportive cooperation was illustrated by an incident which occurred between Crompton and a guard as he was being escorted to a hospital to have his eyes tested. On the way, a group of German officers stopped them and angrily enquired why Crompton had not saluted them. The guard salvaged the situation by lying, telling his officers that Crompton was blind; had he not done so, both of them would have been punished.⁶⁰ Like many others, Crompton’s episode reveals that POWs and Germans had the capacity to create friendships despite being enemies, in situations which were complex, and often delicate. Ultimately,

⁵⁷ Mortlock, J. 1956. *The endless years Reminiscences of the 2nd World War*: 69.

⁵⁸ Brokensha, D. 2007. *Brokie’s Way An Anthropologist’s story. Love and Work in three Continents*: 107 – 108.

⁵⁹ Cremer, A.J. n.d. *Oorlogsherinneringe*: 31. ‘Dit was die begin van ‘n mooi vriendskap tussen twee oorlogsvyande. Hy kon nie Engels of Afrikaans praat nie, net so effens verstaan. My kennis van Duits was nie beter nie. En tog het daar ‘n goeie verstandhouding tussen ons bestaan.’

⁶⁰ Crompton, C. & P. Johnson. 2010. *Luck’s Favours Two South African Second World War Memoirs*: 68.

relationships between POWs and guards probably amounted to a mix of friendship, a recognition of shared humanity, fluctuating and uncertain loyalties and inner conflict as both sides struggled with, or took advantage of, each other's positions and status. Perhaps the last word here should be left with Hammond, a classic opportunist whose close relations with guards never weakened his practical commitment to the Allied cause. As camp leader, Hammond helped two POWs to escape from their work camp near Lamsdorf. When the Gestapo returned them two days later, the commandant was severely embarrassed and angered as it became clear that he had not been aware that the two men were missing. Attacking Hammond for not keeping a closer count on the POWs, he was met with a shrug. 'You're the guard, not me!' was his reply.⁶¹

Hidden motives

In an overcrowded Lamsdorf camp, POWs suffered water shortages and inadequate toilet facilities, with Van Alphen Stahl recalling how all the windows in the washrooms were broken, meaning that the 'forty-seater' toilets were regularly covered in a layer of snow 'and you had to warm them up before you [could] sit down.'⁶² In his 1950s study of New Zealand POW experiences, Mason argued that the Germans fostered participation in sport and recreation as a means of trying to alleviate the effects of poor living conditions, and possibly also to prevent camp disorder.⁶³ Van Alphen Stahl fondly remembered the carnival acts which he found especially entertaining, in particular one occasion when white servicemen from Natal 'blackened-up' in the familiar male group routine of Zulu mimicry. Having smeared their faces with black shoe polish, 'they were now Zulu warriors, and they screamed and danced and they made spears and shields and they were stomping and singing Zulu chants, and the Germans' eyes could have popped out of their heads when they saw this stuff.'⁶⁴

At the same time, not all kinds of recreational pastimes encouraged and overseen by the Germans were innocent horse-play. More ominously, Rosmarin's memoirs also recalled an event in which 'mad sugar farmers were announced the winners of the coveted first prize, a week at the holiday "camp" at Gengshaven (sic).'⁶⁵ Situated near Berlin, Genshagen was in fact a camp for the recruitment of volunteers for the *British Free Corps* (BFC). This

⁶¹ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over The Story of Herbert Rhodes (Aussie) Hammond*: 122 – 123

⁶² Fred van Alphen Stahl interview: 25 May 2010, Cape Town.

⁶³ Mason, W.W. 1954. *Prisoners of War New Zealand in the Second World War 1939 – 45*: 369 – 370.

⁶⁴ Fred van Alphen Stahl interview: 25 May 2010, Cape Town.

⁶⁵ Rosmarin, I. 1999. *Inside Story*: 69.

indoctrination programme was a German attempt to convince Allied POWs to join the fight against Communism and was first instituted in May 1944 when a circular was sent to all POW camps. This claimed that the establishment of the BFC was a result of ‘repeated applications from British subjects from all parts of the world wishing to take part in the common European struggle against Bolshevism.’⁶⁶

The BFC initiative also, clearly, denounced the war against Germany, something that may be seen to have had some appeal for Afrikaans-speaking POWs, especially those with German ancestry, those who had joined up for jobs rather than for patriotic reasons, and those who still harboured resentment of the British for the concentration camp excesses of the South African War. On the other hand, German propagandists were conveying a mixed message to any disaffected South African POWs. Declaring the post-1939 war to be a ‘betrayal of the British people and British Imperial interests’⁶⁷ clearly took no account of Afrikaner nationalism and of nationalist sentiment to be independent of Britain.

Upon arrival at Genshagen, prisoners were informed that the aim of the POW holiday camp was physical and mental recuperation to allow POWs to recover from physical and mental inactivity. However, for those who spent time there the real purpose of the camp was soon obvious. As George Oram of the 2nd Anti-Aircraft Regiment found, attempts were made to ‘induce men to commit treason by joining the German army.’⁶⁸ Using a similar method of offering rewards in return for service, the Germans promised food and uniforms to Russian POWs in Stalag VIIIIB who were suffering acute privations in compounds which had been set apart from the others.⁶⁹

When a British soldier in a German uniform visited work camp 1169 in the summer of 1944, Brokensha and others with him ‘were enraged [...] especially by the sight of a small Union Jack neatly sewn next to the German eagle on his German uniform.’ Nonetheless, when his camp was invited to send a group to the alleged holiday facility, David Brokensha was tempted, as he was convinced that he would be able to withstand indoctrination. However, his brother and camp leader, Paul Brokensha, would not allow it as in his view mere attendance at Genshagen might be seen as disloyalty once the war was over.⁷⁰ Rosmarin’s memoirs record captives being ‘bombarded with thousands of anti-Semitic pamphlets’, not without

⁶⁶ Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*: 247.

⁶⁷ Mason, W.W. 1954. *Prisoners of War New Zealand in the Second World War 1939 – 45*: 393.

⁶⁸ Leigh, M. 1992. *Captives Courageous. South African prisoners of war World War II*: 162 – 164.

⁶⁹ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over The Story of Herbert Rhodes (Aussie) Hammond*: 78.

⁷⁰ Brokensha, D. 2007. *Brokie’s Way An Anthropologist’s story. Love and Work in three Continents*: 104.

some effect, as ‘these blatant lies were swallowed by many P.O.W.s’ who vented their feelings on us.’ For him, Genshagen was a ‘super Nazi propaganda camp [where] the Nazis cleverly preyed on the feelings and emotions of the Kriegies.’⁷¹

Still, Oram’s experience at Genshagen was that only four of the group of 200 POWs decided to join the BFC.⁷² While memoirs certainly allude to BFC recruiters visiting camps, few oral narratives and memoirs acknowledge holiday camps, suggesting that their impact was marginal. Even Oosthuizen, who held the Germans in high regard, never considered the BFC, in fact, seeming totally unaware of its existence, remaining firm that it was in Germany where he experienced his worst times as a POW.⁷³

‘Ad absurdum’⁷⁴

Over the course of hostilities, there were many opportunities for Allied and Axis governments to accuse one other of not upholding the terms of the Geneva Convention in the treatment of POWs, as in Article 2 of the Convention which states that ‘Measures of reprisal against them are forbidden’.⁷⁵ The issue of reprisals against POWs was more often than not a propagandistic political contest between enemy governments and affected POWs only in the ways in which camp authority carried out any reprisal orders. Here, probably the most well-known single incident was the shackling of enemy prisoners following the Allied landing at Dieppe in August 1942. The hands of captured Germans were tied, it was claimed, to prevent escape. The British response to a touchy situation was poorly handled. At first, they tried to deny that such an order existed. Then it was asserted that the order had been issued without authority. And lastly, the position was that if an order had been given, it was to have been retracted immediately.⁷⁶

The OKW was infuriated by what it referred to as ‘Wild West methods [which] will be immediately answered with the sharpest reprisals.’ In the same document of 16 October 1942, the Germans listed other instances of the British contravening the Geneva Convention, including the tying up of German POWs following London’s attack on occupied Sark in

⁷¹ Rosmarin, I. 1999. *Inside Story*: 63.

⁷² Leigh, M. 1992. *Captives Courageous. South African prisoners of war World War II*: 164.

⁷³ Wessel Oosthuizen interview: 4 December 2010, Hartenbos.

⁷⁴ The High Command of the German Forces describing Churchill’s interpretation of the Geneva Convention with regard to reprisals between belligerent countries with regard to the treatment of prisoners-of-war. NASA BTS 9/55/1. Public announcement by the High Command of the German Armed Forces dated October 16, 1942.

⁷⁵ ICRC International Humanitarian Law, Treaties and Documents. Convention relative to the treatment of Prisoners-of-War, Geneva, 27 July 1929. Available at <http://www.icrc.org>. Accessed 30 May 2011.

⁷⁶ MacKenzie, S.P. 1995. ‘The Shackling Crisis: A Case-Study in the Dynamics of Prisoner-of-War Diplomacy in the Second World War.’ *The International History Review*, 17(1): 83.

October 1942, and ‘standing orders’ during the Western Desert campaign in which German POWs were not to have received ‘food, sleep nor drink, nor any favour or comfort’ until they had been interrogated. The tone and language of the OKW document was highly threatening and accusatory, denouncing the British as liars, whose use of ‘barbaric methods’ against captured Germans would be counteracted, so that ‘British terrorists [would be] ruthlessly mown down wherever they appear.’⁷⁷

Most controversial of all was the concluding OKW hint that all Allied POWs would be treated in the same manner in which Germany had been treating Russian POWs unprotected by the Geneva Convention:

Treatment contrary to the international law or inhumane treatment of German prisoners of war in any theatre of war, e.g. in Soviet Russia also, will thus from now onwards have to be atoned for by the totality of the prisoners taken by Germany without regard to their nationality.⁷⁸

In London, the issue was taken very seriously and, for the first time, the War Cabinet became directly involved in POW affairs, when Churchill intervened in response to Nazi threats.⁷⁹ Resting on his ‘instinct’, he had ‘the strong impression that the original order for tying up prisoners came from Hitler and is a sign of his rage and fury and that it encountered a good deal of passive opposition not only from the German Foreign Office but from the German military authorities under whom the prison camps now fortunately are.’⁸⁰ Churchill was right.

Although the shackling of POWs started in 1942, the South African Red Cross only came to know about the measure by December 1943 when Urquhart sent an urgent communication to the Prisoner of War Directorate in Pretoria, saying that distressed parents had brought in letters from their sons at Stalag VIII B in which they mentioned that they were being tied up. Urquhart believed that ‘apart from any physical handicap, the mental effect on the men must be very distressing.’⁸¹ While the local Red Cross called for an urgent investigation, the POW

⁷⁷ NASA BTS 9/55/1. Public announcement by the High Command of the German Armed Forces dated October 16, 1942.

⁷⁸ NASA BTS 9/55/1. Public announcement by the High Command of the German Armed Forces dated October 16, 1942.

⁷⁹ MacKenzie, S.P. 1995. ‘The Shackling Crisis: A Case-Study in the Dynamics of Prisoner-of-War Diplomacy in the Second World War.’ *The International History Review*, 17(1): 85.

⁸⁰ NASA BTS 9/55/1. Copy of Telegram from Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, London, to High Commissioner for the United Kingdom, Pretoria. 2 November 1942. No. 2000 Most Secret and Personal. Message from Prime Minister date 28/10.

⁸¹ DOD AG(POW) 1527/344 Vol I. Correspondence from Clara Urquhart, South African Red Cross Society to Colonel Clapham, Prisoner of War Directorate, Pretoria. 7 December 1943.

Directorate had in fact been receiving all documentation relating to the shackling situation since it had begun.

By March 1943, discussions were held by the Swiss Minister in charge of British interests at which the German Army representative suggested that the ‘shackling should be regarded as a “symbolic act”’⁸² and no more. In addition, Swiss diplomacy reported that, according to the Senior British Medical Officers at Stalag 383 and at Eichstätt in Bavaria,⁸³ the practice did not have a negative impact on the morale of POWs and that those who had been shackled were able to move about and were not isolated from the other prisoners.⁸⁴ Then, towards the end of that year, D.D. Forsyth, Secretary for External Affairs, wrote to the Director of Information to confirm that he had been informed by the British government that shackling had ended in November. At the same time, Forsyth was also explicit that the press should not publish any reports on the issue as it was ‘most important not to run the risk of shackling being re-imposed.’⁸⁵

By all accounts, POWs who experienced being shackled were not necessarily openly enraged by the practice, but also evidently understood that it was a matter to be handled with care, given their vulnerable circumstances. Thus, it was reported that while POWs had ‘no complaints or demands’, ‘they asked the Swiss Legation officials to treat the matter with utmost discretion since their present condition was quite bearable and they feared that further steps and representations to German authorities might have an unfortunate effect.’⁸⁶ In reassuring letters, all of which were passed by censors, POWs calculatingly made light of their situation and wrote about it with humour, for instance, as with Frederick Lowe who wrote that ‘it’s a bit awkward to write with manacles [but] I’ll be able to keep you laughing for hours when we are able to discuss all that’s happened.’ Walter Robert Francis insisted that he ‘couldn’t worry as [the chains] don’t handicap me much, Big Joke, ha ha.’ Oswald Hansen displayed the archetypal cunning and dead-pan sarcasm of the POW attitude when he declared that ‘we are now with the world-famed chain gang, and we are issued with hardware

⁸² NASA BTS 9/55/1. Telegram from Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, London, to Minister of External Affairs, Cape Town. Circular D. No. 166. Secret. 20 March 1943.

⁸³ Other affected camps were Oflag 7B, Stalag 9C and Marlag Milag Nord. NASA BTS 9/55/1. Telegram from Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, London, to Minister of External Affairs, Pretoria. Circular D. No. 670. Secret. 18 September 1943.

⁸⁴ NASA BTS 9/55/1. Telegram from Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, London, to Minister of External Affairs, Pretoria. Circular D. No. 670. Secret. 18 September 1943.

⁸⁵ NASA BTS 9/55/1. Correspondence from Secretary for External Affairs to Director of Information. 20 December 1943.

⁸⁶ NASA BTS 9/55/1. Telegram from Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, London, to Minister of External Affairs, Pretoria. Circular D. No. 670. Secret. 18 September 1943.

every day but that does not worry us as the whole mechanism is very simple and is easily wangled as the *Ketang* [chains] remains *onder die kombes* [under the blankets] all the time and is only displayed when required – life is a big joke here.’⁸⁷

Van Alphen Stahl, Rosmarin and Ogilvy were all at Lamsdorf, one of the prison camps where the shackling reprisal was carried out, yet they treated the episode humorously.⁸⁸ For Rosmarin and his friends, it became a game of comic resistance. Guards naturally had to tie and untie the shackles whenever POWs visited toilets, and ‘as soon as their hands were tied the victims visited the toilets where a squad set about untying them – and back they went into the queue. The Germans could not understand why the queues never shortened!’⁸⁹

As most Union POWs arrived in Germany during 1943, those who experienced shackling only did so at the time when Britain and Canada had started to resolve the crisis. Moreover, as Germany became increasingly preoccupied with operational war matters, it paid less and less attention to ongoing political and diplomatic arguments over conventions.⁹⁰ Notably, Red Cross reports on Stalag VIII B/344 indicated increasingly that the ‘case today is a more symbolic one than a physical strain or pain [...] camp authorities appear to shut an eye to the prisoners taking off their handcuffs and move about with the others.’⁹¹ Leniency may have been the result of many guards’ growing doubts over Germany’s chances of emerging victorious from the war. Equally, it may also have been a consequence of the humane bonds that had formed between some of them and POWs. Another more mundane point is that the shackling of prisoners was an impractical arrangement for authorities who needed POW labour. In some cases, other ranks were freed from shackles, although their number was replaced by non-labouring officers being shackled. But even in Oflag 7B, officers had to be freed so that they could carry out ‘urgent camp duties.’⁹²

⁸⁷ DOD CE 15/8/155. Correspondence from DCS (DMI) Defence Headquarters, Pretoria, to DAG (POW), Commander Military Mission, Senior Army Education Officer. 10 December 1943.

⁸⁸ Vourkoutiotis, V. 2000. ‘The German Armed Forces Supreme Command and British and American Prisoners-of-War, 1939 – 1945: Policy and Practice.’ PhD Thesis: 192.

⁸⁹ Rosmarin, I. 1999. *Inside Story*: 62.

⁹⁰ Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*: 244 – 245.

⁹¹ DOD AG(POW) 1527/344 Vol I. Report No. 204 Stalag VIII B. Date of visit: 29th June 1943.

⁹² NASA BTS 9/55/1. Telegram from Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, London, to Minister of External Affairs, Cape Town. Circular D. No. 166. Secret. 20 March 1943.

POWs and German citizens

In Germany, POWs mostly came into contact with civilians either while being transported on public trains or in trams, or on work camps where some worked under the supervision of civilians. Encounters with civilians were often genial, reminding both parties of their shared humanity, as with Hammond who witnessed a fellow POW handing out chocolates to two eager young girls at a train station, ‘for a moment or two we were neither strangers nor enemies, but an ordinary group of people united by a bar of chocolate’. However, in this case guards soon intervened, ordering civilians out of the waiting room.⁹³

One feature of certain work camps was prolonged contact with German citizens which gave both sides an opportunity to experience a sense of normality as friendships developed over time. This was especially the case with camps such as 1169 near Dresden and 4008 near Breslau where POWs worked alongside civilians. According to strict OKW policy, relationships between POWs and German women were forbidden and both parties could face long periods of imprisonment or even the death penalty if they were found to be engaging in such relationships.⁹⁴ While POWs were generally aware of rules curbing relations with civilians, it seems nevertheless that where relations between prisoners and guards were good, relationships between them and civilian women were often tolerated by guards and, in some cases, were even eased. Depending on personal impulses and attitudes towards regulations, some others risked liaisons with women while others restrained themselves, despite a deep emotional need for female companionship. One such example was Dickinson in work camp 1169. He was not inclined to cultivate local female company as he had heard of a POW who had been detained for three months because of a suspected relationship with a German woman. Although the prisoner seemed to have escaped the harsher punishment of 10 years or death, the implicated woman appeared not to have escaped the brunt of retribution, as she was left ‘disfigured for life.’⁹⁵ More broadly, any German citizen who became too friendly with POWs was putting themselves at risk of being ostracised from the *Volksgemeinschaft*, [community] who were expected to remain loyal to Hitler’s ideals throughout the war.⁹⁶

⁹³ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over The Story of Herbert Rhodes (Aussie) Hammond*: 80 – 81.

⁹⁴ Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*: 120. According to Gilbert there is no evidence that any Allied POWs were ever executed for this reason.

⁹⁵ Dickinson does not reveal his sources for this information and it is not known who was responsible for the woman’s punishment.

⁹⁶ Vourkoutiotis, V. 2000. ‘The German Armed Forces Supreme Command and British and American Prisoners-of-War, 1939 – 1945: Policy and Practice.’ PhD Thesis: 194.

Regardless of threats of punishment and warnings to POWs that local relationships were ‘*verboten*’ [forbidden], the situation must have been very difficult for prisoners long deprived of female company. At another level, women on the German home front were also experiencing the absence of men. Dickinson’s diary, for example, reveals something of the desperation for emotional and physical closeness in Dresden and the extent to which civilians would virtually abandon themselves to obtain what they needed:

We hear that a man can’t walk down the main street of Dresden without being accosted by several women, and decent class women at that, including officers’ wives. They will pay all expenses, including an apartment if one can get it. There is obviously a man shortage and women are finding things difficult [...] In Dresden and Breslau, the two main cities as yet unbombed, refugees from Berlin and other areas are compounding the problem [...] We have heard of a brothel in Strassburg (sic) where payment is required in food.⁹⁷

This recollection is ambiguous, with women reportedly prepared to pay for male company, and then others for whom men had to pay in food, yet it nevertheless illuminates the emotionally stressful effects and deprivations of war upon the civilian population. Dickinson himself never had sexual dealings with German women, but could not resist Brigitta, a young German girl he met at the Dresden station and who became the lucky recipient of his Red Cross chocolates.⁹⁸ In the mass bombing of Dresden, he speculates that she must have been killed.⁹⁹

Dickinson’s philosophical nature and his attempts at understanding his experiences and his observations regarding the effects of war on civilians helped to justify his decision to volunteer, as in Germany he realised that National Socialism was a ‘regime whose basic law is war’, and that he had been right to volunteer, although at the time of volunteering he had not been motivated by these realities.¹⁰⁰

Crompton and accompanying work camp POWs who were transferred to the Breslau tram depots formed social relationships with other foreign workers, in his case with Danish women, as these were not subject to regulations and sanctions. It seems, though, that these never took the form of ‘personal relationships [as they] were never given any privacy with

⁹⁷ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo’burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by E.B. Dickinson*: 124.

⁹⁸ According to Dickinson Brigetta could not have been older than ten years.

⁹⁹ Dick Dickinson interview: 4 December 2010, Mossel Bay.

¹⁰⁰ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo’burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by E.B. Dickinson*: 126.

the girls.’¹⁰¹ On the other hand, there were POWs who entered into purely sexual relations and who had to make plans to secure privacy, at times at considerable risk. Aussie Hammond became involved in numerous relationships, both with German women and with foreign workers, it being up to each prisoner to decide if he was going to chance being caught.¹⁰² On the other hand, good POW relations with guards or even a camp commandant meant greater freedom to instigate relationships with women. Thus, at work camp 1169, Horst Mainz allowed Paul Brokensha to visit his German ‘girlfriend’ at night, something which his brother believed was the benefit of a ‘good camp leader and camp commandant, so things were more relaxed.’¹⁰³

Similarly, the link between Hammond and Fish-eyes also enabled him to establish a relationship with a German woman. A widow who had lost her husband in North Africa, when she shared her loss with Hammond it was an opportunity to befriend her. Then, when he found her stealing factory sugar, he manipulatively offered her more regular sugar in return for sexual favours. For a satisfied Hammond, she was ‘a warm-blooded young woman who had evidently decided to make the best of the bargain.’¹⁰⁴ Engaging in casual sexual relationships was evidently routine for him, as he had similar liaisons with Russian women while working in a sugar factory near Klettendorf. Still, when he encountered Maria, the daughter of a shopkeeper in Weinberg, his higher emotions seemed to intervene as he ‘had no wish to take advantage of [Maria’s] youth and innocence: in an otherwise alien and uncertain way of life it remained sufficient to know that the warm comfort of her affection was directed at me.’¹⁰⁵

In Oosthuizen’s case, the game was reversed when the supervisor of a group of German nurses fell for him. He was working on a wine farm near the Austrian border and recalls being unnerved by the stern position regarding German women. When injured and confined to barracks, the woman invitingly placed flowers at his door, but Oosthuizen curbed his instincts, admitting decades later to still being regretful at his conduct.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰¹ Crompton, C. & P. Johnson. 2010. *Luck’s Favours Two South African Second World War Memoirs*: 71.

¹⁰² Brieg and Breslau are 43 kilometres apart. Available at <http://maps.google.co.za/maps> Accessed 31 August 2011.

¹⁰³ David Brokensha interview: 10 September 2010, Fish Hoek.

¹⁰⁴ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over The Story of Herbert Rhodes (Aussie) Hammond*: 134 – 136.

¹⁰⁵ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over The Story of Herbert Rhodes (Aussie) Hammond*: 144.

¹⁰⁶ Wessel Oosthuizen interview: 4 December 2010, Hartenbos.

The bombing campaigns

With most of the Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk POWs having been in their camps since early 1944, they found themselves in the path of the Allies' strategic bombing campaign which had commenced in the first quarter of the preceding year. German cities had been suffering and the loss of life and material destruction would unavoidably have had an effect on relations between POWs and German civilians and guards. It also affected the way POWs viewed their experiences in prison camps and their role in the war. On a practical level, for captives the raids had an adverse impact on living conditions as food provision became erratic, the Red Cross experienced difficulty in delivering food parcels, and inspectors were unable to reach camps for scheduled inspections.

In September 1943 the Germans were already suggesting that all camp locations be made known to all belligerents 'in view of danger of bombing attacks'. With many Stalags and work camps in close proximity to cities, this endangered the lives of POWs.¹⁰⁷ German concern was aimed evidently at their POWs in Allied hands as no effort was made to move camps away from endangered areas. Near Lamsdorf, prisoners attached to work camps were forced to work among unexploded bombs following an air raid. Working hours were also increased as they were forced to work twelve hours under the supervision of heavily armed civilians.¹⁰⁸ From Stalag XVIII A, Wessel Oosthuizen was sent to a work camp near Graz where he and others had to fill up bomb craters after bombing for rail lines to be restored. He found this work terrifying amidst unexploded bombs.¹⁰⁹ In December 1944, the Protecting Power reported that twenty-eight POWs from work camp E793 had been killed at the beginning of that month. These work camps were in the vicinity of Stalag VIIIIB / 344 near Lamsdorf.¹¹⁰ The German response was that there was 'no ammunition dump which could endanger prisoners of war in vicinity of Stalag 344.'¹¹¹ Such air raid deaths may be ascribed not only to the proximity of some camps to strategic bombing targets, but also to the

¹⁰⁷ DOD AG(POW) 1504B/7 Vol. I. UDF P.W. Camp Locations by Area (Germany) including strengths. Document 3. 28 September 1943.

¹⁰⁸ DOD AG(POW) 1527/VIIIIB Vol. I. Sherrif [camp leader] to Protecting Power. 14 August 1944.

¹⁰⁹ Wessel Oosthuizen interview: 4 December 2010, Hartenbos. '*party van die bomme het nie ontplof nie, dis tyd bomme jy weet, jy werk nog so en daar vlie die wêreld die lug op, dit was verskriklik.*'

¹¹⁰ DOD AG(POW) 1527/VIIIIB Vol. I. From Berne to Foreign Office. 15 December 1944.

¹¹¹ DOD AG(POW) 1527/VIIIIB Vol. I. Reply to telegram 434. November 1944.

American strategy of dense area carpet bombing from 1943, as in the heavy raids on Bremen, Hamburg and Kiel.¹¹²

Equally, the more intense the bombing, the more morale could be raised in camps as the increased strength of raids signalled increasing Allied supremacy. ‘Excitement reign[ed],’¹¹³ when Dickinson spotted his first American aircraft in April 1944. In the work camp near Laussig, POWs counted 762 bombers, with Mugglestone describing it as ‘a lovely sight and made us quite homesick to think the lads above would be home again in four hours.’¹¹⁴ By April 1945, the Allies had dropped a total of 1.18 million tons of bombs on Germany.¹¹⁵ It was a bombing campaign that significantly damaged German morale.¹¹⁶ Although the more depressed home front mood was felt particularly by women, many of whom still had family members fighting in the disastrous campaign against Stalin’s Red Army or in the north of Italy where Mussolini’s fascists were making their last stand, it was also from females that many POWs received kind treatment.¹¹⁷

Meanwhile, Heinrich Himmler continued to proclaim the prospect of German victory, seeking to counter any opposition to the Nazi Party through declining public morale.¹¹⁸ POWs observed the increased use of fear in propaganda, with Dickinson noting in his diary early in 1944 that posters of a ‘furtive-looking individual’ had appeared all over Dresden. German citizens were warned that the enemy was listening. Moreover, ‘it was just then that the Hitler salute broke out afresh, and we suspected that the people had been warned to salute this way or else.’¹¹⁹ After the June 1944 Allied Normandy landings, German military command was shaken up as Hitler tried to revive his war effort.¹²⁰ Thereafter, as Allied forces started to march on Germany itself, Nazi leadership created the *Volkssturm*, civilian forces that would be expected to defend the Reich in a noble battle.¹²¹

¹¹² Friedrich, J. 2006. *The Fire The Bombing of Germany 1940 – 1945*: 164.

¹¹³ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo’burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by E.B. Dickinson*: 124.

¹¹⁴ Mugglestone, D.I.H. n.d. *Destination Unknown*: 42.

¹¹⁵ The total tonnage of bombs for the entire war was 1.42 million.

¹¹⁶ Evans, R.J. 2008. *The Third Reich at War*: 441 & 460 – 463.

¹¹⁷ Evans, R.J. 2008. *The Third Reich at War*: 652.

¹¹⁸ Jacobsen, H-A. 1999. ‘The Structure of Nazi Foreign Policy 1933 – 1945’ in Leitz, C & H. James (eds) *The Third Reich: The essential readings*: 86 - 87. Evans, R.J. 2008. *The Third Reich at War*: 511.

¹¹⁹ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo’burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by E.B. Dickinson*: 119.

¹²⁰ German Generals who were replaced included Kurt Zeidler, Chief of the Army General Staff, Field Marshal von Rundstedt and the Air Force Commander Hugo Sperrle. Evans, R.J. 2008. *The Third Reich at War*: 623 – 624.

¹²¹ Bessel, R. 2009. *Germany 1945 From War to Peace*: 16.

While these second front developments burdened Berlin, naturally they raised POW morale, many of whom received news of the invasion on secret camp radios. Captives also became aware of increasing war divisions among civilians, as patriotic denunciations rose to almost 14,000 cases in 1944, with many of the victims executed by the People's Court.¹²² As Dickinson observed, four days after D-Day, 'we have a sort of twisted privilege of being witness to history from the inside. There appear to be as many Germans wishing the Allies success as there are not. They are speaking more openly, and the rise in morale of forced workers and prisoners-of-war is amazing.'¹²³

Elsewhere, though, morale among front-line German soldiers was still holding up and by the end of 1944 retreating soldiers were being used in propaganda efforts to raise civilian morale, although the effect was difficult to determine.¹²⁴ At the same time, POWs had initiated their own informal propaganda messages to illustrate to ordinary Germans that the Allies were coming out on top. Mortlock, for instance, recorded that while at work camp 1169 they 'tried to keep ourselves as neat as possible, boots polished (the polish naturally came from the station) trousers pressed etc, as we felt that it was good propaganda for the Allied cause. We always marched smartly through the streets.'¹²⁵ In Stalag VIIA, Chutter saw black market trade between POWs and civilians as being of 'enormous' propaganda value, as items like soap, chocolate and coffee had become virtually unobtainable in Germany, while prisoners enjoyed supplies through the Red Cross. According to Chutter, 'it made the Germans think.'¹²⁶

Since 1943, Nazi intelligence had become aware of the potentially demoralising effect of healthy POWs on German citizens, with a commission report warning of an arrogant and superior air to British POWs as they were well provided for by the Red Cross and had good personal hygiene conditions.¹²⁷ Allied POWs were also a source of counter-information. Whatever information given to civilians by their soldiers was often contradicted by what they obtained from contacts with prisoners. POWs had a well-established information system supported by hidden radios and by news gathered from newly-captured Allies soldiers. Theirs was not an undiluted diet of official Allied propaganda. German soldiers, on the other hand,

¹²² Friedrich, J. 2006. *The Fire The Bombing of Germany 1940 – 1945*: 399 – 400.

¹²³ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo'burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by E.B. Dickinson*: 126.

¹²⁴ Fritz, S.G. 1995. *Frontsoldaten The German Soldier in World War II*: 183.

¹²⁵ Mortlock, J. 1956. *The endless years Reminiscences of the 2nd World War*: 68.

¹²⁶ Chutter, J.B. *Captivity Captive*: 109.

¹²⁷ Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*: 157.

were fed strictly controlled information on the war's fortunes which by the end of 1944 had become totally unrealistic.

Living conditions in urban areas and in POW camps worsened during the second half of 1944 as the bombing campaign focused on Germany's transport infrastructure, leaving it able only to transport half of the goods needed on the front and in cities.¹²⁸ Shortages were especially felt in camps, where rations were reduced and some Red Cross supplies disrupted. Work camp 1169 received only half of its supply from September, prompting Dickinson and a companion to plan their escape, although nothing came of it and he eventually found himself working for a builder.¹²⁹

As the food position deteriorated, so did relations between POWs and guards as some increasingly desperate guards seized prison rations for themselves. Aussie Hammond first noticed diminishing food rations in January 1944, and after an investigation with Fish-Eyes, concluded that 'a fiddle was being worked, probably by someone in the quartermaster's stores.'¹³⁰ Mugglestone's experience was similar, starting with a declining bread ration and then discovering that their camp commander, nicknamed 'Swine', had been exchanging inferior Swede jam for their Red Cross tinned jams. Enraged, POWs started to collect their food in bulk, instead of in individual portions, to curb Swine's meddling. In October 1944, Mugglestone and fellow inmates POWs were ordered to consume food parcels by a set date, or face their confiscation. By Christmas, Red Cross consignments had dried up. The longer the delay, the more resentful the atmosphere between POWs and their guards became. When Red Cross supplies finally arrived, guards 'came in full force and made a good mess of the parcels.'¹³¹

Another effect of bombing was the nature of its impact on relationships between POWs and civilians, including those that had developed before the start of mass air raids. For instance, following the bombing of Dresden, Mortlock avoided Annie, a German acquaintance as he expected blame for the death of her daughter during a raid. Yet she turned out to be fatalistically forgiving, acknowledging that 'war is that way.' On the other hand, the attitude of female civilian strangers was often violently hostile, turning on POWs as 'pigs and spitting

¹²⁸ Evans, R.J. 2008. *The Third Reich at War*: 462.

¹²⁹ David Brokensha and two others were also sent to work for the same builder. Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo'burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by E.B. Dickinson*: 132.

¹³⁰ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over The Story of Herbert Rhodes (Aussie) Hammond*: 117 – 119, 131.

¹³¹ Mugglestone, D.I.H. n.d. *Destination Unknown*: 43.

at us. It was quite a relief to get back to camp.’¹³² As Dickinson’s diary reveals, on occasion guards stood in to protect their captives against enraged civilians. At the same time, feelings could also fluctuate, softening once air raid crises eased. On one occasion, while walking back to their camp following an Allied attack, Dickinson saw a:

woman spit[ting] in Tom’s face. Another woman asks them to excavate her husband, but the guard thinks that getting the chaps back to camp alive is a better option. Back in camp [the POWs] are prepared to go back and help, but the offer is turned down. After a few days the terror of war is forgotten and we receive our smiles again.¹³³

Unsurprisingly, the later massive incendiary bombing of Dresden early in 1945 had an extreme impact on both civilians and POWs. As Mortlock recollected, deaths increased because air raid sirens were affected, ‘due to the incendiary raid, lots of electric mains were disrupted; causing many sirens to short circuit and blow the “all clear”. I remember one siren that continued for hours. It was largely due to these faulty sirens that lots of people were caught out in the open when the high explosive bombs arrived.’¹³⁴ Allied POWs were used to help to excavate dead bodies trapped under rubble, which were then destroyed by SS ‘extermination experts.’¹³⁵ In an exceptionally grisly part of his memoirs, Mortlock recalled how he joined others in cleaning an air raid shelter which had been penetrated by a bomb:

well, we had to scrape them off the walls with our spades. It was said that there were about twenty to thirty people in the shelter at the time. All we could find only filled half a wheel barrow. The largest portion that I saw was one solitary hand with a ring on one finger. Shoes had been completely blown off their feet. In some cases the shoes were still tightly laced.¹³⁶

The fate of Dresden had a particularly painful outcome for David Brokensha’s friendship with Wolfgang, as ‘after the bombing in Dresden he wouldn’t speak to me, and I was devastated, [...] I’ve heard his sister’s flat had been bombed and she’d been killed so I can’t blame him, but I remember.’¹³⁷

¹³² Mortlock, J. 1956. *The endless years Reminiscences of the 2nd World War*: 71.

¹³³ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo’burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by E.B. Dickinson*: 133.

¹³⁴ Mortlock, J. 1956. *The endless years Reminiscences of the 2nd World War*: 76.

¹³⁵ Miller, D.L. 2006. *Masters of the air: America's bomber boys who fought the air war against Nazi Germany*: 440 – 434.

¹³⁶ Mortlock, J. 1956. *The endless years Reminiscences of the 2nd World War*: 77.

¹³⁷ David Brokensha interview: 10 September 2010, Fish Hoek.

The ‘six hundred mile hell march’¹³⁸ to liberation

Whatever Berlin’s denials of Germany’s deterioration, the evacuations of POW camps and of many German cities and towns were proof of an unstoppable Allied advance. As Soviet forces approached from the east and the British and Americans from the west, Nazi leadership became ever more obsessed with continuing the war and proclaimed selected sites as fortresses, where the *Wehrmacht* and the *Volkssturm* were expected to fight to the bitter end.¹³⁹ With the entire Northern Silesia declared a fortress, all POW camps in that area were now caught up in the conflict between Russian and German armies, both sides of which, noted Schwikkard, ‘knew the consequences of being taken POW. Hence both sides would rather fight to the death than be captured and taken prisoner.’¹⁴⁰ From as early as the beginning of 1944, camps in the east of German-occupied territories as distant as Lithuania were being evacuated, with POWs mostly required to walk to new camps within Germany. With the Russian advance the most imminent threat, Germany’s evacuation of its POW camps in the east was a priority.¹⁴¹

The capital of Upper Silesia was Breslau, where Cyril Crompton found himself in a work camp attached to Stalag VIII C. By December 1944, he realised the depth of Russian penetration when he saw Germans preparing to blow up the bridge across the Oder and ‘the Germans now admitted to us that the Russians were coming.’¹⁴² Scarcely a month later, Soviet troops had reached the Oder on both sides of Breslau. At their camp near Waldenburg, Schwikkard and others could hear the artillery of the approaching Russians, increasing their hopes of looming liberation. But the arrival of the Russians was preceded by train-loads of wounded German troops and Schwikkard was drafted in as a medical orderly. Despite having been ‘simply...dumped in cattle trucks with or without water’, the wounded soldiers were ‘so fanatical and convinced of their superiority that some of them actually protested at being carried by us, their enemy, and referred to us as “*Swiner Honde*” (sic) [pig dogs].’¹⁴³

In some instances, more friendly guards warned POWs against the brutality of Russian soldiers, even convincing some of them not to wait for liberation by Soviet forces but to

¹³⁸ Schwikkard, B.E. 1999. *My life briefly told*: 45.

¹³⁹ Bessel, R. 2009. *Germany 1945 From War to Peace*: 38 – 39.

¹⁴⁰ Schwikkard, B.E. 1999. *My life briefly told*: 43.

¹⁴¹ Greeff, I.B. 1991. ‘South African Prisoners-of-War on the Long Marches 1944 – 1945.’ *Military History Journal*, 8(6). Available at <http://samilitaryhistory.org/vol086ig.html>. Accessed 22 September 2011.

¹⁴² Crompton, C. & P. Johnson. 2010. *Luck’s Favours Two South African Second World War Memoirs*: 77.

¹⁴³ Schwikkard, B.E. 1999. *My life briefly told*: 44.

march westwards to be freed by American or British troops. Consequently, many POWs chose to march with their German captors and made no attempt to escape in an effort to avoid the Russians. Nonetheless, it has been estimated that five percent of all POWs managed to escape while on the march, despite German threats of being shot if captured or of five POWs being shot for every POW who escaped.¹⁴⁴

But, as Ogilvy discovered, such threats were not always real. Trying to conserve energy along the way, he discarded his possessions, including his diary. Behind him, Staff Sergeant O'Neill was struggling to keep up, and finally collapsed as he reached for the diary, which he mistook for a Bible. When a German guard approached, O'Neill expected to be shot, as they had heard shots being fired at the back of the column since the start of the evacuation march. Instead, he was helped on to a wagon, joining a group of others who had been presumed shot. In Ogilvy's account, the Germans were threatening to shoot those who could not keep up, so that only the utterly exhausted would fall behind. Each time such a man was picked up, guards fired two shots, driving on the marchers and at that same time signalling to the wagon to collect another POW.¹⁴⁵

Perhaps shaken by previous experiences of being transported, some POWs were panicked to hear that their camps were to be evacuated. Rosmarin, for instance, 'felt sick with worry and was sweating profusely in spite of wintry weather.'¹⁴⁶ He managed to evade the first evacuation from Stalag VIII B/344 by pretending to be ill, delaying his departure. On hearing rumours that the camp was to be evacuated a second time, Rosmarin and a few others escaped and hid out in a nearby forest, waiting for liberation. On news that the Americans were very close, they returned to their camp. Meanwhile, shortly after the liberation of the Lamsdorf camp, many other POWs returned from nearby hiding places.¹⁴⁷ Others, like Hammond, hoped to escape the march entirely by taking matters into their own hands. Granted, not all agreed with him, as some 'thought it would be better to go west with the Germans rather to wait for the Russians, who to most represented a fearful, unknown quantity.'¹⁴⁸ Hammond and eighteen others, however, were determined not to join the Germans on their march and managed to hide within the camp enclosure.

¹⁴⁴ Greeff, I.B. 1991. 'South African Prisoners-of-War on the Long Marches 1944 – 1945.' *Military History Journal*, 8(6). Available at <http://samilitaryhistory.org/vol086ig.html>. Accessed 22 September 2011.

¹⁴⁵ Ogilvy, P. & N. Robinson. 1975. *In the bag*: 94 – 95.

¹⁴⁶ Rosmarin, I. 1999. *Inside Story*: 89.

¹⁴⁷ Rosmarin, I. 1999. *Inside Story*: 93 – 95.

¹⁴⁸ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over The Story of Herbert Rhodes (Aussie) Hammond*: 153.

Following its evacuation, Hammond grew impatient and decided to set out alone in search of the Russians. Following a few days of liberty, he came across German soldiers while hiding in a hut with Polish refugees. By now, circumstances for both sides had altered quite dramatically. An exhausted German NCO was concerned with the state of young soldiers under his command, and had no plans to take prisoners. Hammond also made no effort to hide his identity, declaring calmly, 'I'm British.' The enemy warned him that seeking out the Russians was unwise as they would 'shoot without waiting for you to speak first.' Although sceptical of anti-Russian sentiment, Hammond was persuaded to join the Germans on their move westwards. He got as far as Weiden, remaining a 'part-time prisoner' until the camp was liberated by Americans.¹⁴⁹

Just as in North Africa, numerous POWs narrowly missed being liberated as they were evacuated just before the Russians arrived. Again, too, circumstances were not dissimilar to pre-Armistice Italy, as poorly-nourished POWs were unprepared for the deprivations that they faced on their journey. To add to this, most men commenced marching in unusually cold January or February winter months, marked by severe snow storms.¹⁵⁰ As with previous transportation experiences, prisoners were again at risk of being attacked, this time from Allied fighters strafing columns mistaken for German forces.¹⁵¹ Thus, those evacuated from Stalag VIIIC and various work camps around Breslau were menaced by Allied aircraft. A terrified Crompton was among those strafed by American fighters, with friends dying in numerous attacks. Determined to survive, he once dived for cover with a piece of bread and the thought, 'I am going to eat this whether I die or not.'¹⁵² News of these inadvertent air attacks on POW columns containing their troops only reached South African authorities well into 1945 through a Red Cross distribution list.¹⁵³

The threat of air attacks compelled POW columns to continue marches at night, placing an even heavier burden on already exhausted bodies. Crompton estimated that they had marched about 900 kilometres between January and April 1945, and that only some thirty or forty of the original 140 who had left his work camp survived the trip due to strafing, exhaustion and

¹⁴⁹ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over The Story of Herbert Rhodes (Aussie) Hammond*: 172 – 173, 175, 195.

¹⁵⁰ Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*: 300.

¹⁵¹ Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*: 300.

¹⁵² Crompton, C. & P. Johnson. 2010. *Luck's Favours Two South African Second World War Memoirs*: 85.

¹⁵³ DOD AG(POW) 1527. Vol III. POW 40 File A2. Concerning the bombardments and air attacks on POW Camps, Hospitals and columns of prisoners of war on roads on the interior of the Reich. Red Cross 30 April 1945.

starvation.¹⁵⁴ Meanwhile, the Brokenshas, Mortlock and Dickinson were still on postal work, only later joining the thousands of mobile evacuees. Their march experiences were no less harrowing. On the way to Czechoslovakia, Brokensha's group was abandoned by their German guards and prisoners were left to fend for themselves. This was something of a relief because of wild rumours that 'Hitler had an idea of keeping some hundreds or thousands of Allied prisoner of war hostages in the mountains.' David Brokensha was himself wounded during an air attack and became convinced that he was going to die a day after hearing a radio announcement that the war was over.¹⁵⁵

Thereafter, the wandering POWs came across heavily inebriated Russian soldiers who were firing into the air. One of them compared them to his 'farm labourers on a Saturday night, they were all getting drunk.' Although they appeared friendly, dressing Brokensha's wound, the POW group felt safer moving on without Russian company. After securing transport in the form of a fire engine from a small town, the Brokensha band once again ran into the Russians who demanded their truck. At this stage of their uncertain and hazardous journey, they felt far from being liberated and continued hoping to meet up with British or American forces. When they eventually encountered the Americans they were met unexpectedly with suspicion. In one of David Brokensha's most memorable stories, a sergeant was asked, "there's a guy here who says he's a South African, whose side is he on?" His response to the soldier was "you dope, haven't you heard of Jan Christian Smuts? let him through" so that's the day [of liberation], lovely words.'¹⁵⁶

Naturally, the further west the Stalag, the shorter the march to western Allied forces. For Mugglestone, for instance, his was only ten days before liberation by the Americans. En route, though, he and fellow POWs were alarmed by the state of their accompanying guards, as they 'were panic stricken [and] we decided to take matters into our own hands and bade *au revoir* to them.' Once with the Americans, the first task of their liberators was to sort POWs from the assembly of German civilians and former camp guards who had fallen in with them on their march.¹⁵⁷

Not all Union prisoners were freed through camp evacuations and movement in the direction of friendly forces. In cases such as Stalag VIIA and Stalag VIIB, POWs waited to be

¹⁵⁴ Crompton, C. & P. Johnson. 2010. *Luck's Favours Two South African Second World War Memoirs*: 86 – 88.

¹⁵⁵ David Brokensha interview: 10 September 2010, Fish Hoek.

¹⁵⁶ David Brokensha interview: 10 September 2010, Fish Hoek.

¹⁵⁷ Mugglestone, D.I.H. n.d. *Destination Unknown*: 47.

liberated by incoming Allied forces, as camps were handed over in the presence of representatives of the Protecting Power. At Stalag VIIB, the surrendering commander complained of the Americans who, following the take-over, 'made their way enthusiastically to the town, where they behaved in a fairly undisciplined manner.' Many deprived POWs needed no encouragement to follow suit, heading for nearby towns to procure food and any other goods they wanted.¹⁵⁸

An exception was Weiden, where Hammond was placed in charge until American infantry arrived in full. Making full use of his power, he even kept Russian prisoners confined to their camp until the American arrival as he was unsure of how they might react when freed. Shortly after threatening to have the town's civilians shot for looting, Hammond liberated Nazi and Gestapo insignia from the town hall to keep as war souvenirs.¹⁵⁹ When dwelling on memories of liberation, former POWs whose lives feature in this study virtually all acknowledge their uncontrolled personal emotions, unable to hold back tears. Equally, though, for some, news of the formal signing of peace came as an anti-climax. Typically, for Dickinson, 'things' had 'gone on too long and too slowly.'¹⁶⁰ The plain fact was that liberation was mostly simply a matter of being handed over to Allied control. For very many, the feeling of being completely free was something experienced in fragments or as connected episodes, first that of being liberated, then of being sent to Britain, then of being sent home to South Africa, while all the time remaining dependent, still relying on others for the provision of food and shelter.

¹⁵⁸ DOD AG(POW) 1527 Vol. III. Report. Concerning visits to the Camps Stalag VII A Moosburg, Stalag VII B Memingen, Ilag Biberach and Ilag Wurmach, from 27th April until 3rd May, 1945.

¹⁵⁹ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over The Story of Herbert Rhodes (Aussie) Hammond*: 198 – 99.

¹⁶⁰ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo'burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by E.B. Dickinson*: 142.

Chapter 9: The Home Front and going Home

1939 – c.1950

Information and communication during the war

Before soldiering enlistment and capture, many men who came from a letter-writing culture were accustomed to regular correspondence. Once in enemy hands, however, they faced unknown delays in being able to write, as well as monitoring. This was an immediate cause of acute concern as POWs knew that the lack of personal information about their fate would be traumatic for families and friends. In most cases, distressed families in the Union waited months for confirmation that sons or husbands were accounted for as prisoners, and were no longer listed simply as missing. At the outbreak of hostilities, there was no clear policy arrangement in place for communication with POWs, but as the war progressed and increasing numbers of Allied soldiers were taken prisoner, responsibility for the handling of POW affairs was passed from the War Office to the DPW. In the provision of any official confirmation to relatives, the Directorate was still dependant on information from enemy countries which, especially while POWs were still in transit camps, could take months to materialise.

Official information came as a belligerent governments made name lists available to the Protecting Power who would then make these available to the relevant POW Information Bureau of the British Foreign Office.¹ The whole procedure was both cumbersome and often imprecise. Notification of POW status by enemy governments was frequently slow and name lists then had to be analysed by London authorities to determine POW nationalities. On top of the regular omission of nationality, there was the further complication of language difficulties between POWs and captors which often led to names being misspelt. Incomplete lists despatched to London also failed to include regimental numbers, again making personal verification difficult.² Where POWs were seriously ill or wounded and unable to provide adequate details, the process was even further delayed.

¹ Hatley-Broad, B. 2002. “‘Nobody would tell you anything’: the War and Foreign Offices and British Prisoner of War Families during World War II.” *Journal of Family History*, 27(4):461.

² Hatley-Broad, B. 2002. “‘Nobody would tell you anything’: the War and Foreign Offices and British Prisoner of War Families during World War II.” *Journal of Family History*, 27(4):465.

Establishing a clearly agreed inter-governmental position on communication in this sphere of the war was clearly a complicated matter. An important example of this was the issue of telegraphic payment for informing families of the deaths of prisoners. While unable to establish the overall basis of financial arrangements between enemy governments and the ICRC, Britain stuck to paying a fixed sum to the ICRC for telegrams costs. As such paper agreements were supposedly reciprocal, there was squabbling over the equitable sharing of the costs of communication, complicated by the financial strains of the changing fortunes of war for various belligerents.³

In Britain meanwhile, numerous POW families who were disillusioned with government communications turned to informal sources. For those in a far distant South Africa, efforts to gain accurate information were even more frustrating as London channelled information and oversaw all reciprocal agreements with enemy authorities. Although Britain readily took the initiative, there were frequent delays as Whitehall had to wait for the agreement of Dominion governments. One such instance was the delay in ratifying an Anglo-Italian agreement on notification of POW deaths and serious injuries because Pretoria was slow to confirm its acceptance.⁴

Further communication misunderstandings also hampered contact between prisoners and their families. With no direct wartime communication between Rome and Pretoria, it was agreed that information on camp deaths would be relayed between respective Red Cross societies. This, however, encouraged the assumption that the Red Cross would take responsibility for other reciprocities, something which the local body was unwilling to assume.⁵ By April 1943, subcommittee A and the London War Office was still considering unresolved questions around communication between the POW information bureaux and enemy governments, including, for instance, that of 'the extent to which, as regards to nationals of the governments represented on the subcommittee, there is evidence of reciprocity by the enemy p.w.i.bs [prisoner of war information bureaux].' The committee was also requested to consider:

³ NASA BTS 9/55/1A Vol. 1. Directorate of Prisoners of War. Imperial Prisoners of War Committee; Sub Committee A. Channels of communication between prisoners of war information bureaux and enemy governments. 2 April 1943.

⁴ NASA BTS 9/55/1A Vol. 1. Correspondence from High Commissioner, London, to Secretary for External Affairs, Cape Town. 22 April 1943.

⁵ NASA BTS 9/55/1A Vol. 1. Correspondence from Postmaster, Johannesburg to the General Secretary, S.A. Red Cross Society, Johannesburg. 1 March 1943. NASA BTS 9/55/1A Vol. 1. Correspondence from Clara Urquhart, South African Red Cross Society to Secretary for External Affairs. 3 March 1943.

whether the proposal of the IRCC [also ICRC] for direct telegraphing between British Commonwealth P.W.I.Bs and Geneva of the names of dead prisoners should be approved; and if so whether such direct telegraphing should be confined to notifications of those dying in captivity or cover all notifications of dead or cover all notifications of names, dead and alive.⁶

Not surprisingly, while government bureaucracies continued to busy themselves with procedural things, many Union POW families relied more and more on unofficial sources, including name lists broadcast by the Vatican short-wave external radio service, and stories brought by men who had been able to escape early in the war.⁷ Meanwhile, the enormous number of prisoners taken at Tobruk presented a crisis for official communications as well as for the Red Cross. Figures available to the Red Cross showed that by the end of August 1942, the total missing or believed prisoner-of-war casualties amounted to 15 731, of which only 4 550 were confirmed POW by the ICRC. Those counted as wounded, killed or returned to their unit amounted to 1 372, leaving 9 809 still missing. By 10 October 1942, the ICRC was able to confirm a further 3 911 as POW, but that still left 5 898 unaccounted for.⁸

During the first few weeks after capture, direct communication between POWs and families were non-existent, although by the time prisoners reached Benghazi many could receive letters. Return correspondence involved restrictions. Letters from POWs to South Africa were restricted to two letter cards and four postcards per month. By the time they reached Germany, prisoners had to pay $\frac{1}{4}$ mark of the camp currency, *lagergeld*, per letter or card.⁹ Earlier, when transferred from transit to permanent Italian camps, POWs received postcards on which they could fill in simple information on their health and provide an address. Although these did not permit personal messages they did act as confirmation to the family that the soldier was still relatively safe and that a correspondence could be started between them.

The fragmentary way in which news could be relayed to families is illustrated well in the case

⁶ NASA BTS 9/55/1A Vol. 1. Directorate of Prisoners of War. Imperial Prisoner of War Committee. Sub Committee A. Channels of Communication between Prisoners of War Information Bureaux and Enemy Governments. 2 April 1943.

⁷ Hatley-Broad, B. 2002. “‘Nobody would tell you anything’: the War and Foreign Offices and British Prisoner of War Families during World War II.” *Journal of Family History*, 27(4):461.

⁸ NASA BTS 9/55/1A. Clara Urquhart for the General Secretary, South African Red Cross Society to the Secretary for External Affairs. 13 October 1942.

⁹ DOD CE 8/1/3. Prisoners of War. Released or Escaped POWs. Broadcasts by released POWs. Correspondence suspected to require special attention. Mail from South African Prisoners of War in Germany. 23 February 1944.

of the Brokensha brothers. Both Paul and David were captured at Tobruk and stayed together throughout the war, but news of each one's POW status reached their parents three months apart. David Brokensha's mother was informed of his POW status in August 1942, the same month in which the eldest brother, Guy, was reported killed in action. Paul Brokensha's POW status was only confirmed in November of that year, upon reaching Italy.¹⁰ In another more extreme case, Smollan's parents heard nothing about their son from the time of his capture in June 1942 until he arrived in Cairo in February 1944, following his escape to Anzio from a POW camp after the Italian Armistice.¹¹

The inability to inform relatives of their fate and the lack of reliable communication between the Red Cross and South African families was a source of great stress and anxiety for both imprisoned soldiers and their kin. Before his capture in June 1942, De Lisle had been corresponding with his mother on a weekly basis, and once in enemy hands his 'great anxiety' was for his mother, as he knew that she would learn that her son was 'missing, believed prisoner.'¹² After months of silence on her son's fate, she eventually heard about his POW status when the Catholic Church in South Africa distributed a list of names from a Vatican radio broadcast.¹³ When Van Alphen Stahl's mother received news that her son had gone missing, the loyalist minister of the local Afrikaans church in the small rural town of Malmesbury tried to comfort her by tactlessly suggesting that her son would be better off dead than a prisoner of the Germans. This soldier's mother had to wait upon the Red Cross for notification, which only came months after his capture.¹⁴

In some other cases, families were obliged to wait up to a year or more before they were assured of the circumstances of missing men, as with Oosthuizen, long after the beginning of his confinement to the Fara Sabina camp.¹⁵ With the ICRC inundated with queries about the missing, families turned to the service provided by the Vatican radio. The Catholic channel seems to have been the main source of news about Italian-held POWs for their South African families, with the local Red Cross approaching the Catholic Archbishop of Bloemfontein for Church liaison assistance in obtaining information on missing soldiers. An already established communication channel from Lisbon via Lourenco Marques helped to facilitate

¹⁰ David Brokensha interview: 10 September 2010, Fish Hoek.

¹¹ Saks, D. 2009. 'Long Journey to Anzio A Springbok Escapee Story.' *Krygshistoriese Tydskrif*, 14(5): 193.

¹² Michael de Lisle interview: 4 June 2010, Cape Town.

¹³ Michael de Lisle interview: 4 June 2010, Cape Town.

¹⁴ Fred van Alphen Stahl interview: 25 May 2010, Cape Town. 'Mevrou, liefster dood as 'n gevangenis van die Duitsers.'

¹⁵ Wessel Oosthuizen interview: 4 December 2010, Hartenbos.

this.¹⁶

In response to Tobruk and to Red Cross organisational difficulties, the South African Prisoner-of-War Relatives and Friends Association (POWRFA) was established in July 1942. Its aim was to work with the Red Cross, to assist in the dissemination of information to families, and to help to improve conditions for South African POWs through the supply of food, clothing and other necessities to Italian and German prison camps. In a poignant appointment, David and Paul Brokensha's father was elected chairman of the Relatives Association. Its proclaimed role was that of rehabilitation, concerning itself with the 'physical and mental welfare of prisoners of war and to facilitate their re-establishment in civilian life' upon their return.¹⁷

In September 1942, the Red Cross agreed to collaborate with the Association¹⁸ and in the following month it organised its first event in support of POW families – a day of prayer to be held on 23 November, the first anniversary of Sidi Rezegh and six months since the fall of Tobruk.¹⁹ From the start, unlike its British counterpart, the Prisoner-of-War Relatives Association (POWRA) which had a strained relationship with both the War Office and the Foreign Office, the local Association interacted smoothly with officialdom and with other bodies concerned with POW interests.²⁰ Throughout hostilities, POWRFA coordinated with the Red Cross, the Union Defence Force Prisoners-of-War Welfare Committee and the South African Gifts and Comforts Organisation. Equally, with support organisations based mostly in Johannesburg, families in more remote smaller towns were often beyond their reach and unable to make use of their services.²¹ Relatives in small settlements therefore tended to organise their own support groups, as exemplified by the 'Anxious Annies', a group in rural Malmesbury in the Western Cape, made up largely of mothers, wives and girlfriends of POWs from the Second Anti-Aircraft Regiment, popularly known as the Ack Ack.²²

¹⁶ DOD AG(POW) 1507E. UDF POW Vatican Messages. Correspondence between S. Sweet, Secretary to the Central Committee and the Most Reverend Archbishop B.J. Gijlswijk. August 1941.

¹⁷ AG(POW) 1582A Vol. 1. Minutes of meeting called for the purpose of considering the formation of a South African Association of Relatives and Friends of Prisoners of War. 21 July 1942.

¹⁸ AG(POW) 1582A Vol. 1. Lewis J. Grant, General Secretary of the South African Red Cross to the Secretary for External Affairs. 22 September 1942.

¹⁹ AG(POW) 1582A Vol. 1. A.W. Eaton, Acting Chairman of the Prisoners-of-War Relatives Association to Mr Forsyth, President, State Committee for the Prisoners of War, Department of External Affairs. 9 October 1942.

²⁰ Hatley-Broad, B. 2002. "'Nobody would tell you anything": the War and Foreign Offices and British Prisoner of War Families during World War II.' *Journal of Family History*, 27(4):472.

²¹ Leigh, M. 1992. *Captives Courageous. South African prisoners of war World War II*: 320 – 321. Rand Daily Mail; *War Prisoners Relatives Association to Form National Council*. 8 August 1944.

²² Fred van Alphen Stahl interview: 25 May 2010, Cape Town.

Returning home

Following the 1943 armistice, those men who escaped successfully and reached Allied lines were repatriated to South Africa. The majority of South African POWs, however, returned to the Union only after the war. Once liberated, South African POWs were transported to Britain via France, where they were deloused yet again. In Britain, each of the Dominions had a separate camp for demobilisation and the white South Africans were accommodated in a camp in Brighton before being repatriated to South Africa. Soldiers of the NEAS Corps were sent to different camps across Britain, where they were provided with clean clothes, food and comfortable accommodation. Gunner Maurice Edwards of the Cape Corps described his demobilising experiences as ‘everything to amuse the mind and nothing to worry over.’ Edwards was one of those who recognised Judge Brokensha’s paternal role in helping returning POWs, ‘Mr Justice Brokensha took over where [the Red Cross] left off.’²³ As chairman of POWRFA, Brokensha went to Brighton to assist POWs with their passage home. Some soldiers spent up to four months in England waiting to return to the Union, being treated to a ‘royal life’²⁴ which included 28 days’ leave with the benefit of free railway passes.²⁵ The stay included organised tours to the Westminster Parliament and to South Africa House. But there was also an overwhelming impulse simply to return home as soon as they could,²⁶ whatever their enjoyment of new-found British freedom. For Mrs A.S. Ogilvy of the POW Information Bureau at South Africa’s High Commission, footloose demobbed men were finding it difficult to function in a civilian environment, preferring to ‘just wander about and not having to do anything.’²⁷ Typical of these were the Brokensha brothers. For most of the war unaware of their father’s welfare activities, in an extraordinary moment they came across him by chance in a telephone booth in the camp at Brighton.²⁸

Sobering realities

The joy and happiness of finally arriving home was for many a short-lived experience as they suffered from what became known as ‘barbed-wire disease’. While in captivity, many had

²³ DOD AG(POW) 1582A. Vol. I. Prisoner of War Relatives Association. Copy of letter from Gunner M. Edwards, ‘Personal Opinion’. 18 January 1946.

²⁴ ‘*ons [het] ’n koninglike lewe gehad.*’ Wessel Oosthuizen interview: 4 December 2010, Hartenbos.

²⁵ Mason, W.W. 1954. *Prisoners of War New Zealand in the Second World War 1939 – 45*: 497.

²⁶ Wessel Oosthuizen interview: 4 December 2010, Hartenbos; Bernard Schwikkard interview: 17 March 2010, Johannesburg.

²⁷ *The Star*, 9 May 1945. Ogilvy’s husband was also a POW held in Oflag VA.

²⁸ David Brokensha interview: 10 September 2010, Fish Hoek.

spent hours fantasising about returning home, but these daydreams were inevitably often not realised. Meanwhile, for those who returned to homes in Britain, the experience was undoubtedly even more demoralising as it had been enduring the daily burdens and deprivations of the war, leaving some citizens even regarding POWs as having been fortunate in having escaped much of the conflict's grimmer realities.²⁹ In South Africa, on the other hand, POWs were often faced with friends and families who had little if any idea of the deep costs of the war and its impact on former POWs and soldiers. If returning servicemen were able to set aside their feelings of not being understood, their re-adaptation to civilian life was made easier, as their remote country had remained largely unscathed by the conflict.

Indeed, in many ways, South African POWs had little choice but to bottle up their emotions, frustrations and personal discontents and carry on with life as the country's government was moving in a new political direction and after the 1948 election war veterans were not its priority. Britain established Civil Resettlement Units (CRUs) to help returning POWs to adapt to post-war life and to bear the trauma with which many were left as a consequence of lengthy captivity. By 1946, up to 15 000 men had taken part in this voluntary scheme.³⁰ The Union did not develop any organisations similar in form to the CRU initiative.

That said, in efforts to protect the position of white war veterans in the labour market against the perceived competitive threat of black workers, the Smuts administration formed a Soldiers' Charter. One of its aims was to assist veterans in finding their feet following the war and to ensure that all volunteers would be included in state recognition of its responsibility towards ex-soldiers.³¹ In that, Union authorities had made no distinction in status between former POWs and former soldiers, the only exception being a March 1945 amendment when the Smuts Government altered the terms of the Military Service Bill so that no former POW would 'be compelled to render at any place beyond the said territorial limits any military service whatsoever.' The previous wording had included, 'without his consent.'³²

Oral testimony confirms that those captured did not receive any specific compensation, neither were they treated any differently from other veterans after the war. In general, most veterans had a low regard for the Soldiers' Charter and felt disappointed at what they

²⁹ Allport, A. 2010. *Demobbed Coming Home After the Second World War*: 110 – 111, 197 – 202.

³⁰ Allport, A. 2010. *Demobbed Coming Home After the Second World War*: 203.

³¹ Roos, N. 2009. 'The Springbok and the Skunk: War Veterans and the Politics of Whiteness in South Africa during the 1940s and 1950s.' *Journal of Southern African Studies* 35(3): 651.

³² *Rand Daily Mail*, 7 March 1945.

considered to be the Smuts government's perceived 'ungratefulness' for their contribution to the war. Then, after 1948, the lukewarm or unappreciative stance of the Smuts order was supplanted by emphatically more discriminatory Nationalist actions and a blatant disregard for veterans' loyal service during the war.³³

Some POWs felt frustrations more acutely, having a particular sense of entitlement because of their special wartime circumstances. In a few cases, ex-POWs attempted to create public awareness about their needs. An example of this which was an open letter to the *Rand Daily Mail*, explaining that delays caused by 'endless questions and red tape' were preventing POWs from returning to jobs and were subjecting them to 'even more anxiety and worry'. POWs were unwilling to tell civilians or authorities about their prison experiences 'because they learnt not to indulge in self-pity', but without fair treatment, the 'waste of human material [...] will undoubtedly cause much resentment.'³⁴ Still, when considering the decisions that POWs made following their return, it becomes evident that most became preoccupied with personal needs and objectives. Turning inward, they seemed to have had had enough of organising for resistance, let alone conflict. In concluding, we now consider what some of those POW voices reflected on when their war had ended, and take some account of their lives after 1945.

Fred van Alphen Stahl

One would have liked to be in the final push, and then you say, well, would I've been pushing my luck, you know, [...] you regret that you never went through the final push, because that would have been your aim and ambition when you joined up, to be on the winning side physically, so that is a regret [...] all things considered, you can count your blessings, there's people who went into prisoner of war camps who didn't come out whole mentally, physically, so that's war, that's life. [...] you do have regrets that you weren't in at the end on the winning side as it were, doing your bit, not on the bench, you would have liked to been in the scrum at that time.³⁵

Following the war, Fred van Alphen Stahl returned to his pre-war occupation and became a junior prosecutor in Cape Town. In later decades, he returned to military life when the South

³³ Roos, N. 2009. 'The Springbok and the Skunk: War Veterans and the Politics of Whiteness in South Africa during the 1940s and 1950.' *Journal of Southern African Studies* 35(3):653 – 659.

³⁴ *Rand Daily Mail*, 1 April 1945.

³⁵ Fred van Alphen Stahl interview: 15 June 2010, Cape Town.

African Border Wars commenced, but had no interest in career promotion and was content to remain a lieutenant in the rear while serving in the army's risk management and loss control divisions. When a young lieutenant jokingly referred to him as the oldest lieutenant in the army, he became known in this affectionate way among the younger and junior recruits.³⁶ For his part, Van Alphen Stahl also met and befriended senior members of the National Party government, one of whom was J.J. (Jim) Fouché, who became Minister of Defence in 1959.³⁷ At the eightieth anniversary of the Bloemfontein Race Club in the Orange Free State, when Fred van Alphen Stahl congratulated Fouché on his appointment he was informed by the new minister that he was reluctant to accept the position. In a supreme irony for an Afrikaner Nationalist, Fouché admitted to having been reading Churchill's volumes on the Second World War to prepare for his military responsibilities.

Michael de Lisle



When Michael De Lisle returned to the Union in 1944 following his escape in Italy, he secured a 'modest pension' from the authorities by manipulating his medical board tests. His response to being examined for mobility was, 'in captivity I had lots of time to teach my knee not to jerk when it was tapped.'

Soon afterwards, he was able to resume his education at the University of Cape Town where he found that the university had credited him with his first academic year 'on the strength of six months' study in the first half of 1940.'³⁸ The period following his return was exceptionally busy, as he was studying towards his BA degree, 'leading a rock climb every Sunday, [...] I was running a night school for Coloured children in Woodstock, I was on the mountain club committee at the university and on the ex-service committee, I was busy.'³⁹ At the same time, he found it hard to return to his life in his mother's house as he discovered that she did not understand that he had matured into a man while he had been away. Small things, like being instructed to switch off his bedroom lights by nine-thirty caused immense frustrations.

De Lisle found it difficult to talk about his POW experience after the war because 'people talked [about the war], but they just didn't understand.' In 1946, he went to Britain to further

³⁶ 'Oom is seker die oudste flippen lieutenant in hierdie weermag.' Fred van Alphen Stahl interview: 25 May 2010, Cape Town.

³⁷ Pfister, R. 2005. *Apartheid South Africa and African States From Pariah to Middle Power, 1961 – 1994*: 33.

³⁸ De Lisle, M. n.d. *Over the hills and far away my twenties in the forties*: 112 – 113.

³⁹ Michael de Lisle interview: 15 June 2010, Cape Town.

his education and was away when the National Party won the 1948 election. It left him shocked, but also 'very out of touch with South Africa feelings.' However, he believed that had he stayed on in South Africa he would have joined the Torch Commando as it stood for constitutionalism and civil rights, a 'principle [which] was being betrayed by an apartheid government.' As a result of his teaching Italian to fellow POWs, De Lisle decided to continue with a teaching career when the war ended and not to follow the theological route of becoming a minister, as his family had expected he would do. He married in 1955, a time in which he was still 'talking Italian and crying out in [his] sleep.'⁴⁰

Clive Luyt



When Clive Luyt volunteered he had been working as an articled clerk at an accountancy firm, and when he returned he completed his examinations to become a chartered accountant. As an older man after the war, he found it hard to enter the labour market on a junior level, while others much younger were already in more senior positions because they had not volunteered for the UDF at the outbreak of hostilities. Luyt viewed these non-volunteers as unpatriotic '*bangbroeke* [cowards] and they're just selfish, they put themselves before their country.' He became heavily involved in rugby after the war during which, following a match during the New Zealand All Blacks tour in 1949, a fellow former POW brought him his missing watch strap which a friend had repaired in POW camp. The strap remained on the watch which he used for the remainder of his life. Clive Luyt became an Honorary Life Member of the SACS Old Boys' Union, his former high school. He passed away in September 2011.

⁴⁰ Michael de Lisle interview: 4 June 2010, Cape Town.

Stanley Smollan



Following his successful escape and reaching of the Allies at Anzio early in 1944, Stanley Smollan was first evacuated to Cairo and from there flown back to South Africa with a small group of escaped POWs who were given the publicity of an ‘official welcome’ at the Waterkloof airfield in the Transvaal. This was followed by three months’ leave. One of the first things he did once back home was to try to arrange for the repatriation of an Italian POW, Tammaso de Lellis, but these attempts were all unsuccessful.⁴¹ Smollan believed that his POW experiences gave him ‘proper perspective on values, you know what a loaf of bread meant,

what a small meal meant, those things which you take for granted.’ On the liberal side of the post-war political clashes between the Torch Commando and OB sympathisers, for Smollan ‘it got a bit ugly at times.’⁴² He entered into a family business and went on to enjoy a successful working career in finance.

David Brokensha

Upon his return to South Africa, David Brokensha found it a great strain to discuss his war experiences as he felt guilty, and still does to some residual extent, at having been taken prisoner. He briefly considered joining up again as a pilot as the war was still continuing, but his brother’s fiancé convinced him otherwise as she believed that his mother would not be able to cope with him going to war again, especially not as a pilot. When war ended, David was awarded a scholarship to study at Cambridge, where he obtained a degree in Anthropology. Brokensha felt that in his interview for the university scholarship, the panel to some degree pitied him when it heard that he had been a POW and he could not help wondering if this was the reason why he was awarded the scholarship. After the Nationalists came to power in the late-1940s, as a liberal English-speaking individual he was unable to secure a sought-after government position at the Department of Native Affairs, and ended up working in Tanganyika, where he met his life partner. In 1986, his brother Paul died and this

⁴¹ See chapter 6: Confinement and lost liberty.

⁴² Stanley Smollan interview: 19 February 2011, Johannesburg.

prompted David to write his biography, *Brokie's Way An Anthropologist's Story. Love and work on four continents*.⁴³

E.B. (Dick) Dickinson

I think I was just thankful that I was still alive and had come through the war. I think that was the main thing. [...] we had a [book] launch here, and the point that I made was that I dedicated [my memoirs] to my friends that didn't come back. And that still gets to me, those guys I played cricket with, I was at school with, I was friendly with, one or two of them were in the air force and they were never heard of again. That still gets to me, but that's nothing to do with POW life, that's army life.⁴⁴

Dick Dickinson made full use of his time in Britain following his liberation. He toured the British Isles and even participating in a recording of Afrikaans songs for the BBC in July 1945. Upon his return to South Africa, Dickinson resumed his studies at the University of the Witwatersrand, which he completed in 1946.⁴⁵ He then worked in Johannesburg and thereafter in 1948 started a career as a soil consultation officer in the Bethlehem area of the Orange Free State. He later bought a farm near Harrismith and became a farmer. His response to the outcome of the 1948 election was, 'very disappointed obviously [...] I couldn't understand how these intellectual people could believe that [apartheid] could work.'⁴⁶

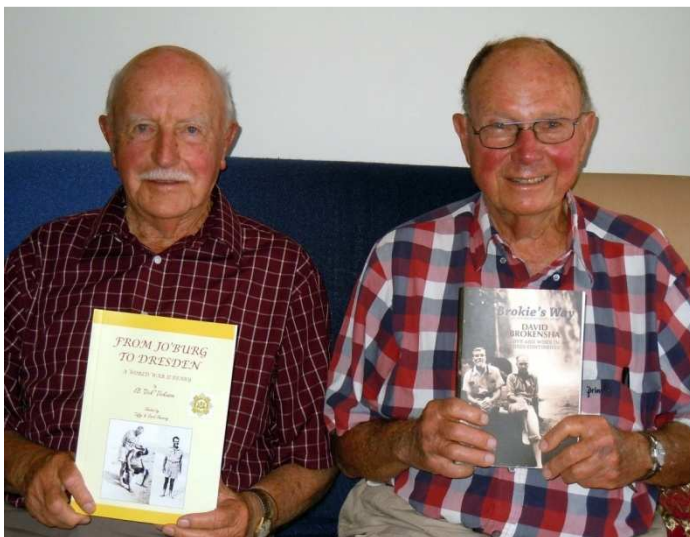


Figure 9: Dick Dickinson (left) and David Brokensha (right) with their memoirs (2011)

⁴³ David Brokensha interview: 10 September 2010, Fish Hoek.

⁴⁴ E.B. (Dick) Dickinson interview: 4 December 2010, Mossel Bay.

⁴⁵ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo'burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by EB Dickinson*: 146 – 147.

⁴⁶ E.B. (Dick) Dickinson interview: 4 December 2010, Mossel Bay.

Bernard Egner Schwikkard

Throughout his captivity, Bernard Schwikkard had dreams of arriving home on a Sunday, with the roast on the table and his family sitting there waiting for him. In those recollected dreams he would ignore his family and head straight for the food. When he was finally liberated he and a few companions immediately ordered German women to cook them a meal, ‘we had a wonderful meal, we gorged ourselves.’ Schwikkard was one of the first South African POWs to arrive at the Brighton compound and pleaded to be sent home at the first available opportunity. He flew back crammed into a Dakota with a group of POWs to an air force base where they were welcomed by the Women’s Auxiliary, ‘they were very kind to me and they put me on a train and gave me sorts of bedding and something to eat and I phoned my mother – this was a tremendous emotional time for me [...] I was the first of the family to get back.’⁴⁷

Before enlistment, Schwikkard had worked for Rand Mines and had been paid throughout the war. When he returned to his employment he received an increase and this combined with an education grant from the military enabled him to complete his courses in mining. He married in 1948. Schwikkard believes that it was during his period in the coal mines in Upper Silesia that he was able to acquit himself ‘in a position of tremendous responsibility as a member of the camp staff [and] as medical orderly I was able to win the respect and trust of the other men [...] no one ever questioned the fairness of my decisions or complained about lack of attention to the sick.’⁴⁸ Bernard Schwikkard passed away in October 2011.

William (Bill) Hindshaw

Bill Hindshaw and a friend escaped from their Italian camp following the armistice and spent time in the Italian countryside living with the Garbelli family near Padino. They also spent a period with Italian partisans and eventually walked a total of almost forty days during which they existed on apples and dry chestnuts. They finally met up with Allied forces in France and were sent to Nice, then to Cannes and from there to Helwan in Egypt before being flown back to the Union.⁴⁹ Once in South Africa, Hindshaw considered returning to Italy for some time, as he ‘would have married there [and] corresponded [...] but that's all water under the

⁴⁷ Bernard Schwikkard interview: 17 March 2010, Johannesburg.

⁴⁸ Schwikkard, B.E. 1999. *My life briefly told*: Epiloque.

⁴⁹ Hindshaw, W. n.d. *An account of my experience as a prisoner-of-war and escapee in the Italian Alps during the Second World War*: 62 – 63.

bridge.’ Before the war, Hindshaw had worked as an apprentice bricklayer and after his return was offered a position at a training college for master builders where he eventually became principal.⁵⁰

Fred J.W. Geldenhuis



Following three months in England, in 1945 Fred Geldenhuis returned to South Africa on a Union Castle mail liner that had been converted into a troop ship. He did not enjoy the voyage for it reminded him of POW camp, ‘where the fellows every evening used to walk around in groups, partly to keep in motion, partly to pass the time.’⁵¹ He also spent much time wondering about his welcome as before the war he and his stepmother had not enjoyed a good relationship. Moreover, he was also acutely aware that his father’s neighbours were members of the OB. His ship arrived in Cape Town in August 1945, and he reached Pretoria after a three day train journey.

Not recognising anyone on the platform as there to welcome him, he was heading for a bus station when he heard a girl’s voice:

“Hello Frikkie” [...] Well, I took her and kissed her and said, “who are you” and she said she’s Annatjie. I could not recall an Annatjie so kissed her again. Just then the other person came up to us and I recognised her as Kotie de Waal, Annatjie’s sister, whom I knew from school days, and particularly our friendship. So I kissed her too.⁵²

During his three months’ army leave, he visited friends in Natal as an escape from a tense domestic atmosphere because of his bad relationship with his stepmother. That leave was cut short when Geldenhuis was told that he was needed to officiate at the opening of Parliament in 1946.⁵³ He continued his soldiering life as Regimental Sergeant Major of the Prince Alfred’s Guard, retiring finally at the age of sixty-nine. In his eightieth year he visited Italy and met some of those who had helped him during his short-lived period of freedom following the Armistice. Fred Geldenhuis died in August 2011.

⁵⁰ William Hindshaw interview: 19 March 2010, Johannesburg.

⁵¹ Geldenhuis, F.J.W. n.d. *A Soldier’s Scrapbook*: 206.

⁵² Geldenhuis, F.J.W. n.d. *A Soldier’s Scrapbook*: 211.

⁵³ Fred Geldenhuis interview: 9 July 2010, Pretoria.

Wessel J. Oosthuizen



Like Bernard Schwikkard, Wessel Oosthuizen used to fantasise about enjoying a Sunday roast, specifically a roast leg of lamb with gravy and peas. Like Schwikkard, too, he also confessed to having been more fixated upon the fantasy meal than embracing his family.⁵⁴ Oosthuizen's parents were unaware of the fact that he had returned to South Africa and he was taken to the family farm by a cousin who met him by chance near the train station in Johannesburg. In reflecting

upon his POW experiences, Oosthuizen believed that it had made him a better person and that he had gained from it. That, however, did not necessarily mean that his war experiences had enabled him to overcome old Afrikaner nationalist grievances. Thus, for Oosthuizen, Nazi actions towards Jews could be compared to British concentration camps during the Anglo-Boer War.⁵⁵ At another level, Oosthuizen's memories of the intensely passionate nature of white politics before the war were that this fractiousness started to dissipate after the 1948 accession of the Nationalists, and that thereafter most people became more tolerant. Long comfortable in uniform, Oosthuizen continued with his career in the police force and eventually retired to the Southern Cape coast.

Matthys Beukes

When Matthys Beukes returned home he was permitted to write his outstanding university examinations as most universities made allowances for returning soldiers as they had done before 1939 when students had volunteered for service in the UDF. Having escaped from Italian captivity he had returned to South Africa before the war was over. There, he had no intention of staying on in the military, especially when he was obliged to write a reluctant report on how his psychological state had been affected by his experience as a POW. Following a further confrontation with an officer in Pretoria, he resumed his judicial career as a prosecutor, but first had to get past the commanding nationalist network in the Department of Justice which was in a position to dictate his location of work. By circumventing the

⁵⁴ Wessel Oosthuizen interview: 4 December 2010, Hartenbos. *'nou sien ek my ma se Sondae braaiboud met die bruin sous en die ertjies daar, ag die heerlikste kos, jy dink nie aan die mense nie, jy sien die kos daar. En daai kos wil jy hê.'*

⁵⁵ Oosthuizen's mother was interned in a British concentration camp during the Anglo-Boer War.

system and threatening to go to Smuts himself with copies of key paperwork, Beukes eventually managed to get the Department of Justice to send him to Cape Town, just where he wanted to be, leaving him ‘very satisfied with the outcome of events’.⁵⁶

J.C. Smuts and the ‘end of an era’⁵⁷

In some ways, Smuts’ declining popularity through the 1940s and his weakened position in white politics after the war might even be compared to the ways in which returning POWs perceived their country’s political and social situation after 1945. The Union’s POWs had been exposed to profound events in Europe which influenced their consciousness and sense of the world, and left many thinking differently about their place in their own country. Moreover, weary of conflict and war, they simply wanted to enjoy the notion of a ‘normal’ life. Smuts, too, experienced shattering world events and participated centrally in global movements, encompassing the work of the Imperial War Cabinet, Commonwealth policies, and the direction of the League of Nations as well as the post-war formation of the United Nations. Yet Smuts the internationalist was unable to realise his vision in South Africa. The United Party’s reliance on the soldiers’ vote and its misjudgement of the support among certain of its constituencies during the 1943 election indicated that Smuts’ interpretation of the South African situation was skewed. Although he won the 1943 election, it is widely considered that the electoral victory was an ‘illusion’ as a result of the effect of the soldiers’ vote and that the polls were not a realistic indication of the true political feeling among soldiers.⁵⁸ Later, like most of those POWs who had fallen in behind him as Smuts’ men, he gravely underestimated the influence and determination of the Nationalists after World War Two. When the wartime prime minister died in 1950 it was, as one leading South African historian has concluded, the ‘end of an era in the history of South Africa.’⁵⁹ For POWs, too, in a modest yet also meaningful way, it was also the closing of a small door of some recognition for their wartime sacrifices.

⁵⁶ Matthys Beukes interview: 2 February 2011, Bloemfontein. ‘*toe stuur hy my Kaap toe, toe lag ek lekker want ek het toe alreeds die army verneuk.*’

⁵⁷ Marks, S. Oxford Dictionary of National Biography; Smuts, Jan Christiaan (1870–1950). Available at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/36171?docPos=1> Accessed 1 November 2011.

⁵⁸ Tothill, F.D. 1989. ‘The Soldiers’ Vote and its Effects on the Outcome of the General Election of 1943.’ *South African Historical Journal*, 21(1):85 & 93. Soldiers cast their votes between 15 June and 3 July, but at this time the POWs were more concerned with rumours concerning the Italian armistice. None of those interviewed mentioned the 1943 election, nor was it highlighted in any of the memoirs.

⁵⁹ Marks, S. Oxford Dictionary of National Biography; Smuts, Jan Christiaan (1870–1950). Available at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/36171?docPos=1> Accessed 1 November 2011.

Chapter 10: Concluding perspectives

National identity among POWs

The South Africans who were taken captive during the war comprised a structurally diverse group that included men of all races and language groups, including white Afrikaner and English, coloured men and black Africans. In effect, this meant that the sense of a national identity was different among each group as each of them would have had different views on South Africa at that time. Because interviews and memoirs for this study came mainly from the English-speaking group, it is difficult to reach a definitive conclusion on how, and if, the POW experience might have influenced or changed the idea of national identity of the POW group as a whole. Two exceptions, those being the Afrikaans-speaking Geldenhuis and Oosthuizen, are not sufficiently representative to allow for a comparison or to determine if the English- and Afrikaans-speaking groups developed a unified national identity towards the end of the war as a result of their POW experience.

Another factor that hinders the determination of national identity is the lack of references to it in memoirs and other recollections as most former POWs concentrated on actual or concrete experiences and did not spend time philosophising on abstract ideas such as identity. To gain any insight into POWs' sense of national identity, it is necessary to comb through memoirs and interview transcripts, which leave one with occasional references to South Africans. Furthermore, in most cases allusions to South Africans are spontaneous and even unconscious in tone, and at best a researcher is only able to offer cautious assumptions on national identity as a result.

Yet, what is evident nonetheless is that South African POWs, like those of many other nationalities, believed in some shared distinctiveness, in that they were best able to cope with the hardships and demands of prison life. For instance, De Lisle believed that of the 46 nationalities in Camp 82, the South Africans represented the strongest group, after the 'Legionaries' [French Foreign Legion].⁶⁰ Similarly, Scott mentioned that 'all the [South African] men, although painfully thin, stood the rigours of captivity well, but many of the remaining 70 British, New Zealand and Indian prisoners were too weak to walk and had to

⁶⁰ De Lisle, M. n.d. *Over the hills and far away my twenties in the forties*: 50.

brought out by stretcher and ambulance.’⁶¹ The view of one’s own nationality being innately superior also extended to hygiene matters, as expressed by Mortlock in his memoirs, as ‘the British troops did not appear to be as averse to lice as the South Africans.’⁶²

Equally, some POWs made other kinds of bigoted judgements on the ‘character’ of other nationalities, in which past history became mixed up with enduring – and contemporary – common prejudices. As a good example, there is Hindshaw’s view on relations between Commonwealth nationalities, where ‘we got on very very very well with the New Zealanders, and occasionally we got on with the Australians, but they were just the same as they are today, bombastic and boastful.’⁶³ On the other hand, views expressed of other nationalities in memoirs as opposed to views expressed in private letters also indicate the extent to which POWs massaged their memoirs in order to appear more acceptable if read by a public audience. An example is found in Uys Krige’s POW memoirs, *The Way Out*, in which he gives a very positive description of relations between nationalities:

for almost two years [in Italian POW camp] I had been intimately connected with all these men, sharing the hard life of the three thousand English privates for fifteen months and living with the officers – first the British, then the Australians, then the Canadians – for a further seven; and because during that time I had got to know them well, with all their faults – and they had many – and with all their virtues of humour, courage and endurance in adversity, until at length I, the stranger among them, no longer considered them as members of a different race with a different outlook and a different background.⁶⁴

In contrast, in a letter to Lydia Krige, his feelings towards British officers were made clear when he stated that if the authorities did not allocate a private room to him, he would ask for a transfer to a South African camp as he could not stand being with the English officers. Krige could not have known at that point that a purely South African camp did not exist.⁶⁵

While most South African POWs seemed loyal to their country for the most part, they also easily fell behind a British or English identity when the situation demanded, as is evident

⁶¹ Scott, D. 1946. *My luck still held*: 13.

⁶² Mortlock, J. 1956. *The endless years Reminiscences of the 2nd World War*: 43.

⁶³ William Hindshaw interview: 19 March 2010, Johannesburg.

⁶⁴ Krige, U. 1980. *The Way Out*: 13.

⁶⁵ Uys Krige Collection of the J.S. Gericke Library, Stellenbosch University. 225.KF.15(10) Letter from Uys Krige to Lydia Krige. no date. ‘Maar nee, hier sit ek weer met ’n klomp rooi offisiere in ’n groot vertrek, met al my besittings om my bed versprei, [...] kry ek een [eie kamer] gaan ek hard probeer werk. Kry ek nie een gaan ek versoek dat hul my na ’n SA kamp verplaas.’

from another statement by Scott, ‘Here I may say that the Red Cross was probably one of the finest means of propaganda we had, and certainly brought proof of our claims and stories of British might.’⁶⁶ Those POWs who had escaped in Italy often referred to themselves as British when they came into contact with Italian peasants, simply because in most cases the Italians did not know about South Africa’s involvement in the war and the identification of British was easier. For instance, on more than one occasion Scott had to convince Italians that he was not German but British, as this was crucial in order to secure food and lodging from the peasants.⁶⁷

Education levels also played a role in the perception of other nationalities, with Beukes, who on occasion wrote letters on behalf of British POWs, viewing the British as unintelligent, although he was careful to emphasise that all POWs were equal, suggesting that the POW identity was more important than national identity while the war was continuing.⁶⁸ De Lisle’s assertion that ‘we were all fighting for the same cause’ also supports the notion of national identity being less important than the soldier or POW identity.⁶⁹ The emphasis by former POWs on the identity of the POW as opposed to national identity leads the focus of this chapter towards the different identities experienced by POWs from the time they volunteered to their liberation at the end of the war.

POW identity

To be a hero, the soldier must be a team player, but has also to distinguish himself as an individual from the group.⁷⁰ This definition of the heroic soldier removes POWs from the realm of heroism, at least in the public’s perception, as they were seen to be rendered powerless and unable to act as individuals while in captivity. However, following the First World War, the image of the brave soldier became increasingly insignificant as disillusionment with war started to pervade public perceptions. The attitude among veteran soldiers also changed as they started to view the ability to survive war as more important than

⁶⁶ Scott, D. 1946. *My luck still held*: 31.

⁶⁷ See for example Scott, D. 1946. *My luck still held*: 65 & 89. ‘In a few minutes another woman appeared and asked in German whether I was a German. “No,” I replied in Italian, “I’m an Englishman.”’ / ‘We eventually persuaded this owner that we were English, and he gave us food and drink, and lodged us comfortably in his hay store.’

⁶⁸ Matthys Beukes interview: 2 February 2011, Bloemfontein.

⁶⁹ Michael de Lisle interview: 15 June 2010, Cape Town.

⁷⁰ Rose, S.O. 2003. *Which people’s war?: national identity and citizenship in Britain, 1939 - 1945*: 161.

heroism. The soldier who managed to survive the war became the hero, 'the ideal military figure, the Happy Warrior', while heroic deeds happened almost by accident.⁷¹

It was during the Second World War that general attitudes among soldiers towards individual notions of brave conduct changed decisively, and the over-eager heroes were often scoffed at by others who were ultimately interested only in survival.⁷² It may be on this basis that a number of former POWs made statements in interviews and in memoirs such as, 'there was nothing heroic about it; we were just looking after ourselves',⁷³ and 'I honestly and sincerely, in writing my memoirs of the years in uniform during the Second World War, do not wish to make myself a hero, but just an ordinary person who was young and adventurous.'⁷⁴

However, it could also be that former POWs do not consider it possible that a prisoner could also have been a hero, at least not in the same sense as a fighting man could be.

While both the soldier identity and the POW identity tended to become removed from the concept of heroism during World War Two, POW identity can also be viewed as different from that of a soldier's identity in that it is further removed from the concept of hero in the public realm. Yet, in the personal perception of the POW, it is closer to that of a hardy survivor. In this respect, while some might consider the idea of a survivor and a hero as very similar, for POWs during the war it was mostly a case of adapting and accepting their circumstances while waiting for, in some cases, by creating opportunities for liberation. The contrast between public and personal perception of POW identity is evident in many letters written by POW friends and family, revealing their ignorance regarding POW experience. On the other hand, POWs often regarded their experience in captivity as a personal struggle which was fought face to face with the enemy. For the most part, they were not involved in armed battles that could lead to death, but in battles of the mind, requiring ingenuity while confronting physical deprivation such as hunger and cold. Depending on each POW's unique experience, this non-violent but personal – and sometimes hidden – struggle through the imagination could also imply a degree of heroism.

When considering POW experience, it is important to distinguish between the general experience and the individual experience, which was unique to each POW. As evidence for this study was gained mostly from oral testimony, published and unpublished personal

⁷¹ Hynes, S. 1997. *The Soldiers' Tale Bearing Witness to Modern War*: 37.

⁷² Hynes, S. 1997. *The Soldiers' Tale Bearing Witness to Modern War*: 151.

⁷³ Clive Luyt interview: 19 May 2010, Cape Town.

⁷⁴ Geldenhuis, F.J.W. n.d. *A Soldier's Scrap Book. The memoirs of Frederik Jacobus Wagenaar Geldenhuis*: 5.

memoirs, as well as from post-war statements found in the Department of Defence Archives and in the Ditsong National Museum of Military History, it portrays events as experienced by the ordinary rank and file men. By focusing on each man's unique experience and then comparing that to the experiences of others in similar situations, it is possible to extract the individual experience from the general experience, as each former POW understood and interpreted what was happening to him in his own unique way.

Furthermore, it is important to separate the circumstances and conditions from the POWs' reactions to those circumstances and conditions, as these represent the general experience and each POW's reaction to the general experience signifies the individual experience. The way in which each POW chose to react to his circumstances is seen most prominently in each prisoner's decision to try to escape or not to escape, or, on the other hand, to attempt to speed up or to delay his transfer to a new camp either to Italy and Germany. Each POW's reaction to impending freedom during the forced marches in 1945 also reveals significant insight into the difference between the unique and the general experience.

Another aspect that determined a POWs individual experience to a large extent was his ability to accept his POW status and circumstances, and then to adapt to the new situation. If the process of acceptance and adaptation was achieved fairly successfully, it allowed POWs to emerge relatively unscathed mentally from these experiences with a fair sense of normality. However, POWs were required to accept and adapt on a continual basis as they were regularly transferred to new locations as the war demanded. During each of the distinct phases of their experience, that of volunteering, captivity and liberation, POWs were required to accept and to adapt anew, requiring ingenuity and resourcefulness if they were to do so effectively.

The volunteer identity

In most cases, the decision to volunteer for the UDF required considerable – even exceptional – courage and conviction as a result of the political divisions regarding South Africa's participation in the war, although for others it was simply a matter of doing one's duty or acquiring a bread-ticket. Many who enlisted were confronted at some point during their training with those who did not approve of their decision, most notably from the members of the *Ossewabrandwag's Stormjaers* [stormtroopers], who on regular occasions confronted the

red tab men in street fights.⁷⁵ The hostile attitudes towards their going to war could also have come from their own families, and friends who chose not to enlist. Negative press from newspapers such as *Die Transvaler* also played a role, but probably served more to inspire members of the OB than to influence the volunteers in that the newspaper openly supported Hitler's views – the same views that the volunteers saw as a threat to freedom and democracy.⁷⁶ For others, however, resentment at finding themselves in a North African prison camp was aimed at the Smuts Government as some believed that the government had tricked them into enlisting or into serving outside of the borders of the country, as was the case with a number of members of the SAP, one of those being Wessel Oosthuizen.⁷⁷ To accept their POW status, many felt they had to justify their capture, and to do this, they sought to lay blame on something or someone.

The captive identity

None of the South Africans who enlisted for war service expected to be taken prisoner or seems to have given the prospect of captivity a second thought. Therefore, dealing with captivity and the implications thereof was virtually for all POWs an unanticipated experience with which they had to deal as best they could. Adapting to their new status in the war required not only physical adjustments, but also mental coping strategies, and the use and effectiveness of these strategies were unique to each man.

Coping devices included assigning blame on something or someone for their capture, denial, both at the time of capture and at later stages of captivity, humour, religion and an intense preoccupation with sport, reading or any other recreational pastime. Others made life easier for themselves by trading with food and other commodities, but they often became known very despairingly as racketeers. Thus, De Lisle referred to Rosmarin in this way: '[Rosmarin] was never hungry, most of us were, but he was just into all the trading rackets, bribing, buying and selling, making friends with the enemy [...] he went into a new camp and he was cold shouldered, people knew he was a racketeer.'⁷⁸ Rosmarin, on the other hand, was proud of his ability to make the most of his situation and actually used his position of trust with the

⁷⁵ Crwys-Williams, J. 1992. *A country at war 1939 – 1945 The Mood of a Nation*: 56.

⁷⁶ Marx, C. 2009. *Oxwagon Sentinel Radical Afrikaner Nationalism and the History of the Ossewabrandwag*: 256.

⁷⁷ Wessel Oosthuizen interview: 4 December 2010, Hartenbos.

⁷⁸ Michael de Lisle interview: 4 June 2010, Cape Town.

guards to gain supplies needed by the camp's escape committee. As for being seen as a racketeer, he declared, 'I enjoyed the racketeering for food with the guards.'⁷⁹

For others, in other ways, prison life was too hard, especially if they were not convinced that they were fighting a just war, or if they fell prey to Nazi propaganda, mostly while they were spending time at the so-called holiday camps where they were subjected to propaganda. Accordingly, some South Africans joined the British Free Corps and treason cases were brought against a number of former POWs following the war. In a report on Nazi propaganda directed at inducing POWs to join the British Free Corps, it was stated that the delegate of the Protecting Power informed a German Commandant that 'it was unwise to spoil the excellent impression made by the camp as a whole by propaganda which, for the chance of getting hold of a few poor soldiers, threatened to spoil the peace, good atmosphere and discipline in the camp. The delegate was surprised to find that the German officers agreed.'⁸⁰ This matter related to a case against three South Africans who became members of the Free Corps, one of whom was reporting directly to Chief Gestapo officers.⁸¹

Naturally, developing a POW identity was closely linked to accepting POW status. In order to absorb this, POWs had to accept responsibility in the field for their capture. In most cases, however, POWs were unwilling to accept this and either blamed another individual or a situation or, in some instances, a more abstract blameworthy entity, such as *the British*. It was rarely the achievement of the enemy. Thus, in the instance of South African POWs captured at Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk, none of them blamed the Axis forces as most looked to their own or to perceived weak or incompetent British commanders, while others blamed management of the battle and poor environmental conditions. Once in captivity, captors were blamed for bad treatment and terrible living conditions. An especially problematic factor for all South African POWs in accepting their status as prisoners and in developing a POW identity was that they were all volunteers. Those who had volunteered out of a sense of duty were no longer in a position to carry out their self-appointed service. Alongside them, those who had volunteered for other reasons, such as for employment or from mixed personal circumstances, now experienced a strong sense of antagonism and resentment which was often directed towards the Union Government or towards General Smuts in particular.

⁷⁹ Rosmarin, I. 1999. *Inside Story*: 58 & 88.

⁸⁰ DOD AG(POW) 1556B. PW in Germany: Propaganda on formation of British Free Corps. 8 January 1945.

⁸¹ DOD AG(POW) 1556B. Shaef mission to France. SLB/3/NWE/BFC.

The POW experience in North Africa was for many the most shattering, not only because it was unexpected, but because most experienced disorder and confusion during the battles, followed by utter chaos and hardship during the first days and weeks of capture. Many were not prepared for battle against disciplined German forces as they had had only limited experience against Italian forces who had not offered much resistance in East Africa. The shock of capture was made even more profound by the feeling among many POWs that they had been let down by their commanders, especially those who were captured at Tobruk. Here, South African experience echoes wider Allied experience. Many narratives of British and American POWs captured in Europe emphasise the fact that surrender was inevitable due to a lack of ammunition, thereby rationalising their surrender and to an extent denying their possible role in the adverse turn of events.⁸²

In a similar sense, the South Africans captured in North Africa, specifically at Tobruk, blamed Klopper's generalship for their misfortune, while others apportioned the blame even further away, implying that Klopper's role was insignificant and that the loss of Tobruk was the result of the British High Command which did not handle the situation in a competent manner. Beukes, who fought with the Regiment President Steyn, even went so far as to suggest that the Germans were unable to break through where South African forces were placed, forcing Rommel to go around the Gazala line instead of through it.⁸³ However, the belief that South African forces were able to repel Rommel while other forces were unable to do so is flawed, as it is generally accepted that Rommel's tactics of concentration were superior to those of the dispersed British forces at that stage. For instance, the Gazala line was intended to defend Tobruk, but the defences were not adequately reinforced. The Allies were therefore forced to be on the defensive along excessively long lines, whereas an offensive approach could have given them an assault advantage over the encircling Afrika Korps. The Germans also had the upper hand in that they were able to crack British radio communications, and had greater armoured mobility than the Allies. Allied leaders also failed to exploit gains that were made by acting decisively. Thus, when on 30 May 1942 a Yorkshire Regiment destroyed 200 Afrika Korps tanks, had the South African Brigades attacked on 31 May they might well have achieved considerable success. But, while the

⁸² Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*: 24.

⁸³ Matthys Beukes interview: 2 February 2011, Bloemfontein.

Allied command was indecisive, Rommel seized the opportunity and opened up a route to Tobruk for his tanks.⁸⁴

While men in the European theatre often point out that a lack of ammunition had forced them to surrender, a significant number of South Africans could not blame any munitions shortage as many of them were not even engaged in fighting and were not fully informed of the situation when the Germans started rounding up POWs. The result was that South African POWs held different opinions about the reason for their capture, with some blaming Klopper while others blamed the British Commanders, a resentful situation that may have caused a split in historical opinion over the issue, although little of this is reflected in personal memoirs or in oral testimonies.

Klopper's own version of events, published in 1950, is in stark contrast to what many South Africans experienced at the time, and it shows that he also attempted to justify his actions and decisions at Tobruk. He was careful to point out that all forces were making a last stand against the advancing Germans, thereby denying any allegations of cowardice from his surrounding fellow South Africans. He also asserted that he ignored suggestions from his staff to surrender as he wanted to ensure an advantage for the 8th Army, thereby refuting any allegations that his decisions put the 8th Army in a weaker position.⁸⁵

Regardless of the military balance and Klopper's actual decisions, it seems obvious that Klopper tried to influence public perception in his favour. His popular magazine articles were aimed at the general reading public in South Africa a few years after the war and, while the writing style is that of someone who felt justified at the decisions he made, on the other hand his statement to authorities when he returned to South Africa displays a more realistic explanation of events at Tobruk. The discrepancies between the official statements and the *Huisgenoot* articles also indicate that the government supported his aim of reassuring the public of South Africa's brave role in the Desert Campaign.⁸⁶ Some of Klopper's statements were presumably aimed at creating a positive public image of those rank and file men who did not survive Tobruk. For instance, he claimed that their sacrifices led to the eventual

⁸⁴ Holland, J. 2006. *Together we stand Turning the Tide in the West: North Africa 1942 – 1943*: 27 – 95.

⁸⁵ DOD UWH Narep ME 13. *Huisgenoot* 30 June 1950. 'Al wat nou in die Tobruk gebied bespaar kon word, het op hierdie kritieke oomblik met sy rug teen die muur geveg en sy oë op die aanstormende vyand gerig, want die res van die buitekring het alle aanslagpogings afgeslaan... Sommige van my staflede het my aangeraai om nie meer aan te gaan met die weerstand nie. Ek het hierdie voorstelle van die hand gewys, want ek het besef dat elke minuut wat ons Rommel by Tobruk ophou, vir die Britse 8ste Leer van onskatbare waarde sou wees.'

⁸⁶ DOD UWH Narep ME 13. *Huisgenoot* 30 June 1950.

Allied victory at El Alamein.⁸⁷ Yet, with regard to those who became POW at Tobruk, Klopper's comments no doubt also helped to create negative public perceptions of prisoners, as he claimed that his actions had created an opportunity for many to escape. Those who had not escaped could, therefore, be viewed by the public as having been either cowardly or incapable.⁸⁸

Whatever the view of South Africans of the events at Tobruk, other Commonwealth POWs had a more basic approach to the perceived debacle. Put plainly, they did not distinguish between South Africans and South African commanders, they simply blamed the South Africans as a whole. This was especially the case with the Australian forces as their 9th Division had been besieged in Tobruk from April to October 1941. However, it was also during this period that the Australians insisted on concentrating their forces elsewhere in the campaign, making it very difficult for Auchinleck to utilise them and at the same time placing more pressure on South African forces with regard to the fragmentation of their corps.⁸⁹

Being impelled to blame a specific person or a tight situation for their surrender did not, however, help to lessen the shock of capture, and nor did it prevent soldiers of other nationalities from blaming South Africans in general for the loss of Tobruk. While feelings of animosity between South Africans and others may have been brewing in North Africa, POWs were generally physically too weak to pay much attention to it as they were more concerned with their own physical survival as a result of the poor conditions in the transit camps. The issue of blame for the fall of Tobruk would, however, remain alive throughout the war and in some cases, when men had a chance to regain their physical strength in Italy and Germany, fist fights would break out between stigmatised South Africans POWs and others. According to Brokensha, the tension was especially high between South Africans and Australians, be it in camp sports events or as a result of rivalry and 'snide remarks'⁹⁰ concerning Tobruk. Rosmarin recalled in his memoirs that 'suggestions of cowardice and fifth-column activities were rife and we South Africans bore the brunt of these attacks on our honour. Throughout

⁸⁷ DOD UWH Narep ME 13. *Huisgenoot* 30 June 1950. 'Die Suid-Afrikaners wat hier in Tobruk in die slag gebly het, kan hulle troos dat hulle opoffering by Tobruk daartoe gelei het dat Rommel uiteindelik by El Alamein gestuit is.'

⁸⁸ DOD UWH Narep ME 13. *Huisgenoot* 30 June 1950. 'Ek het geredeneer dat ons reeds aan Rommel die dag ontnem het deur hom te dwing om ons aan te val, en indien ek iemand wou kans gee om te probeer ontsnap, dit nou die laaste en enigste oomblik was waarop dit kon geskied, en ek het gehoop dat minstens vier of vyf duisend manne die paal sou haal.'

⁸⁹ Orpen, N. 1971. *War in the Desert. South African Forces World War II Volume III*: 5, 33 – 35.

⁹⁰ David Brokensha interview: 10 September 2010, Fish Hoek.

my time as a p.o.w., especially when conditions were tough, I was blamed as a South African for the Tobruk debacle.’⁹¹

With the growth of hindsight, many former POWs no longer blame Klopper or other officers for their capture, with Smollan, for instance, declaring, ‘I defend [Klopper] utterly.’⁹²

However, Smollan’s opinion was almost certainly influenced by information gained after the war. Others, though, continue to harbour traces of animosity towards Klopper, holding ambivalent views such as, ‘there was nothing wrong with Klopper but [he] didn’t know his foot from his elbow.’⁹³ Historically, the fall of Tobruk is considered widely as the ‘greatest single military disaster ever experienced’ by South Africa as it involved the capture of an entire Division. Moreover, it also held grim consequences for the entire Allied war effort, as almost 33 000 men became POWs while huge stores of ammunition and equipment were taken by the Afrika Korps.⁹⁴

The fact that the fall of Tobruk was such a shock and major setback for the Allies, coupled with the fact that a South African commander was blamed by most South African POWs for the disaster, certainly set South Africans apart from other nationalities within the Allied sphere. Equally, this was so only to a degree as, for the most part, POWs of all nationalities were concerned more with daily survival and with dealing with their captors than with confronting each other about issues in the past. Furthermore, blaming of officers was by no means uncommon. New Zealanders captured during 1941 in North Africa similarly blamed an officer who, according to them, ‘refused to heed the common-sense suggestions of his senior NCO.’⁹⁵ In this case, the unfortunate officer even ended up in the same transit camp as the rest of the men where they did not miss the opportunity to inform him of their feelings towards him. Although South Africans ended up being disparaged by some soldiers of other nationalities in POW camps, they could always deflect the blame on to Klopper, who was unable to defend his actions as he was separated almost immediately into an officers’ camp.

While blaming someone or something for their predicament was a fairly common coping device among POWs, reliance on faith was not necessarily widespread and religious activity seemed to flare up mostly at times when captives were faced with new and unknown

⁹¹ Rosmarin, I. 1999. *Inside Story*: 17.

⁹² Stanley Smollan interview: 15 March 2010, Johannesburg.

⁹³ Clive Luyt interview: 19 May 2010, Johannesburg.

⁹⁴ Stewart, A. 2008. ‘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 Studies* 36(1):80.

⁹⁵ Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*: 42.

circumstances. The fervour then seemed to die down again as POWs adapted to their circumstances. For many POWs, religion did not play a significant continuous role in their experience of captivity. In the view of Van Alphen Stahl, 'it's strange, you'd find men, boys who are searching for comfort, or hope, its either God or mother. And more often than not, it's mother, not God.'⁹⁶ This perception was supported by Brokensha who, although he became a member of the Roman Catholic Church during the 1950s, did not see religion as playing a significant role in POW camp.⁹⁷ According to De Lisle, religion was a private matter and not 'really much of a factor [during captivity], we said our own prayers obviously, especially praying for our families, but it wasn't a public thing at all.'⁹⁸ Gilbert asserts that many POWs attended religious services merely to break the tedium of their routine, and this was affirmed by a number of those South African POWs interviewed.⁹⁹ It is, therefore, arguable that the level of a man's religious devotion before his capture may have determined his dedication during his captivity. In other words, there is little evidence that imprisonment itself encouraged religious faith or deepened adherence.

In contrast to the indifferent attitude towards religion, some coping strategies led some men to developed a more intense interest in what would be classed during peace time as humdrum recreational activities, all in an effort to combat boredom which, when left to fester, would lead to severe depression and low morale. These included sport, reading, music, theatre, bird watching, needlework and art. The way in which some men coped with the mental and physical strains of captivity also had the consequence that they could be categorised by other POWs as, for example, racketeers or as mentally deranged. In some cases their chosen pastimes, such as needlework, could bring into question issues regarding traditional gender roles, although none of the interviewees or memoirs expressed any thoughts in this regard. In this way, some POWs therefore had identities imposed on them by others who considered themselves in a position to pass superior or moral judgement on others, which in itself says something of those who judged and those who were judged.

An example of the allocation of identity to others is evident in the way in which Van Alphen Stahl used humour both to cope with his own situation and then also to judge a fellow POW as being mentally unstable. During an interview, Van Alphen Stahl related an incident shortly after his capture when he mocked his Italian captors and jokingly asked them for ice-cream.

⁹⁶ Fred van Alphen Stahl interview: 15 June 2010, Cape Town.

⁹⁷ David Brokensha interview: 10 September 2010, Fish Hoek.

⁹⁸ Michael de Lisle interview: 4 June 2010, Cape Town.

⁹⁹ Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*: 228.

Although it seemed as if he experienced this episode as a humorous encounter, both at the time and in later recollection, he admitted subsequently that his riskily misplaced humour was the result of intense frustration.¹⁰⁰ It was similar to the incident when he unwisely and with youthful bravado, confronted a column of retreating Germans,¹⁰¹ who then proceeded to thrash him senseless and to leave him unconscious by the side of the road.¹⁰²

While these two impetuous episodes played a role in Van Alphen Stahl's fashioning of the character of his POW status, humour was also used at later stages in prison camps to help to lift morale. In this instance, Happy Harry in Stalag 344 Lamsdorf was an example of the way in which POWs allocated an identity to a fellow POW which then allowed them to project their fears of mental instability as a result of captivity onto a distinctive individual. Harry used to entertain POWs by 'running around the field, amusing the crowds' at so-called 'international soccer [or] rugby matches'. Harry gained his 'happy' status when it became evident that he did not realise, or chose to ignore, the fact that his wife was expecting another man's child. Harry was oblivious to the obvious questions from puzzled fellow prisoners as he proudly showed off a letter from his wife informing him of the birth of their son, four or five years after his capture at Dunkirk.¹⁰³ While it is impossible to guess at Harry's real state of mind and the reasons for his behaviour, it is clear that he found a way to cope with the situation, and that the way in which he chose to cope also helped other POWs to cope by being able to view Harry's behaviour as abnormal and strange. Being able to project light-hearted bewilderment on to a 'happy' Harry came to serve as a form of release.

Naturally, morale was important to all POWs and humour certainly played a crucial role in combating low morale. But POWs also developed strong bonds of friendship, which in turn led to the development of strong camaraderie amongst them. This bond was different from the bond between fighting soldiers as different factors were important – they were not physically fighting, but were committed against their will to a mental war against their captors, their conditions, often also their fellow POWs, as well as against their own mental impediments. As a result of language and cultural similarities, POWs often found solace amongst members of their own nationality, but the bond between them often extended across nationalities if some other common ground was evident between POWs, or for that matter between them and civilians who were also caught up in the war.

¹⁰⁰ See chapter 4.

¹⁰¹ See chapter 6.

¹⁰² Fred van Alphen Stahl interview: 15 June 2010, Cape Town.

¹⁰³ Fred van Alphen Stahl interview: 25 May 2010, Cape Town.

Among POWs of different nationalities, language could be divisive or it could strengthen unity. In this instance, Afrikaans-speaking POWs were perceived to socialise less with other nationalities as a result of their language which was not understood by members of the other Commonwealth forces. Afrikaans, therefore, often had the effect of creating two distinct groups in camps where many South Africans were held, one English-speaking group consisting of POWs from all Commonwealth countries, and an Afrikaans-speaking group consisting only of South Africans.¹⁰⁴ On the other hand, for English-speaking South African POWs, the use of Afrikaans by their fellow countrymen did not present a significant obstacle when it came to forming ties of camaraderie, as is evident from numerous interviews and memoirs.

Language facility could also play a role in the improvement of morale, especially when POWs acquired new languages as a result of their captivity, creating a sense of pride. Dickinson's diary gives an indication of the extent to which language played a role in POW experience, especially among those who worked among civilians in Germany. Early in 1945, Dickinson and others from work camp 1169 travelled on a tram while 'Frank was speaking to [a Spanish girl] in English. Dave was speaking French to a Frenchman. Jacko, Italian to some Italians. Someone else was talking German to a German civilian, while Hardy and I were into Afrikaans.'¹⁰⁵ POWs of all nationalities were exposed to foreign cultures, races and languages during their captivity and this could not but have had some effect on their sense of internationalism and world view.

Furthermore, camp newspapers had an effect both on the development of South African national identity as well as on morale. Many of the articles in these papers were specifically written to improve morale and many were humorous and made light of the hardships men faced on a daily basis. A particularly surreal example of such an article was one entitled, 'Idle Ambitions', in which the author describes his ambitions and reasons why he would probably be unable to achieve them. His main ambition was to set fire to a racketeer, something he thought he would never achieve as racketeers were known to be 'notoriously fussy about things like that'. The second was to push a pea uphill with his nose, but 'I sneeze and lose the pea, or get hungry and eat it.' Other ambitions included 'walk[ing] round with a bull on my

¹⁰⁴ Gilbert, A. 2006. *POW Allied Prisoners in Europe, 1939 – 1945*: 204.

¹⁰⁵ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo'burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by E.B. Dickinson*: 135.

shoulders [...] waggle my ears [...] or twiddle my thumbs.' Once he had achieved these ambitions, the author planned to 'settle down to a conventional existence on top of a pole.'¹⁰⁶

Most camp newspapers were predominantly British in origin and tone, and South African news did not get much column space. The more serious views expressed in these papers therefore reflected a British imperial outlook and strengthened the view that South Africa was rightfully and justifiably part of the British Empire. This association, in turn, resulted in a widening of the ideological gap between empire loyalist POWs and those who had not volunteered for war in protest against South Africa's participation. Others who volunteered for financial reasons may also have been affected by the British character of camp newspapers. They might, perhaps, have rebelled against the diet offered by camp papers, but most probably did not as a sense of belonging played a key role in morale and in day-to-day survival in camp. POWs had to share food and had to tolerate each other's idiosyncracies, making stubborn adherence to nationalist sentiment irrelevant and out of step with the needs of life in camp.

The emotional shock of capture was enlarged by the physical hardships that men endured during the first weeks of captivity and it was during this primary time that they constructed the POW identity which determined how they would conduct themselves later in camps in North Africa, Italy and Germany. The experience of capture and of being imprisoned under extreme conditions compelled men to do what they thought necessary for survival, and this could bring out the best or the worst in any man. Their POW experience was largely characterised by extreme conditions which in most cases resulted in extreme reactions from POWs. While routine in camps provided a sense of normality, being transported between camps resulted in many men experiencing severe physical hardships on the one hand, while at the same time their hopes of liberation were raised as a result of advancing Allied activity. That, paradoxically, held not only hope but also danger for POWs.

Dichotomy of hope and fear

The experiences of most POWs were punctuated by periods of high expectations, improved morale, only to be followed by exhaustion and disappointment. High expectations came when POWs were told that they would be moving to new camps, which lifted their morale in that they expected better conditions and more food in the new camps. Often these expectations

¹⁰⁶ Harding, G.M. 1943. 'Idle Ambitions' *The Clarion* 6. Stalag VIIIIB, Germany: 3.

would be encouraged by promises of food from the guards. However, the transport to the new camps, whether by trains, cattle trucks or by marching, was often so exhausting that it had the effect of breaking their high hopes. Upon arriving at new camps, POWs were searched and had personal items confiscated by their captors, making soldiers despondent and antagonistic towards their new surroundings even before they had a proper opportunity to evaluate the living conditions of a camp. Still, most POWs nevertheless settled into a routine and this allowed them to slowly adapt to their new circumstances, which also had the effect of gradually improving their morale. But this cycle was transient, for it lasted only until they were transported again.

While POWs experienced periods of stability in Italy and Germany, they were able to control matters that influenced their morale, and most did so relatively effectively. However, when they were not in control of their circumstances, their morale declined and their behaviour and reactions to circumstances became more extreme. The times when POWs held least control over events, was when they were being transported from North Africa to Italy in 1941 and 1942, and then from Italy to Germany in 1943. These phases were experienced as chaotic and confusing, and fomented greater discord and enmity between captives and captors. While there were gratuitous examples of brutal or regularly unfair treatment of captives, the captors were themselves very often also in a very difficult position as they had to obey orders that were at times almost impossible to carry out as a result of the effect that the war had on infrastructure, manpower and food production. The level of preparedness that captors had in receiving and accommodating large numbers of POWs also affected an unstable situation, making the experience of the POWs in these more dire situations worse than it might have been had their captors been better resourced.

POW experience of their transfers to new camps or between countries were characterised by extreme emotions. While suffering from severe food and water shortages in the terrible conditions of the transit camps in North Africa, POWs nevertheless gained hope of liberation when they witnessed the Benghazi harbour being bombed by the Allies. At the same time, they must also have realised that they were witnessing their food supplies being destroyed. In another example, while on a boat being transported to Italy from North Africa, POWs were subjected to atrocious confinement conditions, leading one of them, Paul Brokensha, to ask desperately, 'God? There is no God.'¹⁰⁷ Brokensha was by all accounts a robust soldier, and

¹⁰⁷ Brokensha, D. 2007. *Brokie's Way*: 81 – 82.

his steady emotional capacity and marked intellectual ability led to him becoming a respected camp leader in Germany. Yet, on the same despairing journey, POWs, including Paul's brother, David, cheered on the RAF when they attacked their boat.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, when POWs were being transported in cattle trucks and trains towards Germany, the RAF once again attacked these convoys. Then, again, although POWs were once more subjected to inhumane conditions on these trains, their hope of liberation was once again motivated by attacks from the air, the very thing that could have killed many of them.

By the time POWs were being transported to Germany, they had gained more experience of living as a prisoner and had become more adept at taking opportunities when they arose, with many of them jumping from trains in an effort to escape. These individualised, impetuous escape attempts may also have been prompted by the knowledge that they had missed an opportunity of liberty by adhering to the order to 'stay put', which eventually led to their continuing captivity. The hope of liberation was therefore stronger than the fear of death and the grimness of their circumstances.

Equally, as the POW reaction to their situation became more daring, the reaction from their captors also grew more extreme. Thus, there were examples of German guards shooting at POWs while they were still in train trucks. For instance, Geldenhuis remembered that the Germans threatened to shoot one out of every five POWs if they found that one had escaped.¹⁰⁹ In another example, related by Hammond in his memoirs, a German guard fired 'a short vindictive burst through the closed doors of the defenceless truck, peppering it from side to side' when the POWs inside protested that the doors were not being opened for fresh air while the train stopped briefly at a siding.¹¹⁰

Towards the end of hostilities, POWs no longer took much notice of orders and had little regard left for any military authority, even if by that time they had come under the control of the SS. During the so-called death marches, many POWs, again forced to survive under severe circumstances, simply took matters into their own hands and finally took responsibility for their own freedom. A case in point was Schwikkard who, at the time of the Italian armistice did not try to escape because 'my only excuse was that I was an ignorant but

¹⁰⁸ Brokensha, D. 2007. *Brokie's Way*: 82.

¹⁰⁹ Geldenhuis, F.J.W. n.d. *A Soldier's Scrap Book. The memoirs of Frederik Jacobus Wagenaar Geldenhuis*: 167.

¹¹⁰ Chambers, J. 1967. *For you the war is over The Story of Herbert Rhodes (Aussie) Hammond*: 68.

obedient soldier.’¹¹¹ However, during the death march he had had enough of following orders and doing his duty and was confident enough to declare, ‘I believe I’ve done my bit, I am not qualified for this [medical orderly] job, rightly or wrongly I am now deciding to save my own skin’ before simply walking away from the column of marching POWs.¹¹²

The liberated identity

Although South African POWs were exposed to foreign nationalities and new ideologies, there is not much to suggest that this diluted their consciousness of national belonging. Indeed, the experience of returning to South Africa seemed to awaken a sharp sense of identity that many POWs were unable to express properly or did not feel possessed by in the pre-war era. Dickinson’s diary reveals this pungent sense of national identity when, upon returning to South Africa, he wrote, ‘everywhere the impression of heat even though only early spring ... Everywhere dryness and the other side of Germany’s and England’s greenness. But we are not Europeans. We are Africans. And we are home. October 1945.’¹¹³

Similarly, Fred van Alphen Stahl found a sense of identity in the Springbok symbol and stated that this made him ‘more a South African, I think the idea that we were all together as South Africans [and] they would say “hello Springbok”, just with the red tab and that made me feel South African, Springbok to my mind, is just South African.’¹¹⁴ Furthermore, there is little doubt that the perception and awareness of race among POWs underwent some form of change during their captivity. This is evident when comments on African and coloured soldiers at the time of captivity in North Africa are compared to comments on Italian peasants when some POWs became dependant on them for survival.

Those who did not escape in Italy also experienced some shift in their orthodox ideas of race and class as they were exposed at first-hand to the attitudes of peasants and forced labourers while in work camps. In other cases, POWs experienced at close quarters the terrible ordeal that German citizens went through at the time of the bombing campaigns, causing many of them to reconsider if the purpose of the war still justified the consequences. By sharing with the enemy and by living through some of the same experiences of the enemy, there were certainly POWs who came to the conclusion that the war was futile. In instances where

¹¹¹ Schwikkard, B.E. 1999. *My life briefly told*: 38.

¹¹² Bernard Schwikkard interview: 17 March 2010, Johannesburg.

¹¹³ Shearing, T & D. (eds) 2010. *From Jo’burg to Dresden. A World War II Diary by E.B. Dickinson*: 149.

¹¹⁴ Fred van Alphen Stahl interview: 25 May 2010, Cape Town.

POWs experienced the war from the vantage point of the enemy, the idea of war as a futile activity was reached long before they arrived in Germany and experienced the bombing campaigns, as was the case with Robinson, who was one of those on the torpedoed *San Sebastian*. In witnessing the chaos and horror on the ship, Robinson did not distinguish between friend and enemy, but thought:

bitterly of the smug announcement which would report this and a thousand incidents like it: “one of our submarines torpedoed an enemy merchantman off the coast of ... When last seen she appeared to be sinking by the bows.” If people could see what it was like they would never have applauded such news. If they knew what it was really like, I thought, they would say nothing on earth justified the torpedoing of ships at sea.¹¹⁵

Equally, those who did not experience the war from a more empathetic inside tended to maintain their fixed pre-war views on matters such as race. Indeed, while conservative ideas about racial ordering began to change after WWII in most other Commonwealth countries, these rigidities became more prominent and more entrenched in South Africa as Afrikaner nationalism gathered momentum. Notwithstanding the critical or disillusioned way in which most POWs viewed the developing white electoral situation, they were in any event too few in number to mount any defence of the potentially reformist Smuts political order through the ballot box. When asked about the 1948 elections which ousted Smuts, Clive Luyt lamented that he was ‘appalled, absolutely appalled’¹¹⁶ and Hindshaw held a similar view in that he was ‘sad, you know like everybody else.’¹¹⁷ It is equally likely that even if in general the numbers of returned and reform-minded white servicemen – including POWs – were such that they could have made a significant impact on the political direction in which the country was moving, the hypothetical measure of that is hard to judge. For their part, the former POWs were more concerned with their own welfare interests after having been held captive and at the mercy of others for so long.

The courage of their convictions

Once back in South Africa and having had time to evaluate their experiences, a few of the former POWs displayed a new-found confidence when confronting military authority or in

¹¹⁵ Ogilvy, P. & N. Robinson. 1975. *In the bag*: 32.

¹¹⁶ Clive Luyt interview: 19 May 2010. Cape Town.

¹¹⁷ William Hindshaw interview: 19 March 2010, Johannesburg.

dealing with personal aspects of their lives. At the same time, their sense of self-interest and personal confidence was sometimes in conflict with the ideological awareness which they had acquired while in POW camps. Although interviews revealed that most POWs acquired and came to accept a fresh world view during their captivity, they nevertheless believed that by the time they returned to South Africa they had done their duty and that they now wanted to focus on their own needs, their main ambition being the achievement of normality and a sense of personal security. For most white POWs the post-war Government aid schemes for returning veterans made employment and economic security a viable possibility because the Directorate of Demobilisation provided sheltered labour opportunities, gratuities and even clothing grants.¹¹⁸ Without these prospects, white veterans may very possibly have been motivated to become more involved in the political and ideological struggle that followed the Second World War. In most cases therefore, self-interest triumphed, regardless of the fact that the returning POWs were aware – and disapproved of – the extreme nationalist direction into which the politics of the country was heading. Following Beukes' successful escape from Italy after the Armistice, he returned to South Africa only to be confronted by an aggressive officer at Roberts' Heights in Pretoria. Beukes addressed the officer in English as 'sir' as he could not see if the officer's rank was that of captain or sergeant-major.¹¹⁹ The officer lost his temper and demanded of Beukes, 'now what's your reason for getting out of the war', to which Beukes responded, 'who said I want to get out of the war, is there anything else you want to know, [are] there anymore oaths that you want me to sign?' Assured by his pre-war legal knowledge and clearly no longer seeing any need to show respect towards military authority, Beukes believed that he could deal with anything with which he might be confronted by an officer.¹²⁰ A few years following his release from the military, David Brokensha took a similarly confident step when he met his life partner in 1951. Acknowledging and making known publicly to others that one was homosexual was almost unheard of in the 1950s as at that time homosexuality was still viewed as a criminal offence.¹²¹ However, Brokensha 'fell in love with [his partner] and it wasn't easy then and I

¹¹⁸ Roos, N. 2009. 'The Springbok and the Skunk: War Veterans and the Politics of Whiteness in South Africa during the 1940s and 1950s.' *Journal of Southern African Studies* 35(3):651 – 652.

¹¹⁹ It is acceptable for English-speaking soldiers to address all senior officers as 'sir', in Afrikaans however it is required of the rank and file soldier to address the senior officer according to the offer's title, i.e. Captain, sergeant- major, etc.

¹²⁰ Matthys Beukes interview: 2 February 2011, Bloemfontein.

¹²¹ Sexual acts between men were decriminalised in 1967 in Britain. Smith, G., Bartlett, A. & A. King. 2004. 'Treatments of homosexuality in Britain since the 1950s – an oral history: the experience of patients.' *British Medical Journal*, BMJ, doi:10.1136/bmj.37984.442419.EE.

think having been a prisoner of war gave me the chance and the courage to be true to myself and I had a wonderful 50 years with him.’¹²²

The home front experience of war in South Africa was mild in comparison with that of Britain, with life in the Union able to continue in a more or less settled fashion, whereas the British experience of wartime was that of food shortages and bombing of their major cities.¹²³ Still, South Africa did undergo change during the war, not least with regard to its politics. Shifts in white politics towards the nationalist right were a particular source of concern for English and Anglo-Afrikaner veterans as aspects of Afrikaner nationalism seemed to have more in common with Nazi ideology and ran counter to the emerging sense of common society liberalism in post-war Europe. For POWs, the rightward trajectory of South Africa was, perhaps, even more profound a perception given their daily experience of the war. In their sense, both as soldiers and as POWs, they had been given insight into the attitudes of Italian and German citizens as well as into the mentalities of Italian and German soldiers. POWs were, therefore, in a position to form opinions based on varied viewpoints and based on each one’s distinctive personality and war-time experiences. As a personal formation, each one of them returned home with their unique opinion about South Africa’s role in the war, as well as on the preferred political direction the country should follow after the end of hostilities.

Some POWs returned to South Africa convinced that they had done the right thing to help rid the world of Fascism, while others returned with no apparent hostility towards Fascism, believing that the Nazis had been correct in fighting Communism. Yet others returned with a radical conviction that social democracy or even Communism or socialism was the way forward. The post-war POW point of view, especially the desire for conflict-free self-realisation contributes to the idea that the 1940s was a decade that was characterised by unique ideas on identity and nationalism, as was experienced in a broader sense among different groups in South Africa.¹²⁴ The majority of the South African electorate, however, still viewed ruling politics and its major questions regarding race and the capitalist market order from a conservative perspective, with most remaining in the sway of government and other associated political influences.

¹²² David Brokensha interview: 10 September 2010, Fish Hoek.

¹²³ Nasson, B. Forthcoming 2012. *South Africa at War 1939 – 1945*: 7 – 8.

¹²⁴ Dubow, S. & A. Jeeves. (eds) 2005. *South Africa’s 1940s Worlds of Possibilities*: 13.

Those nationalist Afrikaners who aimed at steering the country in a new direction following the end of the war were especially concerned about perceived ‘Communist’ tendencies among returning soldiers and kept a close eye on their activities. Nor were they alone. Already in May 1943 official concerns about the ideological direction of the Springbok Legion had been raised, especially about the ‘Communist-inspired organisation which is hoping to cash in on discontented elements in the UDF.’ According to an Information Officer, those in the UDF who were leaning towards Communism had ‘decided not to worry about placating the Government and have openly become Communist.’ Another officer stated that the Communists among the veterans were ‘organising a society for disbanded soldiers after the style of M.O.T.H. so if the present Government does not carry out its promises to the exservicemen (sic) S.A. will once again become a merry maze of politics and gangs.’ What would have been in mind was the example of a non-commissioned officer, so dissatisfied with the domestic political situation that he even went as far as to conclude:

our leaders here today shall be our leaders when things are normal again and not the ticks who have been living on the fat of the land at the expense of our blood. There is no such person in the army as English and Afrikaans, we’re all one, “South Africans”, in other words “Afrikaners” (sic) and we’ve no intention of selling our country to any other bastard, as a big section of parasites are trying to do just now, for the present we’ve a job on our hands so we cannot pay 100% attention to other things, but when its (sic) over its going to be 100%.¹²⁵

Conservative and more liberal ideas among returning soldiers and those who stayed at home clashed increasingly as the war ended and South Africa started to find its new political feet. By and large, it was English-speaking POWs who held more liberal views on the political future of the country, yet none of the available interviews or memoirs reveals any distinctive effort on the part of any former war prisoners to attempt to change the direction in which the country was evidently moving. Rather, there were more mundane concerns and stock ex-soldiering grievances. Predictably, many men felt aggrieved that some who could have volunteered had not done so, and had instead stayed behind in South Africa, making progress in their careers, completing their studies or getting married and starting families. All this was while the POWs were stuck in camps, unable even to contribute to the war effort for which they had volunteered, and even less able to live out their personal ambitions.

¹²⁵ DOD CE4/15. Report No. 2012. CD 033348. Fortnightly summary covering British and Allied forces and P/W’s in enemy hands (2.12.42 – 15.12.42). Received by Defence Headquarters, Pretoria on 15 May 1943.

The general population was largely unaware of detailed aspects of soldiering political turbulence as newspapers preferred to focus on the bare facts that the POWs were returning. For instance, on 30 April 1945, the *Star* reported simply that the arrival of several POWs at the Johannesburg station was a ‘quiet but happy welcome [and] there was no exuberance of emotion – no cheers and no tears.’¹²⁶ The low-key manner in which returning POWs were welcomed in the Union was in stark contrast to the way in which they were received at the temporary base in Brighton, where they were thanked for their contribution to the war effort by Lord Croft, Under-Secretary for War. The *Star*, reporting on the same issue, included the comments of Heaton Nicholls, High Commissioner for the Union, regarding Smuts’ contribution to the post-war peace process and that Smuts was trying ‘to lay the foundations of the edifice for which you have been fighting.’¹²⁷ It was only when these men arrived home later that they realised that this edifice was hanging on the precipice of political upheaval. Still, most POWs decided to focus on their personal dreams and ambitions instead of entering into another war, even if an ideological war to be fought at home. It seemed as if the prediction by Major D.L. Charters, of the Royal Army Medical Corps and himself a former POW, was slightly misplaced, at least in the South African context, when he stated in the *Sunday Times* in January 1945 that POWs:

have gained in tolerance, understanding, patience, forbearance and courage. They have acquired a bigger concept of comradeship and the community of life. They more fully recognise the need for the individual to pull his weight in the interests of the group. The average prisoner has demonstrated a high standard of adaptability, and will do so again when he returns home to the post-war world.

It is significant that the heading of this article was ‘Prisoners of War will not present peace problem’ and that the section quoted above was marked by hand-drawn lines by someone in the military.¹²⁸ While it is true that POWs became more resilient and resourceful during their captivity, their resilience, exposure to various ideologies and general aversion to unfairness was not such as to make their voices heard conspicuously for or against any political party. In a way, those interviewed returned from the war less inclined to fight battles for others. However, there were notable exceptions, as was the case with Sir De Villiers Graaff, who was captured at Tobruk in 1942, returned to South Africa to become a member of the

¹²⁶ *The Star*, 30 April 1945.

¹²⁷ *The Star*, 26 April 1945.

¹²⁸ *Sunday Times*, 7 January 1945.

Assembly in 1948 and later became leader of the United South African National Party. Already during his time as POW at the Modena officers' camp, Graaff participated in a group who regularly discussed ideas regarding post-war scenarios for South Africa. Graaff's contribution concerned mainly constitutional matters, although he also presented lectures on Friesian cattle. Already in 1943 the United Party had nominated Graaff for the Hottentots Holland district and in 1946 he was asked to stand for the Somerset West branch. Still, though he made a significant contribution towards opposition politics throughout his career, it cannot be said that his POW experiences motivated him to enter into this sphere. In fact, it is clear from his memoirs that had it not been for the United Party's persistence he would have preferred to spend more time on this farm and concentrate on expanding his legal firm after the war.¹²⁹

POWs' generally passive acceptance of their domestic post-war situation may be explained to some extent by several factors. Firstly, they were for the most part unwilling to talk openly about their experiences as a result of shame and guilt, both at being captured and at not contributing actively to the war. Secondly, many of them also realised that their families and friends were ignorant of the realities of the war, and would not understand the meaning of their experiences and attitudes. For Beukes, for instance, this realisation came when he found that most South Africans with whom he came into contact viewed Italians with suspicion, and in general harboured very adverse opinions of the Italian nation.¹³⁰ Those POWs who escaped after the Armistice, however, had depended on Italian peasants for their survival and had developed strong bonds of friendship. In some cases, they had even married Italian women, some choosing to bring their Italian wives to South Africa while others settled in Italy.¹³¹

Many POWs also felt helpless to prevent the ideological direction in which the country seemed to be moving, despite global changes in the opposite direction and this can be ascribed to the tendency among most returning POWs to avoid conflict in order to heal the emotional scars brought about by years of captivity, as was the case with former British

¹²⁹ Graaff, De Villiers. 1993. *Div Looks Back The Memoirs of Sir De Villiers Graaff*: 86 – 87 & 118 – 119.

¹³⁰ Matthys Beukes interview: 2 February 2011, Bloemfontein. '[Suid-Afrikaners] het niks goed gepraat van die Italianers nie, hulle het net gesê hy is 'n sleg bliksem en so, en ek was verbaas daaroor gewees want ons wat deur hulle behandel is, het nie so gevoel nie, om die waarheid te sê daar is baie van die ouens wat ontsnap het, Italianers het hulle weg gestee vir jare tot ons mense daar aangekom het, van die oues ook, so ek dink die mense wat so haatdraend is was die mense wat net by die huis gebly het en net die nuus gelees het.'

¹³¹ *The Star*, 12 February 1945. Marriages between escaped POWs and Swiss women also took place in those cases where escaped POWs reached Switzerland successfully. Schamberger, P. 2001. *Interlude in Switzerland: The story of the South African refugee-soldiers in the Alps during the Second World War*: 103 – 118.

POWs who sought help from the CRUs.¹³² In South Africa, however, former POWs had little option but to suppress their own narratives and to withhold their POW experience from the public sphere. Yet the most significant factor was probably the feeling among POWs that they simply wanted to make up for time lost in prison camps and this inspired most of them to focus simply on their own contentment, education and careers. All the while, those who did not agree with the post-war politics of the country sometimes vented their anger in private, as a handwritten note in Mugglestone's memoirs shows:

I wore these two tabs right through the war & survived POW life, so that you & your extremist comrades & rebels may enjoy the freedom you have to-day. May all the sane & right thinking South Africans pester you so much during the rest of your Nazi domineering rule, that you see nothing else but RED, tabs & all.¹³³

South Africa: Proudly POW?

The experience of capture and captivity was very similar for all nationalities who became POWs in the European theatre of war. All POWs, whether they were British, Australian, New Zealander, Canadian or American experienced much the same anxieties upon capture, the same physical hardships and hunger during the first few weeks of captivity, and the same ups and downs of morale as a result of boredom and uncertainty about the outcome of the war. All of them had many hours to consider their part in the conflict and how to deal with the fact that they were not able to contribute actively to prosecution of the Allied cause. The experience of shame and guilt at capture was similar for most POWs and most of them found similar ways in which to create a contrived sense of normality, mostly by developing exaggerated interests in pastimes that they would perhaps never have considered taking up before the war. The long hours of thinking combined with the manufactured reality of camp life, also compelled many POWs to reconsider their notions of all that was considered socially acceptable in communities during peace time during the 1930s and 1940s. When confronted with their captivity and the unusual circumstances and inter-personal relations that developed as a result, many POWs not only reassessed their opinions on war, but also feelings about gender, masculinity and sexual relations between men and women and homosexuality. At the onset of war, the recruitment campaigns were relatively successful as a

¹³² Allport, A. 2010. *Demobbed Coming Home After the Second World War*: 201 – 206.

¹³³ Handwritten note in the typed memoirs of Mugglestone, D.I.H. n.d. *Destination Unknown*.

result of aiming their messages at the European notion of South African masculinity.¹³⁴ When POWs returned after the war however, many were less attached to those ideas and had become more confident with regard to forming their personal positions – they were no longer as gullible as they had been five years earlier. The rejection by many POWs of the traditional British idea of masculinity, which was ‘disseminated in South Africa through British controlled commerce, industry and media’¹³⁵ during the 1930s could also explain why some POWs may also have felt more positively disposed to the idea of South Africa as a country independent of British control after 1945. However, although the Army and POW experience broadened many young men’s view regarding race and nationality, it did not necessarily mean that all of them simply accepted Afrikaner nationalism and the political direction in which the government moved following the 1948 election.

David Brokensha, for example, admitted that he had a ‘very provincial’ childhood and that he looked ‘down on everybody, Jews, Blacks, Afrikaners.’ This attitude, however, changed during his time in North Africa when he and an Afrikaner, Piet Pieterse, became firm friends. So, although Brokensha’s ideas regarding Afrikaners became more positive, he nevertheless viewed the Apartheid policies as damaging, not only to his career, but also to Afrikaners, as he stated that he ‘used to get impatient with people outside [the South Africa] blaming apartheid on Afrikaners and knowing how narrow and provincial the Natal English are and know how apartheid had existed.’¹³⁶ Similarly, Fred van Alphen Stahl stated that his regiment, the 2nd Anti-Aircraft, ‘didn’t fight for a political party we fought for South Africa.’ For Van Alphen Stahl the Nationalist government’s apartheid policies were unacceptable because it influenced the way in which the Defence Force functioned. In Van Alphen Stahl’s mind, politics and army were two separate entities.¹³⁷

When marching out of Lamsdorf camp at the end of the war, Rosmarin considered his experiences as a POW and came to the conclusion that it ‘had in a way been good to me, for here I had learnt to face the facts of life and increased my patience, tolerance and humility. I had decided that human beings would have to mend their ways if any sort of everlasting peace were possible.’¹³⁸ While others felt that the POW experience was an ‘awful waste of

¹³⁴ Roos, N. 2005. *Ordinary Springboks White Servicemen and Social Justice in South Africa, 1939 – 1961*: 38.

¹³⁵ Roos, N. 2005. *Ordinary Springboks White Servicemen and Social Justice in South Africa, 1939 – 1961*: 38.

¹³⁶ David Brokensha interview: 10 September 2010, Fish Hoek.

¹³⁷ Fred van Alphen Stahl interview: 25 May 2010, Cape Town.

¹³⁸ Rosmarin, I. 1999. *Inside Story*: 84.

time'¹³⁹, it is probable that some would have shared Rosmarin's sentiment, in hindsight, that the experience had some positive outcome.

Throughout the war, POWs from everywhere were forced to adapt to their situation and to accept certain facts and conditions that they were powerless to change while the war was still being fought. The idea of adaptation and acceptance was therefore central to maintaining a reasonable level of morale and a sense of normality. What perhaps sets the South African POWs apart, however, is that upon their return home, they had to adapt and accept yet again, as their country had changed dramatically during the 1940s. When the war ended in 1945, Fascism was defeated, but in South Africa the emergence of extreme nationalism among Afrikaners who were 'impervious to arguments relating to world politics' was starting to steer the country in a direction that many of its opponents would equate with Fascism.¹⁴⁰

In effect therefore, veterans and especially former POWs who had seen the effects of Fascism at first hand had a responsibility to continue with the anti-Fascist struggle in South Africa. Yet their experiences during the war, the deprivations and hardships they had suffered, caused most of them to adapt and to accommodate a situation yet again, whatever unease may have continued to be felt. Arguably, for those Afrikaans-speaking former POWs who had volunteered more materially, as a consequence of financial need, adapting to and accepting the post-1948 nationalist order was instinctively easier than for those who were English-speaking and more liberally inclined. Nonetheless, both white groups were marginalised by the new post-war government as their contribution to the war was smothered by a nationalist interest that had opposed participation. Both Afrikaans- and English-speaking former POWs ended up experiencing a lack of recognition and even discrimination from the authorities, yet despite this, former POWs were not motivated to make a stand against the apartheid policies of the National Party. Although POWs and veterans alike sometimes vented their anger towards the nationalists in private as Mugglestone revealed in his diary, on the surface they seemed to accept the conservative and authoritarian state of affairs which came to dominate South African society after 1948. In a sense, the acceptance of authority and obedience to the government may be compared to the way in which many Jews accepted the Nazi government in 1933. In this way, the joke that Dickinson likes to tell about the Jews' state of mind before

¹³⁹ E.B. (Dick) Dickinson interview: 4 December 2010, Mossel Bay.

¹⁴⁰ Marx, C. 2009. *Oxwagon Sentinel Radical Afrikaner Nationalism and the History of the Ossewabrandwag*: 295.

the war may also be applicable to white South Africans' acceptance of authority at the end of the 1940s:

There's a little joke I tell about Germans before the war, two Jewish guys decided that Hitler must be assassinated so they bought rifles and they found out that Hitler would be coming along at a certain place at a certain time, so they were there waiting for him and he didn't come and he didn't come and he didn't come and the one said to the other – I hope nothing happened to him.¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹ E.B. (Dick) Dickinson interview: 4 December 2010, Mossel Bay.

A Strange Afterword

When George Tewkesbury was 17 he volunteered and joined his mother's regiment, the Black Watch. He was captured on 4 February 1944 during the Allied landings at Anzio, Italy. George spent most of his captivity in Stalag 357, near Fallingbommel in Germany, and endured his POW experiences with an unrestrained sense of humour as he believed that it was during his confinement that he learnt to 'laugh at life, because if you don't laugh at life there's nothing.' The camp commandant was an infamous man who seemed to enjoy setting his Alsatian on POWs for even the smallest of transgressions. George also remembered how a POW was shot while trying to climb the camp fence. On the commandant's orders, the dead POW was left hanging on the fence as a lesson to the others.

On 16 April 1945, George and his fellow POWs woke up to find that all of the German guards had disappeared during the night. While most of the POWs ransacked the food stores, George decided to go to the officers' hut to see what he could 'nick'. He found the camp commandant's uniform and a flag, but decided against taking these as he believed that he may be regarded as a Nazi sympathiser. He did however take the medals and a small knife, which he found in the uniform pockets. Following the war, George met his wife while on a trip to South Africa and settled in Cape Town.

Some years later, George went to a pet shop in Newlands and found that the owner, Willy, had been a POW in the same camp. The two of them became firm friends and it was not long after that Willy phoned George with extraordinary news. The German camp commandant visited the pet shop that morning to buy food for his dog. Apparently the German had emigrated to South Africa and was living in Camps Bay. Willy recognised the commandant immediately and told him in no uncertain terms to leave the shop at once. It was then that George started to experience pangs of guilt and if he should return the medals to the commandant. Seeking advice from his church, George was told to return the medals. Not completely satisfied with the answer, George approached a military man about the situation, and was told that the medals were 'captured property' and rightfully belonged to George.

Secondly, he was told that 'the war is over and thirdly [that it] is nobody's bloody business.'
George kept the medals.¹⁴²

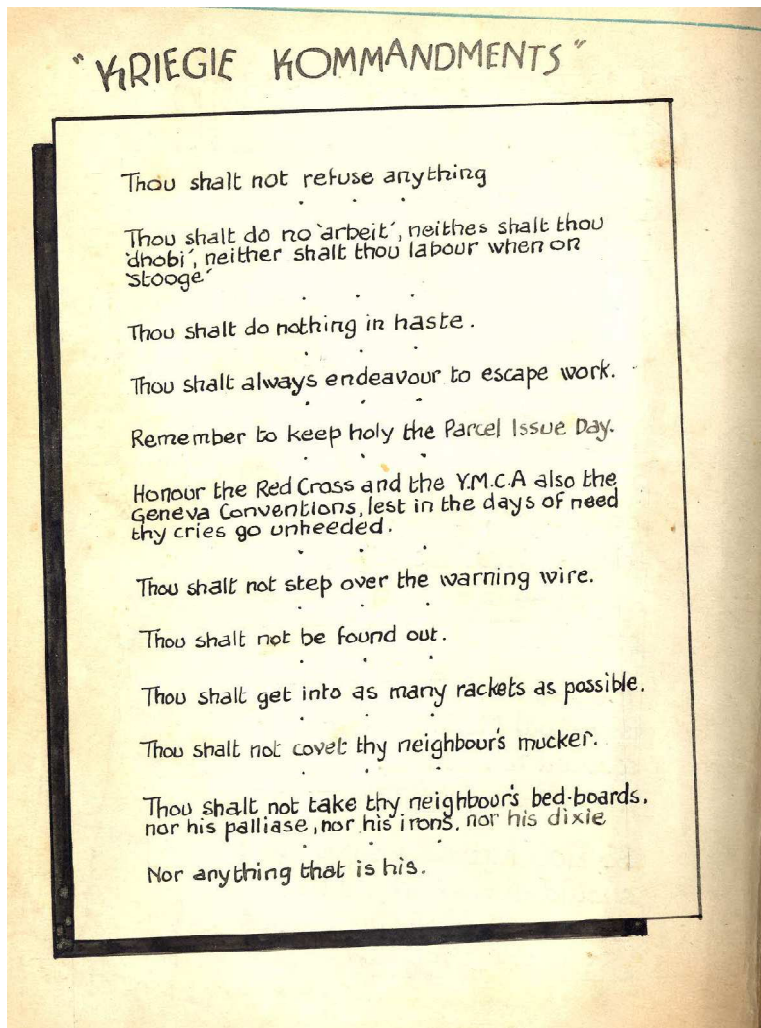


Figure 10: A page from George's War-time Log

¹⁴² George Tewkesbury interview: 5 March 2010 and 28 May 2010, Cape Town.

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AG (POW): Adjutant-General; prisoner-of-war collection

CGS: Head of the General Staff

DC: Secretary of Defence

Div Docs: Divisional Documents

Narep: Narratives and Reports

UWH: Union War Histories

National archives (NASA), Pretoria

ARB: Department of Labour (1917 – 1967)

BLO: Ambassador, London (1910 – 1968)

BNS: Secretary of Home Affairs (1899 – 1973)

BTS: Secretary of Foreign Affairs (1919 – 1944)

BVE: Custodian of Enemy Property (1822 – 1975) & (1915 – 1930)

DGD: Director General of demobilisation (1940 – 1951)

GG: Governor-General (1905 – 1974)

JUS: Secretary of Justice (1899 – 1966)

KOG: Controller and Auditor-General (1910 – 1968)

PWD: Secretary of Public Works (1895 – 1966)

SAP: South African Police (1901 – 1975)

TES: Secretary of the Treasury (1904 – 1974)

UOD: Secretary of Union Education (1911 – 1968)

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