

## Chapter 10

### Second World War

#### Prisoners of War - Germany

*Barbed Wire! Barbed Wire! Barbed Wire!*

*To the North, South, West and East*

*Will it always hold me captive*

*Without hope or joy or peace*

*Must I ever curve this eager flame*

*That burns within my chest*

*Or know once more the joy of home*

*With pleasant hours of rest*

*Such questions to my mind do crowd*

*When deep in thought I sit*

*But ever with it comes the cry*

*It won't be long, don't quit*

*And so it goes from day to day*

*A never changing scene*

*But someday soon I will leave it all*

*As though it were a dream.*

Untitled

Author unknown

Some 5,000 Australian soldiers arrived in Germany in 1941 after long journeys through Eastern Europe from Greece. In 1943 another 1,000 men crossed the Alps from Italy. They were held mainly in closely guarded camps known as 'Oflags' for officers and 'Stalags' for other ranks. As well, 1,400 Australian airmen who had drifted down by parachute into enemy-held territory were held in special POW camps in Germany known as 'Stalag Luft' (air camps). There was also one camp for naval personnel called 'Malag-Milag'.

To most Australians, their understanding of the POW experience in Europe has been dominated by the stories of escape attempts. Soldiers and sailors captured in Greece and North Africa, and airmen who fell into enemy hands over Europe, have been romanticized in films and books as they dug tunnels, joined local partisan groups and made daring escapes through resistance channels.

However, many of the men who escaped were recaptured. Some were executed and others died during these escape attempts. Just as harrowing, but less well known, were their experiences on the forced marches during the last months of the war as Russian and Allied troops crossed the German border. As the Allies advanced further and further into Germany, the Germans became more determined to keep their prisoners out of Allied hands. Some of these forced marches were over 500 kilometres often in the bitterly cold German winter.

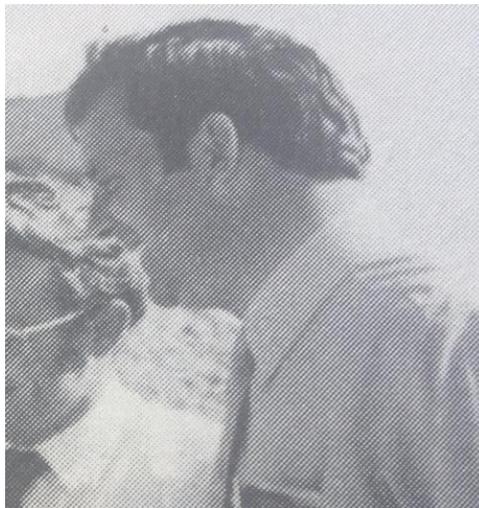
Of those Australians taken prisoner by the Italians and Germans, 265 died in captivity. Of the remainder, 1,329 were returned in prisoner exchanges during hostilities and the rest were evacuated to England soon after liberation. These numbers were very low compared to the experience of prisoners of the Japanese.

There were two main reasons for this. Firstly, they were generally better treated by the Germans (and Italians) and they had access to regular Red Cross parcels as well as medical supplies. Secondly, there was a possibility of being repatriated before the war was over, due to reciprocal prisoner exchanges between the Allied and Axis countries. German POWs were also allowed to regularly send and receive mail – an important morale booster and a way of keeping in touch with loved ones at home. While these are generalisations, comparisons between the two groups only serve to diminish the genuine suffering of European POWs. They returned to a public that was focussed on the stories of Australian POWs in the Pacific and, apart from the stories of the escapes from the German camps, knew little about life in captivity in Europe.

These are the stories of our CRB men who were incarcerated as prisoners of war of Germany – in alphabetical order.

**Flight Sergeant Kevin Alexander Bush 410590 (V45521)**

Kevin took over the Pipe Testing Officer's role at the CRB when Frank Jackson (see Chapter 9) retired. He joined the Citizen Military Force (Number V45521) and when he enlisted, he switched to the RAAF.



Kevin Bush – 1974.

Kevin was born in Alexandra in 1921 and enlisted at the end of January 1942. He completed a Wireless Air Gunners Course 26 in Ballarat between May and November 1942. Twenty-eight of his fellow students – out of a total of 102 – were killed in battle mostly over France and Germany.

The Wireless Air Gunners School was established at Ballarat to train wireless operator/air gunners as part of the Empire Air Training Scheme. Operations commenced in April 1940 at the Ballarat Showgrounds, but when it received its first Avro Anson aircrafts in October it moved to Ballarat Airfield. At the end of 1940 the unit's overall strength was 770. In early 1942 the school doubled in size, with the unit staffing increasing to 43 officers, 1,238 airmen, five civilian instructors and seven civilian labourers. The aircraft available were 2 Douglas-DC2s, and 51 Wackett trainers. By the end of 1943, 3,836 wireless/air gunners had been trained.



Trainees in class at 1WAGS Course.

Kevin became a Flight Sergeant in the RAAF - an aircraft midship gunner – in 640 Squadron during World War 2. He was a crew member in a Halifax Bill LW549. On 30 March 1944, the plane took off from Leconfield at 2211 hours detailed to bomb Nuremberg<sup>1</sup>. Nothing was heard of the aircraft after take-off and it failed to return to base. When outbound, the aircraft was shot down over Germany by an ME 110 night-fighter flown by Oblt. Helmut Schultze II. It crashed at Olferbutt, a village on the west bank of the Ochse, six kilometres south east of Vache.

Kevin was one of three survivors. I feel it is only appropriate to record the death of the crew members who were recorded as lost in the aircraft. They were:

Flying Officer Martin Corcoran (RAAF) aged 25 years,

Sergeant Dennis Cutler (RAF) aged 21 years,

Flying Officer James Laidlaw (Royal Canadian Air Force) aged 20 years, and

Pilot Officer Frederick Shuttle (RAF) aged 22 years.

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<sup>1</sup> Another CRB veteran participated in this same raid – Arnold Easton (see Chapter 7). The battle of Nuremberg was RAF Bomber Command's greatest loss. On that night, 545 Allied airmen were killed and 160 were captured by the Germans. Kevin was one of those captured.

Three survived. Apart from Kevin the other two were:

Flying Officer John Austen (RAFVR) and  
Flight Sergeant James Henderson (RAF).

As the plane was going down, Kevin could not immediately undo the perspex bubble in order to get out of the crippled bomber. Finally, he was able to release it and jumped out to find that he was hanging by only one strap of his parachute as he descended.

He landed awkwardly in the snow and injured his ankle. He lost a boot in the process. He was captured by farmers and subsequently handed over to the German military and became a prisoner of war in Stalag 357 – where he remained until the war ended.

In a POW report Flight Sergeant Bush stated:

*“The aircraft was attacked by night fighters. I gave the Pilot the correct evasive action to take and opened fire on the nearest fighter. My guns went out of action. After about ten minutes the Flight Engineer reported that the two starboard motors were hit and on fire. The Captain ordered parachutes on and (to) then bale out. This was acknowledged by all except the Navigator who was wounded in the back and unable to bale out. All were still in the aircraft when I left at about 12,000 feet. The aircraft was out of control I came down in a field with only one boot on. I walked over a hill and was taken prisoner by farmers. Also Henderson and Austen. I landed near a village called Vache.”*

The Wing Commander of No. 640 Squadron wrote to Kevin’s brother in Shepparton informing him of Kevin being missing and the circumstances of it. He said that Kevin’s effects were to be collected and sent back to his family. The archive does not give any indication of when it was confirmed that Kevin was a prisoner of war. This same, painful scenario was played out for thousands of families of airmen during the war – on both sides.

Stalag 357 was found by the British to be virtually an Anzac prison camp. Many AIF men (taken prisoner in Crete) and RAAF/RNZAF airmen were freed. The British Army caught up with parties of Anzacs being force marched away from the camp. The ex-POWs returned to spend their last

night in the camp to await transport back to Britain. They were issued with tents, as their quarters were found to be uninhabitable.



Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery talks to an RAAF Officer in Stalag 357 shortly after its liberation by units of the 2nd British Army.

Kevin was discharged from the RAAF in October 1945 with the rank of Warrant Officer. In 1946, Kevin married Lilian (Lily) McHale. In 1949 he was employed by the State Electricity Commission and lived in Trafalgar in Eastern Victoria. Before joining the CRB, Kevin worked as a carpenter building houses for the building workers on the Eildon Dam project. He enjoyed this part of his life largely because he could drive around the district in his MG sports car accompanied by Lily.

Kevin retired from the CRB in 1981 and died in July 1989 in Western Australia.

### **Corporal Robert Arthur Stewart MacDowell, VX15747**

Known as Arthur, he enlisted on 20 May 1940. Arthur was born in Kensington on 23 December 1899 so he was over 40 years old when he joined up. He listed his occupation as Surveyor's Assistant at the State Rivers and Water Supply Commission. He joined the 2nd/8th Field Company (Engineers).

He married Ada Lillian Foster in 1924.



Arthur MacDowell's enlistment photo – 1940.

After his initial training at Puckapunyal, he embarked from Melbourne on HMT *S1* on 15 September 1940 and disembarked in Palestine a month later. On 30 March 1941 he left Egypt for Greece and in the following June he was 'reported missing believed to be a prisoner of war.' Although not mentioned in his archive, it is probable that Arthur was deployed to Crete where so many Australians were captured.

Australian forces were sent to Greece – especially Crete – to defend against German forces in May and June 1941. They were overrun and over a thousand of the Allied forces – including the Australians - surrendered to the Germans. Arthur was, probably, one of these men. I say 'probably' because there is no mention in the archive of his precise location. He may have been somewhere else in Greece but it is definite that he was captured.

Over a year after him being reported missing, on 14 September 1942, it was reported that he was a Prisoner of War. According to his archive, he was interned in three camps - Oflag 111C – as P.O.W. No 222 and Stalags 13C and 383 as P.O.W. No 10478.

However, these entries are misleading. Oflag 111C was located in Hohenfels in Bavaria and used for Allied NCOs but it was later named Stalag 383. So, they were the same camp. Stalag XIII-

C was also in Bavaria. In May–June 1941 Yugoslavian, predominantly Serbian prisoners, arrived from the Balkan campaign, and soon after in June–July 1941 Australian and other British Commonwealth soldiers arrived, captured during the Battle of Crete. I suspect that Arthur first arrived here and was later transferred to Stalag 383.

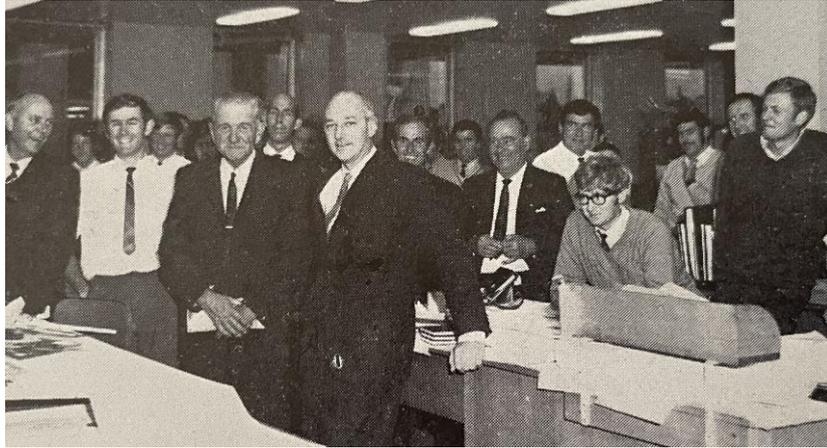
He was recovered after the war and arrived back in the UK on 11 May 1945 and back in Australia on 8 August 1945. He was discharged in November 1945.



Further portraits of Arthur Mac Dowell – dates unknown.

He joined the CRB in March 1946 and was attached to Keith Yard's survey party where most of the work was done in rural Victoria, particularly in Benalla and Bairnsdale Divisions. He retired in May 1970 after 24 years of service with the Board. A report in the *Roadlines* magazine (Spring 1970) described his farewell from the Plans and Survey Section, referring to him as Mr. A. MacDowell – probably in deference to his age.

He died in May 1979.



Arthur MacDowell (third from left) being farewelled by Neil Guerin at his farewell function.

The man on the extreme left is Charlie Robertson mentioned elsewhere in this history.

### **Corporal Keith Thomas Pullin, VX23150**

Keith was born in Footscray in 1912. He was a Corporal in the 2nd/8th Field Company and he was discharged in November 1945. Keith was a clerk in the Works Sub-branch although at the time of enlisting he was a storeman.

Immediately after enlisting in June 1940, Keith was sent to Puckapunyal in Central Victoria for training and in September he embarked for service overseas. He disembarked in Palestine in October where he remained until April 1941 when he embarked for Greece. The record shows he arrived in Egypt shortly afterwards. The next entry says: *6-6-41 Missing in Crete and trans. to X list date unknown*. I translate this cryptic note to be that, on 6th June 1941, he went missing in Crete and that he was placed on a list of soldiers whose whereabouts was unknown. Ten days later it stated that it was believed he was a POW. In November 1941, it was officially reported that he was a POW interned in Stalag VII-A.

CASH REGISTER		TELEGRAM	AFFIX STAMPS HERE
S. C. 2941—9/1940.		This message is presented for transmission subject to the Post and Telegraph Act and Regulations.	Charges for ORDINARY RATE Telegram For 14 words or less: Within a 15 mile radius 9d. Beyond a 15 mile radius 1/- Each additional word in both cases 1d.
Words	The address must contain all information necessary to ensure delivery.		For Office Use Only
Charge	Mrs M PULLIN		T
Time	22 KING ST ESSENDON		C
By			B
Remarks			
DISTREC 6706	K.T. PULLIN	PRISONER OF WAR	
VX 23150	PULLIN K.T.	I HAVE TO INFORM YOU THAT	
PREVIOUSLY REPORTED MISSING BELIEVED PRISONER		ENTERED	
IS NOW REPORTED PRISONER OF WAR			
A REPLY PAID TELEGRAM is a courteous means of ensuring A PROMPT ANSWER (PLEASE TURN OVER)		From MINISTER FOR THE ARMY	

The telegram sent to Keith's mother to inform her that Keith was a prisoner of War.

Stalag VII-A was the largest POW camp in Germany. It was located just north of the town of Moosburg in southern Bavaria – just north of Munich. The camp covered an area of 35 hectares (86 acres). It served also as a transit camp through which prisoners, including officers, were processed on their way to other camps. At some time during the war, prisoners from every nation fighting against Germany passed through it. At the time of its liberation on 29 April 1945, there were 76,248 prisoners in the main camp and 40,000 or more working in factories, repairing railroads or on farms.

Edgar Bartrop, who was a colleague of Keith in Works Sub-branch of the CRB, said that Keith said that after his capture he was imprisoned in Greece for some time, before being transferred to Germany. From my research, it appears that the POWs from Crete and Greece were incarcerated in transit camps in Corinth and Salonika, from where they were taken north to Germany by train. However, Keith told Edgar that he and his fellow prisoners were force-marched from Greece to Bavaria and that it took about over a month to travel the distance. By my reckoning, the distance would be over a thousand kilometres meaning they would have had to cover about 25 to 30 kilometres per day. There is nothing in Keith's archive that confirms this although there are many recorded instances of the Germans force-marching prisoners to camps. In fact, they were notorious for it. Another possibility may be that Keith was referring to forced-marches between prison camps in Germany because he was to change camps twice more.

The archive is clear in that he was also incarcerated in Stalag 8B (which was renamed Stalag 344) and finally, in Stalag 357. Stalag 8B was near Lamsdorf (now Lambinowice) in Silesia in south western Poland. Over 100,00 prisoners passed through this camp. They came from Australia,

Belgium Canada, France, Greece, India, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, South Africa, the Soviet Union, the UK and the USA.

Stalag 8B was notoriously harsh and overcrowded. A Polish academic Dr Anna Wickiewicz wrote in her book *Captivity in British Uniforms: Stalag VIII B (344) Lamsdorf*, that fuel for heating was scarce and the wooden barracks often had no glass in the windows. Most of the POWs worked as labourers in paper, chemical and armament factories, on farms, in forestry and sawmills, and on road and bridge construction. A typical work shift was 12 hours per day. Wickiewicz's research showed that Australians and New Zealanders were mainly sent to work in nearby coal mines. She wrote: "*All the hazards typical of miner's work were additionally augmented by the guards' cruelty, as it was only by means of terror that they were able to force the soldiers to stay obedient.*" The International Committee of the Red Cross inspectors who visited the camp concluded that, compared with other camps, Lamsdorf was to be classified as the worst. And yet the photograph of some of its Australian prisoners in the photograph below show them to be in relatively good spirits.



Group portrait of 16 Australians captured on Crete and sent to a German POW camp. August 1941.

Keith was liberated in April 1945 and returned to England for debriefing and recuperation. He returned to Melbourne on the RMS *Otranto* in September 1945. He may have suffered trouble with his eyesight, because the last entry records an eye test in November 1945 – but no result was recorded.

Keith married Audrey Rodgers in 1948. He died in January 1995 and is buried in Stanthorpe Cemetery in Queensland.

### **Flying Officer Hartley Trevor Sargeant, V44681, 419278**

Hartley was born in Essendon in 1918 and enlisted in the CMF in January 1940 (V44681). On 17 July 1942, he joined the RAAF (419278).

Hartley started work with the CRB in 1937 after working for A. G. Healing – the bicycle makers. He had put a note in with Zercho's Business College that he was looking for a change, and out of the blue, he received an invitation from the CRB. He started work in the old Dunlop Building in South Melbourne doing clerical work for the Mechanical Branch, but he was soon transferred to the drawing office. At enlistment, he described himself as a mechanical draftsman.



Hartley Sargeant's paybook photograph – 1942.

Hartley undertook training in Bradfield Park (Initial Training School) and Temora Elementary Flying Training School) from the time of his enlistment (July 1942) to February 1943. He then embarked from Sydney for Canada arriving there on 2 March 1943. After more training in Edmonton, he went by sea to the UK arriving there on 1 September 1943.

He was a navigator in RAF 214 Squadron (Federated Malay States). No. 214 Squadron was formed in 1917 as part of the Royal Naval Air Service but changed to 214 Squadron after the formation of the Royal Flying Corps. Its name was expanded in recognition of the gift of aircraft purchased with funds subscribed to the British Government through the Federated Malay States War Fund which was inaugurated by the *Malay Mail* in 1940.

No. 214 Federated (Malay States Squadron) spent the entire Second World War operating with Bomber Command. Hartley flew a total of 40 operational flights over two tours of duty.

The following account of events is recorded on the website of No. 214 (Federated Malay States) Squadron, Royal Air Force.

*‘On 14 March 1945, the mission of Flying Fortress Mark III HB802 BU-O to Lutzkendorf failed to return. It was brought down by light flak at 3,000 ft on its way home. All ten crew members were taken as Prisoners of War. Alternatively, it may have been shot down by the rear gunner of Hptm Martin Becker's Me 110 of Stab IV/NJG6. Becker claimed nine ‘Lancasters’ were shot down that night - this being the last, at 23.37 hrs, approximately three miles south east of Baiersbronn (near Strasbourg and Stuttgart).*

*Flt/Lt John Wynne was the pilot of the other 214 Fortress which was shot down on March 14, 1945 and gives further insight into the loss of HB802. Quote: "The other Fortress accompanying mine was flown by Norman Rix DFC, who became a celebrated architect. His aircraft, some miles further south than mine, was shot down over Stuttgart and Rix was lucky to survive. His parachute opened a few seconds before he crashed into the top branches of a pine tree. As a POW, Rix saved the Bavarian village of Ettringen from destruction by the advancing U.S. 7th Army. Having been marched to Ettringen, he persuaded his guards to lay down their arms and then took control of the village. The next day, he went forward to meet an American tank patrol and informed the astonished commander that Ettringen was already in British hands. A formal handover was arranged for the following day. No shots were fired and no civilians injured. Sadly, Rix's achievement was never recognised by the authorities, but the villagers of Ettringen have not forgotten what he did.’*

The crew of Flying Fortress Mark III HB802 BU-O consisted of two RAAF (including Hartley), three RNZAF and five RAF airmen The following letter was sent to Hartley's father on 15 March 1945.

*Dear Mr Sargeant,*

*I am writing to offer you the sincere sympathy both from myself and the whole squadron in the anxiety you have experienced since learning that Pilot Officer Hartley Trevor Sargeant, is missing from air operations.*

*He was the navigator of an aircraft which took off to operate against the enemy on the night of 14<sup>th</sup> / 15<sup>th</sup> March, 1945. No message was received from the aircraft and it failed to return. Nothing has since been heard of it or of any of the crew.*

*There is a possibility that Pilot Officer Sargeant may have escaped from the aircraft by parachute, or in a forced landing in enemy territory, in which case he would be a prisoner of war, and news of this would not reach us perhaps for many weeks. The International Red Cross would be the organisation to receive any further news and they would pass it immediately to the Air Ministry. The Air Ministry would then communicate with you direct, thus avoiding any necessary delay.*

*I feel most deeply for you in this anxious time. If there is anything I can do to help, please let me know. I join with you in hoping and praying that he is safe.*

*Yours very sincerely,  
D.D. Rogers'*



A Mark III Flying Fortress in flight - similar to the one that Hartley came down in.

Details of Hartley's account of leaving the aircraft are in his archive. He described how the light flak damaged the starboard engine which then caught fire. The crew were ordered to fix parachutes. Hartley said that he left the aircraft after the bomb-aimer. The skipper was the last to leave. The plane was at about 5,000 feet and, from his parachute, Hartley could see the aircraft, still on fire, explode on impact. He landed in snow in the Black Forest. He hid in a small box suspended above the snow, but armed civilians with dogs sensed him out and, after being frisked for arms, he was marched back to the village of Rippledon and handed over to the army authorities.

Hartley was captured with two other airmen – Pilot Officer A.R. Irvine (RAAF) and Flight Lieutenant N. Rix (RAF). All crew members survived to become prisoners of war.

He was interned at a transit camp at Ludwigeburg (in Stuttgart) for a period of 12 days. He described the accommodation as fair but crowded, with no facility for bathing and poor sanitation. There were no recreational facilities and he was not required to work. He described the guards as being very 'loud voiced'. Pilot Officer Irvine was the only person he knew in the camp. He said that the German rations were 'little and poor' but the cooking facilities were fair.

Fortunately for Hartley, the war ended not long after he was captured. The official date of the end of the war is 8 May 1945, but there must have been some sort of cessation of hostilities preceding that date as he was repatriated to the UK on 7 May 1945.

Back in the UK, he was interviewed about his interment – as were all POWs – and the information about his experiences was recorded in the debriefing.

After his debriefing, he was asked for anything else he needed to record. He said "I cannot speak for camp treatment since I was on the march most of the eight weeks I was in captivity."

He arrived back in Melbourne on 22 October 1945 and was immediately discharged.

He resumed work in the Mechanical Branch of the CRB and was a popular and well-respected member of staff. Late in his career, he mused at how elementary the plant was before the war – whether it was bought in or designed by the CRB itself. There were no hydraulics or pneumatics in those early days. The designs were experimental. A prototype was made and, if it worked, more would be made with progressive improvements.

After the war, one of the most pressing problems in Mechanical Branch was the maintenance of the equipment used in the Bituminous Surfacing (BS) Units around the state. Hartley was appointed to tour around the countryside regularly to visit the BS Units and sort out their problems – including non-mechanical ones.

He remained with the Board (and the Branch) for 40 years.

Hartley retired in the mid-1970s and died in 2010 aged 92.

### **Lieutenant Colonel Robert (Bob) Mace Webber VX28662**

Bob worked in the Transport Section of the Country Roads Board at 25 Church St, Hawthorn for about 10 years in the 1970s. He worked for John Gibney, a man Bob greatly admired. His nephew, Jim Webber, also worked for many years in the CRB, the RCA and VicRoads and I am indebted to him for most of the information in this entry. All the photographs in this section are courtesy of the Webber family.

Bob, who was born in 1909 at Castlemaine, was the sixth of nine children born to Benjamin and Jessie Webber. The Webber family owned the Webber's Hotel (now the Northern Arts Hotel) for 40 years from 1882 to 1922.

Bob began his apprenticeship as a fitter and turner with Thompsons Engineering & Pipe Co. in Castlemaine in 1923. He worked at Thompsons until 1928 after which he moved to the family's home in Kew. In 1936 he was the first of the Webber children to marry. Two years later he was offered a position as a fitter and turner in the Australian Military Forces at the Ordnance Workshops, Victoria Barracks, St Kilda Rd, Melbourne.

Following the start of the Second World War in September 1939, the Australian Army Services were shipping manpower and equipment to Egypt by June 1940. Bob left from Melbourne in August 1940 aboard the RMS *Strathallan*, arriving in Palestine in October. The records for servicemen in the Australian National Archives invariably record the date of embarkation from Australia and the date of disembarkation at the other end – usually the Middle East or England. Sometimes – but not always – they provide the name of the ship, and as a consequence we know

nothing of what happened in between. In Bob's case however, we are lucky to have a description of the trip which was described in the history of the 2nd/2nd Field Workshops of which Bob was a member. It stated:

*“Embarked .... on the Strathallan.... calling at Adelaide, Fremantle, Singapore (where a route march in tropical conditions was a new and somewhat unpleasant experience) and at Colombo en route, disembarked at Bombay (Mumbai) on 3 September and encamped at the main cricket stadium. Later, on 20 September the unit moved to the military station over 2,000 feet above sea-level at Deolali, across the Gnats about 100 miles NE of Bombay and near the ancient city of Nasik. The stay at this site on the Grand Trunk Road was brief as the unit boarded the SS President Doumer<sup>2</sup> on 24 September and as part of a large convoy sailed for Egypt. The convoy began with 17 ships but it grew daily until the naval escorts joined on 2 and 3 October when there were 45 ships.*

*Near Asmara, Italian planes made high level attacks. This was a taste of things to come in the desert. Although no hits were made, bombs were close and splash in the portholes left open, gave some duckings. The trouper (sic) anchored at Suez on 11 October, 60 days after leaving Melbourne. The next day the troops moved ashore by lighters and entrained for Helwan, a camp about 14 miles from Cairo and once the quarries for the limestone of the Pyramids.”*



Bob and 2 AIF companions at the Cheops Pyramid in Cairo – 4 November 1940.  
The identities are unknown. His family think he is second from the left.

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<sup>2</sup> SS President Doumer was a British Troop Transport which was torpedoed and sunk by a German U-boat off the coast of Madeira on 30 October 1942. The master, 173 crew members, 23 gunners and 63 troops were lost. 78 crew members and seven gunners were rescued.



Bob Webber 9 November 1940, probably at Helwan, near Cairo.

The history of the 2nd/2nd then described their first action as follows:

*“An advance party of the unit moved (westwards) to Amyria on 3 December 1940 and moved on to the exposed, stony and flea-ridden area at the top of Hell Fire Pass (Halfaya). Halfaya is 12km east of the Libya border.*

*On the eve of Australia’s first army battle of the 1939-45 war, headquarters of 6 Australia Division (which occupied ancient Roman or Greek granaries near the Libyan-Egyptian frontier) asked the unit to provide all available lorries to carry ammunition from the AOD and unit drivers were thrilled to arrive at gun sites in action.*

*The Battle of Bardia<sup>3</sup> (against the Italian Army) began at half-past five on the very cold morning of 3 January 1941. The wire, mines and anti-tank ditch were breached by the RAE and the(ir) tanks, followed by the infantry who moved into the fortress on the afternoon of 5 January.*

*Derna (Darnah) fell on 29 January. We (were) ordered on to Giovanni Berta (which is now known as Quba) which 6 Recovery Section reached on 5 February and Tecnis the next day. Tecnis (or Tacnis) is about 300km west of Tobruk and about 127km from Benghazi.*

It appears that Benghazi was as far west as Bob went in North Africa.

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<sup>3</sup> Jim Webber’s mother’s only sibling, Private Len Parker VX5438, was killed at the Battle of Bardia.



Map showing the Cyrenaica theatre where Bob was initially based.

Bob was made a Lieutenant in January 1941. He spent several months training in Palestine before he embarked for Greece on 1 April 1941, a few days before the German invasion of Greece on 6 April. He embarked from Alexandria (Egypt) and arrived at Piraeus (Port of Athens) on 3 April. On 12 April, the 2nd Anzac Corps of Australian and New Zealand troops was formed to assist the Greek Army. On the South Australian RAEME website ‘5 Recovery Section (2/2 Army Field Workshop)’ it states that “At this time Lt McGillivray was replaced by Lt R. Webber, a permanent Military Officer.”

During the Greek Campaign the Anzac Corps was rapidly pushed southwards. On 22 April, orders were given to destroy machinery, stores and equipment except for a number of oxygen and acetylene welding bottles. Two very difficult days brought them to Magoula just west of Athens where their remaining equipment was destroyed – except for their vans.

The main Anzac Corps reached the coast at Argos, Nafplio and Tolo (Tolon). Bob was captured at Tolo on 28 April. His unit had waited at Tolo for two days to be evacuated, but no rescue ships turned up. About 11,000 Allied troops were evacuated to Crete and Alexandria while about 2,000

others were captured by the time the Germans were victorious on 30 April. A total of 2,065 Australians were captured in Greece.



Map showing the location of Tolo (Tolon) where Bob was captured by the German Army.



Tolo Beach, Greece – today.

Bob described the last few days prior to the surrender in his statement on 12 May 1945 at Eastbourne after the war as follows:

*“2<sup>nd</sup> in charge. No. 4 Recovery. By order from C.O. evacuated sub-section from Ellisson (Elassona). Rejoined the Recovery at Livardia (Livadeia), while equipment was destroyed, and evacuated from there to J Beach (Magara). Spent 2 nights there but no ships arrived, moved to Tulon (sic) under orders, first night most of the Recovery was evacuated, second night, again no ships arrived ... on April 28<sup>th</sup> '41 we were ordered to surrender to the enemy by Lt. Col. Hutchinson A.I.F. All attempts to escape were unsuccessful.”*

Bob was kept in a prison in Corinth before being taken to Germany on 16 June 1941. The POWs were generally transported to Germany by rail in closed wagons on a journey in appalling conditions of up to a week. Bob's wife and two young daughters initially heard that Bob was missing in June 1941. The Argus on 31 July 1941 under the heading 'Missing Officers Located', listed Bob as one of 59 officers located in German prison camps by the International Red Cross Committee. He spent nearly four years as a POW in Germany in four prisons for officers - Oflag 5B at Biberach (4 months), Oflag 6B at Warburg (11 months), Oflag 7B at Eichstaldt (30 months) and Oflag 7A at Murnau (1 week). All four camps were in southern Germany near Munich. At Eichstaldt where Bob spent most of his incarceration, he was in charge of cooking for a bloc of 230 officers.

Bob also made the following statement in his debriefing after the war.

*Worked on 4 tunnels from our hut at Warburg, all of which were unsuccessful. 11 months at Warburg was attached to the Escape Squad, made one of the ladders for the successful jump over the wire at Warburg, when 28 officers escaped. Worked directly under Major E. Bessel-Brown, 3<sup>rd</sup> Field Regiment & Major C. Parker, R.F.*

While in captivity in December 1941 Bob was Mentioned in Dispatches 'in recognition of distinguished services in the Middle East, during the period February 1941 to July 1941'.



Lt. R. M. Webber Australian Prisoner of War in Germany.  
This photo was taken in Oflag 5B in August 1941, four months after his capture.

The record of Bob's de-briefing in England after the war indicated that the conditions in all prisons were fairly grim, with the winter cold being a major problem. It is interesting that the above photo was taken while in captivity, presumably by his captors. Another interesting aspect of life as a POW was that Bob was able to receive family photos while in the camps. Jim has several that Bob brought back home after the war- the one below sent to Oflag 5B featured Jim as a two-year old. Jim has been unable to find any reference as to how they were dispatched in Australia. Given that they included the camp address, it's possible that the family just dropped the addressed photos in the mail box.



Jim Webber (age 2) and his father (also Jim).

VX 28662  
LT R. M. WEBBER (ARMY)  
AUSTRALIAN PRISONER OF WAR  
No 262 IN GERMANY  
OFLAG YB Bn IV  
OFLAG VIB  
23 geprüft  
Jens + familie taken at Lie's  
Sept 14<sup>th</sup> '42

Written on the reverse of the photo.

Oflag 7A was liberated by the USA Army on 29 April 1945.

Australian POWs from German prisons were sent to England after being released - in Bob's case, to Eastbourne in East Sussex. During his time there he completed two statements regarding his capture, his experiences in the German camps, and his involvement in any escape attempts - one statement for Australian POWs and the other for Australian, British and American POWs. On the one hand, these statements were used to identify war crimes and mistreatment, and on the other, to identify those who could be compensated for assisting escapees.

Bob arrived back in Australia four months after his release and a month later he was made a Captain.



Bob's family welcoming him back to Melbourne. They are behind the welcome sign.  
September 1945.



Bob's welcome home at 41 Rix Street, Glen Iris.

He remained in the Australian Army after the war. Bob and family were first posted to Canberra for seven years, where he was Officer in Charge heading the Ordnance Workshops at the Royal Military College in Duntroon. Bob, by then in the Australian Electrical & Mechanical Engineers (AEME), and his family then spent more than two years in Nottingham, England and Cologne, Germany from 1952 to 1954 where he was seconded to the British Army on an exchange basis. Bob then had three years in Adelaide before being finally posted to the Army's Headquarters in Melbourne where he was made a Major in July 1962. On his retirement in February 1964, following 26 years in the services, he was made a Lieutenant Colonel.



Bob and Helen Webber (centre) with their two daughters – Jill (left) and Bobbie (right) – October 1953 – before they left England for Germany.

Bob died at Coolangatta in June 1992 at age 83.