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“A damned dangerous act”: New Zealand prisoners of war on the run in  
Europe during the Second World War

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## **Abstract**

During the Second World War thousands of New Zealand servicemen found themselves behind barbed wire as prisoners of war. The vast majority of them were taken captive in failed campaigns in Greece, Crete and North Africa. This thesis will analyse the journey taken by those who dared to escape in the European theatre of war. It will begin by analysing the impact that the unsuccessful campaigns in the Mediterranean and North Africa had on motivating servicemen to escape. From there it will begin to analyse the many different ways in which men attempted escape; starting with those who slipped away in the heat of battle, to those who jumped from moving trains en route to prison camps, to those who planned elaborate get-aways under the noses of prison guards in Italy and Germany. The final section of this thesis will examine what it was like for escaped prisoners on the run in enemy occupied territory, including those who could not get back to their own lines and ended up fighting with partisan groups in Greece, Yugoslavia and Italy.

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## Introduction

During the Second World War thousands of New Zealanders were taken captive as prisoners of war in Europe, North Africa and the Pacific. Of the 100,000 New Zealanders who served during the war, just under 10,000 were held in prisoner of war camps between 1939 and 1945. The majority of these were soldiers serving in Europe and North Africa.<sup>1</sup> In fact, ninety-four per cent of New Zealand's prisoners of war were captured before the end of 1942 in four major battles located in Libya, Greece and Crete.<sup>2</sup> Capture though, did not mean the end of the war. For many of these men it was the beginning of an adventure that would see them not only devising ingenious escape plans, but also surviving in a foreign land not knowing who was friend or foe. Despite facing numerous obstacles these men continued to persevere, and although a good number of them made it back to Allied Forces, many were recaptured and put back into prisoner of war camps. This did not diminish their resolve for freedom as plenty attempted multiple escapes. According to the *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War* there were 718 successful escapes made during the war. 236 were from German camps, 480 from Italian and only 2 from the Japanese camps.<sup>3</sup> Although there were many unsuccessful escape attempts these still proved invaluable to the war effort as they continued to be a thorn in the side of the Axis resources. Every escape attempt harassed the enemy and forced them to

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Wright, *Escape! Kiwi Pows on the Run in World War Two* (Auckland: Random House, 2006), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> David McGill, *P.O.W. The Untold Stories of New Zealanders as Prisoners of War* (Lower Hutt: Mills Publications, 1987), p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> D. O. W. Hall, "Escapes," in *Episodes and Studies Volume 2. The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War* (Wellington: Historical Publications Branch, 1954), p. 3.

increase manpower in prison camps with guards, special police and administration.<sup>4</sup>

The majority of literature published on New Zealand prisoners of war during the Second World War are autobiographies, biographies or transcribed oral histories. This research will build upon the limited published material on New Zealanders in European prisoner of war camps by analysing the capture, escape and evasion of these men. The focus questions for this research are: What impact did the defeat in Libya, Greece and Crete have on New Zealand forces; what methods of escape did prisoners use in order to gain their freedom; what obstacles did escapists face once free of prison camps; and what happened to escapists who could not make it back to Allied forces? Prisoner's motivation for escaping is limited in the Official Histories and will be an area of focus throughout this thesis in order to fill in the gap in the historiography. As the majority of sources are biographies and oral histories, motivation for escaping will come from these records.

In order to answer these focus questions a range of sources will be used. They will include published material, official histories, war diaries, intelligence files and other government records, archives from the Red Cross, oral histories and personal accounts from survivors and their families. Sources below have been grouped together based on function.

*The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War: Prisoners of War* by W. Wynne Mason<sup>5</sup> offers a wealth of factual information on this topic. This volume covers everything from the beginning of the war in Europe to the final liberation of prisoners of war in the Pacific. Every chapter is

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> W. Wynne Mason, *Prisoners of War*, The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War (Wellington: Historical Publications Branch, 1954).

dedicated to a specific time period in the war and examines subjects such as the protection of prisoners, relief work, and the evacuation of prisoners at the end of the war. Included in this volume are maps detailing the main transport and escape routes and images of prison camps and the prisoners themselves. Looking at the secondary sources available *The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War: Prisoners of War* is the only New Zealand one that discusses prisoners of war holistically. The others mainly focus on individual and personal accounts. In saying that, the information on escaped prisoners in Greece, Italy and Switzerland is minimal with only half a dozen pages on each. Despite this, it does provide a solid foundation on which to build this research. Another highly useful section inside the Official Histories is located within *Episodes and Studies Volume 1* and *Volume 2*. D. O. W. Hall has written a series of chapters dedicated to the experiences of prisoners of war in Germany and Italy, as well as a chapter dedicated purely to escapes.<sup>6</sup>

There are many published books on first hand accounts of escapes. These are most often personal narratives and do not compare experiences in different camps or escapes. Some examples are, *North to the Apricots. The Escape Stories of Sergeant Bruce Crowley DCM, New Zealand Prisoner of War in Greece and Germany 1941-1943* [Bruce Crowley and Julia Millen]<sup>7</sup>;

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<sup>6</sup> D. O. W. Hall, "Prisoners of Germany," in *Episodes and Studies Volume 1. The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War* (Wellington: Historical Publications Branch, 1949); "Prisoners of Italy," in *Episodes and Studies Volume 1. The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War* (Wellington: Historical Publications Branch, 1949); "Escapes."

<sup>7</sup> Julia Millen, *North to the Apricots: The Escape Stories of Sergeant Bruce Crowley D.C.M. New Zealand Prisoner of War Greece and Germany 1941-1943* (Wellington: Bocoman Ltd, 2012).

*Sometime Free* [Fred Stuckey]<sup>8</sup>; *Mark of the Lion: The Story of Captain Charles Upham, V.C. and Bar* [Kenneth Sandford]<sup>9</sup>; *Captive Kiwi* [R. H. Thomson]<sup>10</sup>; and *Committed to Escape: A New Zealand Soldier's Story* [D. J. Riddiford]<sup>11</sup>

These books are invaluable to this study as they offer an insight into the motivation prisoners had in wanting to escape, as well as an abundance of information on escaping prison camps and then evading the enemy. They go into detail on the obstacles faced in breaking free and the subsequent journey back to Allied forces, including partisan activity.

There are also a number of Australian accounts, which include information on New Zealanders who were in the camps with them. For example *War Behind the Wire. Australian Prisoners of War* [editor Michael Caulfield]<sup>12</sup>. This book is a collection of interviews by men who were in different prison camps across Europe and covers topics such as camp conditions and escape attempts. *On the Run: Anzac Escape and Evasion in Enemy-Occupied Crete* [Sean Damar and Ian Frazer]<sup>13</sup> looks at Australian and New Zealand soldiers who escaped from their camps on Crete and then had to survive and evade enemy troops while trapped on the island. A comprehensive and very useful publication on Australian prisoners is *POW Australian Prisoners of War in Hitler's Reich* [Peter Monteath].<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Fred Stuckey, *Sometimes Free. My Escapes from German P.O.W. Camps* (Ashhurst: Published by the author, 1977).

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth Sandford, *Mark of the Lion. The Story of Charles Upham, V.C. And Bar* (London: Hutchinson of London, 1962).

<sup>10</sup> R. H. Thompson, *Captive Kiwi* (Auckland: Whitcombe & Tombs Ltd, 1965).

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Riddiford, *Committed to Escape* (Wairarapa: Ruamahanga Press Ltd, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Michael (ed) Caulfield, *War Behind the Wire. Australian Prisoner of War* (Sydney: Hachette Australia, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Sean Damer and Ian Frazer, *On the Run: Anzac Escape and Evasion in Enemy-Occupied Crete* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> Peter Monteath, *P.O.W. Australian Prisoners of War in Hitler's Reich* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan Australia, 2011).

There are a number of published books that contain transcribed oral histories of New Zealanders in war camps, such as: Megan Hutching (ed), *Inside Stories: New Zealand Prisoners of War Remember*<sup>15</sup>; David McGill (ed), *P.O.W. The Untold Stories of New Zealander's as Prisoners of War*<sup>16</sup>; and Matthew Wright (ed.), *Escape! Kiwi POWs on the Run in World War II*.<sup>17</sup> Finally, there are a number of general books on prisoners of war. These offer a wide coverage of the topic and provide a good base on which to begin a study on prisoners of war. For example, *The Colditz Myth: British and Commonwealth Prisoners of War in Nazi Germany* [S. P. Mackenzie]<sup>18</sup>, *Prisoners of War and the German High Command: The British and American Experience* [Vasilis Vourkoutiotis]<sup>19</sup>, and *Anzacs at the Frontiers 1941-45, Northern Italy* [Ken Fenton].<sup>20</sup> There are a variety of published works on New Zealanders who fought with the partisans in Italy and France, for example *The Last of the Human Freedoms* [Keren Chiaroni]<sup>21</sup> and *Fighting With the Enemy: New Zealand POWs and the Italian Resistance* [Susan Jacobs].<sup>22</sup>

The National Library of New Zealand hold substantial archives relating to this topic. These include personal accounts from Allan Yeoman,

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<sup>15</sup> Megan Hutching, *Inside Stories: New Zealand Prisoners of War Remember* (Auckland: Harper Collins, 2002).

<sup>16</sup> McGill, *P.O.W. The Untold Stories of New Zealanders as Prisoners of War*.

<sup>17</sup> Wright, *Escape! Kiwi Pows on the Run in World War Two*.

<sup>18</sup> S. P. Mackenzie, *The Colditz Myth: British and Commonwealth Prisoners of War in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford Univeristy Press, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> Vasilis Vourkoutiotis, *Prisoner of War and the German High Command* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

<sup>20</sup> Ken Fenton, *Anzacs at the Frontiers 1941-45: Northern Italy*, vol. One (Nelson: The Copy Press, 2008).

<sup>21</sup> Keren Chiaroni, *The Last of the Human Freedoms* (Auckland: Harper Collins Publishers, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> Susan Jacobs, *Fighting with the Enemy. New Zealand P.O.W's and the Italian Resistance* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 2003).

Noel Masters<sup>23</sup>, George Craigie, James Hargest, Charles Watkin, Raymond Kennedy, Reginald Miles, and Daniel Riddiford, all of who were held in German and Italian prisoner of war camps. These files contain documents such as letters, personal narratives and diaries. There are also files containing information on war crimes committed, such as the shooting of Jack Clar and George Batt by the Germans<sup>24</sup>, records from the New Zealand ex Prisoner of War Association<sup>25</sup>, and records of escapes in Crete.<sup>26</sup> These personal accounts will paint a picture of what conditions were like for New Zealanders in prisoner of war camps, as well as information on escape attempts.

Archives New Zealand offers a variety of records on prisoners of war. The first group relate to casualties. These include correspondence from prisoners and civilians in German and Italian camps<sup>27</sup>, prisoners who escaped<sup>28</sup>, accounts of escaped prisoners being betrayed to the enemy<sup>29</sup> and records of Red Cross supplies delivered to prisoner of war camps.<sup>30</sup> The second group of records are war diaries. These give a very personal

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<sup>23</sup> Yeoman family: Papers relating to Allan Yeoman. MS-Papers-10103-01; Masters, Noel John, 1913-1987: Prisoner of War Diary. MS-Papers-7150; Craigie, George M., 1916-: How I got away from Greece. MS-Papers-4165; James Hargest- Research notes and correspondence. MS-Papers-7811-179; Watkins, Charles James, fl 2006: research papers and papers relating to prisoner of war experiences. MS-Papers-8627-03; Kennedy, Raymond George, 1914-: World War Two Stories. MS-Papers-7439-04; Reginald Miles – Research notes and correspondence. MS-Papers-7811-178; Riddiford family: Family correspondence and other papers. MS-Papers-5714-038.

<sup>24</sup> Papers relating to the shooting of George Batt and Jack Clark. fMS-Papers-8599-4B.

<sup>25</sup> New Zealand Ex-Prisoners-of-War Association. MS-Papers-8097.

<sup>26</sup> Escapees in Crete. C V Christie, H L Stove. MS-Papers-10829.

<sup>27</sup> Casualties – Prisoners of War- Censorship Reports – Extracts from mail from POW and Civilian Internees in German and Japanese Hands. AD1 1402.

<sup>28</sup> Casualties – POWs escaped. AD1 1400. (339/1/77).

<sup>29</sup> Casualties – War crimes – Betraying escaped POWs to enemy. AD1 1406 (339/2/35).

<sup>30</sup> Casualties – POWs Red Cross supplies. AD1 1400. (339/1/71).

perspective on events in the camps, including living conditions and escape stories. For example, extracts from the diary of Private J. Hutton who escaped to Allied Forces through Yugoslavia<sup>31</sup>, a handwritten account by R. H. Ryman and G. M. McLeod on their escape<sup>32</sup>, and the diary of G. C. Weston detailing his time in a German prison camp.<sup>33</sup> There are also important records pertaining to the Red Cross and their role in aiding prisoners, such as documents on Red Cross parcels delivered to prisoners.<sup>34</sup> All of these give a unique and personal insight into life as a prisoner of war.

The first chapter of this thesis will explore the four major battles in Greece, Crete and the Western Desert that resulted in over ninety per cent of New Zealand's prisoners of war being caught. It will discuss their attitudes towards capture and why many of them felt resentment towards commanding officers surrendering rather than fighting to the death; which then helps explain why so many of them became fixated on escaping. Due to the sheer number of prisoners coming from the army, the following chapters will focus largely on their experiences, touching briefly on those from the navy and air force. The second chapter will centre on what conditions were like for prisoners of war being transported to European camps, as well as the dangerous escape attempts made along the way. It will analyse how prisoners began attempting escape right from the moment of capture. This

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<sup>31</sup> Extracts from diaries of 15526 Private J. Hutton (20<sup>th</sup> Battalion, NZ Regiment), while prisoner of war in North Africa and Italy and his escape to the Allied Forces through Yugoslavia, 2 December 1941-15 January 1944. WAIIA2871 1.

<sup>32</sup> Hand written joint account of experiences and escapes while prisoners of war (Original) – 65813 R. H. Ryman and 13825 Gordon M. McLeod. WAIIW2871 1.

<sup>33</sup> Diary of 11026 Major G. C. Weston account of last days as Prisoner of War in Germany (Red Cross). WAIIW2871 1.

<sup>34</sup> Allied Prisoners of War and Civilians in Enemy Territory – General – Conference of British, Canadian and American Red Cross representatives relative to prisoners of war and relief supplies to the Far East. EA1 630 (88/1/16).

will lead into chapter three which will focus on how captives escaped from prison camps. It will investigate the different ways in which prisoners escaped, including the impact of the Italian Armistice which saw men fleeing Italian camps. Chapter four will then examine where escapees went once free. It will analyse the role played by local villagers in aiding the escapee and the difference between being on the run in Greece, Italy and Germany. The role played by neutral countries in harbouring escaped prisoners such as Switzerland will be discussed, as well as what happened to escaped soldiers who were recaptured and sent back to prison camps. Chapter five will then examine the experiences of escapees who could not return to friendly lines and instead joined the partisan resistance behind enemy lines in France, Italy, Greece and Crete.

## Chapter One: “For you the war is over.”

*“To be captured seems like passing through the gates of death.”<sup>35</sup>  
- Daniel Riddiford*

It is a staggering statistic that 94 per cent of New Zealanders who became prisoners of war were captured before the end of 1942. There were four disastrous campaigns that led to almost 8500 men being detained in Axis prisoner of war camps. These battles occurred in Greece, Crete, Libya and Egypt from April 1941 through to July 1942. It is important to note how these men felt about going ‘into the bag’ as a result of these tragic encounters between New Zealand and Axis forces. In the *Prisoners of War Official History*, W. Wynne Mason notes that “a military withdrawal is difficult to accomplish without numbers of troops being wounded or cut off”.<sup>36</sup> He observes that, considering the vast and difficult terrain that had to be covered in retreating, it was surprising that the numbers of men left behind in Greece and Crete was not higher.<sup>37</sup> In the Greek and Crete campaigns the New Zealanders had to face modern combat techniques such as glider-borne troops and paratroopers. This added to the mental strain of fighting a losing battle.<sup>38</sup> The following chapter will examine these four unsuccessful campaigns, as well as how the men responded to this situation. It is interesting to note how they became increasingly bitter and angry about these failed campaigns as

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<sup>35</sup> Riddiford, *Committed to Escape*, p. 13.

<sup>36</sup> Mason, *Prisoners of War*, p. 53.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Wood, Peter William, “A Battle to Win: An analysis of Combat Effectiveness through the Second World War experience of the 21<sup>st</sup> (Auckland) Battalion’, Dphil, Massey University, 2012, p. 44.

time went on, and through this began to discern the faults in their British commanders leadership.

## **Greece**

In early 1941, New Zealand was given the opportunity to be part of a British Commonwealth force to aid Greece against a German attack from the north. This was to be New Zealand's first major fighting role in the war.<sup>39</sup> Code-named *Lustre*, New Zealand troops were to dig in along the Metaxas Line that followed the Aliakmon River. Both General Freyberg and Prime Minister Peter Fraser had doubts about *Lustre*. They were both concerned over whether the combined British forces were adequately prepared for such a large-scale attack since Germany had demonstrated its ability to deploy troops across the continent. However, despite these concerns, Fraser's cabinet agreed to join the Greek campaign.<sup>40</sup>

After a year in the deserts of Egypt and Palestine, the New Zealand troops arrived to a nice change of scenery in Greece. They set up supply dumps at Athen's racecourse and another 150 miles away at Larisa.<sup>41</sup> Freyberg wanted to keep a mobile force in the forward area. He hoped to hold the mouth of the Olympus mountain pass with one brigade and have the rest of the force in reserve on the other side of Mount Olympus.<sup>42</sup> Inside two months those that landed in Greece would have to be evacuated to Crete. The first New Zealand soldiers landed in Piraeus Harbour on 7 March and within

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<sup>39</sup> Mason, *Prisoners of War*, p. 53.

<sup>40</sup> Matthew Wright, *Freyberg's War: The Man, the Legend and Reality* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 43.

<sup>41</sup> Peter Thompson, *Anzac Fury: The Bloody Battle of Crete 1941* (Sydney: William Heinemann, 2010), p. 131.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 133-4.

three weeks would engage in 'a rapid succession of defensive and rearguard actions, delaying the enemy advance and covering its own withdrawal southward.'<sup>43</sup> On 6 April 1941 the Germans declared war on Greece. That night ten German aircraft raided Piraeus Harbour and laid mines. The *SS Clan Fraser*, carrying 350 tons of TNT, hit a mine and caught on fire. The next morning it exploded, sinking eleven other ships and damaging the harbour extensively.<sup>44</sup> A Company of 21 Battalion was stationed in Piraeus at the time of the attack. When the *SS Clan Fraser* exploded the men of A Company were fortunately concealed in an air-raid shelter resulting in only two minor casualties being reported. The *Official History* of the Greek Campaign records that this was "perhaps the Divisions first [casualties] in Greece".<sup>45</sup>

The following day General Bernard Freyberg was told that the Germans had reached Salonika. He ordered the demolition of the Aliakmon Bridge by the Divisional Cavalry, and for 6 Brigade to destroy the bridges on their front. The Germans arrived on the Aliakmon River three days later. By 14 April, Freyberg was given a plan to pull back to Thermopylae where it was hoped they could hold off the Germans until a Greek army could be organised. Unfortunately this did not happen and after four days the New Zealanders were in full retreat.<sup>46</sup> The German's modern armour and air command overwhelmed the joint British forces who hurriedly organised an evacuation. The Greek Prime Minister was in such despair over the course of

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<sup>43</sup> Mason, W. W., *Prisoners of War*, p. 53.

<sup>44</sup> Jeffrey Plowman, *Images of War: War in the Balkans. The Battle for Greece and Crete 1940-1* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2013), pp. 45-6.

<sup>45</sup> W. G. McClymont, *To Greece*, The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-1945 (Wellington: Historical Publications Branch, 1959), pp. 161-2.

<sup>46</sup> Wright, *Freyberg's War: The Man, the Legend and Reality*, p. 47.

events that he shot himself and nine days later German troops entered Athens resulting in mass evacuations of British forces.<sup>47</sup>

Private William Flint was one of the unlucky men who were left behind following the evacuation from Greece. The New Zealand forces had been told to leave the town of Kalamata as it was scheduled to be destroyed. It was not long before the New Zealanders were given the order to surrender. The commanding officer had been given the option of surrendering or being annihilated. As of 0730 that morning they were prisoners of war. Flint recalls that 'in no time flat, the German tanks came in and went around us in a circle, and they put swastika flags out on top of them'.<sup>48</sup> He recalls that at the moment of capture 'it felt bloody awful. That's mild. It's the most heart-sinking sensation in the world...The feeling – it was almost indescribable. It wasn't the fact of being defeated or being a prisoner so much as, why me?'<sup>49</sup> Staff Sergeant Fred Cotterill was captured on the way to Kalamata. He writes that 'we didn't know whether we were going to be lined up against the wall or not. We threw down our arms and they searched us. We were all scared a bit'.<sup>50</sup> A handful of men who took to the hills in an attempt to evade capture were able to make their way down to the waters edge at a later time and commandeer a sailing vessel. Using this vessel they were able to make a dangerous, and at times life threatening, voyage to Crete and join up with British forces.<sup>51</sup> George M. Craigie was one of these men. He recalled after

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<sup>47</sup> Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich at War* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2009), pp. 154-5.

<sup>48</sup> Hutching, *Inside Stories: New Zealand Prisoners of War Remember*, pp. 67-8.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>50</sup> McGill, *P.O.W. The Untold Stories of New Zealanders as Prisoners of War*, p. 18.

<sup>51</sup> MS-Papers-4165. Craigie, George M, 1916-: How I got away from Greece.

that the war that “I am not particularly keen on anything similar again. We can truly thank Providence for our safety”.<sup>52</sup>

One of the more famous stories to come out of the failed Greek campaign was of Jack Hinton, who won the Victoria Cross fighting back against the Germans after he had been left behind at Kalamata. Before the Germans arrived at Kalamata, Hinton got into an argument with Brigadier Parrington who had just ordered the men to surrender. Parrington told Hinton that he would have him court martialled for speaking to him in that manner. Hinton replied with “I’ll have you court martialled for talking surrender”.<sup>53</sup> This is a great example of how the men felt about having to surrender. They would rather fight, to the death if necessary, as can be seen in Hinton’s actions that resulted in him winning the Victoria Cross. The action citation for his V.C. states that he:

ran to within several yards of the nearest gun; ... he hurled two grenades, which completely wiped out the crew. He then came on with the bayonet followed by a crowd of New Zealanders. German troops abandoned the first 6" gun and retreated into two houses. Serjeant Hinton smashed the window and then the door of the first house and dealt with the garrison with the bayonet. He repeated the performance in the second house and as a result, until overwhelming German forces arrived, the New Zealanders held the guns. Serjeant Hinton then fell with a bullet wound through the lower abdomen and was taken prisoner.<sup>54</sup>

British General Archibald Wavell admitted after the campaign that “the whole expedition was something in the nature of a gamble”.<sup>55</sup> It has been described as “flawed in its conception, flawed in its execution, and is still flawed in the

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Gabrielle McDonald, *Jack Hinton V.C. A Man Amongst Men* (Auckland: David Ling Publishing Ltd, 1997), p. 81.

<sup>54</sup> <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/page/jack-hinton-wins-victoria-cross> -21 March 2015

<sup>55</sup> McClymont, *To Greece*, p. 478.

New Zealand histories".<sup>56</sup> But was this flawed gamble worth the losses inflicted? W. G. McClymont weighs up the pros and cons of the failed Greek Campaign in the Official History, summarising that, although the evacuation of Greece was costly, it was indeed worth the risk. He argues that "it helped to create that unstable Balkan front to which Hitler was forever sending men and equipment".<sup>57</sup> The cost to New Zealand forces in securing this front was high, with 1856 men taken captive on Greece. This was the third highest number of New Zealanders to become prisoners in one battle.<sup>58</sup> The rest fled to Crete.



**Image 1.1 2<sup>nd</sup> NZEF troops on retreat in Greece**

2<sup>nd</sup> NZEF troops on retreat in Greece. Taken by an unidentified photographer in 1941. Ref DA-01603-F (Reproduced with permission from the Alexander Turnbull Library).<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ormond, W. L., "Aspects of the Greek Campaign, April 1941", MA Defence Studies, Massey University, 2009.

<sup>57</sup> McClymont, *To Greece*, p. 485.

<sup>58</sup> Mason, *Prisoners of War*, p. 41 (table).

<sup>59</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> NZEF troops on retreat in Greece. New Zealand. Department of Internal Affairs. War History Branch :Photographs relating to World War 1914-1918, World

## Crete

On 25 April 1941, Hitler signed off General Kurt Student's directive to take the island of Crete. Codenamed *Operation Mercury*, Directive 28 saw Crete as strategically important for German advancement. Student believed that if Germany held the three main airfields on Crete then Britain would not be able to use it as a launching pad for attacks against German oil supplies at Ploesti, Romania.<sup>60</sup> The fight for Crete took part in four main battles; Suda, Maleme, Galatas and Canae. There were several factors that determined how the battles would pan out on Crete; lack of equipment, communication, geographical location and supplies such as food and water.<sup>61</sup>

At the time German reports suggested that there were about 5000 British soldiers on the island. Unfortunately for them, this intelligence was very inaccurate. Unbeknownst to the Germans, 42 460 Allied troops were now stationed on Crete after being evacuated from Greece-7750 of them New Zealanders.<sup>62</sup> For these Allied forces, Crete was meant to be an assembly point before heading back to Egypt. However, by May it was clear they would be part of a major battle in defending the island for its strategic value.<sup>63</sup>

The German attack began at dawn on 20 May, with an initial assault by fighter-bomber planes followed by a wave of dive-bombers. After this, the

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War 1939-1945, occupation of Japan, Korean War, and Malayan Emergency. Ref: DA-01603-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.

<http://natlib.govt.nz/records/22848102>

<sup>60</sup> Tzobanakis, S., *Creforce: The Anzacs and the Battle of Crete*, (Fitzroy: Black Dog Books, 2010). p. 12.

<sup>61</sup> Palenski, R., *Men of Valour: New Zealand and the Battle for Crete*, (Auckland: Hodder Moa, 2013). p. 128.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>63</sup> King, M., *The Penguin History of New Zealand*, (Auckland: Penguin Books, 2003). pp. 396-7.

paratroopers were deployed by a 'seemingly endless number' of transport planes.<sup>64</sup> Private Reginald Rolfe recalls that:

The Germans broke through at Galatos and our composite battalion was ordered back to Suda Bay. The road was packed with retreating soldiers. All of us were exhausted and many were wounded...Twenty or thirty bombers screaming horrendously appeared suddenly over us and dropped their bombs...The noise was unbearable. A bomb landed about three metres from us. "Go for your life! It's delayed action!" I yelled. We took off. I was a few yards down the hill when the bomb exploded, knocking me out. I came to, nearly buried in dirt.<sup>65</sup>

Private Jim Thompson was part of 23 Battalion when the German bombardment began. He recalls "on the 20<sup>th</sup>, when the paratroopers arrived, I can always remember it, we were all lined up in the cookhouse, getting our breakfasts, and things started. They started to strafe trees, bomb, and the screamers were on the Stukas."<sup>66</sup>

The Germans suffered huge losses as Allied soldiers began to pick off the parachutists as they floated down. Despite this they were still able to get enough troops onto Crete and direct attacks on the three northern airfields, as well as Suda Bay.<sup>67</sup> Thompson and the men of 23 Battalion made their way to a nearby hill covered with lots of olive trees. From there they were able to take aim, describing the shooting of the German parachutists as "a wee bit different to rabbit shooting."<sup>68</sup>

By 27 May, the Germans had broken through Allied forces. The men were ordered to retreat towards Sfakia. For those on the run from the

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<sup>64</sup> Rolfe, J., *Brothers at War: A Kiwi Family's Story*, (Auckland: Penguin Books, 1995). p. 73.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>66</sup> Hutching, M., *A Unique Sort of Battle. New Zealanders Remember Crete*, (Auckland: Harper Collins, 2001). p. 98.

<sup>67</sup> King, M., *The Penguin History of New Zealand*, (Auckland: Penguin Books, 2003). pp. 396-7.

<sup>68</sup> Hutching, M., *A Unique Sort of Battle. New Zealanders Remember Crete*, (Auckland: Harper Collins, 2001). p. 98-9.

Germans meant spending their days hiding, watching German planes searching for them, and then moving towards the embarkation point at night.<sup>69</sup> The Germans began dropping leaflets on the island encouraging those in hiding to surrender (see image 1.2 on following pages). By this stage New Zealand Prime Minister Peter Fraser feared the worst for the men on Crete. He stated in a telegraph that "I feel the situation in Crete has become impossible...it must be accepted that the... [evacuation] will be a hazardous one and that New Zealand losses are to be expected".<sup>70</sup> Too many ships were being destroyed around Crete and the British commanders could not spare any more for the evacuation. After 31, May no more ships would be sent to evacuate New Zealand troops. Despite Fraser's intervention in trying to send more ships to pick up stranded New Zealanders on Crete, on 30 May he signed a message informing General Freyberg that the men left behind were to surrender.<sup>71</sup>

After fleeing the German advancement Private Reginald Rolfe arrived at Sfakia before the rest of his company. The ships were ready to evacuate troops but Rolfe decided to stay and wait for his comrades. Unfortunately for Rolfe and his company, the ship that had left for Egypt not long before was the last to evacuate troops. The next day he learned that the colonel had ordered 'to have his men stack rifles and helmets in a pyramid "as the British forces are surrendering" ...It was a terrible feeling watching these German alpinists of the Heidelberg Regiment...as they lined us up.'<sup>72</sup> Peter Winter was also amongst those taken captive on Crete. In his book *Free Lodgings* he

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<sup>69</sup> Rolfe., pp. 76-78.

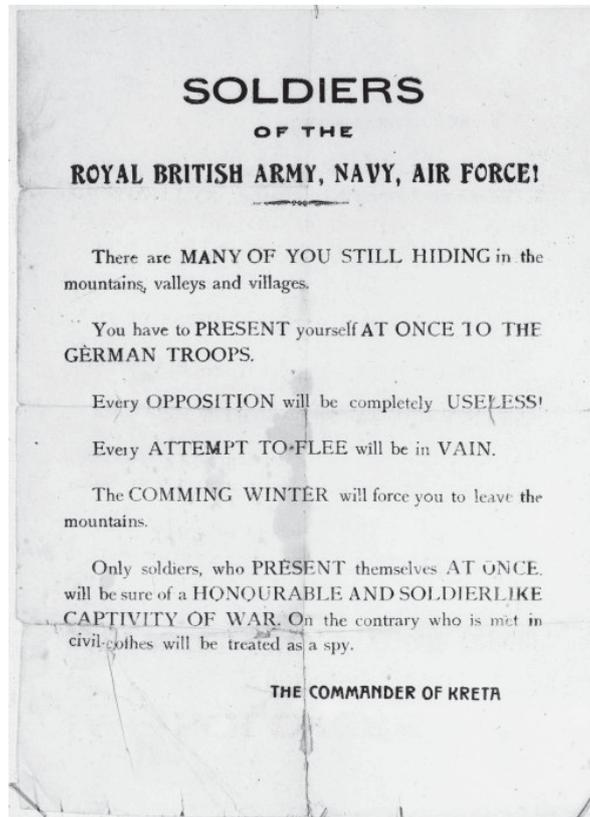
<sup>70</sup> Wright, M., *Battle for Crete. New Zealander's Near-Run Affair, 1941*, (Auckland: Reed Publishing Ltd, 2003), p. 100.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., pp. 100-101.

<sup>72</sup> Rolfe., pp. 76-78.

recounts on the moment he and his men were herded out of Sfakia: 'Personally I felt ashamed and degraded. We were a bedraggled flock of shocked, exhausted and hungry men.'<sup>73</sup> (See Appendix A – poem written on the frustrations of the failed Greek campaign). In his autobiography, Richard Heywood Thomson, recalls how he felt as the Germans took them captive:

I have never felt so terribly as I did at that moment. In fact, I don't think that I ever really felt at all since then. Any troubles I had had in the past were mere ripples compared with this tidal wave. I was disgusted; I was deeply disappointed; I felt frustrated and shamed – above all, ashamed...The Jerries moved quietly among us, with the oft repeated, annoying, precise English phrase, 'For you the war is over'.<sup>74</sup>



**Image 1.2 German poster urging British troops on Crete to surrender**

Photograph of poster taken by C. E. Chetwin 1941. Ref DA-10726. (Reproduced with permission from the Alexander Turnbull Library).<sup>75</sup>

<sup>73</sup> Winter, P., *Free Lodgings. The True Story of a Kiwi Soldier's Amazing Bid for Freedom*, (Auckland: Reed Publishing Ltd, 1993), p. 7.

<sup>74</sup> Thomson, R. H., *Captive Kiwi*, (Christchurch: Whitcombe & Tombs Ltd, 1965), p. 12-13.

<sup>75</sup> Chetwin, Colin Edwin, 1912-1991. German poster urging British troops on Crete

## Sidi Rezegh and Belhamed

Six months after the disastrous campaign on Crete the British Western Desert Force took the initiative in North Africa. Reformed and re-equipped, the New Zealand Division marched into Libya on 19 November 1941, intent on playing their part in desert warfare.<sup>76</sup> Despite the physically demanding heat of the day and freezing temperatures of night, British forces managed to push the Axis armies back almost to the Libyan border. During this push one of the British divisions were cut off at Tobruk and had to be rescued. What resulted was a series of battles around Belhamed and Sidi Rezegh that would see huge numbers of New Zealand troops taken as prisoners of war.<sup>77</sup>

On 25 November, 6 Brigade launched a dawn attack along the Sidi Rezegh escarpment, while the 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade drew level to the north. That night the 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade made a silent night attack while the 6<sup>th</sup> continued to defend its position. Over the next few days they were to suffer some major losses. Unfortunately for these New Zealand troops German General Erwin Rommel made a sudden advance south that would alter the battle in favour of the German forces in the area.<sup>78</sup> The deployment of Rommel's *Afrika Korps* south meant that General Freyberg could not call up 5 Brigade who were eventually cut off near Bardia by Rommel's forces. Brigadier James Hargest, who had no

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to give themselves up - Photograph taken by C E Chetwin. New Zealand. Department of Internal Affairs. War History Branch :Photographs relating to World War 1914-1918, World War 1939-1945, occupation of Japan, Korean War, and Malayan Emergency. Ref: DA-10726. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/22438826>

<sup>76</sup> Mason, *Prisoners of War*, p. 104.

<sup>77</sup> Michael King, *The Penguin History of New Zealand* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 399.

<sup>78</sup> Ian McGibbon, *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Military History* (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 389-90.

tanks to defend his position with, was leading 5 Brigade. All he had at his disposal were eleven artillery guns and four machineguns.<sup>79</sup> Hargest wrote in his autobiography that “Rommel had chosen his time well. He came in under a rising sun which must have shown up our positions clearly, while our gunners were compelled to shoot into the glare”.<sup>80</sup> The ensuing two and a half hour fight was a desperate one-sided clash that resulted in 5 Brigade being overrun. As a result, Hargest and about 700 men were taken captive as prisoners of war.<sup>81</sup> On being captured Hargest wrote:

The fact of being captured is so overwhelming a disaster that for a while one’s mind fails to grasp its significance. It seems quite possible that one’s command, one’s freedom, one’s right to think for oneself, have been taken away, and that henceforth one must obey the dictates of those representing all one hates most in the world ... But now I was caught. With full realization came simultaneously the determination to escape. That never for a moment left me during the next sixteen months.<sup>82</sup>

The following morning German Panzers overran the remaining men of 4 Brigade. Freyberg decided to flee to Egypt instead of getting trapped in Tobruk. He was able to do this because Rommel could not pursue him as he had also suffered casualties and lost many tanks and guns. On 1 December 1941, the Germans attacked Belhamed, destroying 20 Battalion.<sup>83</sup> In documents kept on the desert campaign, Daniel Riddiford described the Western desert as a “tanks paradise – they can go anywhere it is just like sea

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<sup>79</sup> John Thomson, *Warrior Nation. New Zealanders at the Front 1900-2000* (Christchurch: Hazard Press Publishers, 2000), p. 185.

<sup>80</sup> James Hargest, *Farewell Campo 12* (Wellington: Whitcombe & Tombs Ltd, 1946), p. 19.

<sup>81</sup> McGibbon, *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Military History*, p. 390.

<sup>82</sup> Hargest, *Farewell Campo 12*, p. 25.

<sup>83</sup> Thomson, *Warrior Nation. New Zealanders at the Front 1900-2000*, p. 186.

to them. The result is that infantry can never feel safe".<sup>84</sup> Private Wesley Jack was taken captive here. He recalls that

The German tanks came through, and I'll say this, they treated us pretty well. They said, 'Stick your hands up, Tommy. The war for you is over.' They marched us off. It was a terrible feeling; we went there to fight and we held the place for four days, but on the sixth day we had nothing left.<sup>85</sup>

Colin Norman Armstrong watched as Hargest "stood up in his red hat and with the gun of the leading tank four feet away pointing at his chest gave the order to surrender...Somewhat numbed, I stood up in the trench...We were 'in the bag'."<sup>86</sup>

Daniel Riddiford explains the sinking feeling of being captured at Sidi Rezegh in his autobiography:

To be captured seems like passing through the gates of death. One's entire world seems to have disintegrated. The solid framework of discipline, morale and organisation, upon which an Army is built, is dissolved, and each individual is pitchforked out into a colder world where he is without companions and has no one but himself to rely on.<sup>87</sup>

Just two weeks after New Zealand forces crossed into Libya 2578 troops were killed or wounded and 2042 were taken captive.<sup>88</sup> Martyn Uren, who was part of this campaign, wrote that "some of the flowers of New Zealand manhood fell at Sidi Rezegh, and Belhamed, and a person unversed in warfare would say that the gain was out of all proportion to the cost."<sup>89</sup> General Freyberg echoed these sentiments a few years later in a letter to New Zealand

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<sup>84</sup> MS-Papers-5714-038. Riddiford family: Family correspondence and other papers.

<sup>85</sup> Hutching, *Inside Stories: New Zealand Prisoners of War Remember*, p. 132.

<sup>86</sup> C. N. Armstrong, *Life without Ladies* (Wellington: Whitcombe & Tombs Ltd, 1947), p. 12.

<sup>87</sup> Riddiford, *Committed to Escape*, p. 13.

<sup>88</sup> Mason, *Prisoners of War*, p. 105.

<sup>89</sup> Martyn Uren, *Kiwi Saga: Memoirs of a New Zealand Artilleryman* (Auckland: Collins, 1943), p. 167.



## **El Mreir and Ruweisat Ridge**

1 July 1942 saw the beginning of the Battle for Egypt or First Alamein. Rommel's *Afrika Corps* sent a series of probes to investigate the area. These were driven back by the South African and British forces. The Alamein line stretched 65 km north to south between the Qattara Depression and the Mediterranean.<sup>91</sup> The New Zealand Division was asked to take hold of the western end of Ruweisat Ridge in a daring night attack.<sup>92</sup> Once again the New Zealanders would be subjected to poor planning as a result of faulty intelligence and virtually non-existent communication amongst leadership. On 14 July, 4 and 5 Brigades began their attacks an hour before midnight. They achieved their objective but had some serious problems to face. They could not entrench themselves due to the hard rock and there were no support weapons available, leaving them extremely vulnerable. It was not long before the German Panzer Division bore down on the New Zealanders.<sup>93</sup>

In Kenneth Sandford's biography on Charles Upham he describes the moment an injured Upham and his men realised the fight was over:

Here now were the tanks and the cars, sweeping in amongst the 20<sup>th</sup>, rounding up the New Zealanders as they rose from their sangars, hands up sheepishly. Upham lay on the ground watching it coming closer, savouring the bitterness of it. One arm, one leg, one man for whom the war was ending in pain and humiliation.<sup>94</sup>

Historian Ian McGibbon writes that "the battle for Ruweisat Ridge was an unmitigated disaster. For an entire day infantry were left on an open ridge without artillery or armoured support, while senior British commanders

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<sup>91</sup> Martyn Thompson, *Our War: The Grim Digs. New Zealand Soldiers in North Africa, 1940-1943* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 100.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>93</sup> McGibbon, *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Military History*, p. 391.

<sup>94</sup> Sandford, *Mark of the Lion. The Story of Charles Upham, V.C. And Bar*, p. 172.

seemed almost paralysed with indecision.”<sup>95</sup> What resulted from this failure was the loss of a further 1400 New Zealanders who were killed, wounded or taken prisoner.<sup>96</sup>

Despite this blow the New Zealanders fought valiantly. John Mulgan, a New Zealander fighting in the British Army reflected on how the Kiwi’s engaged themselves in battle. He wrote that “through all the days of that hot and panic stricken July they fought Rommel to a standstill in a series of attacks along Ruweisat Ridge. They helped to save Egypt, and led the breakthrough at Alamein to turn the war.”<sup>97</sup>

This was not the end of the big losses for the New Zealand forces though. They were to suffer one more disastrous blow in the fight for the Western Desert. On 21 July 1942 they began another night offensive against Axis forces at El Mreir. The objective was to take this spot so that British armour could exploit it. Once again the New Zealand commanders requested armoured support, which was denied. This resulted in a crushing blow to the 6 Brigade, one battalion managed to escape but the other two were caught in the valley and destroyed. A further 900 New Zealanders became prisoners of war that day.<sup>98</sup>

Arch Scott was one of the men taken captive at El Mreir. In his autobiography he remembers the feeling of being captured:

Prisoner! Useless...and without having done any worthwhile thing...not one bloody thing! We had followed orders, done what we were told, and finished in this ungodly shambles! Handed over on a plate!...What an anti-climax to the ‘death and glory’ feeling and

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<sup>95</sup> McGibbon, *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Military History*, pp. 391-2.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 392.

<sup>97</sup> John Mulgan, *Report on Experience* (London: Frontline Books, 2010), p. 49.

<sup>98</sup> McGibbon, *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Military History*, p. 392.

the belief that you were being given the chance to strike a blow for freedom...and now you'd lost your own!<sup>99</sup>

Kippenberger remembers seeing Major-General Lindsay Inglis on the afternoon of the defeat: "He was angry almost beyond words, and swore that he would never again place faith in the British armour."<sup>100</sup> This sentiment is completely understandable considering what had happened in Greece, Crete, Libya and now Egypt. In just a few days all three of New Zealand's infantry brigades had suffered devastating losses because of poor decisions made by British leaders.<sup>101</sup> As historian Glyn Harper observed in his biography on Kippenberger "the tragedy of these disasters is that they were all avoidable."<sup>102</sup> The only positive in all of this is that New Zealand's fighting spirit and skill on the battlefield left a deep-rooted impression on General Rommel, who had 'a great and lasting admiration'<sup>103</sup> for the New Zealanders.

Year	Campaign	POW losses
1941	Greece (6 April – 30 April)	1856
	Crete (30 April – 2 June)	2180
	Sidi Rezegh and Belhamed (18 Nov - 14 Feb 1942)	2042
1942	El Mreir and Ruweisat Ridge (20 Jun – 31 Aug)	1819
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>7897</b>

**Table 1.1 Prisoner of war losses (Middle East and Mediterranean) 1941-42<sup>104</sup>**

<sup>99</sup> Arch Scott, *Dark of the Moon* (Auckland: Cresset Books, 1985), p. 37.

<sup>100</sup> Howard Kippenberger, *Infantry Brigadier* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), p. 189.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Glyn Harper, *Kippenberger: An Inspired New Zealand Commander* (Auckland: Harper Collins, 1997), p. 166.

<sup>103</sup> Desmond Young, *Rommel* (London: Collins, 1950), p. 147.

<sup>104</sup> Mason, *Prisoners of War*, p. 40.

During this period the number of New Zealand army servicemen reported as prisoners of war rose to nearly eight thousand (see table 1.1 above). The agencies responsible for informing next of kin grew and the Government had to employ further staff to cope with the workload. Personal files were kept on each serviceman captured and letters were sent home informing the families on how they could get in contact with prisoners.<sup>105</sup> At this point in the conflict prisoners of war made up over one ninth of New Zealand military personnel serving overseas. Mason wrote that “the preservation of their safety and welfare had become a task of considerable national importance”.<sup>106</sup> Papers held at the Alexander Turnbull Library suggest that by the end of April 1941 there were approximately 40 to 50 New Zealand escapers and evaders. By the end of September that same year the numbers had risen to at least 1100. These numbers then dropped considerably to a steady trickle.<sup>107</sup> From these four failed campaigns we can begin to understand how frustrated the New Zealand infantry had become at being continually pushed back by the German military due to lack of armoured back up and miscommunication. Historian Michael King writes that “short of death or injury, the most unfortunate fate a serviceman could meet in World War Two was to be taken prisoner ... especially as a result of the debacles in Greece and on Crete”.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 157.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>107</sup> MS-Papers-8599-9. Research papers relating to 2NZEF casualty and prisoner of war statistics during World War Two.

<sup>108</sup> Michael King, *New Zealanders at War* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 214.

<b>New Zealanders with the Royal Air Force - Casualties</b>				
<b>Date to...</b>	<b>Strength</b>	<b>Killed</b>	<b>POW</b>	<b>Total</b>
Dec 1940	1,650	203	40	243
Dec 1941	3,980	586	123	709
Dec 1942	5,085	1,497	312	1,809
Dec 1943	8,466	2,319	460	2,779
Dec 1944	10,375	3,052	540	3,592
Dec 1945	10,950	3,285	548	3,833

**Table 1.2 RNZAF attached to RAF - Casualties<sup>109</sup>**

### **Air Force Prisoners**

The first Royal Air Force officer taken captive in the Second World War in fact was a New Zealander (see table 1.2 above for total numbers of captured New Zealand airmen with the RAF). Shot down on a mission over the North Sea on 5 September 1939, he regained consciousness as a German seaplane landed on the water close by. The only survivor of the downed Anson, he was shortly taken to a Luftwaffe hospital on the island of Norderney where he felt “pretty dashed lonely” after losing three members of his crew and finding himself the “only Royal Air Force officer in enemy hands”.<sup>110</sup> Some airmen who baled out or crashed in enemy territory were able to elude immediate capture with the help of the local population. A few airmen made it back to England but the rest eventually were captured,

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<sup>109</sup> H. L. Thompson, *New Zealanders with the Royal Air Force (Vol 2)*, The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-1945 (Wellington: Historical Publications Branch, 1956), p. 455.

<sup>110</sup> Mason, *Prisoners of War*, p. 1.

usually as soon as they crash-landed by German troops or the Gestapo.<sup>111</sup> The German military had strict instructions on dealing with downed aircraft; remove the airman from the wreck (rescuing them if necessary), extinguish any fires, prevent the prisoner from destroying any papers or equipment, and ensure prisoners are segregated before informing the nearest German Air Field command. Within twenty-four hours fit prisoners were sent to be interrogated.<sup>112</sup> Returning from an aerial bombing over Italy, New Zealander Gordon Woodroofe and his RAF crew members, flew straight into a large electrical storm. A lightning strike destroyed their radio apparatus leaving them stranded, except for a magnetic compass for direction. Forced to climb to a higher altitude to avoid turbulence the airmen lost their sense of direction, finally emerging from the storm hours later as daybreak came into view. To their dismay they realised that the magnetic compass had not been reading true north. A revolver that had been placed near the compass had affected its metallic reading. Lost and with no fuel their Wellington bomber was forced to crash land into the ocean. Fortunately no one was killed in the landing and all men made it onto the life raft.<sup>113</sup> Woodroofe recalls watching the “dramatic sight of the last movement of our wonderful aircraft, “N” Nelly, when, the whole of her body awash, her large tail rose high in the air before diving beneath the waves”.<sup>114</sup> A Danish fishing boat heading home eventually picked them up. As they approached the harbour Woodroofe remembers

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., pp. 20-21.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>113</sup> Gordon Thomson Woodroofe, *Getaway* (Orewa: Riverside Publications, 1998), pp. 2-4.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

seeing German troops on guard and wrote dismally “they were waiting for us”.<sup>115</sup>

### **Captured at sea**

Very few New Zealanders serving in the navy were taken captive as prisoners of war. In fact, the Japanese in the Pacific captured the majority of them. The numbers show that during the course of the war only 21 officers and 42 ratings were captured, as well as 58 merchant seamen detained by the Japanese and between 70-80 New Zealand merchant seamen caught by the Germans.<sup>116</sup>

Lieutenant Commander P. D. Allan was taken captive when *MV Rangitane* was sunk on its way to the Panama Canal by two German auxiliary cruisers, *Orion* and *Komet*. The ship was heavily loaded with wool, dairy products and frozen meat, all bound for the United Kingdom. The crew numbered just over 200, with 111 civilian passengers.<sup>117</sup> In an interview with Commander Allan he describes hearing the alarm bells ringing but initially considered them to be a drill as they had only just left port. He explains how the *Rangitane* tried to outrun the German cruisers but was eventually cornered in a triangle. The Germans opened fire and their “shells hit the upper accommodation and set the ship on fire, we stopped and abandoned

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>116</sup> 'Capture', URL: <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/war/second-world-war/prisoners-of-war/capture>, (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 5-May-2014

<sup>117</sup> S. D. Waters, *The Royal New Zealand Navy, The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-1945* (Wellington: Historical Publications Branch, 1956), pp. 137-9.

her”.<sup>118</sup> Allan describes his experience as a prisoner of war below decks as follows:

Once we were in the Raider we were battened down in really horrible conditions. To this day I can remember the smell as you went down below...below decks the decks were just running in sweat and it was quite vile...the first people to greet us were the survivors from the TURAKINA, which had been sunk in the Tasman about a month earlier...<sup>119</sup>

Once all of the prisoners were on board the *Orion*, they sent a torpedo to sink the *Rangitane* and made a hasty exit to the north-east.<sup>120</sup> As with the men captured in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, food became a major issue for sailors upon capture. If prisoners were lucky they would eat similar food to the ships crew.<sup>121</sup> Others were fed unappetizing meals such as a bean soup or left over rations of tinned whale meat supplied by the Japanese.<sup>122</sup>

The men who have written and spoken about the experience of becoming prisoners of war all talk strongly about how devastating it felt to hear the phrase ‘for you the war is over’. Those on downed aircraft or sunken ships also had to deal with the loss of fellow crew members. For many of these unfortunate servicemen their journey home would be a long and dangerous one. But first they had to escape.

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<sup>118</sup> DLA 0107 Allan - interview with Lieutenant Commander P.D. Allan

<sup>119</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> Waters, *The Royal New Zealand Navy*, p. 138.

<sup>121</sup> DLA 0027 Maud - interview with Mr W.D. Maud

<sup>122</sup> DLA 0107 Allan - interview with Lieutenant Commander P.D. Allan

## Chapter Two: The long march to captivity

*"Dejectedly we struggled on and up passing many who had dropped from sheer exhaustion."<sup>123</sup>*

– C.V. Christie and H. L. Stove

Dehydration and hunger loomed over the forlorn prisoners who were forced to march considerable distances. Those taken captive often faced a long and grueling passage to temporary camps. Many would not make it due to harsh conditions en route, especially if they had been injured in battle. Historian Ian McGibbon writes that, as a result of these difficult conditions along with the disappointment of being captured so early in the war, many POWs suffered with depression.<sup>124</sup> Some men used these difficult circumstances to their advantage and made a desperate break for freedom. This chapter will focus on escape attempts made almost immediately upon capture, as well as the journey to the prisoner of war camps, paying particular attention to the terrible conditions faced by soldiers and how they used these moments of disorder and disarray to attempt escape. As noted in the previous chapter, capture was a devastating mental blow for those involved. In his article, *Captivity Psychoses Among Prisoners of War*, Walter Lunden explains that, for prisoners of war, one of the most important psychological consequences is that they did not know when, or if, they would ever be liberated.<sup>125</sup> This impact had different effects on those captured by the Germans; some decided to play it safe and wait out the war while others could not wait to break free. Life in a prison camp was boring and oppressive

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<sup>123</sup> MS-Papers-10829. Escapees in Crete. C V Christie, H L Stove.

<sup>124</sup> Ian McGibbon, *New Zealand and the Second World War. The People, the Battles and the Legacy* (Auckland: Hodder Moa Beckett Publishers Ltd, 2003), p. 74.

<sup>125</sup> Walter A. Lunden, "Captivity Psychoses among Prisoner of War," *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 39, no. 6 (1949): p. 722.

and seriously impacted a soldier's self-esteem. The idea of escaping had the biggest impact on their morale and was a great enhancement to their self-confidence as it meant that they were once again actively working against the enemy.<sup>126</sup> Faced with this disheartening uncertainty, it is understandable why so many men attempted escape as soon as they were captured.

### **The chaos of battle**

While the Greek and Crete campaigns ended in "fairly controlled withdrawals," the desert campaign "developed into a bewildering alternation of attack and defence".<sup>127</sup> Hall goes on to describe the ensuing battle as "a complicated tangle of captures, escapes, recaptures, and liberations".<sup>128</sup> Raymond Kennedy and his fellow soldiers of the 22 battalion are an example of men who made a break for freedom in the chaos of battle. They were captured by the Italians at Ruweisat Ridge in July 1942, and later handed over to the Germans. Their time as prisoners was very short as they took advantage of the chaos at the moment of being handed over. Under heavy fire the Italians hurriedly urged them on with bayonets at their backs. When the shelling and machine gun fire ceased the last of the Italian guards took off, leaving Kennedy and his men for the Germans in no mans land. Kennedy wrote that "the heat and the stench from blood saturated wounded was so bad one wanted to vomit... [then] the flies started to settle..."<sup>129</sup> They came across some bomb craters that they were able to hide the wounded in from the shelling that had restarted. One of the men went to search the wrecked

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<sup>126</sup> Hall, "Escapes," p. 3.

<sup>127</sup> Mason, *Prisoners of War*, p. 104.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> MS-Papers-7439-04. Kennedy, Raymond George, 1914-: World War Two Stories.

vehicles to find water. He returned with an old broken rifle that they used to deter any Italian soldiers who happened to be in the vicinity. Luckily for Kennedy, two friendly Bren carriers came out to the Wadi to investigate what was going on. Before the Germans could work out what was happening they had loaded all of the men, including the wounded into the vehicles, and were making their way back to their own lines. When the Germans finally realised that they were enemy troops they began firing, but the New Zealanders were far enough away that the drivers were able to take evasive action and get everyone to safety.<sup>130</sup>

Not all wounded were as fortunate to get away in such a hasty manner. Those who were not abandoned in the heat of battle were picked up by the Germans and Italians and put into field hospitals before being taken to prison camps. In North Africa the Italians treated wounded prisoners in field hospitals in an appalling manner, mainly through neglect rather than abuse.<sup>131</sup> Hygiene was primitive, with open pits for latrines and inadequate seating. During the summer when water restrictions were in place prisoners could not shower.<sup>132</sup> Major-General Howard Kippenberger was in a field hospital after suffering a wound to his thigh at Belhamed in 1941. On 28 November, he notes in his diary that the Germans had overrun the camp and that they were now prisoners of war. Fighting continued for a few days, with some of the wounded being killed by stray bullets and mortar fire. One of the biggest problems for Kippenberger and his men was the lack of food and water. He wrote at the time that there were "over a thousand wounded here,

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Hall, "Prisoners of Italy," p. 30.

<sup>132</sup> MS-Papers-8097. New Zealand Ex-Prisoners-of-War Association.

many serious, and [who could not be] washed or properly looked after.”<sup>133</sup> By 3 December, Kippenberger was planning his escape only to be bitterly disappointed when fifty tanks, twenty-eight armoured cars and hundreds of German trucks pulled into camp. This did not dampen his resolve to escape, however, but actually gave him the opportunity he needed to break free. He met with two other men who began planning in order to approach others with the offer to escape with them. Assuming that many would want to join him, Kippenberger was surprised when a “number of those approached were not willing to take the risk. Many, of course, were not fit and several of the doctors held that their duty lay with the remaining wounded.”<sup>134</sup> The next day they put their plan into action with about twenty others. It was an audacious plan: steal a truck and drive right out of the camp. Over the course of three hours they all managed to sneak into the back of a truck only to find that the ignition had been left on all night and the battery was dead. However, by a stroke of luck at that moment another truck pulled up beside them and the Germans got out. Within minutes Kippenberger and his men had snuck into the new truck and were headed for freedom. For these men “it was a delightful moment. There were cheers from the passengers and a great sense of relief and elation.”<sup>135</sup>

### **The arduous march to temporary prison camps.**

Those not in a position to escape immediately after capture faced an arduous trek to transport ships and trains that would take them on to prison camps. The Germans captured nearly all New Zealand prisoners of war, including

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<sup>133</sup> Kippenberger, *Infantry Brigadier*, pp. 100-02.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

those in Italian hands. This large number of prisoners now in German care was a cause of great anxiety for them. To prevent prisoners making an immediate escape the Germans and Italians had to quickly organise for the captured servicemen to be transported to "territory they firmly held".<sup>136</sup> Due to a lack of transport for prisoners the men had to march distances that ranged between ten and sixty miles. These distances could take up to four days of constant marching.<sup>137</sup> For most, the hardest part of this was the lack of food and water. Captured on Crete, Corporal C.V. Christie and H. L. Stove recalled that their only "conscious thoughts were of food. Would he [the Germans] feed us?"<sup>138</sup> The Allied troops taken captive were then forced to march for miles, scavenging food where they could. Christie and Stove recall:

Dejectedly we struggled on and up passing many who had dropped from sheer exhaustion. It did not seem to matter if they died there as some undoubtedly did. The thought of food kept us going the terrible nine or ten miles to the next village up the mountainside...We pass down a line of broken down trucks. Stupidly we search them for food forgetting that hundreds have passed before us with the same desperate need.<sup>139</sup>

Similarly, Private J. Hutton, who was caught in North Africa, recalls in his war diary that "we were marched about a further 12 miles (nothing to eat or drink) and were put in a wired enclosure to sleep. Very cold and we had no kit or blankets."<sup>140</sup> Jack Elworthy, who was captured on Crete, also recalls the hard journey after capture. He says:

I was still weak [from being injured], and as I walked I fell over every few yards. When I made it to the road, I met another patient

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<sup>136</sup> Hall, "Prisoners of Italy," p. 3.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> MS-Papers-10829. Escapees in Crete. C V Christie, H L Stove, as told by A B Watts.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> WAIIA2871 1. Extracts from diaries of 15526 Private J. Hutton (20<sup>th</sup> Battalion, NZ Regiment), while prisoner of war in North Africa and Italy and his escape to the Allied Forces through Yugoslavia, 2 December 1941-15 January 1944.

from the hospital. He had been shot through the foot and was trying to hop along. I gave him my shoulder to lean on but I was not a lot of use and we both kept falling.<sup>141</sup>

Eventually he arrived at the checkpoint with the other soldiers, utterly exhausted and with nothing but his pyjamas, a tin hat and boots with no socks. After a while Elworthy and the other prisoners were ordered to march to a new location. Along the way they came upon some of their own men in a disastrous encounter. He writes that “the Germans used us as a screen and fired over our heads. Our troops returned the fire, unavoidably killing and wounding several in our party.”<sup>142</sup> After a short period of fighting the 19 NZ Battalion managed to overrun the Germans. Jack Elworthy and his fellow prisoners were free men, for



**Image 2.1 Allied troops being marched through Crete and Greece.**

Photo taken in 1941 by an unknown photographer. The caption translates into ‘Englishmen appear with hands raised’. Alexander Turnbull Library. (Reproduced with permission from the Alexander Turnbull Library).<sup>143</sup>

<sup>141</sup> Jack Elworthy, *Greece Crete Stalag Dachau: A New Zealand Soldier's Encounters with Hitler's Army* (Wellington: Awa Press, 2014), p. 78.

<sup>142</sup> *ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>143</sup> Tillick, A J, fl 1941. Allied soldiers being marched on the island of Crete, Greece, during World War II. New Zealand. Department of Internal Affairs. War History

now.<sup>144</sup> Hall records in the Official History that in the first day or two of capture few prisoners were given any food or shelter. To add to this misery the Italians would frequently help themselves to prisoner's valuable items, such as cigarette cases and wrist watches.<sup>145</sup> Hall notes that the Germans were no better in this regard, as they made a minimal attempt to provide adequate provisions for captured servicemen either.<sup>146</sup>

The journey would prove to be both a physical and a mental challenge, as the men on the march would be forced to witness all sorts of horrors. Passing through Hania, Private Lew Lind recalls that the town was "... a place of death and desolation. We could smell the ungathered dead among the ashes and debris..."<sup>147</sup> During the march to Canae, on Crete, Jim Rolfe saw similar horrors. He wrote that "the dead were still there, some standing or crouched in grotesque attitudes just as they were caught by the strafing. The stench was awful. I dreaded the thought of being called for a burial party."<sup>148</sup> Things did not improve for Rolfe once he got to the temporary camp as conditions were terrible; every meal consisted of mouldy bread and lentil soup which left the men hungry all of the time. The latrines were a long stretch of trenches that smelt dreadful. The wind did not help either. Rolfe remembers that it blew the smell "across to the camp. The flies and the

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Branch :Photographs relating to World War 1914-1918, World War 1939-1945, occupation of Japan, Korean War, and Malayan Emergency. Ref: DA-03403-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.

<http://natlib.govt.nz/records/22906934>

<sup>144</sup> Elworthy, *Greece Crete Stalag Dachau: A New Zealand Soldier's Encounters with Hitler's Army*, pp. 82ff.

<sup>145</sup> Hall, "Prisoners of Italy," p. 3.

<sup>146</sup> "Prisoners of Germany," p. 4.

<sup>147</sup> Damer and Frazer, *On the Run: Anzac Escape and Evasion in Enemy-Occupied Crete*, p. 50.

<sup>148</sup> Jim Rolfe, *Brothers at War. A Kiwi Family's Story* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 78.

stench were terrible. This more than anything made me determined to escape.”<sup>149</sup> Rolfe did manage to make his escape not long after reaching the camp. Two weeks after arriving, Rolfe and his friend Jim Sellars, planned to make a break for it at 2200 hours, while other friends watched on guard. The plan was to get over the fence and into the grapevines on the other side of the road. While they were waiting there was a commotion across the road, exactly where they had been planning on heading. Rolfe recalls that the Germans “had become wise and hidden guards in the vines. They had just caught several who were returning from a foraging sortie...we decided to break out in daylight preferring to be shot at then, rather than in the darkness.”<sup>150</sup> In the end, Rolfe’s escape was rather simple – “a scramble over the barbed wire, into a ditch and through a drainpipe. Nobody saw us and we were away.”<sup>151</sup>

### **Conditions in Transit Camps**

Most Anzac prisoners of war caught in Crete or Greece spent time in Salonika before being transported to Italian or German prison camps. The camp at Salonika was a place of misery for those interned there, being described by historians as a hellhole.<sup>152</sup> The *War Surgery and Medicine* volume in the *Official History of New Zealand* records Salonika as being “deplorable in every way”.<sup>153</sup> During a six month period over 30,000 prisoners passed through its gates. The hospital there had over three thousand patients, of which seventy-

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Monteath, *P.O.W. Australian Prisoners of War in Hitler's Reich*, p. 101.

<sup>153</sup> T. Stout and M. Duncan, *War Surgery and Medicine*, The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-1945 (Wellington: Historical Publications Branch, 1954), p. 464.

nine died. Sickness was rampant at Salonika, including “malaria, sandfly fever, pneumonia, bronchitis, diphtheria, jaundice, beriberi, nephritis, enteritis, typhoid, typhus and poliomyelitis”.<sup>154</sup> Adding to the plague of diseases within the camp, the food at Salonika was poor and insufficient. A 70 pound bag of lentils made into soup for 5000 men, plus a small piece of bread, was all they had until the Red Cross arrived (which was many months later).<sup>155</sup> Galatas, a dusty seaside camp, was another facility that New Zealanders were held in while in Crete. The rations there were made up mainly of captured British stores, of which the guards kept the choice items and taunted the prisoners with them.<sup>156</sup> The poor conditions in this camp meant that it took wounded prisoners weeks to recover. Hall writes that once the men regained their strength they found it fairly straightforward escaping from Galatas. Many men were able to sneak out of the camp to forage for food, at times the guards knew but turned a blind eye. Hall argues that “supervision was lax, possible because of the difficulty of leaving Crete”.<sup>157</sup>

After the large amount of men being taken captive in Greece and Crete part of the preparations for the desert campaign involved establishing official instructions on what to do in the event of capture. These instructions were passed on to every man and included the distribution of maps of enemy territory. If captured servicemen were given strict orders to only give their name, rank and number and above all to attempt escape if possible.<sup>158</sup> The Prisoner of War edition in the *Official History* documents that there were

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Hall, "Prisoners of Germany," p. 4.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> "Escapes," p. 11.

<sup>158</sup> Mason, *Prisoners of War*, p. 106.

some Italian and German interrogators at these transit camps. The Italians confiscated large amounts of personal papers and photographs in an attempt to gain intelligence on Allied movements. Another tactic used by the Italians was to infiltrate the camp with spies in an attempt to gather information.<sup>159</sup> The Germans used a more alarming approach that ranged from having a casual conversation to screaming and shouting. At times they would threaten the prisoner with a revolver, or even a machine gun, shooting it over their heads or at their feet to intimidate them.<sup>160</sup>



**Image 2.2 POW transit camp 116, Benghazi, Libya.<sup>161</sup>**

Photo taken in 1942 by L. Steward. Alexander Turnbull Library. (Reproduced with permission from the Alexander Turnbull Library).

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<sup>159</sup> John E. Broad, *Poor People Poor Us: Poveri Gen'-Poveri Noi* (Wellington: Harry H. Tombs Ltd, 1945), p. 18.

<sup>160</sup> Mason, *Prisoners of War*, p. 106.

<sup>161</sup> Steward, L, fl 1942. Prisoner of war camp 116 (Palm Tree), Benghazi, Libya. New Zealand. Department of Internal Affairs. War History Branch :Photographs relating to World War 1914-1918, World War 1939-1945, occupation of Japan, Korean War, and Malayan Emergency. Ref: DA-10889. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/22327820>

### **Jumping from moving transport vehicles.**

Not all captive New Zealanders were able to make quick escapes following a battle. For some, things just went from bad to worse. In April 1941, Fred Woollams was separated from his unit as they hastily retreated out of Greece. He did not make it to the evacuation point and was left behind. Woollams spent months hiding in the hills around Corinth before being betrayed by a local in a small Greek village.<sup>162</sup> Two years later, after spending time in a number of different camps in Greece, Woollams was put on a transport ship in Larissa to be taken to a camp in Italy. This leg of the journey was no easier than the initial long march to the temporary camp. Food was still an issue as well as constant danger. Woollams was given a lifebelt and taken below decks. They were each presented with "Italian bully beef, which was either cat or donkey, and some biscuits which had to be broken with a boot."<sup>163</sup> The next day the ship left for Italy and at around midday there was a terrific explosion, the British had torpedoed them, not realising that it was full of POWs. Woollams recalls that:

The ship listed immediately, and as we were on the downward side, I stepped into water...Water was now flowing in from both sides, and I had to fight uphill against a terrific torrent of water. As I made my way to the voices, the water was past my hips. I grabbed the companion rail just in time. Water was up to our waists, and it was useless to attempt to help those behind us.<sup>164</sup>

Once on deck Woollam and his companions were faced with another mad scramble to find a lifeboat:

Around us were hordes of Italians, and we had to be careful not to get trapped behind them. We hurried on, passing bodies of men

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<sup>162</sup> Wright, *Escape! Kiwi Pows on the Run in World War Two*, p. 26.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

killed by blast and shock, and came out on the stern of the ship...The ship was sinking at the bow, and could not last long...The situation was critical, the captain was gone, there was no organisation, and Greeks and Italians were jumping into the sea.<sup>165</sup>

Eventually Woollams made it to a lifeboat. There was another massive explosion as a second torpedo hit the ill-fated ship, cutting it in two. Within a few seconds “the bow went out of sight, the stern stuck up in a perpendicular position for a moment, then glided away and the ship was no more ... There was a weird emptiness where the ship had been, but the sea all around us was a heaving mass of capsized boats, dead and dying, and wreckage.”<sup>166</sup> With nowhere to run to, Woollams had no choice but to sit in the lifeboat, frustrated at the lost opportunity to escape, and wait for a rescue vessel. Eventually an Italian gunship arrived and the stranded men were hoisted on board. Woollams had “visions of trying to escape” when he reached land but unfortunately was never offered this moment. He spent a further eight months in an Italian prison camp before finally escaping.<sup>167</sup>

Lance Corporal A. G. Davies had more luck escaping from a transport ship. Captured near Tobruk in June 1942, Davies was taken to a temporary camp at Tarhuna for two weeks before being taken to Tripoli and put on an Italian tramp steamer bound for Italy. Davies was suffering from a bad case of dysentery and as a result was allowed to use the latrine on deck. On the third day he made his escape at around two o’ clock in the morning by crawling along the deck to the railings and lowering himself over the side. Davies recalls that “before I jumped I could see land faintly, but could not estimate

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., pp. 37-38.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., pp. 41-42.

how far away it was. I thought, however, I would probably be able to swim ashore.”<sup>168</sup> He spent between eight to ten hours in the water before finally reaching a beach in Tunisia. After resting on the sand for about half an hour Davies made his way to a main road where he was eventually picked up the French Army.<sup>169</sup>

The trains used to transport prisoners were seriously inadequate. Historian Peter Monteath explains that the appalling conditions the prisoners had to endure involved serious overcrowding and intense heat as the majority of prisoners were transported at the end of summer. Once the train doors were closed the only air available came from narrow slits at one end of the carriage.<sup>170</sup> As can be expected the sauna like conditions meant that the men quickly became dehydrated but due to a lack of water the “men were tortured with a thirst they had no way of slaking”.<sup>171</sup> With toilet facilities being nonexistent dysentery and diarrhea became even more of a problem. Monteath explains that men attempted to solve this problem by relieving themselves in torn shirts and then poking the bundle through holes in the walls.<sup>172</sup> For those being transported by train the awful conditions plus the lure of freedom did not stop them from jumping from moving trains, as was the case with Richard Thomson, who was herded onto a train at a camp in Salonika that was bound for Germany. The train was made up of closed in cattle trucks that each held eight horses or forty men. Seeing these conditions, Thomson thought to himself “the horrid prospect of six days

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<sup>168</sup> MS-Papers-8599-5. fl 2006: Research papers regarding prisoners of war, escapers, prison camps and New Zealand servicemen married overseas.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Monteath, *P.O.W. Australian Prisoners of War in Hitler's Reich*, pp. 109-10.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

locked in here hardened my resolve to leave at the first opportunity.”<sup>173</sup> This would be no easy task as the only way out was through one of four oblong slits high up near the corners. All of them had barbed wire nailed over them on the outside and two of them were boarded up with wooden shutters. Armed with a pair of pliers, and under the cover of darkness, Thomson began working the nails to release the barbed wire. At one point while he was working a face appeared at the window; it was an Australian who had cut a hole in the end of the truck in front. The Australian and five others were waiting for an opportune moment to jump from the train.<sup>174</sup> What happened next was nothing less than tragic:

Unfortunately the train slowed down for a station...They had no option but to go then – like it or not. Five dived off to one side and the sixth went the other. The guards saw them and promptly tossed out the anchor. There was so much rushing about and shouting and then the machine guns got going. I could see the five running through a field of grain. The moon showed them up very clearly. Four were killed and a fifth was badly wounded. The lad on the other side got away unnoticed.<sup>175</sup>

Thomson knew that he would have to be careful with timing his escape. When his moment came he was hoisted through the window, feet first, by two other prisoners. Once through, Thomson writes that he “didn’t hang on for more than a second, dropped, ran a few paces, and fell flat.”<sup>176</sup> He lay very still, waiting to hear for a shout or a shot, but nothing happened. He lay in the grass and watched as the train disappeared around a corner – he was free.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Thompson, *Captive Kiwi*, p. 68.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.



**Image 2.3 New Zealand POWs in cattle truck en route to Germany.**<sup>178</sup>

Photo taken in 1943 by Lee Hill. Alexander Turnbull Library. (Reproduced with permission from the Alexander Turnbull Library).

Faced with an unknown future in enemy hands it is understandable that so many attempted to escape as soon as they were able to. Those who survived the awful trek to transport vessels defied the odds to get back to their lines. From escaping under heavy enemy fire, to jumping from moving trains and ships, these men did the unthinkable in order to escape and persevere. For those who did not break free they had to face life in a European prison camp and come up with even more inventive ways to get

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<sup>178</sup> Hill, Leighton McLeod, 1907-1952. New Zealand prisoners of war in cattle truck - Photograph taken by Lee Hill. New Zealand. Department of Internal Affairs. War History Branch :Photographs relating to World War 1914-1918, World War 1939-1945, occupation of Japan, Korean War, and Malayan Emergency. Ref: 1/4-069786-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.  
<http://natlib.govt.nz/records/22523803>

away and gain their freedom. Richard Garrett, a British infantry officer who escaped from Norway, describes escaping as follows:

Escaping was an adventure: the sort of thing that naughty little boys dream (or used to) about. It depended upon such skills as forgery, lies, disguise, theft, even physical violence – activities that, in peacetime, would ensure the perpetrator a tolerably long sentence in one of Her Majesty’s prisons. But in this case the criminal became laudable; what is villainy in peacetime becomes courage in wartime.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Richard Garrett, *Great Escapes of World War 2: And Some That Failed to Make It* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989), p. 2.

## Chapter Three: Planning Escape

*"I was in the hands of the enemy, a prisoner of war. I must get back. I must escape."*

- *W. B. Thomas*<sup>180</sup>

Men who found themselves in prison camps had two options: to accept their fate or refuse to do so. For the first couple of months as captives, most prisoners were exhausted and angry over having been caught. So it was not long before they began to rebel or to plan escape.<sup>181</sup> This chapter will focus on both successful and failed escape attempts. It will examine methods of escape, including escape committees and the role that teamwork played in effectively breaking free. For many attempting to escape the planning and preparation involved took months and quite often teamwork. Those endeavoring to make a run for it knew that rash decisions were not worth the serious consequences of being caught.

"The Geneva Convention of 1929", writes Monteath, "set the standard for the treatment of prisoners of war in the first half of the twentieth century."<sup>182</sup> The idea behind the document was to prevent the atrocities experienced by prisoners of war in previous conflicts from happening again. Guidelines were put in place to ensure prisoners had their basic human rights met.<sup>183</sup> This included the amount of information prisoners were expected to give upon capture. They did not have to give anything except

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<sup>180</sup> W. B. Thomas, *Dare to Be Free* (London: Readers Union Lts, 1953), p. 44.

<sup>181</sup> Caulfield, *War Behind the Wire. Australian Prisoner of War*, p. 212.

<sup>182</sup> Monteath, *P.O.W. Australian Prisoners of War in Hitler's Reich*, p. 6.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

their name, rank and military serial number.<sup>184</sup> Despite these measures prisoners often lived in very poor conditions. Fleas, flies and lice were inescapable behind the wire. Bedbugs were a constant affliction, appearing en masse at nighttime to turn the white sheets black. To make matters worse, when squashed they let off a foul stench of urine and excreta caught off the men fighting typhoid, dysentery and malaria.<sup>185</sup> These infestations were just one of the many reasons that persuaded men to escape. In his book on Australian POWs Monteath explains how the Germans were curious to find out what motivated men to escape from prison camps. They were so interested in the causes that they conducted a survey amongst recaptured prisoners in Military District XVIII. The results showed that men attempted escape due to depression, homesickness, boredom, mistreatment by guards and the conviction of it being their soldierly duty.<sup>186</sup> Interestingly, the officers who had conducted the survey noticed a particularly strong desire in British men wanting to escape and had even written next to this final point “especially amongst the British”.<sup>187</sup>

### **The Role of Escape Committees**

Escape committees were created by prisoners in many camps to aid the planning and coordination needed to pull off a successful escape. The other role of the committee was to oversee all escape plans within the camp to ensure that one plan did not ruin another.<sup>188</sup> The organisation of the

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<sup>184</sup> George Sullivan, *Great Escapes of World War 2* (New York: Scholastic Inc, 1988), p. x.

<sup>185</sup> Monteath, *P.O.W. Australian Prisoners of War in Hitler's Reich*, p. 108.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 345-6.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 346.

<sup>188</sup> Caulfield, *War Behind the Wire. Australian Prisoner of War*, p. 228.

committee varied from camp to camp. In some camps the committee would collect a pool of items for escapers to use. In these camps men were not allowed to escape until the plan had been discussed in detail and each escapee was well equipped for the journey. In other camps the committee was more of a discussion group where people preferred to hold onto escape items in case they themselves wanted to make a break for it. Some committees worked tirelessly to collect information about passes, permits, and trains, as well as information about the civilian life they were escaping to. They also taught escapees appropriate phrases in enemy languages in order to survive. Those who were recaptured and brought back to camp where questioned by the committee in order to perfect the same escape in future.<sup>189</sup> There were also members of the committee who had no desire to escape but did all they could to assist those who did. These men performed vital tasks such as forging passports and making civilian clothes for escapees. This co-operation from other prisoners was vital for a successful escape. Often a diversion was needed to attract the guard's attention elsewhere in order for the escape to happen. Few men were able to escape without the assistance of these escape committees and their fellow prisoners who stayed behind to suffer the consequences.<sup>190</sup> Ron Zwar, an Australian in Stalag IVB, explains how it worked in the camp he was being held in:

There wouldn't have been more than about ten or twelve in the escape committee, kept very small for obvious reasons of security. Anyone who wanted to escape, if they wanted assistance from the camp, from the escape committee, they had to submit a plan to the escape committee and if the escape committee thought that the plan was not practical, they would scrub it, they'd say, 'Well, we

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<sup>189</sup> Hall, "Escapes," p. 4.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

don't want you to go but if you go we can't say don't go. But we don't want you to go.'<sup>191</sup>

Zwar goes on to say that "the will to want to escape is so strong in most people, that you just couldn't control it."<sup>192</sup> This frame of mind caused some to act impulsively, which only resulted in tragedy. Some prisoners could not handle captivity and would snap - rushing at the barbed wire only to be shot and killed in the process.<sup>193</sup>

### **The role of the Red Cross**

Sergeant Bruce Crowley spoke for all POWs when, in an interview with Julia Millen, he simply stated, "we all dreamt about food."<sup>194</sup> Starvation was a constant and very real threat to men behind the wire. Crowley went on to say that "starvation was the worst aspect of life as a prisoner of war. I must have been close to beriberi; we all suffered vitamin deficiencies."<sup>195</sup> From the end of 1941 New Zealand had been contributing to a pool of relief food for prisoners. These items, mainly meat, honey, cheese and milk, were sent overseas as parcels at the rate of around 6000 a week.<sup>196</sup> Historian Ian McGibbon writes that the Red Cross "greatly expanded its role in the Second World War...women sewed, folded, and knitted pyjamas...In addition there were tinned foods, cakes, cigarettes, and chocolates."<sup>197</sup> The Red Cross also kept lists of New Zealand POWs and aimed to send each prisoner a parcel of

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<sup>191</sup> Caulfield, *War Behind the Wire. Australian Prisoner of War*, p. 228.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> McDonald, *Jack Hinton V.C. A Man Amongst Men*, p. 126.

<sup>194</sup> Millen, *North to the Apricots: The Escape Stories of Sergeant Bruce Crowley D.C.M. New Zealand Prisoner of War Greece and Germany 1941-1943*, p. 59.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> McDonald, *Jack Hinton V.C. A Man Amongst Men*, p. 126.

<sup>197</sup> McGibbon, *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Military History*, p. 441.

food, tea, chocolate and cigarettes.<sup>198</sup> An article written in June 1941 on the work that the British Red Cross was doing in Europe explained that they had an elaborate index card system pertaining to POWs. At that point in the war they had six million cards, plus their staff had grown from the initial thirty at the start of the war to 3650.<sup>199</sup>

Red Cross parcels played a vital role in men escaping as it gave them the energy to escape, as well as much needed supplies for the journey. Unfortunately the Germans knew this and would sabotage the Red Cross rations. In many camps guards would put a bayonet through every tin so that soldiers could not hoard it to escape with. Stan Martin, a medical corpsman, recalls that soup was the obvious problem in this case but that "it didn't matter if they bayoneted a tin of meat loaf because it would last a few days anyway."<sup>200</sup> This revelation caused considerable distress for the Red Cross who were doing all they could to help these men survive behind the wire. A telegram from the High Commissioner in London was sent to the Minister of External Affairs in Wellington informing him of this alarming news. The telegram stated that:

International Red Cross Committee report Germans have issued order forbidding foodstuff reserves in camps. Newly arrived consignments will be pierced so as to enforce immediate consumption...British Red Cross Society seriously disturbed by this information.<sup>201</sup>

Regrettably there was not a lot that could be done about this. Plus, the Red Cross had a further substantial concern; that some prisoners were not even

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> John Kennedy, "The Work of the Red Cross in War," *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 89, no. 4590 (1941): p. 486.

<sup>200</sup> Tony Williams, *Anzacs. Stories from New Zealanders at War* (Auckland: Hodder Moa Beckett, 2000), pp. 105-06.

<sup>201</sup> AD1 1400. (339/1/71). Casualties – POWs Red Cross supplies.

receiving these parcels. A report put out by the Red Cross on the rights of prisoners of war highlights the fact that more and more prisoners were complaining about camp leaders not cooperating in regards to Red Cross supplies. It states that:

... the cooperation of the camp leaders in matters of distribution of relief supplies and especially of clothing and boots etc. frequently remain nothing but a dead letter...Delegates and camp leaders also reported that it had become a regular practice to claim from a prisoner an old garment, even if originally from a Red Cross consignment, before a new issue would be granted ...<sup>202</sup>

The Germans were claiming that, as a result of aerial bombardment, large stocks of their own had been destroyed and so believed it their right to dispose of reserve prisoner clothing however they saw fit. Understandably this caused significant protest from the International Red Cross.<sup>203</sup>

Many men arrived at prison camps with injuries that required medical attention. For some this was life and death. Not receiving Red Cross parcels meant that men were not receiving the required nutrients to regain their health. This in turn meant that they were trapped in the camps and could not attempt escape even if they wanted to. James Ian Walker, a bomber air gunner from Wellington, was shot down in Belgium and ended up in a German prison camp. He sustained some serious injuries as a result of the crash landing, resulting in his leg being in plaster up to his hip. After four or five months he became concerned that his leg was not healing, it was still broken, raw and painful. Realising that he needed food with nutritional value he began trading items from his Red Cross parcel for tins of cheese. He would mix the cheese with the potatoes that the Germans rationed out. Eventually

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<sup>202</sup> AD1 1400. (339/1/71). Casualties – POWs Red Cross supplies.

<sup>203</sup> AD1 1400. (339/1/71). Casualties – POWs Red Cross supplies.

his leg began to heal and the plaster was removed. As soon as he could Walker began exercising to get his leg and ankle working properly again. After a while he says that he “became quite fit again....I then began to think about the possibility of escaping.”<sup>204</sup>

New arrivals in camp often posed a further problem on already limited food supplies. Noel John Masters records in his diary that, after a batch of new prisoners arrived at the camp, cereal rations were cut by 25 per cent.<sup>205</sup> Starvation resulted in some men taking more drastic measures in order to eat. Rex Thompson, a driver in the New Zealand Army Service Corps, was held in a camp in Lamsdorf, Germany. The prison guards would let their German shepherds loose on the Russians being held next to Thompson’s camp for sport. He remembers that on one particular morning, “as the dog went to grab him [a Russian prisoner], he just grabbed his front paws and broke both legs. They said that you could hear the dog howl for a while, and within minutes the dog was skinned and eaten.”<sup>206</sup> Between them, the Red Cross and the escape committees provided invaluable assistance to men who wanted to escape. Without the supplies and coordination available they would have had a hard time of getting away.

### **Tunneling out**

Tunnels would prove to be a very time consuming and dangerous method of escape as so much could go wrong due to the unpredictable nature of a tunnel. However, Hall describes tunneling as “the escaper’s favourite indoor

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<sup>204</sup> Richard Campbell and Peter Liddle, *For Five Shillings a Day. Personal Histories of World War 2* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2000), p. 335.

<sup>205</sup> MS-Papers-7150. Masters, Noel John, 1913-1987: Prisoner of War Diary.

<sup>206</sup> Campbell and Liddle, *For Five Shillings a Day. Personal Histories of World War 2*, p. 316.

sport. If it succeeded, tunneling out of camp outwitted the enemy more spectacularly than any other type of escape.”<sup>207</sup> Nearly every permanent prison camp in Italy and Germany had tunnels that had at least been started, if not used. More often than not these tunnels were discovered before being finished, and were consequently blown up or blocked at the entrance.<sup>208</sup> Although unsuccessful in providing escape, these tunnels continued to boost morale. According to Hall, “escapes – successful, failed or future – had the strongest moral effect on everybody inside a prison camp”.<sup>209</sup>

Captain Donald G Brash of 24 Battalion was held in a camp in Weinsberg, Germany, along with other New Zealand, Australian, British and South African prisoners. They started a tunnel under the floorboards in one of the rooms in the Australian barracks. All of the work had been completed. The tunnel had reached the outer perimeter wire and within a couple of feet of the surface. The men were waiting for a moonless night to make their break for freedom. Unfortunately it had been raining heavily for two days leading up to the selected night of escape. Unbeknown to them, half way through the tunnel at the deepest section, it was flooded to the roof and the men had to backtrack and abandon the plan.<sup>210</sup> Things got even worse when, two days later, a couple of Australians broke a window during a boisterous wrestling match. German guards came in to repair the window and had to move a wardrobe. To the surprise of the guards it was completely immovable due to being full of soil from the tunnel. Brash recalls that “then ensued much

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<sup>207</sup> Hall, "Escapes," p. 8.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>210</sup> 2003.167 – Personal recollection: Prisoner of War – Germany WWII

shouting, blowing of whistles and barking of dogs as the full guard moved in and their search revealed the tunnel under the floorboards.”<sup>211</sup>

Brigadier James Hargest and his comrades were being held in Campo 12, a 13<sup>th</sup> century castle near Florence. After multiple attempts to escape over the walls Hargest concluded that “having by this time exhausted all the possibilities for going over the top, we turned our attention on the only thing left to us – to go underground.”<sup>212</sup> A plan was soon put into motion. In the castle’s chapel it was discovered that there was a gap behind the lift well used to carry food up from the kitchen. If they could lower the lift it could be used as a platform in which to stand on and break through the wall and tunnel under. A false panel was then made to conceal the hole when the men were not working on it.<sup>213</sup> Work began on the tunnel in September and was finally ready the following March. As with the tunnel that Brash worked on, this tunnel too filled with water after torrential rain. Hargest wrote that “a regular river flowed down the tunnel forming a lake. Two of us went down and made a sump to hold as much as possible, and to place timber so that the water ran rather than dropped.”<sup>214</sup> Despite setbacks like this the day of escape finally arrived in the final days of March. On an overcast evening the men began their hard goodbyes to comrades who would stay behind and made for the tunnel entrance. Six men would make their break for freedom that night. One by one they slid through the entrance. A blanket was placed over the exit hole to avoid obvious marks left after they had crawled out. The hole was then concealed and they were free. Hargest recalls that “not even

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<sup>211</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>212</sup> Hargest, *Farewell Campo 12*, p. 111.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 112-15.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

the need for action could suppress the wave of exaltation that swept over me. Here was the successful achievement of a year of planning and seven months of toil...I have never been able to recapture in retrospect the fullness of that moment."<sup>215</sup>

### **Working parties and impersonation**

Impersonation as a method of escape was not frequently used due to the obvious dangers of being discovered. It basically involved imitating a visitor to the camp, such as a Red Cross representative, an interpreter or an official. Hall remarks that "although very risky, [it] usually worked for those bold enough to try it".<sup>216</sup> One bold New Zealand sergeant escaped a Greek hospital by walking into the lobby and putting on the peaked hat and greatcoat of a visiting German officer. The sentry outside was too busy saluting to notice that it was not the officer himself but an impersonator.<sup>217</sup> Another New Zealand officer, Captain Webster, made a similar escape but from an Italian prison hospital. He wore a blue air force shirt and hospital trousers. As he walked passed the sentry he lit a cigarette, letting it casually droop from his mouth. The sentry paid no attention and Webster was able to escape.<sup>218</sup>

Daniel Riddiford, captured at Sidi Rezegh, managed to get hold of a French uniform to aid him in his escape. Immediately following roll call on the selected morning of escape Riddiford raced back to his barracks where he quickly changed into the French uniform that he had acquired. He grabbed his knapsack, which held his rations and spare clothing, and headed towards

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid., p. 135.

<sup>216</sup> Hall, "Escapes," p. 9.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

the gate where he would meet up with a small group of Frenchmen who would be leaving the camp as a work party. Luckily for Riddiford he could speak French, which made the disguise all the more believable. He produced a forged work pass and walked straight through the gate unchallenged.<sup>219</sup> Riddiford remembers that moment as “a triumph over the Germans.”<sup>220</sup>

### **Jumping the fence**

For those in the right place at the right time jumping the fence was a bold and daring way to escape. As McGibbon writes “the escape-minded wasted no time in looking for loopholes in their confinement.”<sup>221</sup> However, although this method of escape may have seemed the most straight forward, it was highly dangerous. As Hall put it: “the prisoners chance of escape ‘over the wall’ was the slimmest of all the possible means”.<sup>222</sup> Nonetheless there were some success stories. Jack Hinton, captured on Crete, and fellow prisoner Dennis Gallagher made such a bold move ‘over the wall’. This was not the first escape attempt made by Hinton and would not be the last. They had a difficult fence to climb – a five-metre high barbed wire fence with around two metres of barbed wire entanglements beyond that. To top it all off there was an electric trip wire before even getting to the fence. Timing would be tight as well with about ninety seconds of darkness before a searchlight would swing by. Hinton and Gallagher picked a pitch-black night to attempt their escape. In one swift motion they jumped the electric trip wire, scaled the fence and maneuvered through the entangled barbed wire. Amazed at their luck both

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<sup>219</sup> Riddiford, *Committed to Escape*, p. 103.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>221</sup> McGibbon, Ian in Hutching, *Inside Stories: New Zealand Prisoners of War Remember*, pp. 38-39.

<sup>222</sup> Hall, "Escapes," p. 8.

men raced towards a nearby forest for cover. They soon discovered a train station and jumped into one of the wagons. After a couple of days of travelling they were abruptly awakened when their train hit another wagon. Before they knew it the train door was opened and they were discovered.<sup>223</sup>

Opportunities for a quick getaway over the fence were not common though, and those planning on escaping this way had to spend considerable time planning. One such example is of Major Armstrong's escape from Camp 38, thirty miles South East of Florence. Captured at Sidi Azeiz in 1940, Armstrong and his comrades made multiple unsuccessful escape attempts while at Camp 38. Through these failures the Heath-Robinson Scheme was born. The South Western corner of the prison quarters almost touched the road. Between the building and the road there was a stone wall with a barbed wire fence above it.<sup>224</sup> The idea behind this scheme was that "by means of a contrivance acting as a derrick we would be carried out on a rope on an angle so that we would be suspended over the road at a point opposite the corner of the building. We would the drop down the rope and gallop along the road to the west."<sup>225</sup> Ropes were made out of sheets tied together and the derrick was constructed using three six foot doors from a cupboard. Determined to escape before their resolve faded, Armstrong and his fellow escapee, Captain Allan Yeoman, set the date of departure for four days time.<sup>226</sup> Enlisting the help of fellow prisoners the two men made their escape. Armstrong writes:

With the flutter of a flock of birds, the rope dropped in front of our eyes. We inserted the prong between the knots, caught hold of our

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<sup>223</sup> McDonald, *Jack Hinton V.C. A Man Amongst Men*, pp. 128-32.

<sup>224</sup> Armstrong, *Life without Ladies*, p. 59.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.

ropes and floated out into space... I realised that I was still smoking my last minute cigarette and spat it out at the sentry who was raising the cry of "Alarme! Alarme!" at the top of his voice.<sup>227</sup>

The guards began shooting at Yeoman and Armstrong as they dropped down onto the road and began running for their lives.

In the panic-stricken and desperate dash down the slight decline to the road-block, I was travelling so fast that, with the heavy pack on my back, I was so completely out of control when I tried to negotiate the small opening, that I blundered straight into the mass of wire. I felt an agonising pain in my left hand as I frantically tugged myself free. I turned left and through a hole in the hedge and there was Allan waiting at the agreed rendezvous.<sup>228</sup>

The two men continued running for their lives down the hill as the shouts from the camp became more and more distant. They were free!<sup>229</sup> Years later Allan Yeoman revealed that the only reason they were not shot that day was that the sentry was late back for duty. Instead of heading to his barracks to retrieve his rifle, the sentry grabbed the first one he found not knowing that it was faulty.<sup>230</sup>

Other 'spur of the moment' escape attempts over the wire involved hitching rides in disposal trucks leaving prison camps. Some prisoners had themselves wrapped amongst bundles of rubbish and thrown in the back of rubbish trucks. Others hung under carts in rope slings in an attempt to escape.<sup>231</sup>

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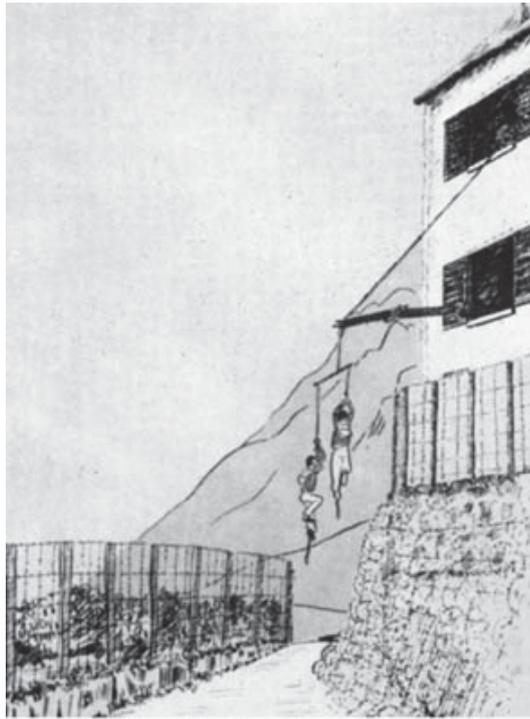
<sup>227</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> MS-Papers-10103-01. Yeoman family: Papers relating to Allan Yeoman.

<sup>231</sup> Hall, "Escapes," p. 9.



The 'Heath Robinson' scheme devised and described by Major C. N. Armstrong. Two escapers swung on a pivoted bar and dropped over the inside wire

**Image 3.1 The Heath-Robinson Scheme.**<sup>232</sup>

(Reproduced with permission from the Ministry for Culture and Heritage).

### **The Italian Armistice**

POWs held in Italian camps had a lucky break at the beginning of September 1943 when Mussolini signed a temporary armistice with the Allies. W. Wynne Mason explains that by 1943 many Italian civilians and camp guards considered the war with contempt. He argues that "it was clear the latter would need little inducement to leave the forces and return to their homes".<sup>233</sup> Private Donald Chambers, a member of 24 Battalion who was captured in North Africa, was in Campo Centosette when he heard the news.

He wrote:

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<sup>232</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>233</sup> Mason, *Prisoners of War*, p. 274.

It was on Wednesday the 8<sup>th</sup> of September, 1943 around 8.30 pm that we first heard rumours of the armistice between Italy and the Allies. Although we had had so many months as prisoners of war with rumours so prominently (and often misleading) a part of our lives, nevertheless the possibility of there being truth in this story, stirred up those previously prepressed emotions that were reserved for this occasion.<sup>234</sup>

It was a confusing time for these men. On the one hand they had hope that they would gain their freedom, on the other the threat that the Germans might turn up and take over the camp. Hearing that Italy had signed the Armistice, numerous Italian guards deserted their posts and left the camp. Many of the prisoners took this opportunity to escape over the wire as well. In fact, some of the Italian guards even helped the prisoners escape. Chambers recalls that “several of the guards had assured the men that they could break free if they so wished and consequently the wire in several places was tampered with and staples were removed from our prison walls.”<sup>235</sup> However, the potential threat of the Germans was always in the back of their minds. At one point the camp leader called them in to warn them not to act foolishly, but stressed “the impending danger of the Germans overtaking the camp and transporting us to Germany.”<sup>236</sup> With these concerns in mind Chambers and his fellow prisoners fled the camp for the village of San Giorgio di Nagaro, heavily laden with Red Cross parcels, kit bags and extra clothing.<sup>237</sup> It is estimated that around 20 000 Allied prisoners of war found themselves walking free of Italian camps, not knowing whether

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<sup>234</sup> 2013.104.3 – Notes: Donald W. W. Chambers - WWII

<sup>235</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>236</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>237</sup> *ibid.*

to remain of make their way back to their own lines.<sup>238</sup> It was a bittersweet moment for them. Chambers recalls that:

It was difficult for us to realise what just happened. Our day had arrived...the day when the gates should open and we, no longer confined so miserably behind wire, be free men. Yes, the gates had opened...opened not onto the roadway home and to complete liberty but rather opened to a new life – fugitive, parasite, escapees...fugitives and escapees from the German Military Command – parasites upon the starving Italian people.<sup>239</sup>

Captain Robert M Wood, attached to 19 Battalion and captured at Ruwaiset Ridge, was being held at Bari and Fonte d'Amore in the Po Valley, Italy. He too heard the news of Mussolini's armistice and did not initially believe it. As with the camp that Donald Chambers was held in, many Italian guards abandoned their posts and left the camp. Wood wrote that at "about 10am some guards dropped their rifles and left ... as the day advanced more and more Italians departed, and I began to feel it would be a good idea to do likewise."<sup>240</sup> Once again the Italians were on the side of the prisoners, giving them advice to leave the camp, as there were rumours that the Germans would be arriving to take over. However, unlike at Chambers camp, they did not have the same amount of time to escape. Shortly after being told this a platoon of Germans arrived and those caught jumping the fence were shot. Wood was trapped once again and told that they were to be sent to Germany immediately.<sup>241</sup>

Wood knew that the time to escape was now, before they left for Germany. Over the next week they devised a plan to escape over a ramp behind the German's living quarters. However, they realised that the wire to

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<sup>238</sup> MS-Papers-9711-08. WWII AIF POW Free men of Europe part Two.

<sup>239</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>240</sup> 2003.339 – Diary: Captain Richard M Wood – Prisoner of War: Italy – WWII

<sup>241</sup> *ibid.*

the rear of their hut had been cut, so in a spur of the moment decision they jumped the fence. Wood later wrote that:

shortly after some firing of the MGs took place around the corner of the wall and we could only assume that we had been very lucky and that the guards from our stretch of wall had been attracted off their beat by the attempt of someone else to escape over the adjoining wall.<sup>242</sup>

At Campo 146 in Sosasco Laurence John Reid, captured in Egypt with 24 Battalion, experienced the same thing. The prisoners were told to stop working and were called into the courtyard. The Italian officer “then informed us that the soldiers who had been guarding us were now there to protect us – but did not say who from!”<sup>243</sup> The following day word came that the German forces were at a nearby town. Once again the Italian guards “flung away their rifles and changed into civvy clothes, then departed to parts unknown – and were never seen in the area again.”<sup>244</sup> Reid and his fellow prisoners followed suit and left the camp. In an attempt to save his own skin, the Italian officer in charge of the camp had tried to persuade them to stay and hand themselves over to the Germans. Suffice to say that his efforts did not work. The liberated prisoners left him ‘lamenting’ in the camp and headed to a nearby farm where the villagers made them very welcome.<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>243</sup> 1999.1231 – Memoirs: Laurence J. Reid – Fiji, North Africa and POW - WWII

<sup>244</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>245</sup> *ibid.*



**Image 3.2 Camp 78, Sulmona, after the Italian armistice.**<sup>246</sup>

Photo taken in 1943 by H R Dixon. View of POWs taking Red Cross parcels before escaping to the hills after the Italian armistice. Alexander Turnbull Library. (Reproduced with permission from the Alexander Turnbull Library).

### **Bribing German Guards**

Towards the end of the war it became increasingly possible to bribe German guards. Monteath explains that by early 1945 “German morale had decayed so severely” that many guards became corruptible,<sup>247</sup> particularly once America and Britain began aerial bombing of Germany and chaos took hold of

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<sup>246</sup> Dixon, H R, fl 1942. Prisoners of war at Camp 78, Sulmona, after the Italian armistice - Photograph taken by H R Dixon. New Zealand. Department of Internal Affairs. War History Branch :Photographs relating to World War 1914-1918, World War 1939-1945, occupation of Japan, Korean War, and Malayan Emergency. Ref: DA-10590-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.  
<http://natlib.govt.nz/records/23012980>

<sup>247</sup> Monteath, *P.O.W. Australian Prisoners of War in Hitler's Reich*, p. 247.

prison camps.<sup>248</sup> The older generation, who had experienced the Great War, were particularly dejected and wanted it to end. They did not relish the inevitable loss of another war and the punishments that would follow. As Monteath put it, “nothing was to be gained from displays of cruelty against the representatives of the forces who would soon rule the German roost.”<sup>249</sup>

Bribery came in many forms and at times, those aiding would-be escapees were doctors who had compassion on men that they had been tending to in the German prison hospitals. One example of this is the account of Walter Babington Thomas, a New Zealander who was captured at Crete and held in a camp in Athens. Thomas was severely wounded and spent months rehabilitating in a prison hospital, during which time he became rather friendly with the hospital staff. This camp had a rule that prisoners who died had to be buried only hours after the death certificate was signed due to the summer heat. After attending the funeral of a fellow prisoner Thomas had an idea that he called the ‘coffin plan’. The funeral had taken place outside of the camp and out of respect for the deceased the German guards had remained in the truck so that the ceremony was British. What happened next was the nail in the coffin for Thomas’ master plan. The priests conducting the funeral explained that “for the sake of economy, bodies were removed from the army coffins before the grave was filled in. All the many dead from the hospital had used the same coffin.”<sup>250</sup> Thomas’ plan began to take shape – if he could bribe a doctor to pronounce him dead he could escape from the shallow grave and the Germans would not think to search for

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<sup>248</sup> WAIIW2871 1. Diary of 11026 Major G. C. Weston account of last days as Prisoner of War in Germany (Red Cross).

<sup>249</sup> Monteath, *P.O.W. Australian Prisoners of War in Hitler's Reich*, pp. 247-48.

<sup>250</sup> Thomas, *Dare to Be Free*, pp. 66-67.

him. The next day he approached some of the Allied doctors who were intrigued by the plan but reluctant to participate. Eventually, a young New Zealand doctor, named Ron Granger, agreed to help. Half an hour later Thomas was in a hospital bed with rumors circulating that he had very high temperature. Over the course of the week his 'condition' deteriorated. Thomas writes that "at three o'clock in the morning of Friday, 14<sup>th</sup> September 1944, I died peacefully in my bed from pneumonia."<sup>251</sup> He was pronounced dead, everything going to plan, until a senior German doctor, who was not in the know about the plan, turned up to inspect the corpse. He bent over Thomas' body and put a hand out to touch his face. Thomas let out a snort of laughter and opened his eyes to see a very startled German doctor, who hurriedly stepped back in fright then burst into uncontrollable laughter. Luckily for Thomas the German doctors found his escape attempt so humorous that they took no action over this foiled attempt.<sup>252</sup>

### **Those who did not wish to escape**

It is important to note that not everybody who found themselves behind the wire had a burning desire to get away. It is believed by historians that as little as 5 per cent of prisoners were actually committed to escaping.<sup>253</sup> Monteath holds that due to films and television programmes, such as *The Great Escape* (1963) and *Hogan's Heroes* (1965-1971), a myth in our popular culture has emerged that every prisoner spent their days plotting escape.<sup>254</sup> Military historian S. P. Mackenzie agrees with this idea, arguing that Colditz, a

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., pp. 70-71.

<sup>253</sup> Caulfield, *War Behind the Wire. Australian Prisoner of War*, p. 224.

<sup>254</sup> Peter Monteath, "Australian Pow in German Captivity in the Second World War," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 54, no. 3 (2008): p. 422.

medieval German castle used for holding captured British officers considered security risks, has given a false impression on what life was like behind the wire. He notes that “the problem with the Colditz Myth is that it drastically oversimplifies and distorts the general experience in Germany”.<sup>255</sup> He goes on to argue that “the emphasis on escapes, which in any case is less pervasive than is commonly assumed, has meant less exciting aspects of the POW experience have been underplayed or ignored”.<sup>256</sup> Many who could not or did not want to escape rebelled in other ways. One prisoner described his work ethic in the Stalag 344 as ‘efficient inefficiency’. As the Germans relied more and more on prisoners working in areas such as factories they did all they could to sabotage this work.<sup>257</sup> Reasons for those who had no interest in breaking out of prison camps varied – some were broken by their capture while others abhorred escapees because of the punishments inflicted on those left behind. For many though, they did not see the risk worth their lives.<sup>258</sup> These men cannot be blamed for feeling this way, as punishments would result in prison life becoming even more intolerable. A common punishment for those left behind was the loss of the much-coveted Red Cross parcels, often for weeks at a time. They could also lose time spent out doors, incur fines or be given sentences of imprisonment.<sup>259</sup> By 1944 the Germans were becoming increasingly intolerant of escapists. A report conducted in May 1944, by the Information and Records Branch using prisoners mail, on conditions in German camps revealed that prison guards were becoming less

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<sup>255</sup> Mackenzie, *The Colditz Myth: British and Commonwealth Prisoners of War in Nazi Germany*, p. 2.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>257</sup> AD1 1402. Casualties – Prisoners of War- Censorship Reports – Extracts from mail from POW and Civilian Internees in German and Japanese Hands.

<sup>258</sup> Caulfield, *War Behind the Wire. Australian Prisoner of War*, p. 224.

<sup>259</sup> Hall, "Escapes," p. 32.

accepting of attempted escapes. It states that a new German order “allows the guards to shoot ... without calling a command or warning if escape is suspected. This allows them to shoot indiscriminately under the ‘Escape’ pretext”.<sup>260</sup> Cammandant Calcaterra, the disciplinarian who ran Campo PG 57, took great pride in knowing that the three-metre high barbed wire fence had prevented anyone from escaping. He encouraged brutality amongst the guards, and prisoners caught attempting to escape were shot.<sup>261</sup>

Escapes from Axis camps were considered a serious threat to security and a massive drain on the manpower involved in recapturing escapees. As a result punishments became harsher to deter prisoners from escaping.<sup>262</sup> Walter Thomas, held in the German run Salonika camp, recalls the punishment inflicted after a failed escape attempt. He writes: “three men had been shot out of hand and their bodies left for days in the hot sun, while for other escapes soldiers had been bound with barbed wire and whipped as a warning to all.”<sup>263</sup> Others caught escaping were given prison sentences of up to three months and were sometimes manhandled as well.<sup>264</sup> Often escape attempts meant reprisals for the entire camp. According to historian Vasilis Vourkoutiotis mass reprisals were forbidden, however, escapes “often resulted in a general curtailment of privileges for all prisoners in the camp in

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<sup>260</sup> AD1 1402. Casualties – Prisoners of War- Censorship Reports – Extracts from mail from POW and Civilian Internees in German and Japanese Hands.

<sup>261</sup>MS-Papers-8097. New Zealand Ex-Prisoners-of-War Association. Wellington Branch.

<sup>262</sup> Vourkoutiotis, *Prisoner of War and the German High Command*, p. 78.

<sup>263</sup> Thomas, *Dare to Be Free*, p. 85.

<sup>264</sup> Hall, "Escapes," pp. 32-33.

question".<sup>265</sup> Punishments inflicted on recaptured prisoners will be discussed in further detail in the following chapter. To avoid harsh punishments upon recapture, those on the run would have to think on their feet and use whatever means necessary in order to survive life as a fugitive in enemy territory.

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<sup>265</sup> Vasilis Vourkoutiotis, "What the Angels Saw: Red Cross and Protecting Power Visits to Anglo-American Pows, 1939-45," *Journal of Contemporary History* 40, no. 4 (2005): p. 701.

## Chapter Four: Life on the run

*“To all prisoners of war! Escaping from prison camps is no longer a sport! All police and military guards have been given the most strict orders to shoot on sight all suspected persons.”*

*- Poster displayed by German authorities in POW camps<sup>266</sup>*

Those lucky enough to escape found themselves on a precarious journey back to their own lines. Avoiding recapture was constantly on their minds, which added unwanted extra pressure to every decision that they made. Escapists had to make life and death choices based on whether they could trust the locals or not. Unfortunately many men found themselves back behind the wire due to trusting the wrong people. Meanwhile, others only survived because of the risk these people took to help them. In her book on New Zealand POWs who fought with the Italian resistance, Susan Jacobs argues that “successful escapers learned very quickly to cast aside any preconceptions or arrogance. Being physically fit and able to get by in the outdoors was not enough to ensure survival”.<sup>267</sup> Being on the run in enemy occupied land meant adapting to the environment. This required imagination and sensitivity due to the long periods of monotonous time spent waiting when it was too dangerous to move.<sup>268</sup> This chapter will examine what happened to those prisoners fortunate enough to make a successful escape. As the majority of New Zealanders were held in Germany, Italy and Greece, this chapter will look at what it was like for men making their way across these countries to gain their freedom, as well as the assistance they received

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<sup>266</sup> Caulfield, *War Behind the Wire. Australian Prisoner of War*, p. 224.

<sup>267</sup> Jacobs, *Fighting with the Enemy. New Zealand P.O.W's and the Italian Resistance*, p. 94.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

from locals along the way. The role played by monasteries and local churches in hiding escapists will be examined as well. Finally, this chapter will discuss the punishments inflicted on recaptured prisoners.

### **MI9 – The British Underground Railroad**

On 23 December 1939 a new branch of British intelligence was created. Called MI9 the purpose was to provide escape and evasion support to servicemen who had been captured, including airmen shot down over enemy territory. MI9 was born through the experiences of men who had been prisoners of war during the Great War. It was through them returning with vital intelligence that the real value of escaped POWs was seen to the war effort.<sup>269</sup> As a result steps were put in place to assist future POWs in their journey back to their own lines. British historian Norman Davies describes how MI9 “established an underground ‘railway’ – that is, a line of safe houses – stretching from Belgium to the Pyrenees, along which some 33,000 Allied servicemen passed.”<sup>270</sup> In his book titled *Great Escapes of World War II* Richard Garret argues that these escape lines seemed like more of an adventure story written by someone such as John Buchan than real life. He writes that “it has all the essential ingredients: a great deal of danger, people who seem to be what they are not, journeys over difficult terrain, plenty of villains, and codes, passwords...plus of course, heroism.”<sup>271</sup>

In her book on MI9, Dr. Barbara Bond discusses the idea of escape-mindedness as part of the war effort. Escape-mindedness was a term coined

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<sup>269</sup> Barbara A. Bond, *Great Escapes* (Glasgow: The Times, 2015), p. 13.

<sup>270</sup> Norman Davies, *Europe at War 1939-1945: No Simple Victory* (Oxford: Macmillan, 2006), p. 270.

<sup>271</sup> Garret, *Great Escapes of World War 2: And Some That Failed to Make It*, p. 135.

by Colonel Norman Richard Crockatt, the appointed Head of MI9, to describe his frontline philosophy. His staff were regularly briefed on this idea and became the primary aim of MI9 training. Bond explains, “they stressed that, if captured, it was an officer’s duty to attempt to escape and, not only officers, it was a duty which extended to all ranks.”<sup>272</sup> This was all good in theory but the question remained as to how these servicemen were to escape. It was Christopher Clayton Hutton’s job, as technical officer, to devise a fool-proof plan to smuggle escape aids into prison camps in order to assist escapees. MI9 was very aware that men taken captive had little to no possessions to help them escape, so it became their mission to provide these needed articles.<sup>273</sup> According to Bond’s research, Hutton and his team smuggled escape aids such as maps and money inside items like board games, chess sets, dart boards, pencils, gramophone records and sports equipment.<sup>274</sup> Bond describes an example of how a board game was used to smuggle in maps as follows:

Monopoly boards began to be manufactured with escape maps hidden inside them. Those containing maps of Italy had a full stop after Marylebone Station and those containing maps of Norway, Sweden and Germany had a full stop after Mayfair...this system of coding also ensured that the appropriate games were sent to prisoners of war in the appropriate geographical area.<sup>275</sup>

Now that the method of smuggling items into camps had been devised, Hutton had to work out how to get them into camps. He did not want prisoners getting caught and therefore losing privileges such as Red Cross parcels. As well as the Red Cross, prisoners also received parcels from family

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<sup>272</sup> Bond, *Great Escapes*, p. 27.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

and friends, which MI9 did not want to interfere with. In response to this they invented entirely fictitious organisations with whom they could smuggle these games and other equipment in containing the hidden escape aids. The main organisation that they used was the Prisoners' Leisure Hours Fund, described as 'a Voluntary Fund for the purpose of sending Comforts, Games, Books etc. to British Prisoners of War'. To create an even more authentic cover for these organisations they designed a fabricated headed notepaper and a fake address in London.<sup>276</sup>

There were a series of principal escape routes arranged by MI9, with three main routes out of north-west Europe. The first, commonly known as the Pat Line, focused on getting escapees through Vichy France and then on to Gibraltar. The next, titled Comet Route, also ended up at Gibraltar but veered in a more westerly course. Lastly, there was Shelburne that left from either Rennes or Paris to a small port called Plouha where the Royal Navy would pick them up.<sup>277</sup> Along these routes were a series of safe houses that concealed escaped POWs. Some of these were sympathetic families, others supportive individuals. One example is of Eva Trenchard, a local woman who owned a tea shop in Monte Carlo. She sheltered about twenty four servicemen until the Germans marched into town and tightened their grip on matters.<sup>278</sup> Another example is of a priest in Abbeville, named the Abbé Carpentier, who was dissatisfied with his war effort. He realised that he had two means of provision. The first was a printing press and the second was a talent for forgery. With these he created an industry producing fake identity

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid., pp. 104-05.

<sup>277</sup> Garrett, *Great Escapes of World War 2: And Some That Failed to Make It*, p. 140.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid.

cards.<sup>279</sup> These are just two examples within the vast machine that made up MI9's escape initiative, each one vital to the cause.

Although MI9 was hugely successful, in 1943 miscommunication had deadly consequences. At this point in the war more than 80,000 British servicemen were being held in Italian prison camps, with an advancing Allied force heading towards the Italian mainland. Mussolini was about to sign the Italian Armistice. Crockatt made a decision to advise the POWs to stay put in their camps. He was afraid that the fleeing escapees would get caught up in the chaos of the impending battle. Using a secret code over the BBC radio he informed POWs on June 7 that "in the event of an Allied invasion of Italy, officers commanding prison camps will ensure that prisoners of war remain within the camp".<sup>280</sup> In his article on this disastrous decision Justin Ewers writes "and so the unthinkable came to pass. When their Italian prison camp guards began leaving their posts, many British officers, determined to follow orders, told their fellow prisoners not to leave".<sup>281</sup> Although more than 11,000 prisoners managed to escape before the Germans arrived, more than 2000 remained behind and are estimated to have died in German camps.<sup>282</sup>

### **On the run in Italy**

Crossing Italy in an attempt to get back to Allied forces was a serious and risky endeavor, as escapists could never tell who was friend or foe. Escapist Allan Yeoman writes that "it was, of course, one thing to get out of a POW camp, and quite another to make one's departure from Italy. There still

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<sup>279</sup> Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>280</sup> Justin Ewers, "British Intelligence Blunder in 1943 Sent 2000 British Pows to Their Deaths," *World War II* 24, no. 6 (2010): p. 8.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

remained the great unknown factor – would another country help or hinder us in our effort to return to the Allies.”<sup>283</sup> Many Italians did in fact aid escapist, often at great cost to their own safety. New Zealanders R. H. Ryman and Gordon M. McLeod ended up on the run in the vicinity of San Dona di Piave after escaping from working camp 107-4. Not long after reaching the River Po they met up with a group of Italians who informed them that the Italians had capitulated. They alerted Ryman and McLeod to the fact that “it was impossible to go south as all the roads and bridges were guarded by the Germans”.<sup>284</sup> They decided to head back towards their working camp as they knew of several Italian families with whom they could stay. They recalled that one day “one of the Italians rushed into the house screaming in the usual manner ‘Tedesci’ so charging outside we spotted about four Jerry trucks charging down the road.”<sup>285</sup> They made a hasty exit off the premises and hid in a grain field until dawn. Unfortunately this incident was too unnerving for the Italian family and the men had to leave – “not before they had given us a good feed and a special loaf of bread they had made.”<sup>286</sup>

Arch Scott was another serviceman who gained his freedom when the Italian guards deserted their posts following the Armistice. After the initial excitement Scott recalls that “Picnic time was over and the biggest job was still finding hiding places for everyone”.<sup>287</sup> Fascists had replaced the absent Italian guards and had begun interrogating Italian families in an attempt to

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<sup>283</sup> Allan Yeoman, *The Long Road to Freedom* (Auckland: Random Century New Zealand Ltd, 1991), p. 99.

<sup>284</sup> WAIIW2871 1. Hand written joint account of experiences and escapes while prisoners of war (Original) – 65813 R. H. Ryman and 13825 Gordon M. McLeod.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>287</sup> Scott, *Dark of the Moon*, p. 79.

find the missing POWs. According to Scott “some fascists would approach people and, speaking in broken Italian, say they were English and wanted to know where their friends were. You’d be surprised how many people fell for it”.<sup>288</sup> Private J. Hutton remembers the chaos that followed the mass exodus of fleeing prisoners from Italian camps. He recalls hearing rumours that “several of our chaps [were] shot on the road...people very panicky”.<sup>289</sup>

If it was not for the generous assistance given to injured escapist by Italian peasants, many would not have survived. Jim Craig leapt from a moving train to gain his freedom. As a result of the fall he broke his collar bone and his leg. To top off his broken bones he also had five bullet holes through the lower part of his body. Fellow POW, Colin Armstrong narrates how Craig “crawled laboriously and painfully to the nearest farm house. The peasants were friendly and took him to the house of an Italian doctor who nursed him back to health and strength”.<sup>290</sup> However, not all Italians had the courage to defy the Germans or Mussolini’s Blackshirts by helping escaped prisoner of war. After all, if they were caught aiding and abetting escaped prisoners they would suffer harsh repercussions themselves. The Italian Blackshirts were capable of committing violent acts to intimidate and spread fear (although no where near the level that was carried out by the Nazis).<sup>291</sup> In his article on Italian war guilt, Filippo Focardi argues that the Blackshirts

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<sup>288</sup> Ibid.

<sup>289</sup> WAIIA2871 1. Extracts from diaries of 15526 Private J. Hutton (20<sup>th</sup> Battalion, NZ Regiment), while prisoner of war in North Africa and Italy and his escape to the Allied Forces through Yugoslavia, 2 December 1941-15 January 1944.

<sup>290</sup> Armstrong, *Life without Ladies*, p. 181.

<sup>291</sup> Filippo Focardi, "Italy's Amnesia over War Guilt: The "Evil Germans" Alibi," *Mediterranean Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2014): p. 8.

“were responsible for numerous acts of violence that are war crimes”.<sup>292</sup> When it came to rounding up enemy resistance they “employed draconian measures of collective punishments that included roundups, the burning of villages, shootings of hostages, massacres, and mass deportations of men, women, and children.”<sup>293</sup> The escaped New Zealanders were well aware of the danger that they were putting their hosts in and did what they could to protect their gracious hosts. For example, Ian Millar and his two Kiwi friends, who were made welcome by the Zanini family, refused to compromise the family’s safety by staying in the house with them and so slept in tents under the grape vines a fair distance from the property.<sup>294</sup> Government records show that there were claims of war crimes made against the Italians by New Zealand. One such protest was made against a man called Davide Onor of Passerelia di Sopra who was charged with collaborating with the enemy (this was after the Armistice).<sup>295</sup> It was maintained that on 27 March 1944 Onor betrayed a New Zealander, Private James McCloud, to the Fascists by leading him straight to them. The documents state that “McCloud tried to escape and was shot by the Fascists whilst running, he died shortly after.”<sup>296</sup>

Many escapists used trains to cover vast distances across Italy, an endeavor which often required nerves of steel. After escaping from Campo 12, Hargest and his fellow fugitives made their way to the local station to attempt buying tickets to Milan. They moved around separately to look less

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<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

<sup>294</sup> Jacobs, *Fighting with the Enemy. New Zealand P.O.W's and the Italian Resistance*, p. 60.

<sup>295</sup> AD1 1406 (339/2/35). Casualties – War crimes – Betraying escaped POWs to enemy.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

conspicuous and to get a better idea of the lie of the land. Finally, one of them ventured to the ticket gate only to return rather unsettled. The ticket lady had said something to him in Italian, of which he could not understand, and so had fled. Hargest writes “we thought it could be nothing more serious than instructions about changing at Bologna, so Miles went over and bought the tickets without any further trouble”.<sup>297</sup> Once on the train an elderly Italian gentleman tried to make conversation. Hargest leant over and said “in a whisper such as I’ve often heard deaf people use: ‘I’m sorry, but I am very deaf.’”<sup>298</sup> This same Italian man unknowingly came to Hargest’s rescue towards the end of the journey. An animated couple attempted to engage him in their discussion to which the elderly man interjected by saying “it’s no use talking to him. He’s deaf. Anyway, I think he’s a German.”<sup>299</sup>

### **On the run in Greece**

In his chapter on ‘Escapes in Greece’ Hall notes that, as in Italy, the

escapers threw themselves on the mercy as well as the hospitality of the local population...Certainly instances can be cited both of betrayal of escaped prisoners by Greeks to the Germans and of magnificent self-sacrifice by Greeks to shield prisoners from discovery and recapture.<sup>300</sup>

This self-sacrifice is remarkable considering, as Hall argues, that the punishment for Allied servicemen and civilian Greeks was not the same. Recaptured prisoners were returned to prison camps; for Greeks helping prisoners the penalty was often death.<sup>301</sup> After escaping from Salonika, Peter Winters evaded recapture by hiding underneath a house for what seemed

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<sup>297</sup> Hargest, *Farewell Campo* 12, p. 137.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>300</sup> Hall, "Escapes," p. 14.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*

like 'an endless afternoon'. Running low on food and starting to cramp up he decided to leave his hideout at sunset. He describes this moment as feeling "very vulnerable and extremely conspicuous" as he was still in his uniform.<sup>302</sup> Winters was saved at that point by "two startlingly attractive girls" who linked arms with him and whisked him to a secluded area. After asking him a series of questions they put him in contact with their cousin who provided him with civilian clothing and food.<sup>303</sup> After a few hours sleep Winters left their company to continue his journey towards Turkey. His luck almost ran out when another Greek civilian offered to show him the road to Stavros. Instead of pointing him in the right direction the man led him to the local police station where Winters had to run for his life.<sup>304</sup>

Thomson was betrayed in a similar way. While hiding in a café a group of Greek youths approached him claiming that they had a boat that could transport them all to Egypt. They explained that they wanted to join the Greek forces fighting in the desert. Thomson recalls that "it all seemed just too easy".<sup>305</sup> Not long into their journey out of Salonika two well-dressed Greeks joined the party, seeming very interested in where Thomson was from. He unconvincingly pretended to be a Yugoslav. They led him to a doorway in a busy market place where a German officer suddenly appeared. Thomson writes "and I was in, back again beneath the protection of the Greater Reich".<sup>306</sup> Winters and Thomson are just two examples of how unreliable the Greeks could be as "it was sometimes several weeks before

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<sup>302</sup> Peter Winter, *Free Lodgings* (Auckland: Reed Books, 1993), p. 52.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

<sup>305</sup> Thompson, *Captive Kiwi*, pp. 84-85.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 87-88.

their guests [escaped prisoners] realised how little reliance could be placed in Greek promises".<sup>307</sup> Greece would prove to be a difficult country to escape from. Although there were many small vessels travelling between the Greek islands and the mainland they were vigilantly monitored. At sea Italian patrol boats could stop these crafts at any time and the owners were at risk of having everything confiscated if escapist were found on board.<sup>308</sup> To many Greeks it just was not worth the risk.

### **On the run in Germany**

Escaped prisoners on the run in Germany had the hardest country to traverse across as it was overrun with police. This included civil police, the SA and the SS, as well as the Gestapo. Every area of the country was monitored, especially the railways, which had their own branch of police to check traveller's papers.<sup>309</sup> Jack Hinton learnt this first hand after escaping from Stalag IXC in Bad Sulza, East Germany. He had escaped by hiding under garbage in the back of a rubbish truck, and then snuck out from under the waste when the truck stopped. Under the cover of darkness he made his way down a country lane when "he saw in front of him a patrol of German soldiers with fierce looking Alsatian dogs on leads".<sup>310</sup> There was nothing he could do but surrender.

Another dead give away was the scruffy presentation given by men on the run. Their clothes revealed the arduous journeys they had taken crawling through swamps and crossing rivers. "The German civilians were generally

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<sup>307</sup> Hall, "Escapes," p. 20.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>310</sup> McDonald, *Jack Hinton V.C. A Man Amongst Men*, pp. 121-22.

clean and tidily dressed” which only caused the escaped prisoner to appear even more conspicuous.<sup>311</sup> The best chance escapist had in leaving the country was with the foreign workers residing in Germany. The vast majority of foreign workers hated the Germans and would happily shelter fugitives. Once out of Germany and into France these workers used an underground movement to provide escapers with their freedom through Spain and Portugal. The difficult part was actually getting in contact with “the right people to begin with in a country where everyone had reason to fear the stool-pigeon and the spy”.<sup>312</sup> The only chance an escaped prisoner had of independently walking out of Germany was if they had escaped near the border. It was possible to cross over to Italy, France, Hungary, Yugoslavia and Switzerland but only if “a few night marches lay between them and freedom”.<sup>313</sup>

1944 saw the creation of ‘death zones’ around Germany in an attempt to deter prison breaks. These were areas where unauthorised trespassers could be shot on sight. Posters were put up around prison camps declaring:

To all prisoners of war, the escape from prison camps is no longer a sport...Escaping prisoners of war, entering such death zones, will certainly lose their lives. They are therefore in constant danger of being mistaken for enemy agents of sabotage groups. Urgent warning is given against making future escapes! In plain English: Stay in the camp where you will be safe! Breaking out of it is now a damned dangerous act. The chances of preserving your life are almost nil!<sup>314</sup>

As can be expected, these posters had very little effect and escapes continued.

This vexed the German high command whose anxiety only grew. Hitler had

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<sup>311</sup> Hall, "Escapes," p. 27.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid.

<sup>314</sup> Monteath, *P.O.W. Australian Prisoners of War in Hitler's Reich*, pp. 300-01.

visions of prisoners united and rising up to overwhelm Germany. Monteath writes that Hitler convinced himself that the only way to keep the POWs was to pass control of the prison camps to Heinrich Himmler and his infamous SS guards in an attempt to restore order.<sup>315</sup> Further to these extreme disciplinary measures, the Gestapo employed civilians as informants in Austria. Some were paid volunteers, but others were individuals forced to do the job. These people were prisoners who were given the choice of helping the Gestapo or being sent to a concentration camp. Informants were placed amongst prisoners of war and suspected partisans or rebels.<sup>316</sup>

### **Help from the pious**

Throughout the war the Vatican City maintained its neutral status. Pope Pius XII condemned both Communism and Nazism but lacked the courage to practically apply his views.<sup>317</sup> The Pope was under the belief that the Nazis would brutally punish church leaders who supported the Jews.<sup>318</sup> That all changed once the Germans occupied Italy after the Armistice in 1943. From then on the Vatican City became a refuge for Jews and escaped Allied prisoners of war.<sup>319</sup> Before the war broke out the Vatican had an international mix of students conducting doctrinal studies at Urban College. This included two New Zealand priests originally from Auckland, Father Owen Snedden and Father John Flanagan. Codenamed Horace and Fanny, these two men would become key players in the Vatican underground.

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<sup>315</sup> Ibid., p. 301.

<sup>316</sup> fMS-Papers-8599-4B. Papers relating to the shooting of George Batt and Jack Clark.

<sup>317</sup> Davies, *Europe at War 1939-1945: No Simple Victory*, p. 288.

<sup>318</sup> Andrew Roberts, *The Storm of War: A New History of the Second World War* (London: Allen Lane, 2009), p. 390.

<sup>319</sup> Davies, *Europe at War 1939-1945: No Simple Victory*, p. 288.

During the Germans nine month occupation of Rome this underground system hid over 3000 Allied escaped prisoners.<sup>320</sup> New Zealand General Bernard Freyberg's son, Paul, was fortunate enough to have been helped by the Vatican underground. Captured at the Battle of Anzio, Paul Freyberg managed to escape to Castel Gandolfo southeast of Rome. Although an extra territory of the Vatican City, Castel Gandolfo was occupied by the Germans. Considering his connection to General Freyberg, Paul would have been a prize trophy if captured. To avoid this he was smuggled into the Vatican City in the boot of a car by members of the underground.<sup>321</sup>

Walter Thomas had an extraordinary experience on Mount Athos, the Holy Mountain of Greece, after escaping from Salonika. Dotted around this area of rugged razor back mountains are a series of orthodox monasteries, one of which he was hoping to find shelter in.<sup>322</sup> Not all of the monks he came across were happy to see him as they greatly feared the Germans, to the point where they indignantly told him to put out a fire he had made on the beach for warmth.<sup>323</sup> Eventually he met up with a group of monks of the Holy Monastery of St. Denys who took him in and gave him food and shelter until he was ready to continue his journey back to Allied lines.<sup>324</sup>

### **Crossing the border into neutral countries**

Once it became clear to the escapists hiding in Italy that the Allied advance was making progress they began taking the risk of leaving the country. There were

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<sup>320</sup> Jacobs, *Fighting with the Enemy. New Zealand P.O.W's and the Italian Resistance*, p. 204.

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 207.

<sup>322</sup> Thomas, *Dare to Be Free*, pp. 154-5.

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

three possible routes for them to take: those in northern Italy could head towards Switzerland; those in north-east Italy had Yugoslavia open to them; and those in central Italy would have to venture through German lines in order to reach an Allied post.<sup>325</sup> It is estimated that, by September 1943, those crossing the border into Switzerland numbered roughly 1000 per day. By the end of that year 39 712 people had found asylum in Switzerland.<sup>326</sup> The number of New Zealanders escaping from Italy to neutral countries such as Switzerland was roughly 12 per cent of the total number at the time of the Armistice (see table 4.1 on following page). In the *Prisoner of War Official History* W. Wynne Mason argues that the reason for this number being so small was that about half of New Zealand prisoners had been held in Campo PG 57. After the Armistice the men in that camp had been transferred to Germany.<sup>327</sup> A further reason for this was that a large number of New Zealand prisoners were in the north-eastern corner of Italy and therefore had to pass through Yugoslavia. German and Fascist guards heavily patrolled the roads and bridges in that area.<sup>328</sup>

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<sup>325</sup> Mason, *Prisoners of War*, p. 301.

<sup>326</sup> MS-Papers-9711-08. WWII AIF POW Free men of Europe part Two.

<sup>327</sup> Mason, *Prisoners of War*, p. 301.

<sup>328</sup> *Ibid.*

<b>The return of Escapers and Evaders up to 30 June 1945</b> <i>Figures prepared by MI Branch of the War Office</i>	
British Commonwealth escapers in Mediterranean area (nearly all from Italy)	11,776
British Commonwealth escapers to Switzerland	4,916
Estimated approximate total of British Commonwealth troops in Italy at the time of the Armistice	70,000
New Zealand POWs in Italy at the time of the Armistice	3700
Approximate number of New Zealand escapers	450

**Table 4.1 The return of Escapers and Evaders up to 30 June 1945** <sup>329</sup>

Source: The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War – Prisoners of War

In a meeting held by the Imperial Prisoners of War Committee in March 1944 it was stated that “prisoners of war who escape to neutral territory are entitled to their freedom and are not in strictness internable”.<sup>330</sup> Making the journey into Switzerland was a tough trek across mountainous terrain, but once there was worth the effort. Those who arrived were physically exhausted, their clothes in rags and tatters. This time is described as the beginning of “a curious new phase of prisoner-of-war life”.<sup>331</sup> They lived in camps of about 200 men and were engaged in a number of different activities. Some men participated in winter sports camps, other took university course or learnt trades. In a press release it was declared by Prime Minister Peter Fraser that the government

<sup>329</sup> Ibid.

<sup>330</sup> EA1 630. Allied Prisoners of War and Civilians in Enemy Territory – General – Prisoners of war escaped from Italy to Switzerland. (88/1/17)

<sup>331</sup> Hall, "Escapes," p. 26.

would be giving financial assistance for all escaped prisoners in Switzerland who wished to partake in university studies. This expense was justified as a way of rehabilitating men into civilian life.<sup>332</sup>



**Image 4.1 Escapees from a prisoner of war camp, Switzerland<sup>333</sup>**

Photo taken on 4 October 1943 by Peter Watson Bates. (Reproduced with permission from the Alexander Turnbull Library).

Nearly all New Zealanders in Switzerland “enjoyed the hospitality of Swiss families and learned to know and love a country in many respects like their own”.<sup>334</sup> Government reports on escaped New Zealand prisoner’s experiences in Switzerland are generally glowing. A report written out in October 1944

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<sup>332</sup> EA1 630. Allied Prisoners of War and Civilians in Enemy Territory – General – Prisoners of war escaped from Italy to Switzerland. (88/1/17)

<sup>333</sup> Bates, Peter Watson, 1920-1993. Escapees from a prisoner of war camp, Switzerland. New Zealand. Department of Internal Affairs. War History Branch :Photographs relating to World War 1914-1918, World War 1939-1945, occupation of Japan, Korean War, and Malayan Emergency. Ref: DA-10660-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.  
<http://natlib.govt.nz/records/22689898>

<sup>334</sup> Hall, "Escapes," p. 26.

states that “in spite of her neutrality, the sympathy of the Swiss people for the allied cause was quite obvious. The hospitality and generosity of the Swiss people towards New Zealand escapees was nothing less than overwhelming”.<sup>335</sup>

### **Punishments for those recaptured**

Article 45 of the Geneva Convention states that “Prisoners of war shall be subject to the laws, regulations and orders in force in the armed forces of the Detaining Power.”<sup>336</sup> Under the Geneva Convention the harshest punishment that could be inflicted on POWs was thirty days imprisonment. Food restrictions could also be used as a method of discipline, although it could not be used if the prisoner’s health was poor. Punishments could not interfere with a prisoner’s mail and they had to be allowed to get regular exercise.<sup>337</sup> However, punishments for escapists were more stringent under the Convention. They “could be subject to a regime of heightened surveillance by the Detaining Power after the punishment was served, but could not thereby be deprived of basic rights given to all prisoners of war.”<sup>338</sup> It is all well and good that the Geneva Convention set out these guidelines to protect POWs, but in reality to what extent were they followed? Historian Charles Rollings argues that “these rules failed to take into account the civil and military cultures of the prospective belligerents.”<sup>339</sup> He proceeds by using the example of how physical and verbal abuse had long been part of the culture within the German forces, behavior that, to the British, was unacceptable. So

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<sup>335</sup> Casualties – POWs escaped. AD1 1400. (339/1/77).

<sup>336</sup> Vourkoutiotis, *Prisoner of War and the German High Command*, p. 75.

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 76-77.

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>339</sup> Charles Rollings, *Prisoners of War. Voices from Behind the Wire in the Second World War* (London: Ebury Press, 2008), p. 286.

“if these punishments were considered the norm in their armies, then they would also be applied to errant prisoners of war.”<sup>340</sup>

Punishments for recaptured escapists ranged from verbal and physical abuse to the truly gruesome. New Zealand serviceman Tami Tamaki and a fellow Australian POW, Walter Riley, escaped from a work camp near the Czech border. Once recaptured and returned to camp they received a barrage of cruel beatings and humiliations.<sup>341</sup> Solitary confinement, also known as ‘the cooler’, was what many recaptured escapists could expect. Major C. N. Armstrong, who escaped from Camp 38 using the Heath-Robinson Scheme, was eventually recaptured at Carrara and delivered back into a camp where he found himself in solitary confinement. He describes the boredom as follows:

A faint glimmer of light in the small barred window high up on one wall, heralded the dawn. When it was light enough I amused myself by conducting a bug hunt. I killed hundreds of them. I squashed them viciously and vindictively because my body was covered with their bites. But still no one came to my cell and not a sound penetrated through the thick walls or the steel door.<sup>342</sup>

Walter Wise, an Australian POW, was given a particularly grizzly task upon recapture. Wise, a veteran of four escapes, was given the job of loading corpses onto a cart. The crematorium was no longer in use, so instead pits were dug to dump the bodies in. Wise’s job was to pull the cart to and from the grave sites. More horrific than pulling a cart loaded with corpses was the fact that some bodies were still alive when dumped into the lime pits.<sup>343</sup>

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<sup>340</sup> Ibid.

<sup>341</sup> Monteath, *P.O.W. Australian Prisoners of War in Hitler's Reich*, p. 314.

<sup>342</sup> Armstrong, *Life without Ladies*, p. 121.

<sup>343</sup> Monteath, *P.O.W. Australian Prisoners of War in Hitler's Reich*, p. 314.

The infamous execution of 47 recaptured prisoners from Stalag Luft III in 1944 is one of the worst examples of retribution against escapees. Also known as the 'Great Escape', Historian Vasilis Vourkoutiotis argues that what happened at Stalag Luft III "constituted perhaps the single greatest crime against British or American prisoners of war during the war".<sup>344</sup> Stalag Luft III, located in what is now Poland, was the largest German prisoner of war camp. The camp was built to hold the growing number of downed airmen captured by German forces. The guards were particularly weary of the potential for prisoners to dig tunnels due to the softer dry soil of the area. They hoped that the sandier soil would prove too difficult for the construction of a tunnel and therefore deter would be escapists. As an extra precaution the camp huts were built a considerable distance away from the fence line, meaning that a tunnel would need to be over 100 metres long in order to clear the enclosure.<sup>345</sup> Despite these measures the POWs formed an escape committee and began making preparations to escape. About 500 men began work on three different tunnels – codenamed Tom, Dick and Harry. The escape happened on the night of 24 March 1944. Although the initial plan involved over 200 men breaking free, only 76 managed to escape before guards realised what was happening and began shooting.<sup>346</sup> As a result of the large number of men who escaped, Hitler himself became involved. He loathed the idea of these pilots returning to the skies to bomb Germany. An extensive manhunt was conducted to recapture these escapists. Then, to send a clear message to would be escapees, Hitler ordered the shooting of 50

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<sup>344</sup> Vourkoutiotis, *Prisoner of War and the German High Command*, p. 181.

<sup>345</sup> Monteath, "Australian Pow in German Captivity in the Second World War," p. 276.

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 278-79.

of these recaptured prisoners by the Gestapo.<sup>347</sup> This punishment caused outrage amongst the Allies. In an official report put out by the House of Lords in July 1944, British politicians called it 'cold-blooded butchery' and vowed that the 'culprits would be punished'.<sup>348</sup> The *Dominion* reported in June 1944 that the Foreign Secretary, Mr Eden, had read the German explanation of the shooting but described it as "a confession of an odious crime." He argued that "the dead British prisoners were cremated...which left only one possible conclusion: They had been murdered."<sup>349</sup>

It was not only the Germans who could turn exceedingly cruel on recaptured prisoners. A group of British and Australian prisoners fled from the Vercelli work camp in Italy, crossing the Rover Po and finally making it to the village of Santa Maria. Unfortunately these men were recaptured and hauled back to Piccone where they were murdered by Black Shirts. One of the prisoners, John Nicholls, contended their death sentence (plus the fact that they had been forced to dig their own graves) and before he was shot they cut out his tongue.<sup>350</sup> This sort of extreme punishment against prisoners of war was uncommon however. Over the course of the war only eight reports indicated exceedingly serious violations of the Geneva Convention. These constituted less than one percent of total reports of visits made to prison camps.<sup>351</sup> Repeat escapist found themselves behind the walls of Colditz Castle. As mentioned previously, Colditz was considered a maximum security

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<sup>347</sup> Ibid., p. 280.

<sup>348</sup> EA1 655. Allied Prisoners of War and Civilians in Enemy Territory – Welfare – Shooting of air force personnel attempting to escape from Stalag Luft 3 (March 1944). (88/6/15)

<sup>349</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>350</sup> Monteath, "Australian Pow in German Captivity in the Second World War," p. 359.

<sup>351</sup> Vourkoutiotis, *Prisoner of War and the German High Command*, p. 181.

for 'escape proof' facility for prisoners considered to be a threat to the Reich.<sup>352</sup> Monteath explains that one of the distinctive features of Colditz was that the prisoners were from all branches of the armed forces due to having one thing in common – they were considered *deutschfeindlich* or hostile to Germany.<sup>353</sup>

Life on the run was a dangerous situation to be in. Not knowing who to trust made every choice a gamble. Many of those who could not make it back to Allied forces would end up fighting with resistance groups in enemy occupied territory. Despite the setbacks New Zealanders on the run continued to push forward with determination and resilience.

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<sup>352</sup> Monteath, *P.O.W. Australian Prisoners of War in Hitler's Reich*, p. 255.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*

## Chapter Five: Rebels and Resistance

*"Italiani ... now is your chance to help your country. Every vehicle and every German that is stopped or hindered from getting down to the Front is a help to us. Do all in your power to assist."*<sup>354</sup>

- *Italian Resistance radio broadcast*

Heavily patrolled enemy occupied territory meant that, for many prisoners on the run, getting out of the region was not an option. Historian Matthew Wright notes that between 1941 and 1945 many escaped New Zealanders "fell in with resistance movements, obtaining succor, transport and support".<sup>355</sup> For New Zealand, the majority of our experiences with the partisans took place in Italy, Yugoslavia and Greece, with a handful falling in with the French and the Cretans.<sup>356</sup> Looking at the archives it shows that, more often than not, escaped New Zealanders who could not get home joined partisan groups in an effort to make a difference for the war effort. Escapists fighting with rebel groups faced many challenges and put their lives on the line on a daily basis. Despite the danger they fought valiantly and helped deal a significant blow to the German and Italian forces, with many of them gaining a fierce warrior reputation. This chapter will examine what it was like for escaped New Zealand prisoners fighting with the partisans in Italy, Yugoslavia, Greece, France and Crete. It will aim to identify the similarities and differences within each group and how that affected the New Zealand experience and the role escapists played within each resistance group.

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<sup>354</sup> Malcolm J. Mason, *The Way Out: A Kiwi Escapes in Italy* (Hamilton: Paul's Book Arcade Ltd, 1946), p. 173.

<sup>355</sup> Matthew Wright, *Behind Enemy Lines. Kiwi Freedom Fighters in World War Two* (Auckland: Random House New Zealand, 2010), p. 7.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

## **The Italian *Rebelli***

After the signing of the Armistice rebel groups, called *rebelli* by the Italians, swiftly emerged all over the country. According to Davies “Nazi rule fostered resistance movements like rain encourages mushrooms”.<sup>357</sup> As well as the escaped prisoners, many Italian soldiers flocked to join these movements in an effort to avoid conscription by the newly appointed Fascist government.<sup>358</sup> This Italian underground, also referred to as Liberation Committees, began out of a fierce hatred for the German occupation. Groups in cities such as Milan, Florence and Novara rose up to form a formidable rebellion army.<sup>359</sup> New Zealander Malcolm Mason was holed up with a group of partisans in Piatto, Northern Italy. He records the radio message broadcast by the local rebels:

*Italiani ... now is your chance to help your country. Every vehicle and every German that is stopped or hindered from getting down to the Front is a help to us. Do all in your power to assist. If Germans ask for directions, give them wrong ones. Kill Germans wherever you can – don't take on a large force, but pick on the odd ones and twos. Steal stores and equipment, drain off the radiators and petrol tanks of stationary vehicles. Hide your food and animals – delay and obstruct your enemies in every way possible.*<sup>360</sup>

These messages would prove to be very effective. It is estimated that one month after the Armistice, groups of partisans north of the Gustav Line had already reached into the tens of thousands.<sup>361</sup> One of the aims within the partisan groups was to assist Allied servicemen and so many of these groups created organisations to assist escaped prisoners crossing Northern Italy into

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<sup>357</sup> Davies, *Europe at War 1939-1945: No Simple Victory*, p. 40.

<sup>358</sup> Mason, *Prisoners of War*, p. 307.

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 315.

<sup>360</sup> Mason, *The Way Out: A Kiwi Escapes in Italy*, p. 173.

<sup>361</sup> Jacobs, *Fighting with the Enemy. New Zealand P.O.W's and the Italian Resistance*, p. 51.

Switzerland.<sup>362</sup> There were also groups of rebels located in the mountain districts who played a significant part in aiding the movement of escaped prisoners by acting as guides along escape routes.<sup>363</sup> In the *Prisoner of War Official History* Mason notes that the “Italian resistance to the Germans was such that as early as 13 October 1943 Italy was recognised as a co-belligerent by Britain, America and Russia”.<sup>364</sup>

The Italian rebels attitudes towards the escaped British and American prisoners was generally very amiable. For them it was important not to judge the Allies who crossed their paths based on current political issues (this perspective was shared by the local villagers who hid prisoners from the Germans).<sup>365</sup> New Zealander Arch Scott, working with partisan leader Don Antonio Andreazza, became so friendly with the villagers that were concealing him that people he did not even know would warn him about Fascists in the vicinity. People knew him because of the blue bicycle he rode around town. Scott records “I went everywhere on it, so much so that it became very well known and I was often warned by Italians, often children ... who had seen the blue bicycle”.<sup>366</sup> The rapport between the partisans and Allied escapists was often used as a means of forging closer ties. In his book on the Italian Resistance historian Claudio Pavone argues that the Allied prisoners who joined the rebel groups “often constituted an original channel for re-establishing genuine ties with the ‘traditional allies’.”<sup>367</sup> These new ties would prove to be very beneficial for the partisan groups as they often lacked

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<sup>362</sup> Mason, *Prisoners of War*, p. 3.

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 315.

<sup>364</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>365</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>366</sup> Scott, *Dark of the Moon*, p. 100.

<sup>367</sup> Mason, *Prisoners of War*, p. 315.

any serious combat training. This created a role for escaped prisoners as instructors in combat effectiveness for the rebels.<sup>368</sup> However this was not a straightforward endeavor as the servicemen had to struggle with language barriers and leadership they did not always agree with. The partisans were not only at war with the Germans occupying their own country, but at the same time were caught up in a civil war with vastly different political ideologies. A further difficulty assisting with training was that partisan groups usually had limited weapons and resources to fight with, let alone to train with.<sup>369</sup> In return for their work with the partisans, escapist were given food, shelter and clothing. Don Antonio Andreazza gave Arch Scott language lessons until he became proficient. He was also introduced to many influential people, provided with “necessities in untold numbers” to take to fellow POWs and was shown possible escape routes that had been tested.<sup>370</sup> When Scott asked Andreazza why he risked his life to help him Andreazza replied “I see the straight road. I shall follow it”.<sup>371</sup>

The significance of the *rebelli* to the war effort is not to be underestimated. British historian Tom Behan argues that, outside of Italy, people are “unaware of the scale of Resistance to fascism during the Second World War”.<sup>372</sup> The reality was that, according to Allied commander-in-chief General Alexander, partisan activity in the North of Italy accounted for six out of twenty five enemy divisions being pinned down. By December 1944, the

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<sup>368</sup> Claudio Pavone, *A Civil War: A History of the Italian Resistance* (London: Verso, 2014), p. 240.

<sup>369</sup> Fenton, *Anzacs at the Frontiers 1941-45: Northern Italy*, One, p. 185.

<sup>370</sup> Scott, *Dark of the Moon*, p. 98.

<sup>371</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>372</sup> Tom Behan, *The Italian Resistance: Fascists, Guerrillas and the Allies* (London: Pluto Press, 2009), p. 186.

Germans had been forced to engage mechanized troops against the rebels.<sup>373</sup> When the war finally came to an end the British Hewitt Report concluded that “without these partisan victories there would have been no Allied victory in Italy so swift, so overwhelming or so inexpensive”.<sup>374</sup> The New Zealanders who took part in rebel activities did so under the shadow of great risk. Wright notes that servicemen captured in battle would be protected under the Geneva Convention, however “their prospects were particularly grim if they ... had been actively involved with partisan groups”.<sup>375</sup> New Zealander Frank Gardner joined a group of Italian youths and formed a rebel group. Together they caused mayhem for the Germans. Gardner’s name, Franco, became notorious throughout the district, “it was to cause terror and despondency to the local Nazi leaders, and rage and hatred to their overlords”.<sup>376</sup> Gardner had made a significant impact in his efforts to hinder the German advancement. He may have established a reputation as an outlaw amongst the enemy, but to the Italian people he was “their brave friend ... who was hourly risking his life in Italy’s fight for freedom.”<sup>377</sup>

### **Yugoslavian Partisans**

Partisan groups began to emerge in Yugoslavia soon after German forces overran the country in April 1941.<sup>378</sup> Revolutionary leader Josip Broz Tito took command of the partisan movement in Yugoslavia, with the goal of uniting all religious and ethnic groups in the fight against the occupying

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<sup>373</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>374</sup> Ibid.

<sup>375</sup> Wright, *Behind Enemy Lines. Kiwi Freedom Fighters in World War Two*, p. 8.

<sup>376</sup> Florence N. Miller, *The 'Signor Kiwi' Saga* (Gisborne: Distributed by Muir's Bookshop, 1993), p. 75.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid.

<sup>378</sup> Mason, *Prisoners of War*, p. 134.

forces.<sup>379</sup> This was no easy task as the country was very divided. Created by the Treaty of Versailles, some Yugoslavs saw the Germans as liberators and others as oppressors. It was not long before more people began to see that the Nazis were not to be trusted.<sup>380</sup> Travelling with the partisans into Otocac, Croatia, Private J. Hutton noted that “the town is very divided politically and no one trusts the other”.<sup>381</sup> However, towards the end of that year “Tito’s authority was formally recognised by the Allies” and he announced a provisional Yugoslav government even though the Germans were still officially occupying the country.<sup>382</sup> Through this Tito was able to mount an extensive resistance that transferred into a ruthless ground war, in which the Germans eventually had to instigate seven large campaigns in an attempt to stop Tito.<sup>383</sup> By 1943, there were already around 20,000 men in Tito’s forces.<sup>384</sup> His numbers continued to grow and by early 1945 he had organised an army that numbered around 800,000.<sup>385</sup> Daniel Riddiford was one New Zealander who connected with a group of Yugoslav partisans. Moving deeper into Yugoslavia, he recalls that “the people were not so friendly as they had been on the Italian side and we began to feel less well [due to the food]”.<sup>386</sup> Riddiford describes the organisation of the partisans as being well structured. He wrote that “at every level of the Partisan organisation, there was a commander and a Political Commissar right down

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<sup>379</sup> Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, p. 235.

<sup>380</sup> Wright, *Behind Enemy Lines. Kiwi Freedom Fighters in World War Two*, p. 12.

<sup>381</sup> WAIIA2871 1. Extracts from diaries of 15526 Private J. Hutton (20<sup>th</sup> Battalion, NZ Regiment), while prisoner of war in North Africa and Italy and his escape to the Allied Forces through Yugoslavia, 2 December 1941-15 January 1944.

<sup>382</sup> Wright, *Behind Enemy Lines. Kiwi Freedom Fighters in World War Two*, p. 12.

<sup>383</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>384</sup> Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, p. 399.

<sup>385</sup> Wright, *Behind Enemy Lines. Kiwi Freedom Fighters in World War Two*, p. 13.

<sup>386</sup> Riddiford, *Committed to Escape*, p. 144.

to platoons.”<sup>387</sup> While with this group Riddiford heard of an escaped New Zealander by the name of John Denvir (also known as Corporal Frank), who had commanded a partisan battalion of about three hundred men. Denvir must have really impressed them as Riddiford writes that he never heard of another British officer permitted to command troops by the partisans. This is most likely because the Political Commissars were weary of others who might undermine their political influence.<sup>388</sup> Corporal John Denvir would eventually receive the Soviet Medal for Valour as a result of his efforts with the partisans.<sup>389</sup> News of Denvir’s adventures with the Yugoslav partisans would even make it into newspapers back home. In April 1944 *The Press* reported that, as a result of his “gallant and distinguished service in the field” King George had “approved the award of the Distinguished Conduct Medal to Corporal John Denvir”.<sup>390</sup>

Another New Zealander who fought with the partisans was Allan Yeoman. He describes his time at Western Slovenian General Headquarters as short because “the essence of Partisan survival was to move frequently so that the Germans never had a static target to attack”.<sup>391</sup> Yeoman was then attached to a partisan group with other escaped prisoners of war. As a way of maintaining rations, keeping the Allied servicemen safe, and providing guidance the ex-prisoners were assembled together in groups of forty along

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<sup>387</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>388</sup> Ibid., p. 144.

<sup>389</sup> Yeoman, *The Long Road to Freedom*, p. 158.

<sup>390</sup> *The Press*, 27 April 1944.

(<http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/paperspast?a=d&cl=search&d=CHP19440427.2.65&srpos=10&e=-----10--1----0greece+partisan-->)

<sup>391</sup> Yeoman, *The Long Road to Freedom*, p. 153.

with Yugoslav partisans.<sup>392</sup> Yeoman notes that it was not just the men who joined the rebels. He writes that “a symbol of the intensity of the



**Image 5.1 NZ tank crew talk with some of Marshall Tito’s men in Trieste, Italy 1945<sup>393</sup>**

Photo taken on 4 May 1945 by George Kaye. Alexander Turnbull Library. (Reproduced with permission from the Alexander Turnbull Library).

Partisan dedication to the cause of freedom ... was the way in which women joined the Partisans and fought alongside the men”.<sup>394</sup> These women ranged in age from girls in their teens to women in their thirties. According to Yeoman these women “carried their packs and their rifles and performed all

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<sup>392</sup> Ibid.

<sup>393</sup> Kaye, George Frederick, 1914-2004. Albanian and New Zealand soldiers in Trieste, Italy, World War 1939-1945. New Zealand. Department of Internal Affairs. War History Branch :Photographs relating to World War 1914-1918, World War 1939-1945, occupation of Japan, Korean War, and Malayan Emergency. Ref: DA-09292. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/22314147>

<sup>394</sup> Yeoman, *The Long Road to Freedom*, p. 159.

duties that were required of men".<sup>395</sup> This mightily impressed Yeoman and his fellow servicemen, as it was a new concept to them, particularly that in one of the other companies a section was commanded by a women. The partisans did have very strict rules of conduct to prevent the women being taken advantage of. Men were not allowed to harass or patronize the women, or even show "affection of chivalry". If broken, these rules carried the death penalty.<sup>396</sup>

### **Greek Guerillas**

As was the case in Yugoslavia, Greek resistance to the Germans began early on in the war. The *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War* notes that guerilla warfare began almost immediately after Greece surrendered to the Germans.<sup>397</sup> In fact, Greece was the "earliest theatre of partisan action", writes Wright.<sup>398</sup> Many New Zealanders who were left behind or separated from their units on Greece were able to hide in the hills for months, keeping one step ahead of the Germans. Groups such as the National Liberation Front and the National Republican Greek League emerged once the resistance became more organised. Unfortunately there were frequent arguments between the groups over politics and who should run the country once the Germans left. This led to rivalries forming between the groups and eventually a civil war.<sup>399</sup> Historian Richard J. Evans notes that

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<sup>395</sup> Ibid.

<sup>396</sup> Ibid.

<sup>397</sup> Hall, "Escapes," p. 14.

<sup>398</sup> Wright, *Behind Enemy Lines. Kiwi Freedom Fighters in World War Two*, p. 11.

<sup>399</sup> Ibid.

these two Greek resistance movements “spent as much time fighting each other as they did the Germans”.<sup>400</sup>

Despite the internal conflicts within Greece escaped New Zealander prisoners successfully participated in their resistance movement. John Mulgan was hiding in the mountains with the Greek resistance and records the harsh reality of his situation in pushing back the Germans: “We had a bad winter in Greece after that. There was civil war among the Greeks...The Germans tightened their blockade around the mountains and burned villages so that the mountains were full of distressed and starving villagers and disarmed, barefooted Italians”.<sup>401</sup> Mulgan wrote that during his time in Greece he saw many villages suffer the same fate, a “sad spectacle of men and women and children fleeing their homes, but it never failed to move me with a sense of tragedy and waste”.<sup>402</sup> Bill Griffiths, another New Zealander who joined the Greek rebellion, adds to what Mulgan noted about the burning of Greek villages. He recalls that the rebels would attempt to sabotage the Germans well away from their own village out of fear of retaliation. He states in an interview that “the only problem was that enemy reprisals were invariably imposed on the village nearest to where the action had taken place ... this did not go down well with the villagers who happened to end up in the firing line”.<sup>403</sup> As was the case in Yugoslavia, women also fought in the Greek resistance (perhaps not at the same level though), always proclaiming their

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<sup>400</sup> Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, p. 399.

<sup>401</sup> Mulgan, *Report on Experience*, p. 125.

<sup>402</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>403</sup> Wright, *Behind Enemy Lines. Kiwi Freedom Fighters in World War Two*, p. 19.

involvement was due to their intense love of Greece.<sup>404</sup> Not as much is known about the role of women in partisan movements due to it being dominated by men (particularly in Greece compared with Yugoslavia). Historian Bob Moore argues that women's participation in physically fighting within resistance and liberation is small compared to the role they played in hiding escaped prisoners, feeding them and providing clothing.<sup>405</sup> This role was definitely appreciated by the New Zealanders, as was the case with Bill Griffiths who, in order to save a Greek family he was staying with, allowed himself to be recaptured and handed over to the Gestapo who were, thankfully, unaware of his involvement with the partisans. Thinking he was nothing more than an escaped prisoner of war Griffiths was sent back to a prison camp until the end of the war.<sup>406</sup>



**Image 5.2 Greek partisans passing through hill country near Athens** <sup>407</sup>

Photo published in the Evening Post. Alexander Turnbull Library (Reproduced with permission from the Alexander Turnbull Library).

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<sup>404</sup> Janet Hart, "Women in the Greek Resistance: National Crisis and Political Transformation," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 38(1990): p. 56.

<sup>405</sup> Bob Moore, "Comparing Resistance and Resistance Movements," in *Resistance in Western Europe*, ed. Bob Moore (Oxford: Berg, 2000), p. 261.

<sup>406</sup> Wright, *Behind Enemy Lines. Kiwi Freedom Fighters in World War Two*, p. 43.

<sup>407</sup> Greek Partisans passing through hilly country near Athens. (Evening Post, 09 December 1944). Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.

<http://natlib.govt.nz/records/17811134>

## French Freedom Fighters

During Germany's occupation of France it is estimated that about 500,000 French men and women worked for the resistance carrying out numerous acts of sabotage against their oppressors. They paid a hefty price for these acts of rebellion as over 90,000 of them were deported, tortured or killed.<sup>408</sup> Despite these numbers the resistance was never a mass movement as it was in Yugoslavia or Greece. Historian Oliver Wieviorka writes that French secret services "rarely represented a genuine military threat to the occupying forces" and would not have been as successful without help from the Allied division.<sup>409</sup> As with the partisans in other countries, the French provided much needed help to New Zealanders who found themselves running from the Germans. In his article on *French Resistance Aid to Allied Aviators*, Joseph E. Tucker writes that due to the help of the resistance fighters over 5000 airmen were able to return to their bases in England.<sup>410</sup> This was no easy task, as noted in chapter one the Germans had a strict procedure in getting to the downed aircraft first in an effort to obtain prisoners and intelligence. Tucker notes that the getting to the wreckage was the most "perilous moments of all, and many Frenchmen paid with their lives for having being caught in the company of an Allied pilot who was still in his flying uniform".<sup>411</sup> New Zealand RAF bomber pilot John Morris was shot down twice over enemy territory. The first time he bailed out of his burning plane

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<sup>408</sup> 'The French Resistance', URL: <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/war/d-day/the-resistance>, (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 13-Jan-2016

<sup>409</sup> Olivier Wieviorka, "France," in *Resistance in Western Europe*, ed. Bob Moore (Oxford: Berg, 2000), p. 125.

<sup>410</sup> Joseph E. Tucker, "French Resistance Aid to Allied Aviators," *The French Review* 21, no. 1 (1947): p. 29.

<sup>411</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

the French Resistance assisted him in getting him to safety.<sup>412</sup> Morris explains how a woman called Lucienne Vouzeland helped him to get passed a German patrol. They were riding bicycles down a road when they turned a corner and happened upon a group of German soldiers. Without warning Lucienne “fell off [her bicycle] deliberately and fell so that she grazed ... all of these young German soldiers rushed to help her because she was a really attractive young woman ...”<sup>413</sup> Thanks to her quick thinking Morris was able to keep on riding passed the guards unnoticed, meeting up with Lucienne further down the road.<sup>414</sup> Another New Zealander who made his way to safety with the aid of the French Resistance was Brigadier Reginald Miles. After a daring escape from an Italian prison camp in 1943 he managed to make his way across France to Spain where he was able to report to British authorities.<sup>415</sup> Some time later Brigadier James Hargest made the same journey across France to Spain using an underground railroad and with the help of Georges Brantes, a young French Resistance fighter.<sup>416</sup> Many men, like Morris, Miles and Hargest would not have made it without this sacrifice from the resistance groups.

### **Cretan resistance**

Escaped New Zealand prisoners found immense support amongst the Cretan civilians. Arriving in Crete after fleeing Greece George Milton Craigie and his comrades were welcomed into a local village with free haircuts and

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<sup>412</sup> 'The French Resistance', URL: <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/war/d-day/the-resistance>, (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 13-Jan-2016

<sup>413</sup> 'John Morris and the French Resistance', URL: <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/media/sound/john-morris-and-french-resistance>, (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 18-Dec-2014

<sup>414</sup> Ibid.

<sup>415</sup> MS-Papers-7811-178. Reginald Miles – Research notes and correspondence..

<sup>416</sup> MS-Papers-7811-179. James Hargest- Research notes and correspondence.

accommodation. The policemen's wives made the men roast meals and provided fresh produce such as goats cheese, bread and olives.<sup>417</sup> On 16 December 1944, *The Press* ran an article titled "Crete Hero's Identity: Christchurch Man". The article was about Staff-Sergeant Dudley Churchill Perkins, described by the NZEF as "one of the most fantastic figures of the modern mythology of Crete".<sup>418</sup> Perkins became legendary as a result of his daring exploits with the Cretan partisans. Better known to the Cretans as Kapitan Vassilios, Perkins organised the partisans into a well-structured force of about 100 to 120 men. According to the *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War* Perkins was "especially active in carrying out night raids on German positions, aimed usually at recovering sheep and cattle which had been taken by the Germans."<sup>419</sup> Unfortunately he was killed instantly when him and four Cretans fell into a German ambush in February 1944. Captain John Stanley of the Royal Signals was in Crete when Perkins was killed. He said of Perkins: "No other member of an Allied Mission was loved, respected and admired as was Kiwi (Perkins)...he has grown into a legend that will never be forgotten".<sup>420</sup> Murray Elliot, who wrote Perkins' biography, writes that for many years after the war, whenever the resistance was mentioned around Cretans they almost always brought up the name *Kapetan Vasilios* (the book was published 40 years after the war).<sup>421</sup>

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<sup>417</sup> MS-Papers-8627-03. Papers relating to prisoner of war experiences and catalogue lists of escape memoirs.

<sup>418</sup> *The Press*, 16 December 1944, Page 6

<sup>419</sup> M. B. McGlynn, *Crete*, The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War (Wellington: Historical Publications Branch, 1953), p. 497.

<sup>420</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>421</sup> Murray Elliot, *Vasili: The Lion of Crete* (Auckland: Century Hutchinson, 1987), p. 163.

These accounts of escaped prisoners of war fighting with different resistance groups shows just how resilient and determined New Zealand servicemen were in fighting the enemy. Historian John Laffin argues that “the ANZACs have built themselves a military reputation second to none. Many military historians and even enemy soldiers consider them the finest soldiers in history”.<sup>422</sup> This assessment is accurate when considering the role that escaped New Zealand prisoners played in helping resistance movements across Europe during the Second World War. Having to deal with language barriers, limited resources and, in many cases, internal conflict, did not hinder their determination. As noted previously, men taken captive did not join the war to sit behind barbed wire. This was their opportunity to rejoin the fight and make a difference.

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<sup>422</sup> John Laffin, *Anzacs at War. The Story of Australian and New Zealand Battles* (London: Abelard-Schuman, 1965), p. 15.

## Conclusion

*"With all our endeavours we try never to throw in the towel despite the setbacks."*<sup>423</sup>

- *Gordon Thomson Woodroffe*

New Zealand servicemen destined to become prisoners of war during the Second World War were pushed to the limit mentally and physically. Starting with the disastrous campaigns in the Mediterranean, these men were faced with the harsh reality of spending the war behind the wire. Those not left behind in the evacuation of Greece fled to Crete where they were caught up in a vicious battle to defend the island from the Germans. With superior weaponry the Germans were able to once again push the Commonwealth forces out of Crete and into North Africa. By this stage the New Zealanders were becoming despondent with the indecisive leadership coming from their British commanding officers, resulting in large numbers of men becoming prisoners of war. For the New Zealand servicemen, surrendering to the enemy was not an option. They had come to Europe to fight. They had thought about the fact that they could have died in battle, but had not for a moment considered that they would become prisoners in anti-climatic battles. Unfortunately, for those fleeing Crete, North Africa would not prove to be any better. The campaigns in Libya and Egypt would become just as costly, with thousands of discouraged and disheartened servicemen falling into enemy hands. While the vast majority of New Zealand prisoners of war were army personnel, a large number also came from the air force. Downed aircraft were quickly picked up by German patrols eager to gain intelligence

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<sup>423</sup> Woodroffe, *Getaway*, p. 307.

from Allied planes and pilots. Prisoners describe being captured as a significant and disappointing blow. For many this only encouraged them to escape and return to the fight.

Those determined to escape attempted to gain their freedom from the moment of capture. Many were able to use the chaos of battle in the deserts of Egypt and Libya to their advantage and make a break for their own lines. Others made daring escapes while being transported to temporary camps. Their short but dreadful experiences as prisoners of the Italians and Germans only encouraged them to escape even more. Dehydrated and starving, desperate escape attempts were made by jumping off of moving trains and ships. Some made it, others were recaptured but remained determined to keep on trying. Planning escape from prison camps could take moments if the opportunity arose, or it could take months of careful planning. To ensure that an escape attempt went as smoothly as possible escape committees were established. Run by senior British officers within camps, prisoners would need to consult them with their ideas. Escape committees did everything in their power to assist the would be escaper, often providing them with escape tools such as maps of the area. More often than not successful escapes were a result of teamwork, making this committee vital within prison camps. Another fundamental aspect of escaping was ensuring that food was available for the journey. In this respect, Red Cross parcels became even more important as a means of survival both inside and outside the camp.

When it came to methods of escape from camps there was no set rule of how to go about it. Some took opportune moments to jump the fence when guards were not looking, others impersonated Red Cross workers or other

officials and bravely walked out the gates. For those in heavily guarded camps tunneling out was the preferred mode of escape. This took months and posed a series of significant problems, such as what to do with the soil and keeping the entrance concealed from the guards. The Italian Armistice was not just a turning point in the war for combatants in the field, but for prisoners in Italian camps as well. As the Italian guards threw down their weapons, abandoned their posts and fled the camps so did the prisoners. Many were even assisted by the Italian guards as they made a hasty exit towards the border. Towards the end of the war, those in German prisons were even able to bribe German guards who were despondent with the way in which the war was going and feared reprisals.

Once free of the prison camp, life became a constant gamble for survival. The British government's underground railroad was an elaborate system created to help those on the run. Those that could not get in contact with members of MI9 had to rely on local villagers to hide them. Escapists at the mercy of the Greeks and Italians often found willing allies. Many villagers hated the Germans and feared life under Hitler. As a result they risked their lives helping prisoners get back to their own or neutral territory. At times help would come in unexpected forms, such as the monasteries in the mountains of Greece.

For those unable to cross the border into neutral territory, the partisans became their way of rejoining the fight. In both Italy and Greece, bitter civil wars complicated the situation. Despite this New Zealanders found moments to shine while partaking in guerilla warfare against the Germans. Some even created a formidable reputation for themselves due to

the courage they displayed pushing back German patrols. In Italy, Greece and Yugoslavia New Zealanders were able to provide military training and knowledge to the groups of partisans they joined. The New Zealanders who assisted these rebels did their country proud. At every opportunity granted them they did all they could to hinder the enemy. They did not give up.

Through this research a strong image of resilient escaped New Zealand prisoners of war begins to emerge. Motivated by their desire to do whatever they could for the war effort these men risked their lives attempting to get back to their own forces, and if that was not possible, to do whatever they could to sabotage the enemy. These men did not join the war to sit behind enemy wire and their desire to put a stop to tyranny was strong. Pilot Gordon Woodroffe summed up the spirit of these men accurately when he wrote: "With all our endeavours we try never to throw in the towel despite the setbacks."<sup>424</sup>

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<sup>424</sup> Ibid.

# Appendix A

## Calamity Bay<sup>425</sup>

(Parody on Calamata Greece)

*Tune of Three Little Fishes*

Away down South in Calamity Bay  
Sat 10,000 men who were trying to get away.  
The Navy came, took away the sick and ill,  
While the rest of us crept back into the hills.

Boom! Boom! Splatter! Splatter!  
Spat the guns  
Of the bombers and fighters of the evil-eyed Hun.  
All day long we sat perfectly still,  
Hidden in the ditches of Calamity Hill.

All next day they repeated the dose,  
Planes flew low and bombs fell close.  
Nightfall came and we assembled in the Bay,  
But the ships that came were sweet F. A.

Dit! Dat! Dit! Dat! Did! Did! Dat!  
Hark to the hail of the wailing morse.  
Where in the Hell is the Royal Air Force.

Monday night was the finish of the fun,  
Instead of any ships came the bloody Hun.  
Swim, said the Brigadier, swim if you like,  
For I've had enough and I'm going to hike.

Bang! Bang! Crash! Crash! Bugger M.T.  
Plop! Plop! Splash! Splash! Chuck it in the sea.  
This we did without any fuss,  
Because we had the Dunkirk habit in us.

Tuesday morn we were Prisoners of War;  
At least that's a thing we've never been before.  
Since then our lives have not been too sweet,  
With nothing to do and bugger all to eat.

Sleep, Sleep, eat a little then more sleep;  
Sleep, Sleep, eat a little then more sleep.  
Each day passes by the same old way,  
To celebrate the doings of Calamity Bay.

*Composed by Lieutenant Hobbs,  
NZEJ - Corinth POW*

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<sup>425</sup> Stuckey, *Sometimes Free. My Escapes from German P.O.W. Camps*, p. 194.

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