

Prisoners-Of-War

As with the prisoners-of-war of 7th Battery, it was not until post-war re-unions of the Regiment that the opportunity arose to meet again with the men of 8th Battery who had been captured in the desert in April, 1941.

After being a P.O.W. for four years, Bombardier Ken Clements returned and recounted some of his experiences whilst in the hands of the Italians and Germans:

"Capua, about 30 km out of Naples, was the camp to which we were taken after arrival at Naples in May, 1941. We were living under canvas, with 20 men crowded into a tent. Heavy rain made conditions bad. The mud was inches deep, so everyone was pretty miserable with their first taste of prison life in Italy. Most men had only the clothes they were wearing when captured, but within a few days warmer clothing became available.

"After a couple of weeks at Capua, we were moved by train to Sulmona, an old World War 1 German P.O.W. camp, then on to Bolzano in the Brenner Valley. The camp here was in an old brewery, which, unfortunately was not working, but was situated near the main road and railway running through the Brenner Pass. We watched the great amount of traffic passing by, including much damaged war material such as tanks and aeroplanes.

"We moved east to Camp 57, situated about 12 km out of Udine. This proved to be our permanent camp until the capitulation of Italy in 1943. It held over 4,000 prisoners, mostly Australian and New Zealand, but later, as working parties went out, English, Scottish, Indian, Cypriot and Palestinian prisoners were brought in, making a cosmopolitan crowd.

"After settling down here, conditions improved, mainly due to the efforts of our fellows in making the camp and living conditions as clean as possible. Italian food rations in 1941 were adequate, especially when supplemented with Red Cross parcels. This state of affairs did not last, as late in February, 1942, the Italian rations were cut by over 60 per cent and Red Cross parcels became scarce.

"The conditions of the coldest winter in Europe for 30 years made it difficult to get supplies through to the camps. Life had now become grim, but the spirit of our fellows remained remarkably good. The food ration was less than 1 lb. a head a day, including bread, rice, vegetables, coffee, meat and cheese. After turning in for the night, very hungry, remarks would be heard such as - 'If you were in a grocer's shop now, what would

you go for?' This would bring forth many comments, and a heated discussion would be carried on until loud voices would in no uncertain manner, tell everyone what to do with chocolate biscuits, fruit cake and the like.

"When the Red Cross parcels came through once more, the camp came to life and with the arrival of sporting materials, cricket, baseball and football were enjoyed. Sporting material was not obtained from the Italians, but was all sent from friends or relatives of the prisoners or by the Red Cross. Even with these better conditions, life was monotonous as we were never allowed out of the camp.

"With the capitulation of Italy, we imagined our troubles were over and that we would soon be on the way home. The Germans had other ideas. We were taken to the railway station along a road lined on each side with German soldiers carrying machine guns, rifles and flame throwers, all of which dissuaded anyone from making a break for it. At the station, fifty men were loaded into each cattle truck and we were off once more on our enforced tour of Europe. We arrived in Austria and stayed in a camp there for four days, then continued on to 8A at Gortitz. This was, at that time, a camp for French and Russians, and here we saw the shocking condition that many of the Russians were in. Our men gave them any food and cigarettes which they could spare. Some Russians took amazing risks, crawling under the dividing wire fence to get into our compound for food or a smoke. A couple were shot in these attempts, but others still persisted.

"At Gortitz we were medically examined by the Germans and with about thirty others I was sent to a sugar factory at Odulerg, but as our barracks were not ready we returned this time to Lamsdorf. Here again we were medically examined and within a week several of us left for a coal mine in Ober, Silesia. In the mines, we worked with Poles on various underground jobs, spending 8¼ hours a day underground, on a morning, afternoon or night shift. As this was considered heavy work, a larger food ration was given, which with Red Cross food was sufficient; but if a man was sick or away for any reason, his ration was cut in half.

"I was transferred to another camp, which had 440 prisoners, of whom 300 were Australians. We remained there until January 20, 1945, when the Russian advance in Poland made the German authorities decide it was necessary to clear all the P.O.W. camps. So we began a march which was to last for 10 weeks during which time we covered over 1,100 km. Being winter, the roads were frozen under several inches of ice, with deep snow over all the surrounding countryside. The insecure footing soon took its toll and most of us were sore and stiff before the first day was

over. As we progressed, practically everyone managed to buy or have a small sled on to which we loaded all our belongings. We had brought all we could carry, having been told that we would march for about eight days to Lamsdorf; but the Russian advance was so rapid that our destination was continually changed. Eventually we had none whatever and were merely walking and waiting for the war to finish. We crossed Silesia to Czechoslovakia, where the people were extremely kind and on reaching our billet which in every case was a barn in a village, people would endeavor to give us food, but on most occasions were prevented from doing so by the German guards. However, the Australians usually found a way of getting what they wanted and much of the food offered was smuggled in. German rations during the march were light and on two occasions, people in small villages had collected cartloads of bread, but were ordered by the Germans to return it as it was forbidden to give food to P.O.W.'s.

"As time went on, practically all prisoners from German camps were on the road marching, and as food rations had to be drawn from these small villages, supplies were becoming exhausted. Bread, the mainstay, was scarce. At one stage, for a period of six days, we received 150 grammes but we were given a few extra potatoes and dried vegetables with occasionally a little meat. About six weeks after our start the Red Cross again made contact with us. Each man received a little over one parcel and a good supply of cigarettes which we had been without for some weeks. We set off next day, feeling much more cheerful. Some weeks later we reached Regensburg and camped 8 km out at a small village.

"Here, work began again in Regensburg, clearing up bomb damage and filling in bomb craters. During our long march about 150 of the lads dropped out and had been taken to hospital suffering from frostbite and other illness; but all to my knowledge recovered and later caught up. As the American advance came our way from Nurnberg, we again took to the road and reached Landshut, where American tank crews and artillerymen released us.

"It was hard to realise that we were free after four years as prisoners. The Americans were kind to us handing out food, clothing and cigarettes and taking no end of trouble to ensure we had all we required. We were flown from Landshut to Rheims in France, where we again enjoyed the hospitality of American troops and later, in Lancaster bombers, we were flown to England. Our stay in England will long be remembered as the kindness and hospitality extended to us was wonderful.

"I cannot express just how much the work of the Red Cross

Society was appreciated by the prisoners of war."

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At Cracow, Poland, Gunner Lew Potter won the draw for an escape attempt, the prize being a collection of the necessary maps, documents, clothes and Red Cross chocolate from his colleagues. After his escape, an unfortunate Italian farm worker answering Potter's description was picked up by the Germans. Potter's prison mates, for some days, re-inforced the Germans' error by addressing the Italian as Lew, which took the heat off the real escapee for a few days enabling him to make good distance from the camp, into Czechoslovakia. Potter was eventually re-captured by German troops who, disbelieving that he could have covered so much distance in the time, accused him of being an Allied spy parachuted from an aircraft. Towards the end of the war, Potter escaped again, and using a German staff car, made it to the American lines. He was taken to England where he played with Lindsay Hassett's Services cricket team before returning home.

As with the prisoners of war of the 7th Battery, the treatment of and the conditions for the 8th Battery prisoners varied from good to indifferent to bad. Each man had his own remarkable story to tell, the relating of which would require another book.