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Are There Voices Missing From the Anzac Legend?

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World War One was a defining moment in Australia's history, as it shaped our nation's identity separate from other countries, and established a degree of confidence in our ability to stand up and be counted in times of crisis. The First World War was won with the assistance of Australian soldiers who displayed bravery, determination and leadership. But one has to wonder, what really happened behind the lines? When enlisting few soldiers, sailors, aircrew and medical corps ever expected to become a prisoner and spend the war under the command of the enemy. Yet, just as death and disease are an inevitable part of warfare so too is captivity. Prisoners of the First World War were not accepted and commemorated as much as the front line soldiers, as the media were more interested in the deaths and the progress of the war. Between 1914 and 1918 Australians at home were not informed that Australian soldiers were being captured and tortured, instead most families of the prisoners were notified that their sons had died.

On the 25 April 1915, while Australian soldiers prepared to dock at Gallipoli and begin their attempt to capture the Turks, the Australian submarine 'AE2' entered the Dardanelles to attack the Turkish ships. Five days later the submarine was attacked and all of its 32 crew were captured and became prisoners of war. Their captors initially treated them as 'honoured guests' but then they were sent to work on the railway being built through the Taurus Mountains in southern Turkey. Medical care was primitive, food was of an unsatisfactory quality and quantity, the climate was harsh and the prisoners suffered from neglect and brutality. Out of these thirty-two men, four of them died. The last man alive from the 'AE2' who died in 1983 recalled '*I don't think, if we had known what was ahead of us, that one of us would have left the boat.*'¹ Society can re-enact and re-tell these stories but one can never truly understand or properly acknowledge the mental and physical pain that the prisoners suffered.

'In 1919 the Australian government issued a booklet entitled *How the Germans treated Australian Prisoners of War.*'² It was published and issued by the Defence Department in Melbourne, Australia. It included statements from the repatriated Australian Prisoners of War, most of who had been wounded'. Some of these statements make disturbing reading, and it appears that many allied prisoners of war were

1 <http://www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/stoloneyears/ww1/turkey/index.asp>

2 <http://www.vlib.us/medical/pow/1916.htm>

brutally treated. During the First World War, the total number of reported prisoners of war from Britain, Australia, New Zealand, France, America and Canada was 191,652. For many decades afterwards, however, relatively little attention was paid to such a sizeable group of servicemen.

In the book *How the Germans treated Australian Prisoners of War* a biography of a private who was captured in Fleurbaix France recalls the conditions and treatment that he had to endure for two years. On 18 January 1916 the private and his fellow diggers marched into Fleurbaix to open fire on the enemy. Most of the soldiers who fought that day died. The private was captured as he was shot on the shoulder and was then forced to walk over two miles to the nearest German hideout with no help or companionship along the way. Over the next few days he was forced to stagger as a stretch bearer for the Germans whilst coping with his own injuries. When the private had finished his hours for the day he was then treated with no sympathy and the food he received was meagre and barely edible. The digger was then transferred to Douai but only stayed a short time but recalls; 'we were treated exactly the same as the wounded Germans and the food we received was wholesome and plentiful.'³

From Douai he was sent to Bochum in Germany and quotes; 'I remained here for five weeks. The food was insufficient and consisted of soups and sloppy foods without any nourishment in them. The medical attention was bad, and the prisoners were strictly confined to hospital. My wound was healing slowly under the treatment.'⁴ The digger was then taken to Sennelager and was there treated brutally. He suffered infections from his untreated wounds and over time more wounds appeared. Here he received his Red Cross parcel of food, but when he opened the package the contents of the cans had been emptied and food was rationed in small amounts over a long period of time.

The last trip the private made was to Switzerland and there received electrical treatment and mechanical exercises for his shoulder. The food he ate was of poor quality and when one of the British officers came to visit he could not believe the rations that they were receiving, but he was unable to assist. He left Switzerland on 11 June 1918 and travelled through France in an ambulance train to La Harve and embarked on the S.S Panama for Southampton. The digger arrived at London on 14 July and was quartered at the King George Hospital, Waterloo. A biography like this shows society that it was not pleasant for the soldiers who had been captured in the war due to the amount of food received, medical and physical support rendered and neglect from both the Germans and their own nation.

On 25 April for the past 91 years, Australians have acknowledged, remembered and are reminded of the sacrifices that our fellow Australians; some who gave their lives, and others tormented by the experience. Prisoners of the First World War were under no law of conduct as the international Hague conventions were created after the war in 1919 and the participating nations reinforced certain rules for future imprisonment. But why don't we remember those so much that lived or were captured? We as Australians are admired by civilians and other nations for our courage, companionship and trust, but why do we advise other nations to follow us in leadership when at times we don't acknowledge some of our own troops. Two of my great great uncle's fought in the First World War, one of them died in Ypres and the others death is unknown. My opinion is now varied between two options; he either died in action and they could not find his body and identify it or he was captured and was neglected by his homecoming nation. Even if he was captured in the First World War he would have still displayed those qualities and emotions shown by the brave and courageous soldiers who died and would have displayed dignity and honoured the family name when he was captured.

³ <http://www.vlib.us/medical/pow/1916.htm>

⁴ <http://www.vlib.us/medical/pow/1916.htm>

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