



THE SIMPSON PRIZE



SIMPSON PRIZE COMPETITION

for Year 9 and 10 Students

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Evaluate the usefulness of diary entries, letters and photographs for providing evidence about the contrasting experiences and perspectives of Australians who served in either the First World War or the Second World War.

Diary entries, letters and photographs are highly useful in revealing how geographical location led to contrasting individual experiences of Australians who served during the Second World War, exposing both the contrasting optimistic perseverance and hardships endured. During World War II, Australians served in two major international regions aside from the domestic homefront: European and Asia-Pacific fronts, which had an impact on individual outlook of the war. Members of the air force in Europe often exhibited optimism whilst prisoners of war (POWs) in the Pacific and ground troops in Europe experienced harsher conditions and suffering. Despite this, whilst the primary sources successfully exemplify individual contrasting perspectives, they are of limited reliability due to bias, unique experiences and potential censorship.

Sources of members of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) serving in Europe reveal the optimistic and often idealistic outlook on their role in the war, however, this generalisation masks difficulties faced, experienced by those serving in the Asia-Pacific.

Such optimism is exemplified in Flying Officer Colin Flockhart's letter (Appendix A) to his family in December of 1944, where he says "I have enjoyed my Air Force service as I have enjoyed no other years of my life and I have been completely happy the whole time," illustrating the shared camaraderie present in the RAAF. Officer Flockhart's letter is highly valuable in revealing the personal motivations of Australians for enlisting, which Flockhart states as, "war was inevitable and I could never have been content unless I did my share," revealing the hopeful attitude of some Australians who served. However, Flockhart's purpose in writing to his family may skew his account of events, reducing fear and hardship to maintain morale, reducing his letter's historical reliability, although this bias is ultimately useful in understanding personal motivations of soldiers.

The photograph of Lancaster "G" for George aircraft crew (Appendix B) expands on the view of the RAAF's teamwork and unity, providing valuable visual evidence of the resilience of the air force. However, the photograph may have been taken for the intent of propaganda, thus potentially excluding signs of hardships endured, especially the ninety operations undertaken by the aircraft. However, this skewed purpose, although limiting reliability, is highly valuable in emphasising ulterior motives undertaken by national governments to maintain public morale.

On the other hand, optimism, when contrasted with experiences in the Pacific, such as in *Appendix C*, reveals how location plays a role in shaping individual experience; "[...] the Japs all tried to shoot us down at once... [...]. It was then that I felt the first real fear in my life." Whilst the RAAF grew ten

times in size from its creation in 1921 to 1941, most men served in Europe as they had trained under the Empire Air Training Scheme (Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2008), further confirming the view that members of the RAAF in the Pacific experienced more extreme hardship.

Overall, RAAF accounts exemplify the idealistic view of the war by those in Europe, a generalisation which arises from the limited reliability of individual accounts, thus opposed by the perspective of those serving in the Pacific.

Sources significantly reveal how Australian Prisoners of War in the Asia-Pacific region were significantly affected by imprisonment, taking a toll on morale, mental and physical health, although individual experiences varied on a personal scale.

Photographs successfully reveal the psychological and physical strain of POWs through depicting loss of morale and malnutrition. Troops captured by the Japanese were forced into hard labour across Asia, such as building the Burma-Thailand Railway (Appendix D), often culminating in diseases such as malaria, dysentery and beriberi. Private Aspinall's secretly taken photograph is highly useful in demonstrating the individual experience of suffering and mental trauma, which is otherwise unable to be emulated by reports, and is authentic due to its secrecy. Despite this, the photograph can only represent a single moment, and only accounts for a narrow POW experience in a specific camp, limiting source reliability. However, unique experiences such as these are highly valuable in revealing contrasting perspectives faced by troops across the war.

Furthermore, *Appendix E* reveals how females such as the Australian Army Nursing Sisters, were also made POWs by the Japanese, and the source's usefulness lies in the fact that it depicts the role of women outside of the homefront during the war. Moreover, the photograph emphasises how stereotypical gender roles of females as nurses and males as soldiers continued even into captivity. However, because *Appendix E* was taken after the nurses were freed from imprisonment, it is subject to bias and may not be historically reliable due to omitting hardships endured during the time and prioritising recovery rather than accurate imagery. Nevertheless, this bias is of significant value in providing an understanding of personal experiences, adding to its usefulness.

However, POWs were not only limited to Japanese captivity, as Germans and Italians also imprisoned Australians, offering a contrasting viewpoint in *Appendix F*. Keith Dodd's diary reveals the harsh conditions; "The sisters in the hospital were rather strange, the orderlies lazy and useless, and the food consisted simply of rice with no flavouring whatsoever," which is useful in revealing a different place of imprisonment which adhered closer to Geneva Convention (State Library of South Australia, n.d.). Of the 8000 Australians taken prisoner by Europeans, 265 died during captivity, but of the 22000 captured by the Japanese, one third of the prisoners died by the time of liberation (Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2025) further cementing the harsher conditions of the Japanese camps. However, *Appendix F* is of limited reliability as it accounts for personal perspective rather than the wider POW experience, shown by the contrasting experiences of Japanese POWs.

Ultimately, primary sources reveal how POW experiences varied based on the location of imprisonment, although lack reliability in making generalisations due to bias and limited scope.

Individual accounts of events prove how Australian ground troops defending against German and Italian initiatives demonstrated both endurance and suffering in uncertain conditions, contrasted by experiences of those in the Pacific.

Lance Corporal Negus' letter to his mother (Appendix G) cements this, articulating gratitude after being evacuated from conflict in Greece; "You have no idea of what it feels like to be safe" but also conveying the hardships faced by the troops; "had no sleep for a week, [...], legs and hands cut and full of thorns," demonstrating the dual perspective of both eagerness to fight for the nation and sheer exhaustion after battle. The letter's potential bias as it was for family, which may lower emotions of fear to reassure loved ones back him, makes it unreliable but useful in providing insight on the experience and motivations of an Australian troop.

The 1941 Siege of Tobruk, whilst occurring in Africa, was a German initiative defended by Australians, which *Appendix H* demonstrates vividly through portrayal of battlefield conditions; "[...] one had a bullet through the head, another in the left chest, then a back wound, several with legs and arm injuries, and there were trench mortar wounds again." Despite this, *Appendix H* proves the endurance of Australians; "He said the men, [...], are nevertheless of high morale and waiting to have a go at the enemy" and is considered of significant value in portraying contrasting experiences.

However, diary entries may be written with personal bias and exaggeration, limiting their historical reliability, although ultimately helping demonstrate individual experiences and intent.

The Battle of Kokoda (1942) was a defensive against the approaching Japanese, and *Appendix I* is of significant value in revealing the unfamiliar terrain, steep inclines and heavy equipment carried by group troops. When contrasted to experiences of European conflict, it is revealed that Australians were met with jungle and mountainous territory which was largely unknown to them, thus creating additional hardships for soldiers. Although *Appendix I* conveys the endurance of soldiers, photographs taken on the Kokoda Trail were often taken before or after battles, reducing reliability but allowing for understanding of the aftermath or preparation taken.

Overall, sources reveal how all soldiers faced hardships, although this varied on an individual and geographical scale.

Ultimately, diary entries, letters and photographs are of imperative importance in exemplifying how geographical location led to contrasting resilience and suffering recounted by Australians who served during World War II, although such differences led to limiting historical reliability. Whilst all individually reaccounted sources are subject to bias, thus narrowing their reliability and accuracy, this is essential for understanding personal experiences, motivations and scope, thereby increasing the usefulness of the source. Both the European and Asia-Pacific fronts play a role in determining

individual contrasting experiences, with those of the European RAAF more optimistic than their Pacific counterparts, and Japanese POWs enduring extreme conditions in comparison to German POWs who received more humane treatment. Additionally, ground troops in European conflicts experienced various hardships, although unfamiliar terrain in the Pacific escalated intensity and suffering. All in all, sources are of critical value for conveying contrasting experiences due to geographical location, but are limited in scope and reliability, making them useful for individual perspectives rather than historical generalisations.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A

Extract from Lance Corporal Lindsay Negus's letter to his mother describing his experiences in escaping capture by the German Army and being evacuated from the island of Crete in May 1940. (AWM 3DRL/4052)

It took us from the 27th to the night of the 30th May to reach our embarkation point. I was knocked over by a lorry, fell down a hill-side twice, and had no sleep for a week, frightened to go to sleep, legs and hands cut and full of thorns, but we all kept going – anything to beat our ruthless enemy. I was on board HMAS Perth and slept for a couple of hours after a cup of hot cocoa and biscuits. You have no idea of what it feels like to be safe, just going from hell to heaven. I shall never go to sleep before thanking God for bringing us out. Our arrival at port (Alexandria, Egypt) was greeted by the Red Cross with steaming hot tea and cocoa, biscuits, fruit and chocolates... All I have at present is one pair of shorts and a shirt plus my razor and pay-book. Everything that you gave me is gone, my souvenirs and things I bought to send home to you all, but never mind I still have my life thanks to our lads who fought rear-guards to keep the Hun back while most of us escaped... I know what it is like to be hungry and thirsty.

Appendix B

Members of the crew of "G" for George, the Lancaster aircraft of 460 Squadron RAAF in the UK. Left to right back row: Flight Sergeant (F Sgt) A G Brown, Sydney, NSW; Flying Officer (FO) R G Sampson, Mackay, QLD; FO J A Critchley DFC, Melbourne, VIC; Sergeant (Sgt) Shaw, RAF, Ramsgate, England; Sgt Knott, RAF, Walthamstow, England. Front row left to right: F Sgt M L Armstrong, Brisbane, QLD; Sgt Starkey, RAF. This aircraft has completed ninety operations. Photograph taken c. April 1944. (AWM UK1302)



Appendix C

Extract from Volume I: Royal Australian Air Force 1939–1942, as stated by Flight Lieutenant JR Kinninmont: (RCDIG1070209)

The sky seemed full of red circles ... the Japs all tried to shoot us down at once. I pulled up to meet one as he dived down ... I was in such a hurry to shoot something that I didn't use my gun-sight. I simply sprayed bullets in his general direction. Somebody was on my tail and tracers were whipping past my wings. Chapman was turning and shooting with four Japs. I decided to get out. I yelled to Chapman 'Return to base. Return to base' ... and went into a vertical dive ... Of the three Japs that followed me down ... one stuck ... like a leech ... As I watched him, my neck screwed around, I saw

his guns smoke and ... a burst of bullets splattered into the Buffalo ... It was then that I felt the first real fear in my life.

Appendix D

Three Australian prisoners of war classified as 'fit' workers by their Japanese captors on the Burma-Thailand Railway. The photo was taken secretly by Private George Aspinall while he was a prisoner of war in 1943. (AWM PO2569.192)



Appendix E

Australian Army Nursing Service Sisters, Jean Keer Greer of Petersham, NSW (left), and Sister Betty Jeffrey of East Malvern, Vic, in hospital in Malaya in 1945 after spending three and a half years as prisoners of war of the Japanese in the Dutch East Indies. (AWM 305369)



Appendix F

Keith Dodd's diary of his experiences as a prisoner of war in both Italy and Germany. (State of Library of South Australia, n.d.)

The sisters in the hospital were rather strange, the orderlies lazy and useless, and the food consisted simply of rice with no flavouring whatsoever. We were issued with bread but nothing to spread it with, and so I was very discontented. There were Tommies in the ward, who had been captured in the desert. Of course, the Iti's went mad with delight upon hearing the day after we arrived, that Tobruk had fallen to the Axis troops.

Appendix G

Extract from Lance Corporal Lindsay Negus's letter to his mother describing his experiences in escaping capture by the German Army and being evacuated from the island of Crete in May 1940. (AWM 3DRL/4052)

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board HMAS Perth and slept for a couple of hours after a cup of hot cocoa and biscuits. You have no idea of what it feels like to be safe, just going from hell to heaven. I shall never go to sleep before thanking God for bringing us out. Our arrival at port (Alexandria, Egypt) was greeted by the Red Cross with steaming hot tea and cocoa, biscuits, fruit and chocolates... All I have at present is one pair of shorts and a shirt plus my razor and pay-book. Everything that you gave me is gone, my souvenirs and things I bought to send home to you all, but never mind I still have my life thanks to our lads who fought rear-guards to keep the Hun back while most of us escaped... I know what it is like to be hungry and thirsty.

Appendix H

Extract from the diary of Lance Corporal P. T. Saunders, 2/8th Field Ambulance, 1 July 1941, Tobruk, North Africa. (Brian Saunders, *Happy in the Service: The personal WWI and WWII diaries of P. T. Saunders*, Green Hill Publishing, Adelaide, 2019)

We are having lovely clear nights with lots of stars and moonlight. I was up all night as nine wounded came in and some were serious...one had a bullet through the head, another in the left chest, then a back wound, several with legs and arm injuries, and there were trench mortar wounds again. They say that Fritz is deadly with them too, over a two to three thousand yard range.

Fritz are out laying many booby traps and mines. One type of booby trap is a mine about twelve pounds in weight, round with spikes on it to which are attached the detonators. There are three hundred and twenty-five pellets in each mine and as soon as one touches it slightly it sets off some TNT which makes the booby trap which is just under the ground, spring three feet into the air and then it bursts, and is pretty effective. They lay these out all over the place about twelve feet apart and in between set a land mine, like a frying pan, which has trip wires attached to it and when walking you trip over the wire and you set her off, and up she goes. We hear they had been placing them under dead bodies and when our chaps go out to bury the dead at night and lift them up, then up goes the mine. They have even gone to the trouble of stacking them so that if you de-activate the one on top and lift it there is one underneath that goes up.

Captain McArthur of Kadina came in wounded this morning and told me all this. He said the men, although using much bad language over the Hun, the country, the conditions etc, are nevertheless of high morale and waiting to have a go at the enemy.

The night patrols are limited to four men and they go out crawling on their tummies for hundreds and maybe thousands of yards or more, feeling the ground for these spikes and trip wires and de-activating them as they go. Two abreast with one behind them in case they miss anything, and then one with a tape that shows them the safe path back to their lines. They try to find out the strength of the enemy and other information before they go back, all the time expecting the wrath of the enemy to fall on them. They do it night after night and then if not on this they are at work digging in at night, and all day long they lay quiet in holes eighteen inches deep and wide. They lay in the broiling sun and

multitudinous flies not daring to move in case the enemy snipers get them, and they are great shots too.

The country here is so full of waddies (gullies) it is possible to get Ambulances up quite close to the front line at night, and so there is no long carrying of wounded by stretcher. The longest is about a quarter of a mile, but wounded are nearly always taken out at night, some even having to lay out all day in the open until night falls. The Regimental Aid Post I am told is not up so close to the front line, but Battalion bearers carry the wounded back to it and then they are picked up by Ambulance behind some hill.

Desert sores are plentiful now and they are like our Barcoo Rot back home, hard to heal up as it keeps breaking out in fresh places and takes weeks in some cases.

A warm day, Alby, Sergeant Hood, myself and Norman Nesbit went down to 'A' Company at the beach and are staying down here for two days. We had just had dinner and were back on the beach when a terrific din was heard...forty to fifty German planes were over bombing Tobruk. There was Anti-Aircraft fire everywhere and then they flew back over us out to sea just skimming the water and firing their machine guns at us in the caves as they went...the bullets were chipping pieces out of the rocks near us. None were brought down as far as I know.

We are sleeping down on the rocks and in the caves on the shore. Alby and I scrounged a big net and are sleeping on it.

There have been one or two more planes over. We went to bed early.

Appendix I

A patrol of the 2/25th Battalion crosses the Brown River on its way to Menari, Kokoda Track, in October 1942. (AWM 027060)



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

027060