'WE'LL NEVER GET OFF THE ISLAND'

PRISONER OF WAR EXPERIENCES IN CHANGI, SINGAPORE, AND TATURA, VICTORIA.

HTAV
HISTORY TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION *of* VICTORIA

VICTORIA
State Government

TATURA
MUSEUM

AN EDUCATION RESOURCE

Contents

Produced by the History Teachers' Association of Victoria (HTAV) 2021.

This project was made possible through the 75th Anniversary of the end of World War II Grant Program facilitated by the Department of Premier and Cabinet (Veterans Branch) Victoria.

HTAV would like to thank Sue Schmitke and George Ferguson from the Tatura Irrigation and Wartime Camps Museum, who went above and beyond in their support for this project.

A special mention also goes to co-author Kaye De Petro who, while creating this resource, drew on the story of her father who was imprisoned at Changi during WWII.

—Jo Clyne

Introduction

Changi and Tatura

This resource provides details of the experiences of Australian prisoners of war (POWs) held in Changi, Singapore, and POWs from opposing forces such as Germany and Italy, held in Tatura, Australia, during World War II (WWII) (1939–1945). While the story of Changi's POWs has been told across the mediums of film, television and text, the story of Tatura's WWII POW camps is relatively unknown. This resource provides historical information on key aspects of the POW experience at each site, inviting readers to develop their understanding of the factors shaping wartime captivity at both Changi and Tatura. This book considers aspects such as geography, political ideology, innovation, education and the role of the Geneva Convention in regulating POW camps.

There were similarities and differences between the treatment of POWs at Changi and Tatura, but their experience was bound by one important geographic characteristic—the location of their prison on an island.

While incarcerated at Changi, groups of POWs used music as a means of passing the time and keeping up morale. One of the artefacts that speaks to the Australian POW experience is a violin used by members of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) Concert Party between 1942 and 1945. It is inscribed with the words 'AIF Concert Party, P.O.W. Camp Singapore' and the names of both Australian and other Allied country POWs who were part of the orchestra. The most poignant inscription runs around the edge of the instrument and proclaims, 'we will never get off the island', a reference to their imprisonment on the island of Singapore.

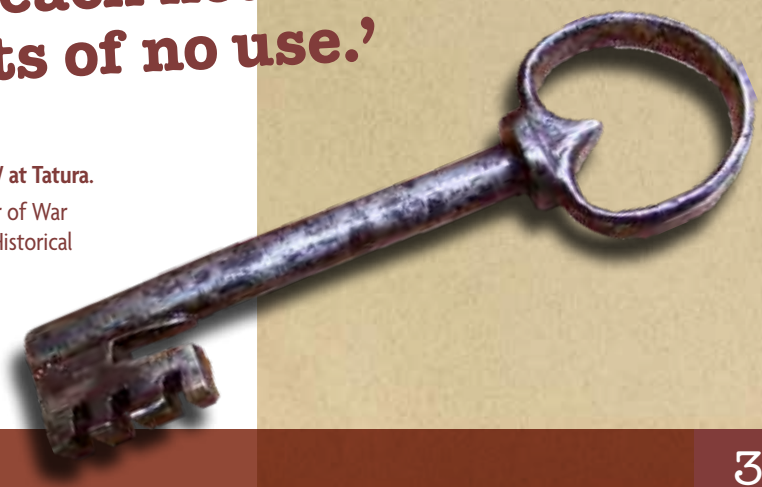
This sentiment was also echoed by the POWs held at Australian camps, such as in Tatura.

The Australian camps were strategically placed away from coastlines to minimise the risk of POWs making contact with ships. Even if they managed to escape—a frequent event at Tatura—there was nowhere to go. They were being forced to sit out the war, stuck on the world's largest island continent, with no way of getting off.

^ Violin played by POW members of the AIF Concert Party.
Source: Victorian Collections, Instrument: Violin, The Changi Violin, 1943. Melbourne Legacy Collection, 00080.

'Since Australia is an island and no possibility existed to reach neutral land, I found escape attempts of no use.'

^ Reflection of Hans-Wolter von Gruenewaldt, German artist and POW at Tatura.
Source: Kay Ball, ed., Art Captured: Hans-Wolter von Gruenewaldt. Prisoner of War Camp 13 Murchison: His Story and Art (Murchison: Murchison and District Historical Society, 2017), 35.



Prisoners of War

A POW camp is an institution created to hold enemy forces captured during conflict. Not to be confused with concentration camps or internment camps, their primary purpose was to remove enemy soldiers from fighting, thereby weakening the opponent.

The first documented POW camps were Norman Cross Prison (built 1796) and HM Prison Dartmoor (1809). Both were erected in England by the Royal Navy during the Napoleonic Wars to house captured enemy troops. The camps were built near a transport system to allow for transfer of prisoners and supplies, such as food, and were located in remote regions to decrease the chances of escape. POWs were permitted to practise certain skills, including the production and sale of wooden items such as toys or games. Most were allowed to keep the money they earned. At the end of the Napoleonic Wars, prisoners were repatriated to their home country, although some chose to remain in England. These practicalities set the standard for POW camps, and many of these characteristics were replicated in twentieth-century institutions.

^ The Depot for Prisoners of War, Norman Cross, Huntingdonshire, c. 1797.

Source: Unknown, *Painting of the Norman Cross POW Camp, 1797.* Wikimedia Commons *https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norman_Cross_Prison#/media/File:Norman_Cross_painting.jpg*

Geneva Convention

The Geneva Conventions are a series of documents that set standards for the treatment of people during wartime. The first iteration, the 1864 Geneva Convention, set out protocols for the humanitarian treatment of injured or ill soldiers on the battlefield. These documents went through several stages of development, with revisions in 1906, 1929 and 1949.

Regulations about the rights of POWs and civilian internees were first added to the Geneva Convention in 1929. The introduction of the clause was the result of concerns that arose during World War I (WWI) (1914–1918) and the first modification in 1949 was made in response to the lessons of WWII. An additional protocol was added in 1977 just after the end of the Vietnam War (1955–1975).

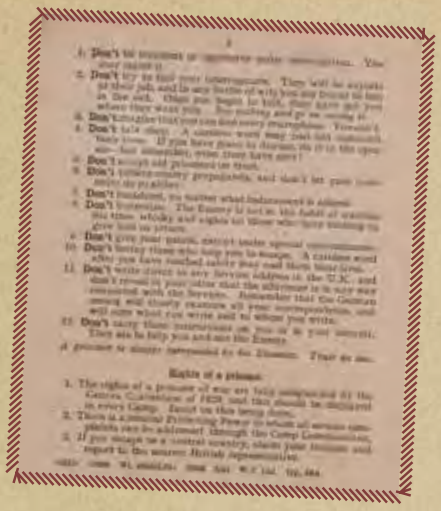
The clause that dictated POWs' rights to be treated humanely while in captivity was comprised of 97 articles related to:

- treatment during capture and captivity
- the conditions of POW camps
- food and clothing of POWs
- hygiene in camps
- intellectual and moral needs
- internal camp discipline
- provisions concerning the rank and status of POWs
- transfer to other camps
- camp work undertaken by POWs, as well as pay
- complaints by POWs
- discipline and punishment
- end of captivity
- liberation and repatriation at the end of the conflict.

The overarching message of the convention is articulated in article 2 of the 1929 Geneva Convention.

POWs were supposed to be issued a copy of the Geneva Convention in their own language. This, alongside the work of organisations such as the Prisoners of War Information Bureau and the International Committee of the Red Cross, was supposed to ensure that POWs were not abused by their captors. However, this was not always the case. POWs across the world have been subjected to inhumane torture, squalid living conditions, and execution. Indeed, this still continues in many parts of the world. This Responsibilities of a Prisoner of War card highlights the experiences of the men who were removed from theatres of war during WWII and subjected to a different kind of battle.

> Prisoners of war are in the power of the hostile Government, but not of the individuals or formation which captured them. They shall at all times be humanely treated and protected, particularly against acts of violence, from insults and from public curiosity. Measures of reprisal against them are forbidden.
>
> ^ Source: *Geneva Convention of 27 July 1929 Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War*, 47 STAT. 2021; 846 (entered into force 19 June 1931), art. 2.



^ 'The Responsibilities of a Prisoner of War' card issued to pilots in European theatres of war, 1944.

Source: Victorian Collections, The Responsibilities of a Prisoner of War, 1944. Lara RSL Sub Branch Collection, 512 (Air Publications 1548). *https://victoriancollections.net.au/items/59549a2e90751a320cab67ff*.

Changi

Changi Prison became infamous in Australian history when approximately 15,000 Australian troops became POWs of the Japanese army after the surrender of Singapore during WWII. However, initially it was not soldiers but civilian prisoners who were sent to Changi Prison. Three thousand men and 400 women and children were interned in a civilian prison intended to hold 600 prisoners. The Allied troops were imprisoned in the Roberts and Selarang Barracks nearby. Thus, the whole area became known simply as Changi.

The Defence of Australia

Since 1788, the British Empire had assumed responsibility for defending the Australian continent against external forces. However, by the early twentieth century, Britain's capacity to defend its colonies had weakened and it had become more focused on the military threats rising in Europe. The Australian Government was concerned about a possible invasion by Japan, which was expanding its territories across the Pacific region. Australia, with its rich natural resources, seemed an obvious target.

In the 1920s, the British and Australian governments came up with a new plan to defend both the British Empire's interests in South-East Asia and Australia from an increasingly powerful Japan. This new defence plan became known as the 'Singapore Strategy'.

The Singapore Strategy

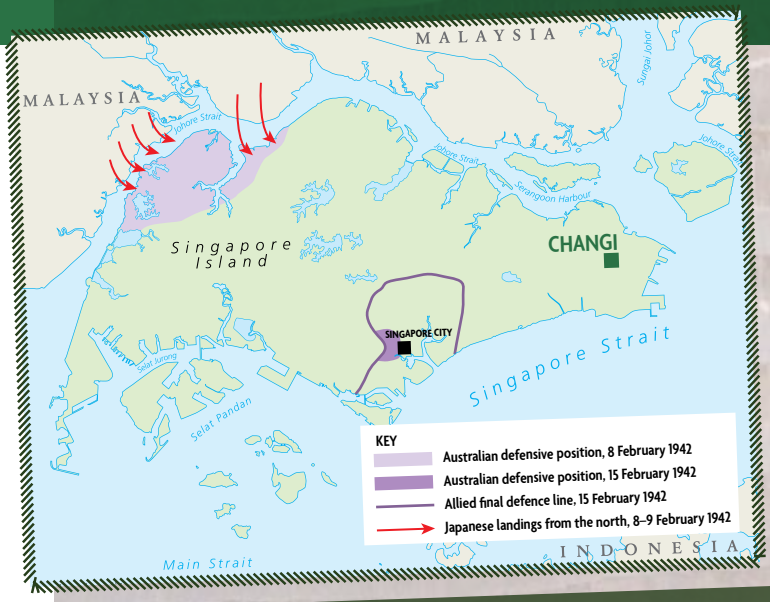
This defence plan was quite simple. It relied on:

- the building of a major British naval base on Singapore Island. Singapore was strategically positioned on the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula between the Pacific and Indian oceans, perfectly placed to control the region
- a fleet of Royal Navy vessels that would be deployed from Britain to Singapore in the event of war in the Pacific
- the fact that a landward invasion of Malaya and Singapore from the north was considered impossible
- aeroplanes of the time being incapable of long-distance attack.

However, by 1941—when WWII was well underway—the reality was that:

- the British fleet was busy fighting the Germans in the North Sea
- the Japanese sent their crack troops to attack Malaya and Singapore
- as the Japanese were fighting southwards through the jungle, they were well supported from the air
- Japanese aircrafts were able to destroy the one British battleship and one battle cruiser stationed in Singapore.

After a week of fierce fighting on Singapore Island, with a million citizens trapped in the city of Singapore, the British commander, Lieutenant General Arthur Percival, surrendered to the Japanese on 15 February 1942. Over 130,000 Allied troops were now POWs, including 15,000 Australian soldiers. More than 7,000 of these Australian soldiers would die over the next three years.



^ Invasion of Singapore by the Japanese, February 1942 and the site of Changi prison.
Source: Getty Images

Changi Prison Timeline

1936: Construction of Changi civilian prison. Holding capacity of 600 prisoners.

15 February 1942: Surrender of Singapore to the Japanese.

17 February 1942: Most of the captured Australian troops (15,000) are moved into Selarang Barracks in the Changi area.

Early March 1942: Fences are constructed around individual camps, restricting movement around the area.

May–June 1944: All 11,700 Allied prisoners, including 5,000 Australians, are moved into Changi Prison itself.

5 September 1945: Changi is liberated by the British 5th Infantry Division.

13 September 1945: Australian POWs repatriated to Melbourne.

^ The Japanese commander, Lieutenant General Tomoyuki Yamashita (seated, centre), has just thumped the table with his fist to demand the unconditional surrender of the British and Allied troops. Lieutenant General Percival, the British commander, sits between his officers with his clenched fist to his mouth (15 February 1942).
Source: Imperial War Museum, Photograph of the British Surrender, Battle of Singapore, 15 February 1942. Black and white photograph. Wikimedia Commons. *https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:BritishSurrender.jpg*

Changi Prison Complex

When most Australians think about Changi POW camp, they think of Changi Prison. However, the camp was actually made up of seven POW and internee (civilian prisoner) camps that covered an area of about 25 kilometres. The whole area became known as Changi, as it was situated on the Changi Peninsula at the eastern end of Singapore Island.

Originally, this area had been the base for the British Army, and troops had been housed in three major barracks: Roberts, Selarang and Kitchener. These, along with Changi Gaol and three smaller camps, were where the military POWs and civilian internees were held in what became known as the Changi Prison Complex.

In the first few weeks, there was relative freedom of movement for the POWs across the area. However, in March, fences were erected around each of the camps, isolating them from each other. In August 1942, Japanese troops arrived to guard the POWs, and all Allied officers above the rank of colonel were transferred to Japan or Formosa (Taiwan).

The Japanese chose to house the POWs and civilian internees in this area for practical reasons. The area was already set up for housing relatively large groups of people. They were close enough together that the whole camp could be guarded easily and were away from the main city of Singapore.

Selarang Barracks

The Selarang Barracks were built in the late 1930s as accommodation for British troops. They were originally designed to house 900 men, however, during its time as a POW camp it housed over 16 times that many people—15,000 men plus the Japanese guards. The barracks are now part of a restricted military area controlled by the Singapore Armed Forces. All that is left of the original British-built buildings are the officers' mess—where the officers ate and socialised, and where the unmarried officers lived—and the headquarters. The other buildings have been demolished.

The Australian troops were imprisoned in Selarang Barracks from February 1942 until they were transferred to Changi Prison in May 1944. Some 11,400 Allied soldiers, including 5,000 Australians, were crammed into a prison designed to hold 600 prisoners.

Changi Prison

Changi Prison was the last civilian prison to be built by the British colonial government in Singapore. It was designed as a modern, secure prison, and opened on 4 January 1937.

The prison comprised two main buildings containing two units; each was four storeys high. On the ground floor were work rooms, while the cells were on the upper floors. There was a hospital block, punishment cells, and cells for unmanageable prisoners. The prison complex was surrounded by a 6-metre-high wall with turrets at each corner.

^ Changi Gaol and surroundings, c. 1945.

Source: Australian War Memorial, Aerial View of Changi Gaol. Black and white photograph, print silver gelatine. P02569.198. *https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C340345.*

^ POWs showing the conditions in their cell: there were four men to a two-man cell. Changi, Singapore, 1945.

Source: Australian War Memorial, Changi, Singapore, 1945-09-19. Black and white photograph. 116463. *https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C220951*

Why Were Australian Soldiers Incarcerated at Changi?

The surrender of Singapore to the Japanese Army on 15 February 1942 was a crushing blow to the British and Australian armies. It is considered one of the worst military defeats in their history.

The British completed improvements to the military base in Singapore in 1938. They were convinced that Singapore could withstand any attack by sea, discounting a land attack as impossible.

However, on 10 December 1941 the Japanese sank the British battleship *HMS Prince of Wales* and the battle cruiser *HMS Repulse*. The day before, the Japanese attacked the airfields, destroying nearly all of the Royal Air Force planes. Singapore was now wide open for an attack by land.

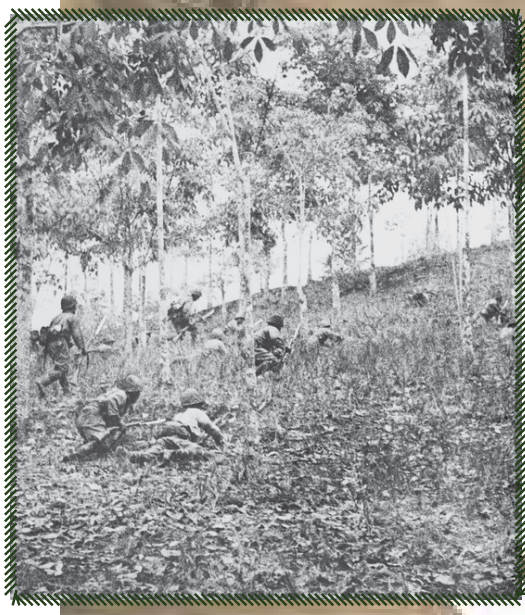
< The sinking of the battleship *HMS Prince of Wales*, 10 December 1942.

Source: Australian War Memorial, At Sea, Off Malaya, 1941-12-10. Black and white photograph. P01101.001. *https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C204694*.

From mid-December to mid-February, the Japanese attacked down the Malay Peninsula with 65,000 battle-hardened soldiers against 90,000 British, Indian and Australian troops. The Japanese troops attacked with great speed and ferocity against the Allied soldiers, many of whom had never fought before.

On 15 February 1942, British commander General Percival surrendered to General Tomoyuki Yamashita. All Allied troops were ordered to lay down their arms by 8.30 pm that evening. Over 130,000 troops were now POWs.

> The most lasting memory of the fall of Singapore was the terrific silence following the ceasefire order. The din of firing, bombs falling and exploding and the general noises of war, had become normal to us. When it suddenly ceased, the silence seemed to hurt. One felt as though he were alone in a secluded forest glade with all the bird sounds and noises muted.
>
> **^ From the diary of John Nevell, July 1942.**
>
> Source: Australian War Memorial, PR00257. *https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C260561*



^ Japanese troops advancing towards Singapore, 11 February 1942.

Source: Australian War Memorial, Bukit Timah Area, Singapore, 1942-02-11. Black and white photograph, film copy negative. 127901. *https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C218435*.

At 2.00 pm on 17 February 1942, the POWs were forced to march the 29 kilometres from Singapore city to the Changi Peninsula—a long march for soldiers who were hungry and weary from battle and defeat.

Each soldier could take only what he could carry; these would be his only possessions for the duration of the war. The men were advised to destroy their private belongings—photographs, letters and diaries—to prevent the Japanese from later using them as propaganda. The troops were also warned that the Japanese would most likely search them for items such as cameras, compasses and cash, with execution as a possible punishment. Soldiers had to choose between taking clothes, food, bedding or boots. Some made rather strange choices. For example, one soldier kept a 4.5-kilogram solid block of polished brass, as it was an item difficult to obtain back in Australia.

In the end, the Japanese did not search any of the POWs, and any Japanese soldiers who stole watches from the arms of the prisoners were ordered to return them. The men marched on through the bombed-out streets past the bodies of the dead. Their only relief was coffee that some of the Chinese women brought out to them. As some weary soldiers floundered by the wayside, trucks were brought later to pick them up. Finally, late at night, the 15,000 Australian POWs arrived at Selarang Barracks to be housed in accommodation meant for 900 men.

Way-station Changi

Not all of the POWs captured in Singapore were incarcerated in Changi for the entirety of the war. Changi became the central control camp that the Japanese used for moving their prisoners around to various sites. Many POWs were sent to other Japanese controlled areas to work as labourers on various projects, and then back through Changi, before being sent on to some other work camp. Allied soldiers captured in other regions were also sent to Changi, often before being moved on to somewhere else.

Australian POWs were sent from Changi to Burma, Thailand, Japan, Borneo, Manchuria (north-eastern China), South-East Asia, Formosa (Taiwan) and Korea. However, some POWs did stay in Changi for the entire war, as they were used for work parties within Singapore.

The most infamous of these destinations was the Burma–Thailand Railway. Some 9,500 Australian POWs were sent to either the Burmese or Thai ends of the railway to work as labourers on its construction. Conditions were appalling: the prisoners were forced to work long hours in thick jungle, immense heat and humidity, and monsoonal rains, with little food or medical care. Nearly one third of the deaths of Australian prisoners of the Japanese (2,646) occurred while working on or marching to and from the railway.

Lack of Communication

One of the many difficult aspects of life as a POW under the Japanese was being isolated from what was happening in Australia and from news of the war. Within a week of the surrender of Singapore, a list of Australian casualties—dead, captured and wounded—was prepared for the Japanese to send to Australian authorities. In turn, this could then be passed on to anxious families waiting for news of the fate of their loved ones. However, the Japanese never sent the list to Australia.

In fact, there was little communication allowed with home at all. Over the three and a half years that the Australian soldiers were POWs in Changi they were only allowed to write five postcards each of only 24 words. The men were permitted to write the first postcards in June 1942 after four months of imprisonment, and then it was another five months before they were sent to Australia. The first incoming mail from home did not arrive until March 1943, over a year after the fall of Singapore. For the duration of their imprisonment, the soldiers' families were uncertain of their fate and knew little or nothing of what was happening to them under Japanese rule.

> The extraordinary silence which has enclosed Singapore since its capitulation on February 15 1942 has created an atmosphere of mystery which has been difficult to penetrate. Information ... has been collected from a French man who was repatriated to Saigon from Singapore in the middle of 1943: from a letter by an Indian; from an officer who spent more than a year in Changi military camp in Singapore, and who eventually reached this country; from a young Asiatic professional man who escaped from Malaya in October, 1943, and from a number of Australian soldiers who were rescued from the prison ship sinking in September, 1944.
>
> ^ Source: "Probing Singapore Silence," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 February 1945. *https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/17940254.*

^ Hospital ward, Burma–Thailand Railway. Changi, Singapore, 1946. Drawing by Murray Griffin.

Source: Murray Griffin, *Hospital Ward, Burma–Thailand Railway*, 1946. Pen and brush and brown ink, pencil, white gouache on paper, 35.1 cm x 51.2 cm. Australian War Memorial Collection, ART25104. *https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C178111*

^ Family and friends of the POWs in Changi receiving their first mail from them since the fall of Singapore, 14 September 1943.

Source: Australian War Memorial, Melbourne, VIC, 1943-09-14. Black and white photograph, film original acetate. AWM139637. *https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C262250.*

Living Conditions for POWs at Changi

Changi was not the worst of the Japanese POW camps, though conditions for the prisoners were still very poor.

> We arrived here last night at 1 am and were bedded down in new huts at Changi at 4 am. We have at last fallen into a prisoner's paradise.
>
> **^ Sergeant Stan Arneil, 2/30th Battalion, on returning to Changi from the Burma–Thailand Railway, 21 December 1943.**
>
> Source: Australian War Memorial, "Stolen Years: Australian Prisoners of War–Changi," *https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/stolenyears/ww2/japan/changi*.

Changi gained its reputation as a hellhole in the months after May 1944, when over 11,000 Allied POWs were moved into Changi Prison itself. This included 5,000 Australian troops. The overcrowding and worse conditions meant that Changi became synonymous with the suffering of POWs under the Japanese.

Accommodation

Upon arrival at Seralang Barracks in February 1942, the 11,500 Australian troops found that they had to be housed in an area designed to accommodate 900 men. In addition, the Japanese bombing of Singapore had damaged much of the area. That first night, using a roster system, each man was able to sleep at least part of the night under shelter of some sort. The next day, the hard work began to re-establish a camp with no proper building tools or equipment and men who were already exhausted.

Food

Food became one of the greatest obsessions of the POWs. Every man became concerned with two things—whether the food they ate would give them the energy they needed for the hard labour they were forced to do each day, and whether their food would be tasty and give them the flavour that they craved.

The POWs had to adjust to a diet largely made up of rice—usually one cup of cooked rice per day, per man. This was sometimes supplemented by rotten fish and a stew made up of hibiscus leaves and other edible grasses. In May 1942, the Japanese allowed the opening of a canteen that sold local food. The prisoners could supplement their diet with the minimal wages paid to them by the Japanese and the money made by smuggling items out of the camp to sell to locals. Often, when out on work parties, sympathetic Chinese Singaporeans would slip parcels of food to the POWs; these were a welcome addition to their diet.

Eventually, the men planted vegetable gardens and were able to grow produce such as Ceylon spinach, yams, sweet potatoes, beans and eggplant. By the end of 1943, these gardens were making a sizeable contribution towards improving the daily diet of the men.

v A depiction of showering in the first year of captivity at Changi, when there was still no running water. The man on the left is pumping rainwater from a below-ground drain to allow the others to shower. Changi, Singapore, 1944. Drawing by Murray Griffin.

Source: Murray Griffin, *The Shower, Changi, Early Days*, 1944. Brush and brown ink and wash over pencil on paper, 38.2 cm x 56.2 cm. Australian War Memorial, ART2085. h*ttps://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C175832*.

v The kitchen at the Changi POW camp in Singapore. This shows the primitive conditions under which food was prepared for the prisoners.

Source: Australian War Memorial, Changi, Singapore, September 1945. Black and white photograph. 019190. *https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C376309*.

Health and Medical Care

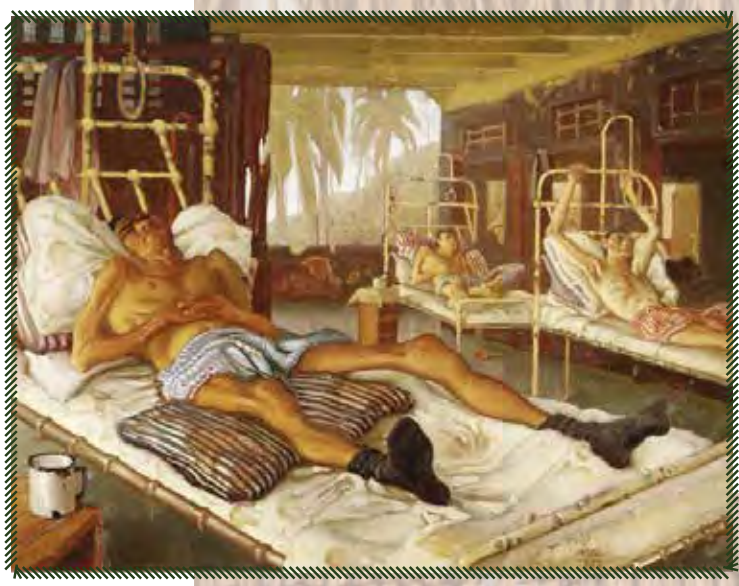
Due to the hard labour of working parties, overcrowding, the lack of fresh water, poor diet and sanitary conditions, the tropical climate, and harsh treatment and physical abuse by their Japanese captors, most, if not all, of the POWs fell ill or were injured at some point during their incarceration.

The illnesses and medical conditions prisoners experienced included tropical diseases such as malaria, dengue fever and tropical ulcers; diseases caused by overcrowding and lack of hygiene, such as dysentery and cholera; and diseases caused by a limited diet and vitamin deficiencies, such as malnutrition, pellagra and beriberi.

Unfortunately, there were major cultural differences in medical treatment and even the types of illnesses suffered by the Japanese and their European prisoners. Two examples of this were the illness diphtheria and the Japanese medical treatment known as 'moxa cautery'.

Diphtheria, a serious bacterial infection of the nose and throat, was quite common among the POWs. Diphtheria in Japan was a childhood disease that adults rarely contracted. Adult Westerners were susceptible to diphtheria, but the Japanese doctors had no training or provision for treating it successfully within the camps.

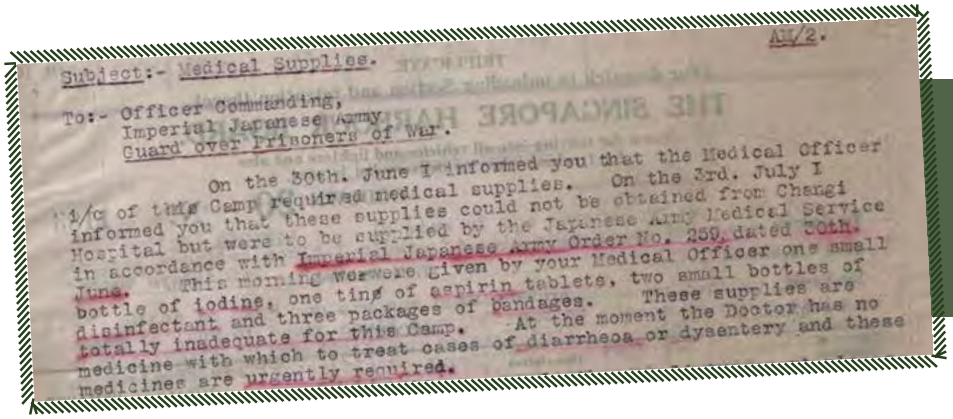
Japanese doctors regularly used moxa cautery, which is a technique of burning dried plant materials near or on the skin to help the flow of Qi in the body and dispel illness. Many POWs treated in this way saw this as a form of torture, as they had no cultural understanding of its value as a medical treatment by the Japanese people



> Three malnourished prisoners in the Roberts Barracks hospital. Changi, Singapore, 1943. Drawing by Murray Griffin.

Source: Murray Griffin, *Roberts Hospital, Changi*, 1943. Oil on hardboard, 64 cm x 82.1 cm. Australian War Memorial, 24491. *https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C175803.*

Hospitals were set up by the Australian medical officers, first in the officers' mess then at a three-storied building at Barracks Square. However, almost as soon as they were set up the Japanese guards forced them to move the hospitals to Roberts Barracks (midway between the Australian and British compounds), only to have them moved back to Seralang Barracks in August 1943. The Australian medical officers faced a huge task to look after over 2,000 wounded and ill men with no running water, no sewerage system, no lighting and with very little proper medical equipment.



All/2.

Subject:- Medical Supplies.

To:- Officer Commanding,
Imperial Japanese Army
Guard over Prisoners of War.

On the 30th. June I informed you that the Medical Officer i/c of this Camp required medical supplies. On the 3rd. July I informed you that these supplies could not be obtained from Changi Hospital but were to be supplied by the Japanese Army Medical Service in accordance with Imperial Japanese Army Order No. 259, dated 20th. June. This morning we were given by your Medical Officer one small bottle of iodine, one tin of aspirin tablets, two small bottles of disinfectant and three packages of bandages. These supplies are totally inadequate for this Camp. At the moment the Doctor has no medicine with which to treat cases of diarrhoea or dysentery and these medicines are urgently required.

< Extract from a report on the health of British prisoners at Changi POW camp in Singapore, July 1942.

Source: The National Archives, London, UK. CAB 106/42. *https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/worldwar2/theatres-of-war/asia/investigation/singapore/sources/docs/3/*

Entertainment

Despite the hard labour of the work parties, the POWs found that imprisonment was boring. So, to provide diversion and keep morale high, the officers encouraged the men to entertain themselves.

For that purpose, the Changi Concert Party was formed. It began with a small group of men who performed on a bare stage in the open to an audience of three or four thousand, and ended in March 1945 when the Imperial Japanese Army issued an order forbidding all entertainment. In that time, hundreds of different shows were performed, many original, in a purpose-built theatre with full sets and costumes. The audience was made up of Japanese soldiers and officers who would arrive each night to watch that evening's entertainment. It must be remembered that these men would perform a new show every fortnight, and each evening the men who performed did so after a full day's work for the Japanese.

< Scene from the 'Dick Whittington' pantomime, written by Leslie Greener. The only known actors are Charlie Wiggins (far left) and Doug Peart (second from the right). Changi, Singapore, 1943. Painting by Murray Griffin.

Source: Murray Griffin, *Pantomime Production, Changi*, 1943. Oil on cardboard, 41.2 cm x 51.6 cm x .6 cm. Australian War Memorial, ART24474. *https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C170585.*

There were also sporting events such as games of cricket and Australian Rules football. The Japanese were particularly fond of boxing, and so encouraged boxing matches.

Within four days of setting up camp in Seralang Barracks, the Australians established Changi 'university', an education program designed to keep the men's minds occupied. There were seven faculties: General Education, Business, Languages, Engineering, Science, Agriculture, Law and Medicine. While the university was set up by the Australian POWs, it was open to all. It became harder to run, as prisoners started being sent on work parties outside Changi to other places but continued until October 1944 when the Japanese guards confiscated all the papers and pens. Only a few papers survived the purge.

Important to the success of the Changi university was the Changi library. Initially, books were limited to the few the troops had brought with them, but over time, the library's collection grew. Working parties brought back books from Singapore, and soon the Japanese allowed books written in English to be sent to the camp from the abandoned libraries of the city.

Treatment of POWs at Changi

The Geneva Convention

Between 1864 and 1949, a series of international treaties were signed by a number of countries, including Switzerland, Belgium, Denmark, Spain, France, Italy and the Netherlands, to allow for the humane treatment of POWs, both military and civilian. These treaties became known as the Geneva Convention, named for the Swiss city where the first talks took place.

The 1929 convention included the following articles.

> Art. 2. Prisoners of war are in the power of the hostile Government, but not of the individuals or corps who capture them.
>
> They must be humanely treated and protected, particularly against acts of violence, insults and public curiosity.
>
> Measures of reprisal against them are prohibited.
>
> Art. 10. Prisoners of war shall be lodged in buildings or in barracks affording all possible guarantees of hygiene and salubrity [healthfulness].
>
> The premises must be entirely free from damp, and adequately heated and lighted.
>
> ^ Extracts from the Geneva Convention of 27 July 1929 relative to the treatment of POWs; see also the 1907 Hague Convention IV

Japan claimed that it had not signed the 1929 treaty, which was still in effect when WWII occurred. However, they had signed an earlier international treaty in 1907, the Hague Convention (IV), which protected POWs, and had also signed the *Geneva Convention on the Wounded and Sick Armed Forces in the Field of July 17, 1929*.

The 1907 version signed by Japan included the following article in chapter II. Prisoners of War

> Art.4. Prisoners of war are in the power of the hostile Government, but not of the individuals or corps who capture them. They must be humanely treated. All their personal belongings, except anns, horseS, and military papers, remain their property.
>
> ^ Extract from Laws and Customs of War on Land (Hague, IV), Convention signed at The Hague 18 October 1907.

The Japanese military did not uphold these treaties in their treatment of POWs during WWII.

In 1929, Japan had also signed the Kellogg–Briand Pact, which was effectively a peace pact, whereby countries promised not to use war as a means of resolving conflict between nations.

Reasons for the Poor Treatment of POWs by the Japanese

The Japanese military disregarded the conventions for the treatment of POWs set out by the international agreements. They did not treat their POWs—military or civilian—in a humane manner. There were several reasons for this.

The leadership of Hideki Tojo, Prime Minister of Japan and Minister of War	Taking their perspective from the leadership of Tojo, commanders of the POW camps focused on the idea that it was imperative to use the labour of the prisoners to help Japan win the war.
Poor training of the Japanese military	Most officers and soldiers did not understand their obligations to POWs under international treaties such as the Geneva Convention.
Differing attitudes of the Japanese to the concept of surrender	The overall viewpoint of both the Japanese military and civilians was that to surrender to the enemy was shameful and showed a lack of honour.
Arbitrary corporal punishment	Corporal punishment was commonplace within the Japanese military. It was often meted out with no explanation, and was seen by the authorities as a better way to deal with underlings than placing them under a formal charge. (Soldiers were punished with a blow to the head or a beating, and then the issue was closed.) The giving out of corporal punishment within the POW camps was made worse by the language barrier between captor and captive. The prisoners often had no idea what they were being asked to do or why they were being punished.

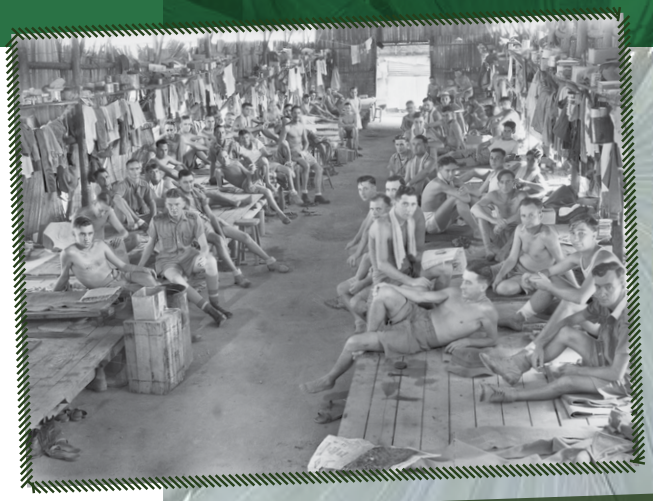
Accommodation

The accommodation in most POW camps, as in Changi, was inadequate due to the lack of time to set up the camps and the sheer number of POWs. There was a lack of proper bedding and little or no privacy.

Red Cross Parcels and Other Necessities

The Australian Comforts Fund sent packages of food, tobacco and personal hygiene items through the International Red Cross to POWs in both Europe and Asia. The Asian parcels were often delayed or could only be sent to some areas due to difficulties of safe transport in the Pacific war zone. However, when they did arrive at Changi, the Japanese commander in charge often did not distributed them. On average, a POW in Changi received one parcel in the whole of the three and a half years in captivity.

When they were handed out, the prisoners were delighted with the chance to eat such foodstuffs as white bread, cheese and jam.



^ Australian POWs in their hut at the rear of Changi Gaol.

Source: Australian War Memorial, Singapore, Straits Settlements, 1945-09-20. Nitrate, silver gelatine photograph. AWM117111. *https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C22287.*

> There was not enough bread in the Red Cross parcel, when it finally arrived, for me to have a jam sandwich and a cheese sandwich. So, I had a cheese and jam sandwich. It was the best thing I had ever tasted.
>
> **^ From the oral history of Roy Willard, Sapper, 2/10th Field Battalion, 1919–2017.**
>
> Source: Willard Family Records.

Not only were the Red Cross parcels delayed or not delivered, but also clothing, including underwear, shoes and bedding, were in very short supply. The prisoners were often reduced to wearing tattered shorts or loincloths.

v The contents of a standard Australian Comforts Fund Hamper, July 1945.

Source: Australian War Memorial, Morotai, 25 July 1945. Black and white photograph. 112039.

https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C19741.

> Men working in the vegetable gardens. Note the two men carrying the Ceylon spinach in the basket; the one in front is wearing only a loincloth. Changi, Singapore, 1944. Drawing by Murray Griffin.

Source: Murray Griffin, *Two Men Carrying Basket of Ceylon Spinach, Changi*, 1944. Brush and brown ink and wash over pencil on paper, 38.4 cm x 56 cm. Australian War Memorial, ART26499. *https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C170482.*

The Importance of the Chain of Command

Luckily for the Australians, the Japanese military, overall, allowed the prisoners' chain of command to remain. This meant many of the common soldiers had little to do with their Japanese guards on a daily basis. In turn, this led to less chance of conflict with their guards. It was an opportunity to maintain some normality, ensure the survival of the men as far as possible, and prevent the prisoners from descending into a mob where only the strongest would rule. When Lieutenant Colonel Galleghan farewelled his troops at the liberation of Changi, he commended them on their resilience and adherence to military discipline despite the treatment of their Japanese captors.

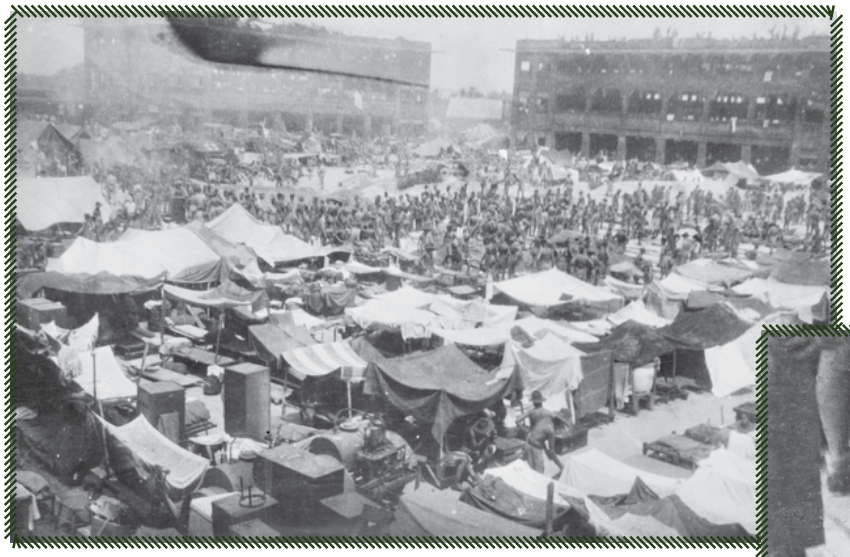
> This drawing shows how organised the POWs were at keeping the camp running smoothly. The lack of Japanese guards in the area shows the relative autonomy the prisoners had in running the camp. Drawing by Murray Griffin.

Source: Murray Griffin, *Garden Area Inside Changi*, 1945. Pen, ink and wash over pencil on paper, 24.6 cm x 30.4 cm. Australian War Memorial, ART25053. *https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C170548.*

The Selarang Barracks Incident

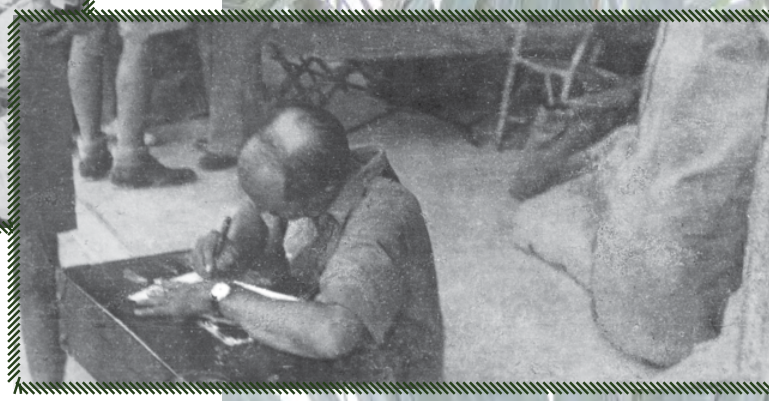
One of the most alarming events to occur at Changi was the Selarang Barracks incident, where a stand-off occurred between the Japanese guards and the prisoners. On 30 August 1942, the Japanese military commanded that the Changi prisoners sign a document promising not to escape. This requirement was because two Australian and two British POWs had just been recaptured after a failed escape attempt. Since the Australian and British POWs regarded escape as their duty as soldiers, they refused to sign.

In reprisal, and to force the issue, the Japanese guards ordered all 15,900 prisoners into the Selarang Barracks and parade ground—an area originally designed for 900 men. Conditions were poor: there were only three working taps for water and, as the Japanese had cut off the water for toilets, latrine pits had to be dug.



< Australian and British POWs confined to Selarang Barracks. In the foreground are makeshift shelters constructed by cooks, nearby a water truck. Troops to the left are queueing at the regimental aid post for what little medical treatment was available.

Source: Australian War Memorial, Changi, Singapore Island, 1942-09-04. Acetate, silver gelatine photograph. 132935. *https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C238269.*



> An officer signing the non-escape document under duress, 5 September 1942.

Source: Australian War Memorial, Changi, Singapore, 1942-08-30. Black and white photograph. P00603.025. *https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C41142.*

The prisoners held on for four days; however, dysentery broke out and men began to die. The Japanese cut the water supply even further, halved their rations and threatened to move the Roberts Barracks hospital into the area. The officers also had to witness the execution by firing squad of the four escapees.

Eventually, to break the stalemate and avoid further deaths, the Australian and British commanders decided that they would agree to sign but made it clear that it was under duress; that is, they were forced to do it and had no choice, so it was not valid. Many of the prisoners signed using false names. Ned Kelly, the infamous bushranger, was the most used pseudonym. The prisoners were then allowed to return to their original accommodation.

v A working party hauling a trailer load of firewood. The trailer was created from a truck chassis and was pulled by manpower. Collecting firewood was one of the most important requirements of prison life, as the wood was needed for cooking. As time passed, the prisoners had to haul the wood for longer distances, as timber became scarcer. Changi, Singapore, 1942–1943. Painting by Murray Griffin.

Source: Murray Griffin, *Trailer Party Bringing in Rubber Tree Logs, Changi*, 1942–1943. Oil on hardboard, 43 cm x 52.7 cm. Australian War Memorial, ART24473. *https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C175789*

Work Parties

Many Allied POWs were sent on work parties outside Singapore Island. These parties were called Forces and were labelled alphabetically. They were sent to work on various building projects for the Japanese military or to POW camps in Japan, Formosa (Taiwan) and Korea. Most of the Forces were sent to either Burma or Thailand to work on the infamous Burma–Thailand Railway, where approximately 2,700 Australian POWs died. The POWs who remained in Changi were used on heavy labouring works in and around Singapore. Tasks included road building, freight moving, mine removal and work in chemical factories. Plus, the men had to work hard just to survive in the camp.

Long-term Effect on Australian POWs Incarcerated at Changi

Many of the POWs who returned from Changi experienced 'survivor's guilt' and suffered serious medical issues that would affect them for the rest of their lives.

Upon examination of the returned prisoners, doctors were pessimistic about the likelihood of many making it to the age of 50. This is because the POWs suffered from the following conditions.

Malnutrition	Led to nutritional deficiency syndromes, such as beriberi. POWs who contracted beriberi had weakened hearts, nerves and muscles.
Dysentery	An inflammation of the colon, causing stomach cramps and severe diarrhoea. If untreated, dysentery could be fatal.
Malaria	A mosquito-borne disease. Symptoms included fever, vomiting, headaches and seizures. Fatal in severe cases.
Tropical ulcers	Common among POWs in tropical climates, tropical ulcers would eat away at the skin on arms and legs, often leading to infection and amputation.
Cholera	Often contracted through contaminated water. Symptoms included vomiting and diarrhoea.

^ Infirm POWs from Changi being carried aboard a hospital ship, 22 September 1945.

Source: Australian War Memorial, Singapore, 1945-09-22. Black and white photograph, print silver gelatine. SUK14745. *https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C281948.*

Studies found that there was an early death rate for returned POWs. Many only lived up to 10 years after liberation, due to tuberculosis, suicide, accidental death, and cirrhosis of the liver due to Hepatitis B. It was also noted that approximately one third of the survivors suffered from what we now call post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), leading to several debilitating symptoms such as nightmares, flashbacks and depression. POWs were also more likely to suffer from stomach ulcers, osteoarthritis and hearing loss.

I am really ashamed to admit this, but since my return form captivity, on a slight upset I just break up and cry. Prior to my enlistment and captivity I led a social and sporting life, being a keen tennis and squash player, also was treasurer of the Lawn Tennis Club and actively associated with social bodies. Now due to my condition I am unable to partake of any sport, and when with a number of people I cannot enter into any conversation and just tremble in case I am called on to voice an opinion. The result is I just stay home and very seldom go out, then only to visit close relations.

^ A POW's personal account from *The Battle Within* by Christina Twomey.

Source: Christina Twomey, *The Battle Within: POWs in Postwar Australia* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2018).

^ Private J. Fleming, 2/18th Infantry Battalion, in his cot in one of the wards aboard the Australian hospital ship 'Manunda', 13 September 1945.

Source: Australian War Memorial, Singapore, 1945-09-13. Black and white photograph. 116044. *https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C220408.*

As well, many POWs found it hard to settle back down to civilian life, and many experienced personal difficulties within their marriages. In some case the POWs came home to find that their wives or girlfriends had found a new partner and did not want to return to the marriage or relationship. In other cases, the men suffered from impotence due to their wartime experiences, which they felt had a huge effect on their marriages and relationships.

Changi Chapel

In 1944, the Australians built an open-air Roman Catholic chapel in Changi, one of many chapels built by the Allied prisoners. At the end of the war, this chapel was dismantled and shipped to Australia for storage. In 1988 it was reconstructed at the Royal Military College in Duntroon, Canberra, as a national memorial to the Australians imprisoned there.

< The Roman Catholic chapel built by Australian POWs, Singapore, 1945.

Source: Australian War Memorial, Singapore, c. 1945. Black and white photograph. P00425.001. *https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C41363*

Also, in 1988, Singapore built a replica of the Changi Chapel and a museum dedicated to Singapore's WWII history, next to Changi Prison. These were moved a short distance away in 2001 when the prison was expanded.

The Australian Ex-Prisoners of War Memorial

What is now the National Prisoners of War Memorial was opened on 6 February 2004 at the Botanic Gardens in Ballarat, Victoria. It was built 'to acknowledge the pain and suffering that all [POWs] endured during their time in captivity, to commemorate the thousands of mates left behind and to acknowledge the sacrifice of families during wartime'. It is the only memorial in Australia dedicated to ex-POWs.

> National memorial to ex-POWs. Botanical Gardens, Ballarat.
Source: The use of these photos are used with the kind permission of the Trustees of the Australian Ex-Prisoners of War Memorial and appear on the Memorial website. *https://www.powmemorialballarat.com.au/.*

The memorial was designed by renowned Australian sculptor Peter Blizzard, as a 'Stone Garden Journey'. The journey begins on a long pathway to show the distance that Australians travelled to go to war, with the paving stones designed to represent railway sleepers. Indeed, railway journeys are an iconic aspect of the POW experience.

Etched onto a long black granite wall is a roll call of the names of all the Australian POWs that are known. There are only names—no rank, number, gender or enlistment details given—as all are equal in their experience of war.

Midway there is a break in the wall where a row of obelisks stands in a pool of water, out of reach to symbolise that all POW camps were far from home. Carved into each obelisk are the names of the countries where Australians were imprisoned. The granite wall then continues to a large stone at the end of the path, which bears the inscription, 'lest we forget'. From beneath this stone, there is a spring of water that flows along the granite walls to the reflective pool, and eventually back to the 'lest we forget' stone. This forms a continuous cycle that binds all POWs together for all time.

v POW names on the national memorial to ex-POWs at the Botanical Gardens, Ballarat.

Source: The use of these photos are used with the kind permission of the Trustees of the Australian Ex-Prisoners of War Memorial and appear on the Memorial website. *https://www.powmemorialballarat.com.au/.*

End of the War

Repatriation or return of POWs from the Pacific war zone proved far more complex and complicated than the Australian authorities expected. To begin, the Japanese captured almost three times as many Australians than had been captured in Europe. Also, the POWs were spread across the Pacific war zone, and since the Japanese had not adhered to the Geneva Convention, the authorities had no idea how many there actually were, where they were held, or the details of their captivity.

The first real hint of the reality of life in captivity for Australian soldiers in Changi and other POW camps came in September 1944, with the sinking of the Japanese prisoner transport ships the *SS Rakuyo Maru* and the *SS Kachidoki Maru*. While many of the survivors were picked up by the Japanese within a few days, over 150 prisoners were later rescued by the United States (US) Navy, including 91 Australians. When these men were debriefed back in Melbourne, they were able to give the authorities the first real information and details about life as a prisoner of the Japanese.

< Oil-soaked Australian and British POWs are rescued from the sinking of the *SS Rakuyo Maru* by the submarine *USS Sealion*, 15 September 1944.

Source: Australian War Memorial. Black and white photograph. 045411. *https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C297408.*

^ Ex-POWs of the Japanese line the road watching Japanese POWs being marched past Changi Gaol, 20 September 1945.

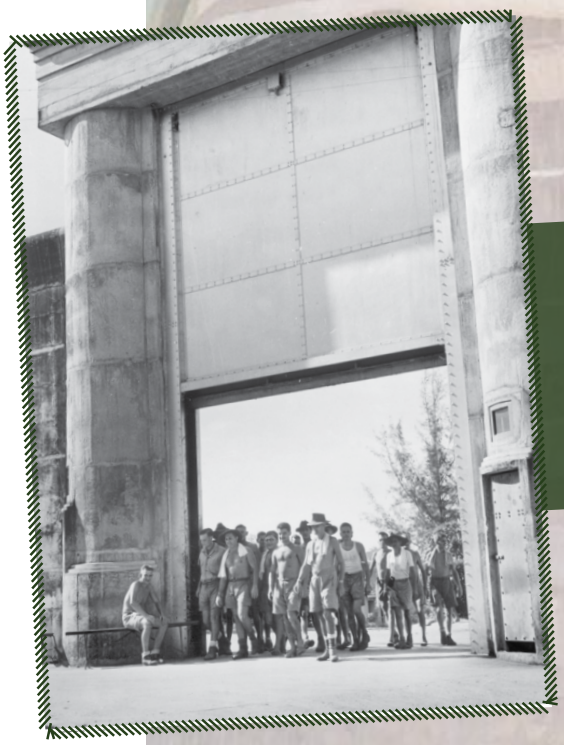
Source: Australian War Memorial, Singapore, Straits Settlements, 1945-09-20. Black and white photograph. 045411. *https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C22288.*

Initially, it was thought that the recovery of the POWs held by the Japanese would be what is known as an incremental operational recovery. That is, as each offensive by the Allies was successful, they would be able to liberate the POWs as they moved through South-East Asia. However, the sudden surrender of Japan on 15 August 1945 following the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 6 August and 9 August, respectively, meant that this plan had to change. Instead, the authorities were faced with mass processing and repatriation of the POWs as quickly as possible. The 2nd Australian Prisoner of War Reception Group—the 1st Reception Group was already dealing with the repatriation of Australian POWs in Europe, as the Germans had surrendered on 8 May 1945—was immediately sent to Singapore as a central location for administration. Despite the lack of public utilities and the chaotic nature of the area, this proved to be a good decision, as many Australian POWs were being held in Changi.

The speed of the liberation of POWs coupled with the lack of transport home meant that most of the Australian troops were still confined to Changi despite their liberation as they waited for transport home.

Changi Today

Changi Prison still operates as a prison following a major redevelopment in the 2000s and 2010s to turn it into a mega complex that houses all of Singapore's prison population. In 2003, the Australian Government petitioned for the preservation of the old Changi Prison due to its significance to Australian military history. The Singapore Government agreed to preserve the original gates, front wall and the two guard towers at the ends of the wall. In 2016, the Singapore Government added them to their National Monuments of Singapore list.



< The main gates of Changi Gaol. Changi, Singapore, 1945.

Source: Australian War Memorial, Changi Prison Camp, Singapore. c. 1945. Black and white photograph. 019321. *https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C324625*

Tokyo War Crimes Trials

In 1946, the year following the end of WWII, two war crime tribunals were set up—one in Nuremberg to prosecute Nazi war criminals, and the other in Tokyo to prosecute Japanese war criminals. The leaders of the empire of Japan were tried for joint conspiracy to start and wage war, conventional war crimes, and crimes against humanity. The Tokyo trials, due to factors such as poor management and translation issues, dragged on until November 1948.

The president of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East was Australian judge Sir William Webb. The judges and prosecutors came from 11 countries: Australia, Canada, China, France, India, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the Philippines, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom and the US. The lawyers for the defence were from Japan and the US.

Seven defendants were sentenced to death by hanging, including Hideki Tojo, Prime Minister and Minister of War. Sixteen more were sentenced to life imprisonment. Three of these men died in prison, while the other 13 were eventually paroled. Other ministers were given lesser prison sentences.

> Japanese General Kenji Doihara in custody during the Tokyo War Crimes Trials. Tokyo, Japan.

Source: Australian War Memorial, Japanese General Kenji Doihara in Custody. Black and white photograph. P00245.002. *https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C46604.*

There were also separate trials held for 5,700 lower-ranking Japanese war criminals. The charges included prisoner abuse, rape, torture, execution without trial, and inhumane medical experiments. Nearly 1,000 of the defendants were sentenced to death, with many of the others given prison sentences.

Controversially, Emperor Hirohito was not charged with war crimes because many of the Allies believed it was important to the stability of Japan, as it moved towards democracy, that the emperor remain in power.

Tatura Prisoner of War and Internment Camp

Tatura Prisoner of War and Internment Camp was the first facility to be built on Australian soil for the purpose of detaining 'enemy aliens' (citizens of countries that were at war with Australia) and POWs. The camp operated between 1939 and 1947.

During WWI (1914–1918) there had been no POW camps in Australia for the practical reason that prisons were located nearer to the theatres of war, where prisoners could easily be transported from battle sites. The decision to build POW camps on Australian soil can be attributed to Australia's Commonwealth alliance with Britain and the lack of available space in Europe to hold captured enemy soldiers. Incarceration of both enemy aliens and POWs was a drain on Allied resources. In 1940, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill secured agreements from Australia, Canada and India to hold POWs captive for the duration of the war.

There were 18 Australian camps located in New South Wales (NSW), South Australia, Western Australia, Queensland, Tasmania and Victoria. Tatura was the site chosen for the Victorian camps, as it had the infrastructure needed to detain large groups. It was close to the Goulburn Valley railway line, which could be used to transport internees, POWs and supplies, while the agricultural township ensured access to fresh food and a workforce that could be employed as guards and to build the camps.

Tatura's rural location was remote enough to minimise any contact between POWs and Australian citizens, and undermine any attempts of escape by sea. The facility's presence was understated, with many locals unaware of the significance of the site at the time.

Tatura was organised into seven camps, the majority holding internees, those defined as civilian enemy aliens, rather than soldiers captured while on active duty. Foreign POWs were imprisoned in Graytown, Dhurringile and Camp 13 Murchison. POWs held at Tatura were predominantly Italian and German soldiers, with some Japanese soldiers transferred from other camps such as Cowra in NSW and merchant seamen from Finland.

Tatura Prisoner of War and Internment Camp comprised of seven sites.

v An aerial photo of Camp 13 Murchison. The circular structure, central avenue and quartered compounds helped create strong lines of sight for guards while keeping POWs contained.
Source: Tatura Irrigation and Wartime Camps Museum archive.

Camp 1 Tatura	Internment	1,000 single male internees (Germans and Italians).
Camp 2 Tatura	Internment	1,000 single male internees (Germans and Italians).
Camp 3 Rushworth	Internment	1,000 family groups of internees (mostly German).
Camp 4 Rushworth	Internment	1,000 family groups of internees (mostly Japanese).
Graytown	POW	Approximately 250 POWs (Italian, German and Finnish seamen).
Dhurringile	POW	50 German POW officers and their batmen.
Camp 13 Murchison	POW	Approximately 4,000 POWs (mainly Italians and Germans). Some Japanese POWs were moved to Camp 13 after the Cowra Breakout in 1944.

< Two unnamed German POWs at Camp 13 Murchison, December 1942.
Source: Australian War Memorial, Murchison, Australia, 30 December 1942. Black and white original film negative, 35 mm nitrate. 030182/07.
https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C347052.

Timeline

1 September 1939	Germany invades Poland. Britain declares war on Germany two days later, leading to Australia's involvement in WWII.
1940	The Australian Government agrees to hold POWs on Australian soil on behalf of Britain. In May 1941, an agreement is made to take POWs from the Middle East. A further agreement to take POWs from Indian POW camps is approved in May 1943.
1941	Land is purchased for the building of POW and internment camps in the Goulburn Valley.
August 1941	First POWs (captured in Africa, Greece and Crete) to be held at Tatura arrive on the *RMS Queen Elizabeth*. They are initially housed at Dhurringile until the remaining camps are built.
August 1941	The crew of the *HSK Kormoran* arrive at Tatura.
11 October 1943	Italy surrenders unconditionally.
13 October 1943	Italy declares war on Germany.
4 August 1944	Japanese POWs at the Cowra camp in NSW stage a breakout. Four Australian soldiers and 231 Japanese prisoners are killed. Four hundred Japanese prisoners are transferred from Cowra to Camp 13 Murchison, Compound A.
8 May 1945	WWII ends. POWs are required to remain at Tatura until arrangements can be made for repatriation to their homelands.
July 1945	The Dhurringile site is closed. Officers are transferred to Camp 13 Murchison.
August 1945	718 Italians are repatriated home on the *RMS Andes*.
2 February 1946	Graytown is closed. POWs are transferred to Camp 13 Murchison.
December 1946	Italian POWs are repatriated on ships including *HMT Moreton Bay*, *HMT Empire Clyde*, *RMS Ormonde* and *RMS Alcantara*.
January 1947	The *RMS Otranto* sets sail for West Germany with German POWs on board.
January 1947	The *SS Orontes* is the last repatriation ship to leave Australia. More than 2,400 German and Italian POWs are on board. Camp 13 Murchison is closed.
1974	First German POW reunion at Tatura.
1988	Tatura Irrigation and Wartime Camps Museum opens.

Tatura POW Camp Sites

The allocation of POWs to Camp 13 Murchison, Dhurringile or Graytown was based on rank and nationality. The lower ranks such as enlisted men were sent to Graytown or Murchison, while officers were housed at Dhurringile.

Camp 13 Murchison

Camp 13 Murchison was divided into four compounds with room for up to 1,000 men in each compound. Distinguishing features included a large main street bisecting the complex with four watchtowers and a double gate at each entrance. Initially, POWs were allocated six-man tents with wooden floors until the camp dormitories were built. They slept on handmade mattresses called palliasses, which were stuffed with straw and covered by woollen blankets. Many worried about the presence of snakes, a new and terrifying phenomenon to most European inmates.

^ POWs in Camp 13's sleeping quarters.
Source: Australian War Memorial, Murchison, Australia, 1943-01. Black and white original film negative. 028544. *https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C12091.*

Early inspections of the site by medical and hygiene authorities deemed them to be unsatisfactory and not meeting the standards required for POW housing according to the Geneva Convention which Australia had signed in 1929. The report was made early in the occupation of the camp, and conditions were soon improved by the building of dormitory huts and additional facilities, including cook houses (where food was prepared), mess houses (dining rooms), showers, latrines (toilets), a laundry, library, canteen and a hospital. A chapel was erected in accordance with the Geneva Convention, which stated that POWs must be permitted religious facilities. Only the cook house, mess halls and chapel were fitted with electricity; everything else was lit by kerosene lamps. A key feature of the Murchison site was the cells used for the solitary confinement of POWs. Any POW attempting an escape was sentenced to up to 28 days in the cells.

v Dhurringile, 1943.
Source: Australian War Memorial, Murchison, Australia. 1943-01. Black and white original film negative. 028650. *https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C12193.*

Dhurringile POW Camp

In contrast to the army huts in Camps 6 and 13, the Dhurringile camp was a 65-room, historic mansion built by James Winter in 1877 at the cost of 30,000 pounds. The name was Aboriginal, meaning 'emu on nest'. Majestic and conspicuous with a turret poking out like the head of an emu above the barren landscape, the camp stood out from the surrounding paddocks.

Located at 870 Tatura-Murchison Road, the camp housed 47 German officers and 32 batmen. Batmen were the personal servants assigned to each commissioned officer by the German Army during service. Their task was to look after their uniforms and equipment, and to act as a runner for their charge.

Despite the camp's grand exterior, Dhurringile had been neglected over the years. The roof leaked, plaster peeled from the walls, and it was notoriously cold inside during the winter season. A 2.5-metre-high barbed wire fence and watchtowers fitted with a machine gun completed Dhurringile's transformation from dilapidated stately home to POW camp.

Graytown

A former gold town, Graytown became another POW camp. Initially, it held 250 Italian POWs and then the crew of the German warship *HSK Kormoran*. A small number of Finnish civilian seamen who had been captured and classified as POWs were also held at Graytown. This site was predominantly used as a woodcutting camp. The buildings were surrounded by trees, which prisoners were employed to fell for use in Melbourne and the other camps. Other onsite utilities included a sawmill and carpentry workshop.

< Graytown, 1943.
Source: Australian War Memorial, Graytown, VIC, 1943-12-01. Black and white photograph. 061202. *https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C52644.*

Why Were Foreign Power POWs Held at Tatura?

The deal brokered by the Australian and British governments to relieve overcrowding in Allied African and Indian POW camps saw men removed from theatres of war and shipped to camps across Australia. While most were treated humanely, for many the journey to Australia was arduous and indirect. German POW and artist Hans-Wolter von Gruenewaldt was incarcerated in six different camps from Sierra Leone, West Africa, to Edinburgh, Scotland, before he arrived at Tatura. While *en route*, POWs were exposed to varying treatment and conditions, as countries differed in the extent to which they adhered to the protocols of the Geneva Convention. Many prisoners were deprived of food and water, endured beatings, had their belongings stolen, and were threatened with execution. Mistreatment of POWs in camps and on transport ships led to many deaths, as in the case of the *HMT Dunera* that transferred POWs and enemy aliens (people of German or Italian heritage living in Britain) from Liverpool, England, to Sydney, Australia, in 1940. Once aboard Allied transport ships, POWs also became the victims of torpedo strikes that sank many Allied ships, including the SS *Arandora Star*. For many, the idea of being incarcerated in regional Victoria was a not unwelcome contrast to what they had already been through.

German POWs

The first group of German men to end up as POWs at Tatura were members of the Afrika Korps, a German-led battalion commanded by Field Marshal Erwin Rommel during the North African Campaign. The men were captured by the British in Tobruk and eventually put on board the *RMS Queen Elizabeth*, the ship that would transport them to Australia. While on board they were treated well thanks to the influence of the chief steward, whose son was a POW in Germany and had been well treated by his captors. Other German POWs on board the *RMS Queen Elizabeth* had been captured in Greece during the Battle of Crete (20 May–1 June 1941) when German troops staged an airborne attack of the Mediterranean island using paratroopers. Additional POWs listed on the ship manifest had been captured from a German submarine sunk off the coast of Java. The *RMS Queen Elizabeth* docked in Sydney on 23 August 1941, and men were transported by train to Tatura.

More German POW arrived at Tatura in December 1941,survivors from the German military ship *HSK Kormoran*, an auxiliary cruiser that had already sunk many Allied ships while disguised as a merchant ship. The *HSK Kormoran*'s final encounter was with the *HMAS Sydney* off Shark Bay, Western Australia, on 19 November 1941. Both ships were critically damaged. The *HMAS Sydney* sank with all 645 crewmembers on board. The surviving crew of the *HSK Kormoran* were initially incarcerated in Perth before being transported to Graytown. Once they arrived, those with injuries were put in the camp infirmary which had been rigged with listening devices in the hope that the officers would reveal more information about what had occurred during the sinking of the *HMAS Sydney*. Although the wrecks of both the *HMAS Sydney* and the *HSK Kormoran* were found in 2008, the details of the incident have still never been confirmed.

German POW Profile: Gustav Pohlig

< Gustav Pohlig.

Source: Australian War Memorial, Murchison, Australia, 4 March 1945. Black and white original film negative, 35 mm nitrate. 030236/17. *https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C351225.*

- Born in Langenburg, Germany, in 1916.
- Prewar occupation: gardener.
- Called up for service in the German Army in 1938.
- During WWII he was stationed in France, Germany, Italy, North Africa and Egypt.
- Captured by British troops in Libya on 15 May 1941.
- Sent to a camp on the Suez Canal.
- Unaware of his final destination, Pohlig was one of 982 POWs put on board the *RMS Queen Elizabeth* and sent to Australia. They arrived in August 1941 and were transported by train to Tatura. Gustav was incarcerated at Camp 13 Murchison, Compound D.
- While at Murchison he participated in many theatrical productions, often taking the female roles due to the absence of women at the camp.
- Remained at Tatura for six years.
- Repatriated back to Germany on board the *SS Orontes*, 21 January 1947.
- Immigrated to the US in 1954 and became a teacher.
- Returned to visit the site of his imprisonment at Tatura in 1974 and 1988.

> The *HSK Kormoran*.

Source: Unknown, Hilfskreuzer Kormoran, 1940. Black and white photograph. Wikimedia Commons. *https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_auxiliary_cruiser_Kormoran#/media/File:Bundesarchiv_Bild_146-1985-074-27,_Hilfskreuzer_Kormoran.jpg*

Italian POWs at Tatura

< A group of unnamed Italian POWs at Camp 13 Murchison, 1945.

Source: Australian War Memorial, Murchison, Australia, 4 March 1945. Black and white original film negative, 35 mm nitrate. 030238/05. *https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C339669*

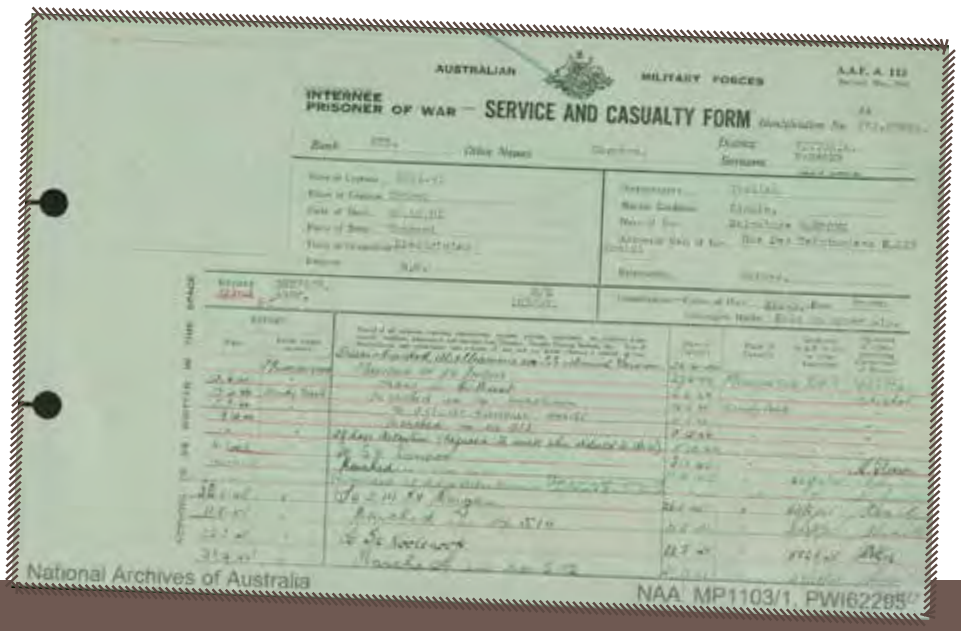
Italy was slower to enter WWII, allying itself with Germany on 10 June 1940 by declaring war on France and Britain. Italy exited the conflict through a signed armistice with the Allies on 3 September 1943. Many of the Italian POWs who ended up at Tatura were part of approximately 36,000 soldiers who had been captured during the Battle of Bardia from 3–5 January 1941 in Libya. This battle was particularly significant, as it was the first fought by Australian troops during WWII. Other Italian prisoners were captured in Tobruk.

Once captured, Italian soldiers were held in temporary POW camps in North Africa in locations such as Alexandria, Bitter Lake and Fayed. They were sent to Egypt to be processed, and then transferred to locations across India, such as Bangalore, Dehradun, Ramgarh and Bhopal. The overcrowding in these camps led to them being shipped to Australia.

The first Italian POWs to arrive at Tatura were two officers and 15 other ranks who came on the *RMS Queen Elizabeth* alongside German POWs in August 1941. Many Italian POWs arrived on the *RMS Queen Mary* and were sent to camps such as Cowra in NSW before being transported to other facilities, including Tatura.

^ A photograph by renowned photographer Frank Hurley shows the vast number of Italians who were captured in Bardia, Libya.

Source: James Francis Hurley, Near Bardia. Black and white original film, acetate. Australian War Memorial, 005250. *https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C27074.*


AUSTRALIAN MILITARY FORCES A.A.F. A. 111

INTERNEE PRISONER OF WAR — SERVICE AND CASUALTY FORM

< Prisoner of War Service and Casualty form for Italian POW and electrician Private Gaspare Marrone shows that he was transferred from a camp in India to Camp 13 Murchison. It also reveals that he was sentenced to 28 days of detention for refusing to work.

Source: National Archives of Australia, NAA: MP1103/1, PWI62295.

After the 1943 Armistice between Italy and the Allies, the Australian Government allowed Italian POWs more freedoms than their German counterparts, and specifically requested that they be allocated to tomato harvesting work in the farms surrounding the Tatura camps. Many of the Italian POWs formed ties with local civilians through this arrangement.

Italian POW Profile: Lieutenant Edgardo Simoni

< This photo of Edgardo Simoni was printed in the newspaper in a public appeal for information following his escape. This eventually led to his capture.

Source: National Archives of Australia, NAA: A7919, C104029.

- Born in Lucca, Italy, in 1916.
- Prewar occupation: military.
- Captured in January 1941 in Bardia, North Africa.
- Shipped to Australia on the *RMS Queen Mary*.
- Escaped in November 1941. Captured within 24 hours and placed in a solitary cell.
- Escaped from Camp 13 Murchison on 6 June 1942.
- Escaped again and was at large for 10 months.
- Travelled to Melbourne and got a job as a door-to-door salesman under the assumed name George Scoto. He was helped by Italian civilians who were charged with harbouring an escaped criminal.
- Nicknamed 'The Fox'.
- Referred to in the camp records as 'a trouble maker, nuisance, undesirable—unwilling to work. … This [POW] is definitely a malingerer and is considered to have fascist views' (National Archives of Australia, NAA: A7919, C104029, 48).
- Sent to Hay Gaol in NSW, which was more secure; however, Simoni escaped again.
- It was noted in his camp record that he was keen to be transferred to the POW camp in Myrtleford so that he could be the first escapee from there.
- Repatriated to Italy in 1946.
- Remained in the army and retired as a colonel.
- Became a member of the Italian Communist Party.
- Passed away in 1987.

v The *RMS Queen Mary* was converted from a luxury tourist liner to a troop and POW carrier during WWII.

Source: Australian War Memorial, *H.T. Queen Mary*. RC11584.551. *https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C2689976*.

Living Conditions for POWs at Tatura

Communication

Once POWs arrived at the Australian camps, their families were informed of their location through organisations such as the Prisoners of War Information Bureau and the International Red Cross. Prisoners were permitted to send two letters and four postcards each month. Unfortunately, due to the great distance between Australia and Europe, as well as interruptions due to the war, postage was very slow, sometimes taking months to arrive. This was particularly difficult around Christmas time when gifts were delayed and food was spoiled during the journey. This angered POWs who felt that their rights were being contravened. All mail was opened and censored by authorities and could include only personal information—nothing relating to the war. Intelligence reports comment on the topics discussed in POW letters including the attempted assassination of Hitler in 1944. Several Japanese POWs were held at Tatura but chose not to write to family, as being captured and missing out on military action was considered culturally shameful.

> A letter sent home by Italian POW Francesco Saltarelli in 1945, which was scrutinised by an official censor.

Source: Tatura Irrigation and Wartime Camps Museum archive. Image courtesy of HTAV.

Food

In accordance with article 11 of the Geneva Convention, 'the food ration of prisoners of war shall be equivalent in quantity and quality to that of the depot troops'. Any punishment that resulted in the removal of food was strictly forbidden. As with many immigrants, refugees and internees, the POWs were unaccustomed to the food served in Australia and longed for the taste of home. They were permitted to cook for themselves and use tokens to buy extra food on camp premises. Several POWs even opened businesses, including a coffee shop and a canteen. While alcohol was not permitted in the camps, POWs became adept at producing a bootleg spirit made from fermented apples and potato peelings. Guards turned a blind eye, as they were also supplied with liquor in exchange for their discretion.

< Camp tokens could be used to buy food and sundries.

Source: Tatura Irrigation and Wartime Camps Museum archive. Image courtesy of HTAV.

Clothing

Most POWs arrived at Tatura in their military uniforms. The clothing supplied by Tatura camps became a rather sore point among inmates, as it was Australian Army uniforms dyed a rather arresting maroon. The theory behind the colour was that it was the only one that could overdye military khaki. It also had the additional benefit of making the POWs highly visible in the dry Victorian landscape. The brightly coloured garments became a problem for POWs during escape attempts. They found a solution by hand sewing trousers and jackets from grey military-issued blankets. These blankets became prohibited items and were the subject of several camp raids, as authorities attempted to find and confiscate them. Photographs of POWs also show them wearing a range of clothing including sport kit, items donated by organisations such as the International Red Cross, and their own military uniforms.

^ Jacket issued to Tatura internees and POWs.

Source: Tatura Irrigation and Wartime Camps Museum archive. Image courtesy of HTAV.

Health

Many POWs who arrived at Tatura were battle weary and had already sustained injuries or illnesses either in combat or through their journey through international camps to Australia. They were treated onsite at camp hospitals or in dental huts. More serious conditions were treated at the Heidelberg Military Hospital. Prisoners were encouraged to stay active and were permitted outside exercise under the supervision of camp guards. They also formed teams for sports such as soccer. Mental stress was one of the more common ailments for POWs. They worried about the safety of their families overseas who were at risk from air raids. Loss of contact meant they could not be sure if their wives, children or parents were still alive. This uncertainty, alongside the stress of imprisonment, weighed heavily on many POWs.

Leisure Activities

Art. 17. Belligerents shall encourage as much as possible the organization of intellectual and sporting pursuits by the prisoners of war.

Source: *Geneva Convention of 27 July 1929 Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War*, 47 STAT. 2021; 846 (entered into force 19 June 1931), art. 17.

^ **Camp 13 German soccer team.**

Source: Tatura Irrigation and Wartime Camps Museum via Victorian Collections, C1602. *https://victoriancollections.net.au/items/545226cd9821f51624ccc893.*

Camp managers realised that boredom among POWs could result in disruptive behaviour. Consequently, a range of diversions was arranged including sports, crafts, music, theatre and opportunities for further education. Many of these programs were aided by organisations such as the International Red Cross and the Society of Friends (Quakers). The Young Men's Christian Association (or YMCA) donated sporting equipment, books, cigarettes, gardening equipment and musical instruments. Twenty-five cases of German language books arrived from the Melbourne German Club.

An educational organisation was established by German POW Corporal Dr Erich Stolleis. The courses included English, French, Latin, Italian, Arabic, Hebrew and Russian, mathematics, technical drawing, chemistry, religion, bookbinding, shorthand, bricklaying, carpentry and butchering. Later, they also organised studies in law and medicine. The camp authorities did register a problem with the chemistry class curriculum, as there were concerns that the chemicals could be used for explosive devices or invisible ink.

< **Kasper (Punch) puppet made by a German POW at Camp 13 as a Christmas present for internee children in Camp 3.**

Source: Tatura Irrigation and Wartime Camps Museum via Victorian Collections, C8101. *https://victoriancollections.net.au/items/5d0b082721ea860cd8130834.*

Many POWs occupied themselves with arts and crafts such as woodworking to pass the time while incarcerated. Among the surviving items were puppets made by German POWs in Camp 13 as gifts for children in internment camp 3. Prisoners also devised and acted in theatrical productions to pass the time.

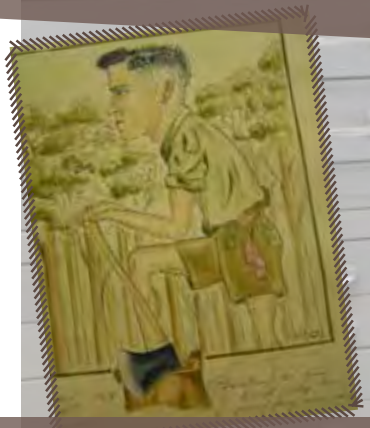
Work

The Geneva Convention had strict prohibitions on the type of work that POWs were permitted. These measures were put in place to ensure that no POW was injured while imprisoned, that they could not be used as slave labour, and that they were not put in a position to access military intelligence. The Australian Government was also concerned that allowing POWs to take on work outside the camps would compromise national security through the interaction of prisoners and Australian civilians. However, with so many young men at war, there was a severe agricultural labour shortage in the Goulburn Valley, and local farmers were keen to take on POWs to pick fruit or work the fields. Eventually, led by then Minister for the Army Francis Michael Forde, a compromise was reached and POWs who wished to work would be allowed to undertake paid employment. Their payment was set at a lesser rate than the local workforce, to preserve Australian jobs. POWs were paid for their work at seven pence halfpenny per day for unskilled labour, and one shilling and six pence for skilled labour. Instead of cash, they were given camp tokens or credit for the camp canteen. Any remaining balance was released to them on repatriation. The German Government also allocated German POWs an allowance of three pounds per quarter. To supplement their income, many POWs also made and sold handicrafts to guards and civilians they met during work parties or on farm placements.

^ **Italian POWs picking tomatoes on a Shepparton property, 1945.**

Source: Australian War Memorial, Murchison, Australia, 4 March 1945. Black and white original film negative, 35 mm nitrate. 030239/13. *https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C13527.*

The jobs on local farms went predominantly to the Italian POWs who were both accustomed to agricultural work and considered more trustworthy than their German counterparts. Men with professions that were of use in the camp (such as building, tailoring, drafting, cobbling or mechanics) continued to practise. The camp administration assembled work parties of both Germans and Italians to cut wood in nearby areas with onsite sawmills and carpentry stations to process the wood. Several prisoners used the work parties outside the confines of the camp as an opportunity to escape, with some even finding new employment while on the run.



POWs were also given the option to work in roles to support the running of the camp. This included gardening, cooking, cleaning and maintenance of the buildings. Many of these activities were documented by German artist and POW George Rozenkranz, who had been on board the *HSK Kormoran*.

↗ **A stylised watercolour painting by Georg Rosenkranz of a POW cutting wood at Graytown Camp.**

Source: Georg Rosenkranz, *Cutting Wood at Graytown*, 1941/1942. Watercolour sketch on paper and wood. Tatura Irrigation and Wartime Camps Museum via Victorian Collections, C3147. *https://victoriancollections.net.au/items/592a540dd0cddb1828947405*

Treatment of POWs at Tatura

Accounts of life at Tatura were often recorded in letters home (summarised in intelligence reports by government letter censors) or in reflections written after the war. While some POWs kept diaries of their time, these were destroyed (in case they could be used as evidence) once it was certain that Germany had been defeated.

While the living conditions at the camp were primitive, POW accounts suggest that the men held at Tatura were treated fairly and in accordance with the Geneva Convention. The key POW frustrations were the dilapidated state of the Dhurringile site, lack of facilities such as showers, and the delay of mail from home.

Conditions improved as the war went on. The key indignity seemed to be that they were being forced to sit out the war—a fate some considered worse than death.

> Generally speaking, the Australians stick very closely to the Geneva Convention, but the mere fact of being a prisoner is enough. Let us hope that prisoners will no longer be taken in future wars. Such a procedure would be infinitely more humane.
>
> **^ A letter from an unknown POW writing home, May/June 1944.**
>
> Source: Barbara Winter, *Stalag Australia: German Prisoners of War in Australia* (North Ryde: Angus & Robertson, 1986), 233

Relationship between POWs and Their Guards

The camp guards were mostly local men who had responded to an advertisement in the newspaper to work at Tatura. Camp documents regularly bemoan that their ineptitude led to the large number of escapees. Many of the guards were WWI veterans who had re-enlisted for WWII.

The Geneva Convention dictates that POW camps adhere to the following protocols.

> Art. 18. Officer prisoners of war shall be required to salute only officers of that Power who are their superiors or equals in rank.
>
> Art. 19. The wearing of badges of rank and decorations shall be permitted.
>
> CHAPTER 5 Internal discipline of camps
>
> Art. 18. Each prisoners of war camp shall be placed under the authority of a responsible officer. In addition to external marks of respect required by the regulations in force in their own armed forces with regard to their nationals, prisoners of war shall be required to salute all officers of the detaining Power.
>
> Source: *Geneva Convention of 27 July 1929 Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War*, 47 STAT. 2021; 846 (entered into force 19 June 1931).

George Campbell became a Tatura POW camp guard after being sent home from Papua New Guinea on a medical discharge. Declared unfit for service outside Australia, he was posted to Camp 13 Murchison.

> My duties were, as an escort guard, to take a party of Germans, mainly Luftwaffe, for six days a week, down to the railway siding at Nagambie, to load 14 tons of cut firewood into each of six trucks. The wood was felled and sawn by German POW at a small camp at Graytown. ... I kept in touch with some of the Nagambie party after their return home, and they sent photos of their new wives.
>
> **^ Recollection of George Campbell, POW escort guard at Murchison, 1944–1945.**
>
> Source: Tatura Irrigation and Wartime Camps Museum archive.

Georg Rosenkranz, a crewman on board the *HSK Kormoran*, was also a talented artist and depicted many aspects of camp life while at Tatura. His sketches of camp guards imply an amicable relationship between POWs and their guards. Lieutenant Gardener features in several of his paintings, engaging in supervised leisure activities such as swimming and fishing.

Prohibited Items

There were several items that were contraband in the camps, meaning that inmates could not own them. The most illegal and prized item was a radio. Radios provided POWs with a channel to the outside world and the means to discern how the war was progressing. They were obtained through bartering with camp guards and, in one case, built from scratch. Once assembled, they had to be well hidden as discovery would result in confiscation. Ingenious hiding places included a hidden lower compartment in a bucket filled with soapy water. There was a complex set of signals for the radio to be hidden in case of a sudden search of the camp. News from the outside world had the potential to disrupt life in captivity. On 11 October 1943, Italy surrendered unconditionally. Two days later it was followed by Italy's declaration of war on Germany. Camp authorities braced themselves for conflict, but it was not forthcoming. Life in the camp had created an unrealistic bubble, and the news did not seem to cause much consternation between the German and Italian POWs.

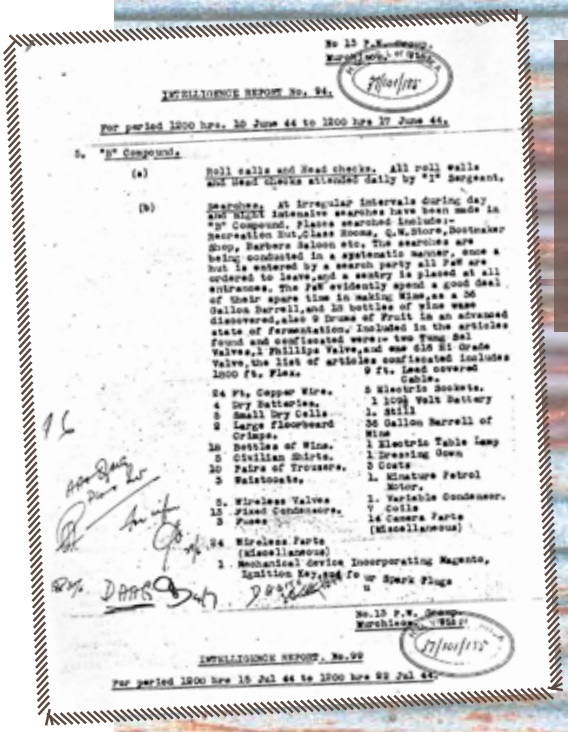
Political Ideology at Tatura

Although often described as Nazis in the media reports and documentation, not all POWs held at Tatura subscribed to Nazi ideology. Many had been compelled to enlist in the German Army, which did not allow them to be members of any specific political party. Several held fascist beliefs, and many of the objects crafted by POWs included nationalistic symbols such as the German eagle and the swastika. Fascist ideology at the camp caused divisions between Italian POWs, particularly after Italy withdrew from the war. This was commented on by censors in their evaluation of letters home from the Italian POWs. Some believed passionately in the cause, while others had regarded it simply as politics.

Opinions on Hitler among the German POWs were also divided, especially after his suicide in 1945. While traditionally classified as German POWs on official documents, the German Army also included Austrians who by 1938 had been absorbed into Nazi administration. After the declaration of peace in 1945, the Austrians began to distance themselves from the German POWs. This ideological division caused conflict, resulting in at least one POW asking to be put in protective custody. Once the end of the war had been declared, Australian camp authorities enacted a government edict that all symbols of the Third Reich would be confiscated and destroyed. Many POWs may have struggled with this request. A metal detector scanning the site in the 1960s came across many metal badges and pins that had been hidden.

^ Watercolour painted by artist Georg Rosenkranz while held at Graytown Camp. The caption states, 'swimming in the river with Lieut. Gardener for behaviour OK in the Camp'.

Source: Georg Rosenkranz, *Swimming in the River with Lieut. Gardener*, 1941/1942. Watercolour sketch on paper. Tatura Irrigation and Wartime Camps Museum via Victorian Collections, C3140. *https://victoriancollections.net.au/items/5bcd3c5c21ea6813e81fa635*



INTELLIGENCE REPORT No. 94.

For period 1200 hrs. 10 June 44 to 1200 hrs 17 June 44.

5. "B" Compound.

(a) Roll calls and Head checks. All roll calls and Head checks attended daily by "I" Sergeant.

(b) Searches. At irregular intervals during day and NIGHT intensive searches have been made in "B" Compound. Places searched include:- Recreation Hut, Class Rooms, Q.M.Store, Bootmaker Shop, Barbers Saloon etc. The searches are being conducted in a systematic manner, once a hut is entered by a search party all PoW are ordered to leave, and a sentry is placed at all entrances. The PoW evidently spend a good deal of their spare time in making Wine, as a 36 Gallon Barrell, and 15 bottles of wine were discovered, also 9 Drums of Fruit in an advanced state of fermentation. Included in the articles found and confiscated were:- two Yung Sol Valves, 1 Phillips Valve, and one Old Ki Grade Valve, the list of articles confiscated includes 1000 ft. Flex.

9 ft. Lead covered Cable.
24 Ft. Copper Wire.
4 Dry Batteries.
3 Small Dry Cells.
2 Large floorboard Crimps.
14 Bottles of Wine.
5 Civilian Shirts.
10 Pairs of Trousers.
3 Waistcoats.
5 Electric Sockets.
1 1000 Volt Battery
1x Still
36 Gallon Barrell of Wine
1 Electric Table Lamp
1 Dressing Gown
2 Coats
1. Miniature Petrol Motor.
5. Wireless Valves
12 Fixed Condensers.
3 Fuses
1. Variable Condenser.
7 Coils
14 Camera Parts (Miscellaneous)
24 Wireless Parts (Miscellaneous)
1 Mechanical device Incorporating Magneto, Ignition Key, and fo ur Spark Plugs

No.13 P.W. Camp, Murchison, Vic.

INTELLIGENCE REPORT, No.99

For period 1200 hrs 15 Jul 44 to 1200 hrs 22 Jul 44.

< A list of items confiscated by camp guards during a search of Compound B included radio components.

Source: Tatura Irrigation and Wartime Camps Museum archive.

v A stone plaque carved by a POW in Camp 13 depicts a German eagle, a swastika and a 1939 Australian penny.

Source: Tatura Irrigation and Wartime Camps Museum via Victorian Collections, Plaque, 1940. Stone and copper, 14 cm × 3 cm × 12.5 cm. C7504. *https://victoriancollections.net.au/items/59950acb21ea6a1280a44593*

Breakouts from Tatura

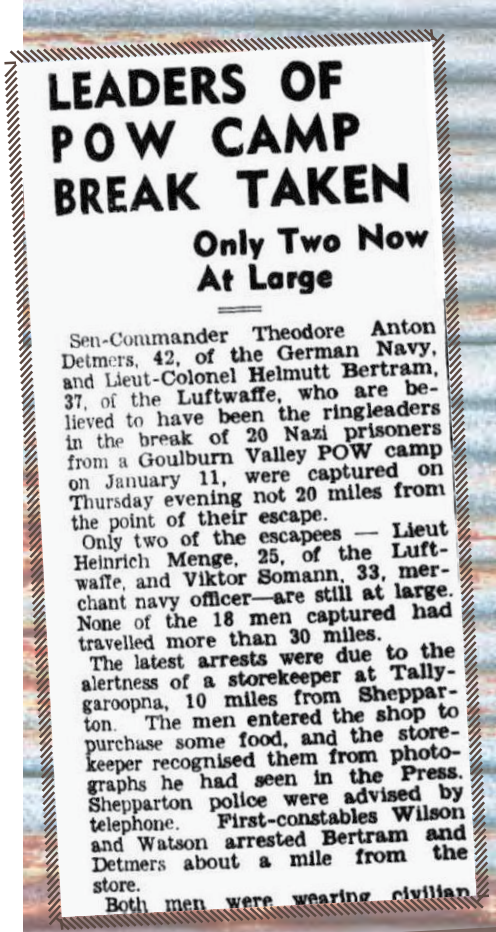
The POWs held at Tatura included many clever individuals from a range of professions including engineering, medicine and academia. Consequently, they devised ingenious strategies to gain contraband items, facilitate movement between the camps and break out on a regular basis. Groups of POWs held in Camp 13 Murchison dug a vast network of tunnels to move subterraneously around the camp and to visit prisoners in other compounds. The soil they removed was white and difficult to hide but was surreptitiously disposed of in the camp vegetable gardens.

Due to the ease with which the POWs could travel around the camp, escapes became a regular part of life at Tatura. Most escapees went missing while out on a work party, while others simply tunnelled out.

Each camp could hold up to 1,000 men. Due to the large volume of people and the high turnover of staff, POWs devised strategies to conceal the escape of fellow inmates from the camp guards. This included moving around the site during roll call so that they were counted twice, and creating stuffed dummies. Consequently, when there were breakouts, it could take camp administrators hours or even days before they noticed anyone was missing. Escaped POWs became bold, with some travelling as far as Canberra.

The most high-profile breakout from Tatura happened on 10 January 1945 when 20 officers of Dhurringile, led by Captain Theodor Detmers, dug a tunnel beneath the mansion. The entrance was hidden by a china cupboard. Once clear of the camp, the fugitives split up to avoid detection. All were captured within days, with Detmers and Luftwaffe Officer Helmutt Bertram the last at large. The escape was widely reported in Australian newspapers and drew attention to the previously inconspicuous Tatura site. The published images of Detmers and Bertram resulted in them being recognised by a shopkeeper in Tallygaroopna, about 30 kilometres north of Shepparton. Once recaptured, all were sent back to Tatura for punishment.

Most POWs were divided on the issue of whether they should try to escape from the camps. Some considered it their patriotic duty, while others considered it fruitless. Others saw it as a criticism of fellow inmates who chose not to escape.



LEADERS OF POW CAMP BREAK TAKEN

Only Two Now At Large

Sen-Commander Theodore Anton Detmers, 42, of the German Navy, and Lieut-Colonel Helmutt Bertram, 37, of the Luftwaffe, who are believed to have been the ringleaders in the break of 20 Nazi prisoners from a Goulburn Valley POW camp on January 11, were captured on Thursday evening not 20 miles from the point of their escape.

Only two of the escapees — Lieut Heinrich Menge, 25, of the Luftwaffe, and Viktor Somann, 33, merchant navy officer—are still at large. None of the 18 men captured had travelled more than 30 miles.

The latest arrests were due to the alertness of a storekeeper at Tallygaroopna, 10 miles from Shepparton. The men entered the shop to purchase some food, and the storekeeper recognised them from photographs he had seen in the Press. Shepparton police were advised by telephone. First-constables Wilson and Watson arrested Bertram and Detmers about a mile from the store.

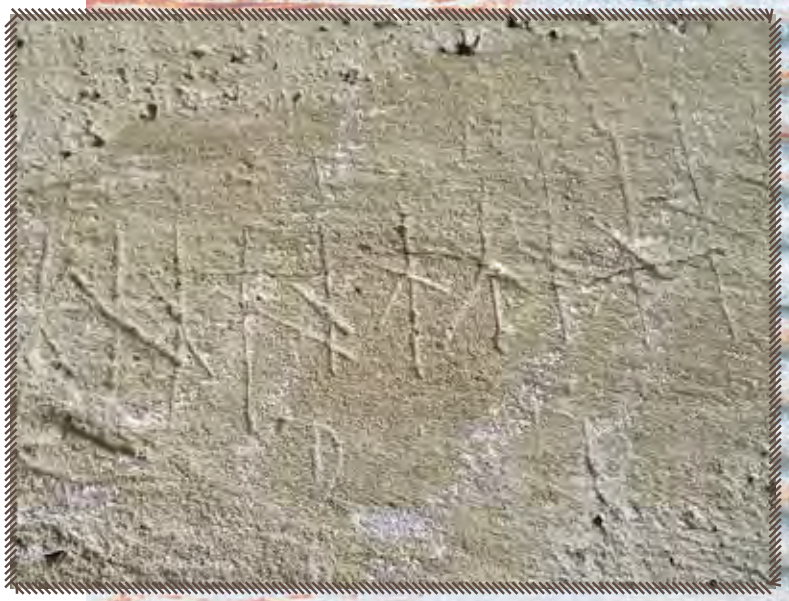
Both men were wearing civilian

^ A newspaper article informs the public of the breakout from Dhurringile.

Source: "Leaders of POW Camp Break Taken," *The Argus*, 20 January 1945, 3. National Library of Australia (Trove). *https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/1108116*

Solitary Confinement

The punishment for breaking out was up to 28 days in solitary confinement. POWs were locked in tall brick cells with only a few small openings for air and light. The cells were in a row, allowing the opportunity for conversations with others. The walls still bear incisions of prisoner names and placenames such as Murchison. The frequency of escapes from Tatura suggested that this punishment did not act as a real deterrent for POWs who wished to abscond.



> Markings on the wall of a solitary confinement cell at Tatura thought to have been made by a POW.

Source: Tatura Irrigation and Wartime Camps Museum archive. Image courtesy of HTAV.

Long-term Effect on POWs Held at Tatura

The experience of being a POW had a profound and long-term effect on soldiers held at Tatura. Some felt shame and frustration that they had been sent halfway across the world to sit out the war.

> In the camp we were like animals in a zoo; we had accommodation and we were fed, above this—nothing.

^ Reflection of Hans-Wolter von Gruenewaldt, German artist and POW at Tatura.

Source: Kay Ball, ed., *Art Captured: Hans-Wolter von Gruenewaldt. Prisoner of War Camp 13 Murchison: His Story and Art* (Murchison: Murchison and District Historical Society, 2017), 34.

^ German War Cemetery, Tatura.

Source: Image courtesy of HTAV

Many POWs had suffered illness and injury because of their war service, and others suffered from PTSD. The terrible treatment of those who had arrived in Australia on board the *HMT Dunera* was brought to light during a 1941 inquiry.

Unlike Australian POWs held overseas who could be assured of the safety of their families, the POWs at Tatura knew that their civilian friends and family were in constant danger from Allied attacks. As the war continued, intelligence documents commented on lowered morale in letters sent home, as an Allied victory seemed assured. There were several suicides at Tatura, including that of a Japanese POW for whom the perceived dishonour of capture weighed heavily. Other suicides were motivated by the death of loved ones overseas. The psychological pressure of captivity affected most of the Tatura inmates, despite the fair conditions. Several locations around the region still provide official and unofficial memorials to their presence as POWs in Victoria.

^ German POWs from Camp 13 Murchison give the Nazi salute while visiting the grave of a fellow POW who died in captivity.

Source: Ronald Leslie Stewart, Murchison, Australia, 11 March 1945. Black and white original film negative, 35 mm nitrate. Australian War Memorial, 030248/04.
https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C327796

Tatura War Cemetery

In addition to being the final resting place for POWs and internees who passed away while imprisoned in Victoria, Tatura War Cemetery also became Australia's German War Cemetery. Remains of civilian internees from WWI and from other camps around Australia were reinterred in 1958 when it was opened by the West German ambassador, Dr Hans Muhlenfeld.

There was only one POW at Tatura who died at the hands of the camp guards. On 21 September 1942, Tobias Tschurtschenthaler was shot during confusion over the end of a roll call. Reports attribute the incident to heightened emotion among POWs due to a cancelled football match and a search conducted by guards of their quarters to find contraband items. Tschurtschenthaler's remains were interred at Murchison and later moved to the German War Cemetery.

During their time at Camp 13 Murchison, surviving members of the *HSK Kormoran* built a memorial to the 80 crewmembers who died during and after its final battle. The original cross was destroyed after the end of WWII as part of a government edict to remove all Nazi insignia. A replacement cross was created by former German POWs who had been held at the camp. The monument is now on private property. Italian POWs and internees who died on Australian soil during WWII are buried at the Ossario in Murchison Cemetery.

^ The original cross on the *HSK Kormoran* memorial with the Iron Cross symbol, January 1941.

Source: Australian War Memorial, Murchison, Australia, 1943-01. Black and white photograph. 028554.
https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C12083

End of the War

Repatriation

One of the biggest challenges for many POWs came with the news of repatriation at the end of the war. Although WWII ended in 1945, it would be almost two years before most POWs held at Tatura would be repatriated to their home countries. Several of the men who had previously escaped from Tatura returned to be repatriated. Many months of delays and false starts caused further anxiety among the men waiting to leave. Many of them would be returning to cities that had been bombed and to the absence of family members who were deceased or missing. German POWs knew that they would be returning to a country transformed by defeat and facing economic hardships. As many had spent most of the war in Australia, they were not fully cognisant of the atrocities committed by the German military and its allies. As part of the repatriation program, POWs were shown films detailing the treatment of people held in German concentration camps. Some POWs were horrified while others were convinced that these were propaganda films made by the US Government.

^ The Sappers' farewell. The caption 'morgen ist auch ein tag' translates to 'tomorrow is a new day' and reflects on the process of closing the camps and repatriating the POWs.
Sketch by German POW artist Hans-Wolter von Gruenewaldt.
Source: Tatura Irrigation and Wartime Camps Museum archive.

Closure of the Camps

The Dhurringile site closed in July 1945, with officers transferred to Camp 13 Murchison. A key argument for its closure was that the structure of the building made it too difficult to guard. Graytown was closed in February 1946. By January 1947, the last POW left Murchison, and in October 1947 an auction was held to sell off the camp equipment, including furniture, cooking utensils, farming machinery and tools. By the end of the year, 12 of the huts were sold to returned soldiers, while others were purchased by local businesses and the Forests Commission. Any remaining camp buildings fell into disrepair.

Dhurringile was repurposed several times for a range of activities including a boys' home, rehabilitation centre, rural training farm, and a minimum-security prison. Evidence of its time as a POW camp continued to emerge for many years as workers uncovered multiple tunnels and concealed objects in the house and grounds.

^ A POW hut is repurposed at the Tatura Racecourse.
Source: Tatura Irrigation and Wartime Camps Museum via Victorian Collections, L0945. *https://victoriancollections.net.au/items/60504dfaaf78f28557lc4196.*

< Tatura's solitary confinement cells fall into disrepair, November 2020.
Source: Image courtesy of HTAV.

Those Who Remained or Returned

Among those who had been POWs at Tatura were men who wished to stay permanently in Australia. A few had formed romantic relationships with Australian women and did not want to leave their partners. One of these men was Paul Adolf Kobelt, a crewman from the *HSK Kormoran* who received special dispensation from future Prime Minister Robert Menzies (then leader of the Opposition) to marry Melburnian Jean Oldham while being held in a military prison awaiting deportation to Germany. He had escaped from Murchison in 1946, assumed the alias of Rolf Jensen, and taken a job as a pastrycook in Dandenong until his arrest.

Some POWs were encouraged to go home and then apply to return as migrants. Others escaped from the camps once they received notification of repatriation, hoping to avoid detection and remain in Australia. Many eventually found their way back to Australia.

In February 1974, a reunion of German POWs was held at Tatura. Among those in attendance was Gustav Pohlig, whose journey is profiled earlier in this section. He returned again in 1988 when the Tatura Irrigation and Wartime Camps Museum was opened. He later wrote that his experiences in Australia had become a formative part of his life, and that he was overwhelmed at how the sapling gum trees he had planted during a work party session were now huge trees.

> I remember Murchison; I remember the white skeletons of dead eucalyptus trees in the dried out sheep paddocks; I remember Christmas in 104 degree Fahrenheit; I remember blooming wattle trees, poisonous snakes under the tent floor, mutton, mutton and more mutton for dinner. I remember. ... Yes, Murchison became a part of my life—and I became part of Murchison.
>
> **^ From the recollection 'I Remember Life in P.O.W. Camp 13. Murchison', written by Gustav Pohlig, US, 1991.**
>
> Source: Tatura Irrigation and Wartime Camps Museum archives.

^ Photo of German POW Hermann Ortmann at Graytown Camp. Ortmann was a survivor of HSK Kormoran and returned to live in Australia after the war.

Source: Tatura Irrigation and Wartime Camps Museum via Victorian Collections, C7467. *https://victoriancollections.net.au/items/545227bb9821f51624ccd124.*

Interpretive Historical Site

Tatura Irrigation and Wartime Camps Museum was founded in 1988 by Lurline and Arthur Knee. Initially, the museum was created to tell the story of the town of Tatura and the Goulburn Valley irrigation system, as the history of the POW and internment camp was relatively unknown. After delving further into the heritage of the area and speaking to locals, the founders of the museum realised that this was an important WWII site.

Since then, the Victorian Heritage Council has recognised the significance of the site. It is still visited by international dignitaries from Germany and Japan and descendants of POWs and internees who wish to honour their memories or gain insight into their time in captivity. Today, it is an institution committed to telling the story of internee and POW experiences at Tatura during WWII.

> Tatura Irrigation and Wartime Camps Museum, 2020.

Source: Tatura Irrigation and Wartime Camps Museum archive.

Bibliography

Changi

Books

Grant, Lachlan, ed. *The Changi Book*. Kensington: NewSouth Publishing, 2015.

Twomey, Christine. *The Battle Within: POWs in Postwar Australia*. Kensington: NewSouth Publishing, 2018.

Digital

ANZAC Portal, Department of Veteran Affairs. "Changi." Accessed 2 May 2020. *https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/wars-and-missions/burma-thailand-railway-and-hellfire-pass-1942-1943/locations/australian-prisoners-asia-pacific/changi*.

———. "Fall of Singapore." Accessed 2 May 2020. *https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/wars-and-missions/world-war-ii-1939-1945/events/japanese-advance-december-1941-march-1942/fall-singapore*.

Australian War Memorial. "Changi." Accessed 15 July 2020. *https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/pow/changi*.

———. "Commemorating and Commodifying the Prisoner of War Experience in South-East Asia: The Creation of Changi Prison Museum." Accessed 18 June 2020. *https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/journal/j33/blackburn*.

———. "General Information about Australian Prisoners of Japanese." Accessed 15 July 2020. *https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/pow/general_info*.

Rowland, Michael. "Fall of Singapore Anniversary: How a Military Defeat Changed Australia." *Australian Broadcasting Commission*, 14 February 2017. *https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-02-14/fall-of-singapore-75-year-anniversary-commemorated/8267650*.

The Australian Ex-Prisoners of War Memorial. Accessed 22 July 2020. *https://www.powmemorialballarat.com.au/*.

Tatura

Books

Ball, Kay, ed. *Art Captured: Hans-Wolter von Gruenewaldt, Prisoner of War Camp 13 Murchison: His Story and His Art*. Murchison: Murchison and District Historical Society, 2017.

Knee, Lurline and Arthur Knee. *Marched In: An Account of the Seven Internment and Prisoner of War Camps in the Tatura Area during World War 2*. Tatura: Lurline & Arthur Knee, 2013.

Winter, Barbara: *Stalag Australia: German Prisoners of War in Australia*. North Ryde: Angus & Robertson, 1986.

Digital

Australian War Memorial. *https://www.awm.gov.au/*.

International Committee of the Red Cross. "The Geneva Conventions and their Commentaries." *https://www.icrc.org/en/war-and-law/treaties-customary-law/geneva-conventions*.

Monument Australia. *https://www.monumentaustralia.org.au/*.

National Library of Australia, Trove. *https://trove.nla.gov.au/*.

Victorian Collections. "Tatura Irrigation and Wartime Camps Museum." *https://victoriancollections.net.au/organisations/tatura-irrigation-wartime-camps-museum*.

Archival

Tatura Irrigation and Wartime Camps Museum Archives, Tatura, Victoria.