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978-1-108-48619-4 — Surviving the Great War
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Introduction

Towards the end of *Somme Mud*, Edward Lynch's fictionalised memoir of fighting on the Western Front, the book's protagonist, Nulla, encounters a group of British and French soldiers who had spent the previous three years as prisoners of war. Among them is a 'tall, gaunt figure' who sways up to Nulla and introduces himself as an Australian who 'got knocked' and was taken prisoner at Fleurbaix in July 1916. 'Can you spare a couple of tins of bully beef?' he asks. Nulla looks pitifully on the 'poor, half-starved wretches. All dirty yellow skin, hollow cheeks and sunken, hopeless eyes.' He gives food and cigarettes to these 'scarecrows on legs' that clutch with 'long, claw-like, grasping fingers that shake'. Nulla was appalled. 'How we pity these poor beggars! How we thank our lucky stars we escaped the ordeal of being prisoners of war. We look upon [these] fellow men reduced to skin-clad skeletons and are sickened.'[1]

The First World War casts a long shadow over Australian history. In four years, the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) suffered more than 215 000 casualties, of whom around 60 000 died, and countless others and their families lived with the war's physical and psychological consequences for decades after. Among them were 4044 Australians who became prisoners of war. Some 200 were taken prisoner by the Ottomans in Mesopotamia, Gallipoli and the Middle East, while 3848 were lost to German forces in the fighting on the Western Front in France and Belgium.[2] Not long after arriving in France from Egypt in March 1916, three Australian infantry divisions were committed to the Franco-British offensive on the Somme, where the violence was so extreme that many

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Australian soldiers came to believe that it would be near impossible to survive the war without injury. The Australian war correspondent Charles Bean realised this after witnessing the fighting at Pozières and Mouquet Farm, where the Australians lost more than 23 000 casualties in just six weeks of fighting. He recorded in his diary, '[T]here is only one way out of this war for an infantryman, and that is on his back. Either sick, wounded or dead. They will be put at it to fight and fight and fight again – until if not in this battle then in the next, each man gets his bullet. There is no way out.'[3]

Figure 0.1 Frank Hurley's staged photograph of Château Wood near Ypres, Belgium, October 1917. It depicts conditions on the Western Front, where trench warfare and the dominance of artillery made capture an unlikely prospect. (AWM E04599)

Their staggering losses made Australian troops increasingly fatalistic the longer the war continued, with many accepting the likelihood that they would probably be wounded or die.[4] But such a bleak outlook overlooked what would happen if they fell into the hands of the enemy. Reflecting the static nature of trench warfare, which limited face-to-face contact with the enemy to trench raids, patrols and a relatively few major engagements, prisoners of war represented less than 2 per cent of Australian battle casualties on the Western Front. Capture was therefore an unlikely prospect soldiers considered before going into battle:

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> We reckoned on three things that could happen. We could either get through unscathed or perhaps get what they called a 'blighty' – that was a light wound to get us out of it – or perhaps get skittled for all time and that would be the finish of it . . . About the only thing we didn't reckon on was being wounded and being taken prisoner. And that's what happened to me.[5]

Australian troops also accepted the grim realities of combat knowing that demoralised soldiers who begged their enemies for mercy in the white heat of battle were sometimes killed. This was informed, in part, by their own battlefield practices and attitudes towards surrendering German soldiers.[6] At Pozières in July 1916, troops of the 1st Australian Division killed demoralised and surrendering Germans while 'ratting' for souvenirs.[7] Negotiating the politics of surrender at the moment of capture was therefore both difficult and dangerous for combatants of the First World War. Despite this, the German Army suceeded in capturing more than 182 000 troops of the British Empire, who then endured up to four years in captivity.[8] While all prisoners of war experienced hardship and anguish of varying degrees in German captivity, the mortality rate among British and dominion prisoners of war varied between 3.1 per cent based on German figures and 7.1 per cent based on British figures.[9] These suggest overall treatment neither usually deliberately violent nor extreme, but when broken down into national and dominion forces, the mortality rate among Australian prisoners of war was slightly higher. Australians in German captivity died at a higher rate than British and South African prisoners of war, but fared better than Indians, Newfoundlanders, New Zealanders and Canadians (see table 0.1).

Table 0.1 Mortality of British and dominion prisoners of war in German captivity, 1914–18

Regiment	*Mortality (%)*
Indian	30.93
Newfoundland	16.75
New Zealand	10.1
Canadian	8.07
Australian	8.04
British	6.91
South African	3.25
Total	**7.1**

Source: War Office, *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire During the Great War, 1914–20*, HMSO, London, 1922, p. 237

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Yet basic statistical analysis suggests that in some respects, a German prison camp was a much safer place to be than in the trenches of the Western Front. For British and dominion forces, the chances of being captured during the First World War were approximately five times less than being killed or wounded in combat. If an Australian soldier was taken prisoner by the Germans, his odds of seeing through the war were significantly better. According to figures in A.G. Butler's *Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services*, 295 000 Australians troops served in France and Belgium, of whom 46 000 died, equating to a loss of 15.6 per cent.[10] Butler's figures show that in captivity, 337 of the 3848 Australians taken prisoner died in the hands of the Germans, but most of these (267) died from gunshot and fragmentation wounds received in battle, putting the number of Australians who died as a direct consequence of German captivity at 70, or 1.8 per cent.[11] Considering that Australians engaged in combat on the Western Front had approximately a 1 in 6 chance of dying, those who spent the remainder of the war in the hands of the Germans had somewhere between a 1 in 11 to a 1 in 50 chance of dying, depending on whether they were nursing wounds when they fell into the hands of the enemy. Surrender and imprisonment did not guarantee survival, but the distinction between combat in the trenches and life in German prison camps is striking. If conditions in German captivity were so awful, why, then, did so many Australian prisoners of war survive and return home?

Despite popular and scholarly interest in the First World War, captivity remains what Heather Jones has called a 'missing paradigm' of that conflict.[12] This is true of the Australian experience, where prisoners of war have been confined to the margins of the national story. This is primarily because the experiences of a relative few who had the misfortune of falling into enemy hands were overshadowed by Australia's 60 000 war dead, who became the focus of private and public mourning in the interwar period. With 397 Australians dying in Ottoman and German captivity (representing 0.6 per cent of Australian wartime deaths), the experiences of prisoners of war did not integrate easily into public narratives and emerging commemorative rituals of the First World War.[13]

Defeat and surrender also sat uneasily within the dominant narrative of Australians at war, the Anzac legend, which celebrated the qualities of Australian soldiers as citizens in arms. Australians saw themselves as courageous and resourceful in battle, contemptuous of authority, loyal to their mates and natural-born soldiers who, above all, made significant

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contributions to the Allied victory over Germany and Ottoman Turkey. Surrender also challenged the Victorian military tradition of celebrating last-stand actions of British soldiers who died holding ground in the presence of the enemy. Battles such as Balaclava in the Crimean War (1854), Isandlwana in the Anglo-Zulu War (1879) and Gordon's last stand at Khartoum (1885) were all seen as heroic deeds of the British Empire in the decades before the First World War.[14] By contrast, captivity was a story of surrender and inaction at odds with a triumphant national memory of the Western Front fighting that gave prominence to the AIF's victories rather than its defeats.[15] Some Australians taken prisoner in the First World War felt they had 'surrendered manhood' the moment they were captured.[16] An Australian officer described his capture at Bullecourt as one of the 'sorest and bitterest feelings of my life'.[17] Another, captured near Bapaume, was so ashamed 'I cared little whether I lived or died'.[18]

In contrast, Second World War prisoners hold central place in the Australian memory of war because of their significant numbers.[19] This was not always the case, but the rediscovery of the Australian prisoner-of-war experience from this conflict coincided with complex global trends in the mid-1980s that made it easier to engage with traumatic aspects of the past.[20] Australia's reassessment of captivity in the Second World War occurred, in part, because of a number of wartime memoirs depicted some prisoner groups as worthy inheritors of the Anzac legend.[21] Coinciding with this, a mode of war memory had emerged by the 1990s that privileged victims of trauma, which validated those who had suffered as prisoners of war, particularly the 22 300 Australian prisoners of the Japanese, of whom around 8000 had died in captivity.[22] This trend gathered momentum over the intervening decades and culminated in the linking of experiences of Australian prisoners of the Japanese with Australian national identity. As the Australian Defence Minister said at the Anzac Day ceremony at Kanchanaburi War Cemetery in Thailand in 2013, 'The Australian sacrifices we honour today helped forge our national identity, helped forge our national characteristics and helped set out national values and virtues ... The traditions forged at Gallipoli, and later by the POWs who suffered and sacrificed on the Thai–Burma Railway, have become an indelible part of our history.'[23]

In February 2017, public commentary during commemorations for the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Fall of Singapore highlighted the extent to which Australian prisoners of the Japanese have been integrated into the Anzac legend. In captivity, 'The Australians survived because they were fit young men, most recruited to the AIF from country areas. They had bush

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skills, which helped them put up rough shelters in the jungles of Thailand and Burma, start a cooking fire in the rain, and – importantly – good old values of Australian mateship.'[24]

Australian prisoners of the Japanese have become so prominent in national memory that there exists a general ambivalence towards prisoners of war from other conflicts and theatres who did not fare as poorly. In some ways, this trend has been global. Historians have been less inclined to address the ambivalence towards the First World War because of a perception that the conflict had little impact on the lives of non-combatants. According to John Keegan, the First World War 'saw no systematic displacement of populations, no deliberate starvation, no expropriation [and] little massacre or atrocity', although there now exists a substantial body of evidence to the contrary.[25] This would seem to apply to the Australian prisoners of war from the First World War, where the overall mortality rate in Ottoman and German captivity (9.7 per cent) was significantly less than in Japanese captivity in the Second World War (35.9 per cent).[26] Disease, malnutrition and wartime atrocities defined the lives of the latter prisoner group, leading to more than thirty years of scholarship on their awful experiences and their place in the memory of Australians at war.[27]

Some Australian scholars have begun to address the missing paradigm of captivity in the First World War. The high mortality rate among Australians captured by Ottoman forces (28.9 per cent) suggests conditions in captivity almost as extreme as those of Changi, Ambon and the Thailand–Burma Railway, but recent studies suggest that the realities were a little more nuanced. In her analysis of the 67 Australians captured on Gallipoli, Jennifer Lawless argues that those who died in Ottoman captivity predominantly did so from wounds received in action and epidemics sweeping the country. Survivors were not always beaten or starved, but many were paid for work and often had access to alcohol and brothels.[28] Kate Ariotti explains that perceptions of Ottoman captivity were shaped by nineteenth-century Western attitudes towards race and the 'unspeakable' Muslim Turk, which, for captured Australians, made imprisonment appear worse than it actually was.[29]

These works fill a void in the literature of Australia in the First World War, but are not representative of the broader prisoner-of-war story. Overwhelmingly most Australians taken prisoner during the First World War were captured by German forces on the Western Front. David Coombes' research on the men of the 4th Australian Division who fell into German hands at Bullecourt in April 1917 is a step in the right direction, but their horrible experiences during the reprisals in occupied

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territory affirms rather than challenges the dominating influence of captivity in the Asia Pacific and the associated narrative of victimhood and trauma.[30] Other than Coombes' work, the Australian experience of captivity on the Western Front has not attracted scholarly attention beyond a handful of articles and unpublished works by predominantly undergraduate and postgraduate students.[31] These show that interest has not been entirely absent, but do not adequately explain the high survival rate of Australian prisoners of war. Did surviving captivity depend on 'mateship', that 'key ingredient' said to have helped Australian prisoners survive the Thailand–Burma Railway in the Second World War, or something else?[32]

Figure 0.2 G. Goddard Jackson, *Schwarmstedt Camp,* oil on board, 12 cm x 30 cm, c. 1918 (IWM ART 1857)

German captivity is more commonly associated with tales of escape and evasion, which offered the possibility of transforming a story of surrender, inaction, confinement and oppression into an exciting battle of wits between captives and captors.[33] As Stephen Garton writes, prisoners of war who tried escaping were transformed into 'heroic men of action in a lineage stretching back to the siege of Troy'.[34] Escapes are today more commonly associated with the Second World War, but they were deeply ingrained in the British cultural imagination in the decades before. One of the earliest stories was Winston Churchill's memoir *London to Ladysmith via Pretoria* (1902), which detailed his escape in the Boer War in South Africa and helped to elevate his political career in the years before the First World War.[35] After the First World War, British escape stories included *The Tunnellers of Holzminden* (1920), *The Road to En-Dor* (1920), *Escapers All* (1932), *An Airman's Escape* (1933) and *Cage Birds* (1940), which all portrayed captivity as something of an adventure where prisoners (predominantly officers) spent their days digging tunnels and

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making maps and counterfeit uniforms. Ian Isherwood explains that commercial publishing encouraged heroic narratives such as these, since they portrayed an image of martial Britishness and helped former prisoners to assuage feelings of humiliation brought on by surrender and an ignominious war in captivity.[36]

Films such as *Barbed Wire* (1927), *Two Arabian Knights* (1927), *Captured!* (1933) and Jean Renoir's classic, *La Grande Illusion* (1937), reinforced the popularity of the interwar escape genre and perhaps played a role in inspiring escapes among British and Commonwealth prisoners of war in Germany during the Second World War.[37]

These, in turn, generated a fresh wave of popular books, films and games that continue to shape perceptions of captivity in today's popular imagination.[38] While the subject still lives in the shadow of captivity during the Second World War, the few modern representations of captivity in the First World War revolve around the theme of escape, as depicted in the television movie *Young Indiana Jones and the Great Escape* (1992). Following his capture on the Western Front while serving with the Belgian Army, the protagonist, Indy, makes a dash for freedom after just three on-screen minutes in German hands. He attempts two more escapes over the program's thirty minutes before finally succeeding as the end credits roll.

The heroic portrayal of prisoners as escapees has become so quintessential that popular author Jacqueline Cook claims that all British prisoners of the First World War turned their minds to escape as soon as 'the key turned in the lock'.[39] But, writing about British and Commonwealth prisoners in Europe in the Second World War, historian S.P. MacKenzie makes the point that escape stories drastically oversimplify and distort the realities of captivity where 'privation, boredom, uncertainty, occasional danger and much else made POW life for most men resemble an endurance test rather than a light-hearted game'.[40] Writing about Australians in German captivity in the Second World War, Peter Monteath adds that escape stories favoured the political circumstances of the post-war order, particularly the integration of West Germany into the Western alliance and the emergence of Soviet Russia as the new enemy.[41] If this can be said of captivity in the Second World War, how representative was escape in the lives of prisoners in the First World War?

The general ambivalence towards captivity during this period is evident in the twelve-volume *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918* edited by C.E.W. (Charles) Bean and published in various editions between 1921 and 1943. Although Bean cannot be credited with creating the Anzac legend, he was sympathetic to it, and enshrined it for a

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receptive public audience.[42] Alistair Thomson argues that Bean's history was a sanitised version of the Australian war experience that diminished aspects of the AIF that challenged the heroic Anzac archetype. Bean wrote carefully about instances of cowardice, desertion, self-inflicted wounds and poor discipline, and was similarly cautious about the capture of Australian troops. The way in which he wrote about surrender supports Thomson's conclusion that Bean was a brilliant mythmaker, not because he denied or ignored evidence that contradicted his ideal, 'but because he admitted and then reworked that evidence in terms of his own preconceptions so that it was less challenging'.[43]

Few pages of the official history covered captivity in detail. The most attention prisoners received is two and a half pages in Frederic Cutlack's volume on the Australian Flying Corps, which recounts the experience of the nine Australian Half-Flight mechanics captured at Kut in Mesopotamia in April 1916: their gruelling thousand-kilometre forced march across the Syrian Desert involved battling exposure, disease and fatigue as prisoners of the Ottomans. Seven of the nine mechanics were among 1800 white British prisoners of war who died, along with a staggering 70 per cent of the British Indian rank and file captured at Kut who are believed to have died in the hands of the Ottomans.[44]

In the four volumes Bean wrote on the Western Front, the experiences of Australians captured in France and Belgium were consigned to a series of footnotes parenthetic to the main battle narrative.[45] By comparison, prisoners of the Second World War received substantial attention from the Australian official historians. It has been claimed that captivity 'barely rates a mention' in these volumes, but chapters and appendices of captivity in Europe and the Asia Pacific amount to more than 400 pages – enough to constitute a separate volume on the experiences of Australian prisoners of war.[46] Bean never set out to write a history that included the experiences of prisoners of war, but even if he did, he might not have had the sources to do so. As part of the repatriation process, the Australian War Records Section collected statements from prisoners returning to Britain from Germany 'for historical record purposes', but these were not transferred to the Australian War Memorial until 1959.[47]

Nevertheless, the way Bean wrote about the capture of Australian soldiers left the heroic archetype of the Australian fighting soldier unchallenged. We see this in the language and phrases he used in the official history to imply that capture was a fate beyond the personal control of individuals. At Fromelles, wounded men 'found themselves' prisoners as German troops overran their positions, while those who remained fighting

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were captured possessing 'no opportunity for resistance'.[48] There was similar treatment of Australians at Bullecourt who 'received no order to withdraw' and were 'entirely cut off' as German troops counter-attacked, while those at Dernancourt who put up 'a very hard fight' surrendered 'to avoid any further useless loss of life'.[49] Germans appeared to surrender quite differently. They were usually portrayed as 'scared, mud-bespattered' 'young boys' who pleaded for their lives, 'terrified and shrieking'.[50] Bean even drew the distinction between 'weaker spirits' who surrendered easily whereas those who died at their posts 'fought with bravery that always drew on them the admiration of Australians'.[51]

These very different descriptions of surrender on the Western Front suggest that Bean found it difficult to write critically about the capture of Australian troops without contradicting the emerging Anzac archetype. It resulted in a sanitised version of combat that emphasised the courageous efforts of Australians fighting bravely to the bitter end instead of surrendering in terror when faced with the certain prospect of death. Bean also chose not to include the identities of officers who had not performed well in battle, but emphasised the deeds of those who had fought courageously. This included Lieutenant Albert Jacka of the 14th Battalion, Australia's first Victoria Cross recipient of the First World War, whose Military Cross action at Pozières on 7 August 1916 excluded mention of an officer whose less than heroic decision was just as important to the story. Bean describes how Jacka led his platoon in an assault on forty German soldiers escorting a party of captured Australians to the rear in the midst of a German attack. Jacka and his men surprised the Germans, causing the prisoners of war to turn on their escorts. Jacka was wounded in the resulting melee, but had reversed the situation and personally killed several Germans.[52]

Bean praised Jacka's actions as 'the most dramatic and effective act of individual audacity in the history of the AIF' and considered it worthy of a bar to his existing Victoria Cross.[53] Yet he made no mention of the captured men who set the scene for Jacka's gallant charge. Among Bean's papers is a letter from Lieutenant Lionel Carter of the 48th Battalion, who sent an apology to his battalion commander from hospital the following day:

> I wish to make it quite clear the fact that I was responsible for the surrender. Now that I think of it calmly I am ashamed and feel I deserve every censure which you and our Brigadier can give me . . . I feel very sorry for having brought this disgrace to the finest Battalion in the AIF and to its best Company.[54]

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