1 Capture

> [S]o here we are captured within sight of home. I can honestly say without shame that I had tears in my eyes when I looked across that narrow stretch of water a prisoner of war after 3 weeks attempting to get home.

Private Ernest Abbott wrote these words at Calais on 20 June 1940, following his capture at 3.30 P.M.[1] He was, quite literally, in sight of home. His wife and two sons lived in the village of Capel-le-Ferne, situated above the White Cliffs between Dover and Folkestone on the Kent coast. Abbott, who had been recalled to the Army Reserve at the outbreak of war, had spent the three weeks prior to 20 June in retreat, along with the rest of the British Expeditionary Force, as it withdrew to the beaches of northern France after Germany's successful invasion of Western Europe.[2] Abbott went on to spend almost five years as a prisoner of war. Abbott's diary entry is unique amongst those that feature in *Captives of War*. Not only had he started keeping a diary before being taken prisoner, but he provides some indication as to how he felt at the moment of surrender. The majority of others started their diaries only after having entered imprisonment and, in their accounts of capture, few give any explicit indication of their feelings.

Initially this chapter sets out when and how the majority of British POWs, including the men who feature in *Captives of War*, were taken prisoner. It then examines how these men made sense of this moment. Capture both signalled the end of one phase of the servicemen's war experience and the start of another. When looked at as an end to their combat duties, POWs' diaries reveal their need to demonstrate they were not personally culpable for their defeat. When considered as the start of something new, the structure of these men's personal narratives demonstrates how they came to see their capture as a rupture, or point of transformation, in their lives. Yet to think of this transformation as

[1] NAM 2001-01-352-1, Private E. W. Abbott, diary entry, 20 June 1940.
[2] The British Expeditionary Force was the home-based British army forces that went to northern France at the start of the Second World War.

happening at the point of surrender misunderstands the mentality of British servicemen captured in Europe. British POWs had a remarkably optimistic attitude towards the length and outcome of the war. They believed it would end imminently following an Allied victory.

Surrender in the Second World War

Harold Shipp, a leading telegraphist in the Royal Navy, was captured on 9 January 1940. He was thirty-one years old. His ship, HMS *Starfish*, was attacked by a German minesweeper during a war patrol in the North Sea. Shipp was one of just a few hundred British servicemen to be captured during the first few months of the Second World War, or what is known as the Phoney War, because there was little fighting during this period. By mid-April 1940, approximately fifteen other ranks from the army had been captured, twelve officers and twenty-four airmen from the Royal Air Force (RAF), and thirty-three officers and 182 ratings from the Merchant Navy and Royal Navy.[3]

In his first two years of captivity, Shipp was moved between six POW camps before finally being sent to Marlag-Milag Nord (Marine-Lager und Marine-Internierten-Lager), a camp specifically established to accommodate seafaring POWs, located in Westertimke in north-western Germany and run by the German navy. Shipp was held in Marlag, which accommodated those from the Royal Navy; Milag held those from the Merchant Navy. The Marlag and the Milag were physically separate, although on the same complex.[4] In 1944, Shipp compiled a logbook of his time behind barbed wire. Out of all the POWs whose personal narratives feature in the following pages, Shipp was the first to be taken prisoner. His logbook is one of twenty-five to be drawn upon in *Captives of War*.

The number of British servicemen taken prisoner dramatically changed with the end of the Phoney War. Norway was the first victim of Germany's Blitzkrieg, or lightning war, in Western Europe. During the winter of 1940, Germany had been flouting Norwegian neutrality by transporting Swedish iron ore, vital for the German war effort, from the port of Narvik to German North Sea ports. In response, Britain warned Norway that it planned to lay mines in her waters to force these German

[3] In February 1945, it was recorded that 266 British POWs who had been in captivity in mid-April 1940 were still in captivity. The actual number of men in captivity at this time is likely to be higher because some would probably have been repatriated by February 1945, see TNA, WO 32/10746, 'Prisoners of War Captured before 14 April 1940, Repatriation of Prisoners of War Who Have Been a Long Time in Captivity'.
[4] Monteath, *P. O. W.*, p. 155.

ships out to where they could be attacked. In February 1940, sailors from a British destroyer also violated Norwegian neutrality by boarding a German supply ship sheltering in Norwegian waters.[5] Adolf Hitler decided to pre-empt any Allied move in the area, and invaded Norway by sea and air on 9 April 1940. In response British forces were sent to Norway. This saw the first large cohort of British men taken prisoner. Amongst them were a naval officer, Lieutenant Commander Peter Buckley, and a merchant seaman, Greaser Claude Bloss. Buckley was captured after HMS *Shark*, which was under his command, was attacked whilst on patrol off the south-west of Norway. Buckley's logbook is another of the twenty-five drawn upon in this book, which he, like Shipp, compiled from the confines of Marlag. Bloss was captured on 8 June 1940, near Narvik. Being a civilian rather than a serviceman, he was not technically a prisoner of war but, like all merchant seamen captured by the Germans and Italians, was treated as such.[6] The letters and postcards Bloss wrote home and received during the following five years – 223 to his wife and 558 from her – form one of the twenty-six sets of correspondence referenced in *Captives of War*.

Germany's attacks on France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, which commenced on 10 May 1940, saw many more British servicemen fall into German hands. Approximately one third of all those who would ultimately find themselves behind barbed wire in Europe in the Second World War were captured during May and June 1940.[7] A similar proportion of the personal narratives that feature in the following pages were written by men taken prisoner at this time.[8] Amongst them was Captain John Mansel. Captured on 21 May 1940, Mansel started writing a diary ten days later. Over the following five years, he filled ten volumes of pocket diaries, exercise books and logbooks [Figure 1.1], and wrote more than 250 letters and postcards home, the vast majority addressed to his mother. The commentary Mansel produced whilst behind barbed wire, written in miniscule but beautiful manuscript, is, quite possibly, the most self-reflective of any prisoner of war. On days of

[5] Martin Gilbert, *The Second World War. A Complete History* (London: Phoenix, 2009), pp. 37, 42.
[6] TNA WO 366/26, Col. H. J. Phillimore, 'Prisoners of War', 1949, p. 70.
[7] Forty-four thousand eight hundred British men were captured at this point, out of a total of 142,319 men serving in the armed forces of the United Kingdom who were captured by Germany and Italy during the Second World War, Wylie, *Barbed Wire Diplomacy*, p. 68; 'Table 9. Total number of prisoners of war of the armed forces of the United Kingdom captured by the enemy as reported to 28th February 1946', in *Strength and Casualties of the Armed Forces*, p. 9.
[8] Twenty men whose personal narratives have been drawn upon in this book were taken prisoner at this point.

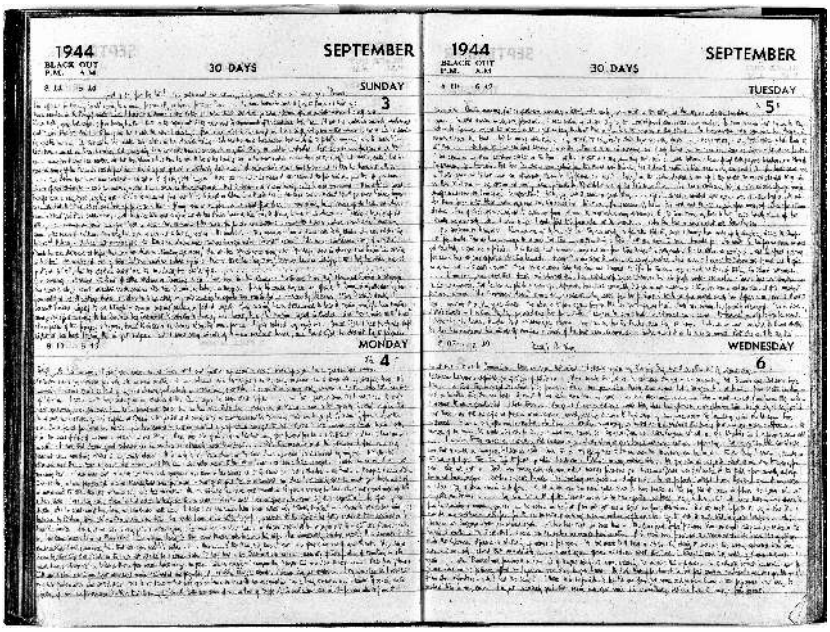

Figure 1.1: Pages from the diary of Captain John Mansel. Mansel, captured in May 1940, filled ten volumes of pocket diaries, exercise books and logbooks with miniscule but beautiful manuscript. His thoughts on captivity feature more prominently than any other prisoner in *Captives of War*.

Source: IWM 99/68/1, Captain J. W. M. Mansel, diary entries, 3–6 September 1944. Reproduced with permission from Gilly Barnard.

no particular note other prisoners would ask Mansel, 'what on earth has happened which can fill the page of [his] diary.' Mansel's response, written in his diary, was 'that people who can find nothing of which to write have no imagination, in fact I am sorry for them, because it must make this life even more empty than it cannot help being.'[9] Mansel's thoughts on captivity feature more prominently than any other man's in this book.

Others captured at this time, whose names appear frequently in the following pages, include Sergeant Major Andrew Hawarden. At forty-four years old, he was the oldest man to enter captivity out of all those who feature in *Captives of War*. He had previously served with the Royal Field Artillery in the First World War. Hawarden wrote a diary entry every day

[9] IWM 99/68/1–2, Captain J. W. M. Mansel, diary entry, 8 November 1941.

for the 1,790 days he spent behind barbed wire, except for a two-month period when he was suffering from bronchial pneumonia. Canon John King was captured shortly after Hawarden. He was serving as a chaplain to the 51st Highland Division and taken prisoner on 12 June 1940, as part of the divisional surrender at St Valery-en-Caux. King's diary is one of three personal narratives written by chaplains to the army that feature here.

Men taken prisoner during the fall of France faced highly testing conditions over the following days, weeks and months. They were forced to trek through France and Belgium in the heat of the summer, with minimal food, shelter and inadequate sanitation. They were then transported to their permanent camps in packed barges or cattle trucks.[10] The officers' journeys were less unpleasant than those undergone by the other ranks. Most officers were ferried, at least part of the way, across France and the Low Countries by vehicle, rather than going exclusively on foot.[11] Mansel, for example, along with other British officers, was put in a lorry three days after his capture, and travelled by truck through Belgium. He arrived at his first permanent camp just twelve days after his capture.[12] Reaching their camps often resulted in little improvement in prisoners' circumstances, particularly for those in the other ranks. As author Sean Longden puts it, 'conditions experienced by the prisoners within the stalags varied in everything but awfulness.' Accommodation was ramshackle, food was scarce, the supply of Red Cross parcels had been halted as new supply routes were found, and organised activities in the camps were rudimentary.[13]

The German invasion of Greece and Yugoslavia on 6 April 1941, to protect Romanian oilfields and secure a south-eastern flank ahead of the planned invasion of the Soviet Union, led to the next large intake of POWs. British forces were sent to aid Greece but, by 28 April, Axis troops had pacified most of the mainland. British forces then withdrew to the island of Crete. In mid-May, German paratroopers landed there and again, after heavy fighting, defeated British forces. Twenty-five thousand British and Commonwealth servicemen surrendered.[14] Amongst them were five soldiers. Rifleman J. Eldridge and Lieutenant Louis Upshall were captured on the Greek mainland in April 1941;

[10] For details of these conditions, see MacKenzie, *The Colditz Myth*, pp. 64–77; Longden, *The Men They Left Behind*, pp. 263–315; Rolf, *Prisoners of the Reich*, pp. 26–33.
[11] MacKenzie, *The Colditz* Myth, p. 71.
[12] Mansel, diary entries, 23–6 May and 2 June 1940.
[13] Longden, *The Men They Left Behind*, pp. 325, 317–53; MacKenzie, *The Colditz Myth*, pp. 161, 165.
[14] Wylie, *Barbed Wire Diplomacy*, p. 70.

Major A. T. Casdagli, Lieutenant John Phillips and Lieutenant Richard Quarrie were captured in Crete on 1 June 1941. The diaries, correspondence and logbooks these men subsequently wrote inform this book. Due to a lack of transport, POWs captured at this point in the war often spent long periods of time in overcrowded, temporary transit cages. Almost all eventually passed through the notorious Dulag 183 (short for *Durchgangslager*, meaning transit camp), at Salonika in Greece.[15] Its buildings were filthy, dilapidated and infested with lice. Men slept on floors without blankets. Sanitation was poor and there was a lack of food and water. Those in the ranks below that of sergeant were forced to do heavy physical work in intense heat.[16] Historian Peter Monteath sums Salonika up as 'a hellhole'.[17] Some POWs stayed there only twenty-four hours; others had to wait several months before their move to Austria or Germany. They were transported in wagons, where cramped conditions, heat and the length of the journey made travel particularly trying.[18]

North Africa was the last sphere of operations in the war against Germany and Italy that saw large numbers of British servicemen taken prisoner. Three campaigns were waged from September 1940 to May 1943: the Western Desert campaign, which took place in Egypt and eastern Libya; Operation Torch in Algeria and Morocco; and the Tunisia campaign. During the course of these campaigns, some 68,000 British and Commonwealth troops were taken prisoner, and the personal narratives that eighteen of these men subsequently wrote feature in the following pages.[19] Amongst those taken prisoner in Libya was Angove, captured at Tobruk. One month into captivity, on 20 July 1942, Angove decided to keep a diary that took the form of letters to his mother. It was a way of keeping note of 'little things and incidents' for his mother to subsequently read.[20] Angove wrote these letters, or diary entries, every few days. His lengthy entries, which provide a highly intimate account of his imprisoned existence, have been drawn upon heavily in *Captives of War*.

[15] MacKenzie, *The Colditz Myth*, p. 77; Gilbert, *POW*, p. 47.
[16] MacKenzie, *The Colditz Myth*, pp. 79–81; Mason, *Prisoners of War*, pp. 78–9.
[17] Monteath, *P. O. W.*, p. 101.
[18] Peter Monteath, 'Beyond the Colditz Myth: Australian Experiences of German Captivity in World War II', in Joan Beaumont, Lachlan Grant and Aaron Pegram (eds.), *Beyond Surrender. Australian Prisoners of War in the Twentieth Century* ([e-book] Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2015), unpaginated.
[19] According to Gilbert, just over 68,000 British and Commonwealth troops made up the bulk of the POW population in Italy, and the vast majority of them would have been captured in North Africa (*POW*, p. 66). Wylie states that the loss of Tobruk in June 1942 alone saw the capture of 33,000 British men (*Barbed Wire Diplomacy*, p. 128).
[20] Angove, diary entry, 20 July 1942.

Many of these prisoners had surrendered to German forces, but they were placed under the custody of the Italian government once in captivity, since they had been captured on Italian soil. Libya had become a unified colony of Italy in 1934 and the Western Desert campaign began when Italy launched an attack from bases in Libya on British forces in western Egypt. Britain defeated the Italian attack and instead drove deep into Libya but, following this, German General Erwin Rommel was sent to Libya to take command of troops sent to reinforce Germany's Italian allies. The German units were rapidly expanded and renamed the German Afrika Corps. Prisoners taken in Tunisia were captured on the soil of Vichy France, but they were also removed to Italy.[21]

Just as for those captured in Greece, the journey of these men out of North Africa and into Italy involved being held in a number of transit camps. Derna, in eastern Libya, was one of the largest to which these prisoners were taken. Here they were housed in tents and the Italian commandant kept prisoners short of water and allowed guards to loot and bully.[22] Benghazi was the other main transit camp in the area. It consisted of twenty-five acres of desert and low bivouac tents. It was grossly overcrowded and had no working sanitation and only limited food supplies [Figure 1.2].[23]

On their journeys to Italy, these prisoners endured vastly different conditions depending on their ranks. Some were placed in the holds of Italian warships or Axis cargo or passenger vessels for seventy-two hours. Barrington, who had been captured in Libya at the fall of Tobruk, retrospectively recorded in his diary that he was held in a hold of about twelve yards square, along with 550 other men. Almost all the officers, meanwhile, were transferred to Italy by plane.[24] Reverend John Naylor, another chaplain whose diary features in the following pages, was flown from North Africa to Italy. Once in Italy, he travelled to his permanent camp by first-class train, six to a compartment.[25]

In the Second World War, of all the men serving in the UK forces who were taken prisoner, the greatest proportion came from the army.[26] The vast majority of them entered imprisonment at the dates and in the places listed earlier. Similarly, forty-four of the authors of the personal narratives drawn upon in *Captives of War* were written by soldiers,

[21] Mason, *Prisoners of War*, p. 139. [22] Mason, *Prisoners of War*, p. 196.
[23] Gilbert, *POW*, p. 50; Mason, *Prisoners of War*, p. 199.
[24] Mason, *Prisoners of War*, p. 202.
[25] IWM P382 (+ Con Shelf), Reverend J. S. Naylor, logbook, pp. 79–81.
[26] Soldiers made up 88 per cent of all those captured in the war against Germany, 'Table 14. Casualties suffered during the war by the Armed Forces, Auxiliary Services and Merchant Navy', in *Statistical Digest of the War. Prepared in the Central Statistical Office* (London: HMSO, 1951), p. 13.

Figure 1.2: 'Six prisoners of war from camp 116 in Benghazi, Libya'. Taken by H. R. Dixon in 1942. These prisoners had been living in these barren conditions for about three months. Their bivouac tents stretch into the distance.
Source: DA-10602, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.

and all but two of them entered captivity in these three spheres of operations.[27]

The second highest proportion of all those taken prisoner came from the RAF: almost 10,000 men or 7 per cent of the British POW population.[28] Eighteen, captured in Europe or North Africa, feature in *Captives of War*. The first of them was Warrant Officer Harold Hurrell. He was taken prisoner on 15 October 1940. Seventy-four letters and fifty-five postcards he subsequently wrote to his parents and sweetheart have informed this book. The last was Flight Lieutenant Paul Cunningham. He was forced to bail out during a raid over Scholven-Buer in Germany

[27] Lance Corporal F. G. Blyth was taken prisoner in Italy in September 1943. It is unclear where Lieutenant R. G. Johnson was taken prisoner.
[28] 'Table 14. Casualties suffered during the war by the Armed Forces, Auxiliary Services and Merchant Navy', in *Statistical Digest of the War*, p. 13.

on 23 June 1944. He was then taken to Stalag Luft III, a camp set up for air force prisoners in Sagan, western Poland, from where he compiled a logbook on his captivity. The most senior officer to feature in this book also came from the RAF: Wing Commander Noel Hyde. Shot down at the age of thirty on 9 April 1941, thirty-seven of the letters he wrote to his wife have been drawn upon here.

Far smaller proportions of British POWs were captured whilst at sea. Just over 4 per cent came from the Royal Navy. In addition to Shipp and Buckley's, the logbooks, letters and diaries of five other naval seamen are featured in this work. The Merchant Navy accounted for the smallest proportion of British POWs: just 3 per cent. The logbooks written by five of them have been drawn upon here, in addition to the letters written by Bloss.

Capture as an End

What was it like, for these seventy-five men, to have to surrender to their enemy? How did they make sense of this ending to their war? Accounts of capture can most consistently be found in prisoners' diaries. The length of the letter form, the censorship of letters and the fact that they were sent to relatives and friends whom POWs often tried not to worry, meant only fleeting references to the moment of capture were made in POW correspondence. Given the diverse purposes for which logbooks were used, a report on surrender was not necessarily a relevant item to include. In the diary, in which dated entries were progressively written, an account of capture lent itself well to inclusion.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, in most of these diaries, the moment of capture was not written about as it happened. The majority of POWs who feature in *Captives of War* only started writing their diaries in the days, weeks, months or years after they entered captivity. Only four of these men record having kept diaries prior to being taken prisoner, but these seem to have been thrown away or destroyed as they entered enemy hands.[29] Five continued their diaries into captivity but, it seems, there was little opportunity, or perhaps willingness, to write lengthy, reflective entries specifically about their surrender.[30]

As a result, the accounts of capture were generally retrospectively written, with an external audience in mind. They differ in the stories they tell of the orders, incidents, events and circumstances that led to

[29] These four are Corporal E. Barrington, Driver J. K. Glass, Lance Corporal E. G. Laker and Reverend J. S. Naylor.
[30] These five are Private E. W. Abbott, Flying Officer R. J. Fayers, Lance Bombardier E. C. Stirling, Corporal J. G. White and Signalman N. R. Wylie.

each man's surrender. Their length varies, with some writing just one paragraph and others much more: notably Second Lieutenant Anthony Jabez-Smith, who filled three exercise books with his account of his capture at Calais in May 1940.[31] But what these accounts do have in common is the way in which they almost entirely consist of descriptions of the external events that led up to each man's surrender. Probably in part due to the time lag between their experience of capture and writing about it, they contain very little explicit articulation about how it felt to surrender.[32]

In a few places, these descriptions are punctuated by rhetorical devices, such as repetition, metaphor or calls for the reader's attention. These are insightful. These sentences stand out above the rest of the account to reveal which aspects of capture the diarist felt most emphatic about. Across these diaries, rhetorical devices are used to impress two main points. The first is these soldiers' helplessness in the battles that led to their surrender. This point frames Driver John Glass's sixteen-page account of his capture in Libya. He calls on the reader – 'you' – to consider the vulnerable position his work in the Petrol Section, which involved suppling petrol, ammunition and rations to the front line, put him in: 'When you consider that our convoys were unaccompanied by any A. F. V's [armoured fighting vehicles] and were dependent solely on each man's .303 [the standard British military cartridge] and perhaps a machine – or Tommy – gun, you will see how exposed we were to enemy action and air activity.'[33] Quarrie demonstrates his desire to point out the disadvantaged position he, along with the rest of the 7th Commandos, was in, prior to capture at Crete, by his intervention in his own narrative. 'It was the old, old story', he wrote, 'of not only lack of air-support but complete absence! However, I don't intend to write about that campaign in these pages.'[34] The animal similes used by others indicate their powerlessness. 'For eight days before our arrival at Mechili', Rifleman Arthur Brook described, 'we had been hounded about the Desert like a fox in the hunt.'[35] Of his capture near Tebourba

[31] This compares to Rachamimov's finding: that when prisoners tell their story of captivity, they often describe the moment of their capture in great detail and that this narration device, of allocating much space to 'what is often in reality just a few minutes in a saga of years', indicates that 'the moment of capture is the crucial pivot of the whole plot; the moment in which the narrator assumes a new identity as a POW and the real beginning of the story' (*POWs and the Great War*, p. 44).
[32] For example, see IWM Documents.2483, Second Lieutenant B. A. Brooke, notebook.
[33] IWM 95/30/1, Gunner J. K. Glass, diary entry, 11 November 1941–22 January 1942.
[34] SWWEC 2009.21, Lieutenant R. G. M. Quarrie, diary entry, 1 June 1941.
[35] Brook also describes himself as being rounded up like a 'herd of cattle' (IWM 80/38/1, Rifleman A. G. Brook, diary entry, pp. 3–4).