

SURVIVING THE GREAT WAR
AUSTRALIAN PRISONERS OF WAR ON THE WESTERN
FRONT, 1916–18

Between 1916 and 1918, more than 3800 men of the Australian Imperial Force were taken prisoner by German forces fighting on the Western Front. Until now, their experiences have been largely overlooked.

Australians captured in France and Belgium did not easily integrate into public narratives of Australia in the First World War and its emerging commemorative rituals. Captivity was a story of surrender and inaction, at odds with the Anzac legend and a triumphant national memory of fighting in France that tended to emphasise the Australian Imperial Force's victories rather than its defeats. Those who had the misfortune of being captured on the Western Front endured a broad range of experiences in German captivity, yet all regarded survival as a personal triumph.

Surviving the Great War is the first detailed analysis of the little-known story of Australians in German captivity in the First World War. By placing the hardships of prisoners of war in a broader social and military context, this book adds a new dimension to the national wartime experience and challenges popular representations of Australia's involvement in the First World War.

Aaron Pegram is a senior historian in the Military History Section at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra.

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PREFACE

The Australian Army has a long and admirable record in fostering serious research and publication about its history. For more than a century the Army has seen the value of history to its future. From its outset ‘Military History’ was part of the formal education of officers at RMC Duntroon, and for a time officers’ advancement depended upon candidates being able to give a coherent analysis of Stonewall Jackson’s Shenandoah Valley campaigns in promotion exams. An understanding of the Army’s history and traditions remains central to its *esprit de corps* in its most literal meaning.

From the 1970s (as a consequence of educating officers at university level), the Army has produced several generations of educated soldiers, several of whom became historians of note, including John Coates, Robert O’Neill, David Horner, Peter Pedersen, John Mordike, Bob Hall, Jean Bou, Chris Roberts, Bob Stevenson and Craig Stockings. The creation of an Army History Unit in the late 1990s demonstrated the Army’s commitment to encouraging and facilitating serious history. AHU has had a profound impact in managing the Army’s museums, supporting research on Army history and publishing its history.

One of the most impressive demonstrations of the Army’s commitment to history has been its long association with several major publishers, and notably with Cambridge University Press. This has been a productive relationship between AHU and the former long-standing General Editor of the Army History Series, Professor David Horner.

The Cambridge Army History Series brings to an academic and popular readership historical work of importance across the range of the Army’s interests and across the span of its history. The series, which I have the honour to edit, seeks to publish research and writing of the highest quality relating to the Army’s operational experience and to its existence as an organisation and as a part of its contribution to the national narrative.

The Army History Unit has created a community of writers and readers (including soldiers in both roles), the product of whose questions,

research, debate and writing informs the Army's understanding of itself and its part in Australia's history. It is a history to be proud of in every sense.

Aaron Pegram's *Surviving the Great War* continues and deepens research produced during the war's centenary. Dr Pegram shows that Australian soldiers' trials in war did not end with capture. By using a productive combination of the rich official and private records for which Australia is notable and overseas sources, including from Germany, he has given us a detailed and candid analysis. *Surviving the Great War* does not merely fill one of the most enduring 'gaps' in the history of Australia in the Great War; it also allows us to understand, for the first time, how Australian soldiers experienced, endured and survived captivity.

Professor Peter Stanley
General Editor, Australian Army History Series
UNSW Canberra

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Finally, I dedicate this work to my mother Carol, who one day before she died, asked me what her Poppy had endured as a prisoner of war.

A NOTE ON CASUALTY STATISTICS

Statistics of wartime casualties are notoriously variable, and differ between sources, the period under examination and research methodologies. Figures on the total number of Australians lost as prisoners of war have been largely drawn from A.G. Butler, *Special Problems and Services*, vol. 3, *Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1943. Any discrepancies with the author's findings are presented in endnotes.

GLOSSARY

Abt. IV/ BayHStA	Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv (Abteilung IV, Kriegsarchiv)
ADB	<i>Australian Dictionary of Biography</i>
AFC	Australian Flying Corps
AIF	Australian Imperial Force
ARCS	Australian Red Cross Society
ARCS NO	Australian Red Cross Society National Office
AWM	Australian War Memorial
Bde	Brigade
BEF	British Expeditionary Force
Bn	Battalion
B-WürHStA	Baden-Württemberg Hauptstaatsarchiv
Capt	Captain
Div	Division
IWM	Imperial War Museum
<i>Kriegsgefangene</i>	German for ‘prisoners of war’
LCpl	Lance Corporal
Lieut	Lieutenant
NAA	National Archives of Australia
NA UK	The National Archives, United Kingdom
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer
OHL	Oberste Heeresleitung (German Supreme Army Command)
Pnr Bn	Pioneer Battalion
POW	Prisoner of war
Pte	Private

RFC	Royal Flying Corps
RSSAILA	Returned Sailors', Soldiers' and Airmen's Imperial League
SBO	Senior British Officer
Sgt	Sergeant
SLNSW	State Library of New South Wales
SLSA	State Library of South Australia
SLVIC	State Library of Victoria
SROWA	State Records Office Western Australia
WMB	Wounded and Missing Enquiry Bureau

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Map I The Western Front, 1914–18

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Map 2 Main prison camps of Germany, 1916–18

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