

'I hope you are not too ashamed of me'

Prisoners in the siege of Tobruk, 1941

Karl James

Around 11pm on 3 August 1941, Captain Ray Conway from the 2/23rd Battalion, 2nd Australian Imperial Force, made a profoundly difficult decision. Early that morning his company had been part of a larger Australian attempt to recapture ground lost to the Germans in an area of Tobruk known as 'the salient'. Taking Post S7, Conway's company held out throughout the day, but its casualties mounted. In addition to himself and a lieutenant, Conway had eighteen men, nine of whom were badly wounded and some 'shock cases'. One Australian was dead. At dusk Conway sent out two signallers carrying identical messages. Requesting battalion headquarters to send just a few reinforcements, he warned: 'The remainder of us are too fatigued to offer any resistance. We have seven [German] prisoners.' As the signallers made for the Australian lines, the Germans closed in on Post S7. Turning to the lieutenant and the two most senior non-commissioned officers, Conway thanked them for their service and said he felt he had no option but to surrender. The others agreed. The captain then said he would wait a few minutes for those who wished to escape, but no one accepted the offer. Having held the post for nineteen hours, Conway called out in a clear, penetrating voice: 'I surrender with all my men.'¹

Conway and his men were among the more than nine hundred officers and soldiers from the Australian 9th Division who were captured in Libya in the days preceding and during the siege of Tobruk in 1941. For many Australians, Tobruk has become a story of defiant victory. As the Rats of Tobruk Memorial on Anzac Parade in Canberra states in bronze, it was at Tobruk that the German forces received their 'first major reverse on land' in World War II. Here too Australian soldiers 'confirmed and enhanced' the 'reputation for heroism won by their fathers on Gallipoli in 1915'. The memorial on Anzac Parade also incorporates a stone from the original memorial built by Australian engineers in the Tobruk war cemetery during the siege. This is inscribed with the words: 'This is hallowed ground for here lie those who died for their country.' Clearly the memorial is dedicated to the dead and to the garrison's heroic achievements.

However, in 1941 more of the 9th Division's casualties became prisoners of war than were killed in action. Conway's 2/28th Battalion, for example, suffered 78 men killed, 150 wounded and 79 taken prisoner. The 2/24th Battalion suffered the heaviest casualties, with 70 men killed, 82 wounded and 259 taken prisoner. Indeed, ten of the twelve Australian infantry battalions in Tobruk, as well as a pioneer battalion, lost men as prisoners.² The large number of Australian prisoners taken at Tobruk is often under-appreciated. However, it should not be assumed from the numbers captured that Tobruk's garrison was passive. On the contrary, one of the key tactics for successfully holding Tobruk was the aggressiveness of its defence, and through its constant patrols and raids on the enemy, the garrison captured over two thousand Italian and German soldiers.

This chapter draws on soldiers' personal papers, translated documents, and intelligence summaries to examine the experiences of Australian, Italian and German prisoners of war within the context of the siege of Tobruk. Beginning with a brief summary of the siege and a survey of the existing literature, the chapter discusses the soldiers' typical response to the shock of surrender, the process for evacuating prisoners from the Tobruk battlefield, and the importance of prisoners of war as sources of intelligence for both the besiegers and the besieged at Tobruk. In contrast to many other theatres of war in World War II, Tobruk was a place where captivity was moderated by the conventions of law and some sense of shared humanity.

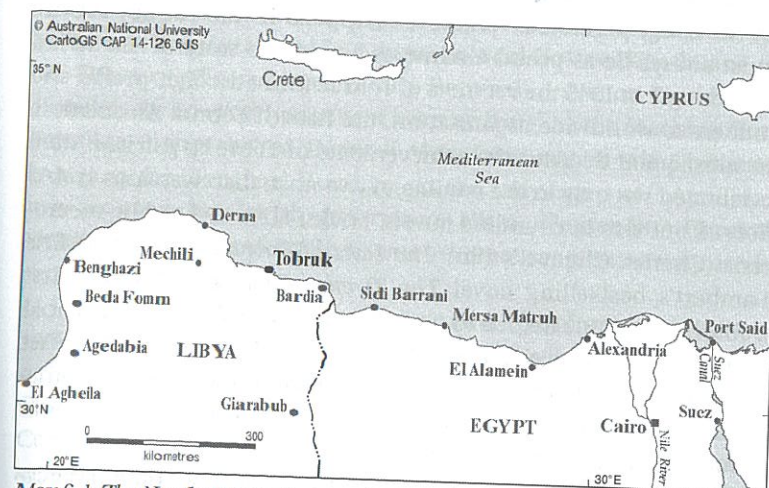
The story of a siege

The year 1941 was one of both victory and defeat for the British and Commonwealth forces in North Africa. In January, Australian troops spearheaded the British advance into Libya, pushing back the Italian forces that had invaded Egypt in September 1940. By the month's end the Australian 6th Division had reached Benghazi, and captured the Italian fortresses at Bardia and Tobruk. However, when the 6th Division was deployed to the defence of Greece, it was replaced by the partially trained and inexperienced 9th Division. Meanwhile the huge Italian defeats in Libya caused Adolf Hitler to send a German force to Tripoli to prevent a complete Italian collapse in North Africa. The first German troops of Lieutenant-General Erwin Rommel's *Afrikkakorps* arrived in Tripoli in mid-February 1941. Quickly realising that the British in Libya were overstretched, Rommel went on the offensive in March 1941. The Commonwealth forces were forced back, with the 9th Division taking up a defensive position in the port of Tobruk. Lying 130 kilometres west of the Egyptian border, Tobruk was the best natural harbour in North Africa. After their invasion of Libya in 1911, the Italians had developed the port into a modern fortress. Its outer perimeter, over 45 kilometres long, known as the 'Red Line', was a series of concrete posts, anti-tank ditches, barbed wire and land mines.

Tobruk's garrison in April 1941, commanded by the Australian Major-General Leslie Morshead, included 14000 Australians from the 9th Division and the 18th Australian Infantry Brigade. British artillery, machine-gunners, a handful of tanks and armoured cars, and an Indian regiment supported the Australians. A second defensive line, the 'Blue Line', was gradually dug and wired. A third line, the 'Green Line', was also prepared closer to town. 'If we should have to get out', Morshead ordered, 'we shall fight our way out. There is to be no surrender and no retreat.'³

Hoping for a rapid victory, Rommel recklessly attacked Tobruk on 14 April, Easter Sunday, but was repulsed with heavy losses. During the night of 30 April a well-coordinated German and Italian attack captured a section of Tobruk's outer perimeter, the high ground around the Ras el Madauuar feature. By 4 May, after four days of intense fighting, the Germans held a pocket about 5.5 kilometres wide and 4 kilometres deep. Throughout May and August the Australians

suffered heavy casualties while trying unsuccessfully to recapture the lost ground. However, Tobruk did not fall, and the siege continued until December—although by this time many of the Australian forces had been withdrawn by sea, at the insistence of the Australian Government.



Map 6.1: The North African theatre of operations, 1941-42

In stark contrast to the disastrous campaigns on mainland Greece and on Crete in April and May 1941, or the low-key campaigns fought in Syria and Lebanon in June and July of that year, the siege of Tobruk was celebrated as a story of endurance, sacrifice and victory. For 242 days the harbour fortress of Tobruk in Libya withstood a German and Italian siege. As British Prime Minister Winston Churchill said in a message to Tobruk's garrison, 'The whole Empire is watching your steadfast and spirited defence with gratitude and admiration.'⁴

However, Tobruk was a hard-fought victory. Between April and October, the garrison sustained nearly four thousand casualties, the burden of which fell on the 9th Division. From 8 April to 25 October Morshead's division and attached troops lost 749 men killed, with nearly 2000 wounded and 604 taken prisoners. The division's artillery incurred another 44 gunners killed, 106 wounded and 96 taken prisoner. The total losses for the 9th Division from the start of March until mid-December were 832 killed, more than 2000 wounded and

941 prisoners. More men became prisoners of war than were killed in action.⁵

The 'Rats of Tobruk', as the defenders were known, became some of the most revered veterans of World War II. In late 1941 the war correspondent, and later general editor of the official history, Gavin Long, predicted: 'Whatever happens in the future, Tobruk must always be as proud a name as any in the story of Australian soldiering.'⁶ In 1945 the veterans of Tobruk formed a high-profile and influential worldwide organisation, the Rats of Tobruk Association. In subsequent decades the achievements of Tobruk's garrison were celebrated not only in the naming of two Australian warships HMAS *Tobruk* but also in countless novels, books, films and public memorials. Charles Chauvel's film *The Rats of Tobruk* (1944) and Eric Lambert's bestselling novel *The Twenty Thousand Thieves* (first published in 1951) helped to make the 'Rats of Tobruk' a household name. Lambert's novel alone sold around 750,000 copies by 1954.⁷ Yet these works made meagre, if any, reference to the more than nine hundred Australians who became prisoners of war in the weeks before and during the siege itself.

It is an omission that began with the earliest wartime publications on the subject, such as John Devine's memoir *The Rats of Tobruk* (1943), and the 1944 novels *Sojourn in Tobruk* and *We Were the Rats* by soldier authors G.H. Fearnside and Lawson Glassop, and war correspondent Chester Wilmot's *Tobruk* (1945). Decades later Frank Harrison's *Tobruk* (1996) and Robert Lyman's *The Longest Siege* (2009) continued to ignore the experiences of those men captured at Tobruk, as did Peter FitzSimons's bestselling tome *Tobruk* (2006).⁸ Until Peter Monteath's *POW: Australian Prisoners of War in Hitler's Reich* (2011), the experiences of Australian prisoners in North Africa had been discussed only in an appendix in the official history, in some unit histories, and in a few soldiers' memoirs.⁹

The shock of surrender

As the Allied forces were pushed back on the defensive in April 1941, numerous men were captured in a series of forlorn blocking actions. At Er Regima on 4 April and Mechili on 6–8 April, for example, British and Australian infantrymen and gunners were outflanked, encircled and overrun. Private Basil Brudenell-Woods, 2/13th Battalion, was

captured at Er Regima in his first engagement. His Bren light machine-gun was 'of little use' against the German tanks, and so, as he later lamented, 'we went "in the bag"'.¹⁰ Hundreds of British troops, including more than four hundred Australians from the 9th Division, were also captured in the confusing withdrawal to Tobruk and the Egyptian border. The sight of bypassed or lost British soldiers became so frequent that Lieutenant-Colonel Gustav Ponath, one of the German officers spearheading Rommel's advance, could note dismissively how 'odd prisoners keep arriving' as his Machine Gun Battalion 8 approached Derna.¹¹ Most famously, in what became known as the 'Benghazi handicap', in the early hours of 7 April, the two most senior British generals in Libya, Lieutenants General Richard O'Connor and Philip Neame VC, were captured as they drove through the night.

For all these men, whatever their rank, the moment of capture was one of great danger and anxiety. Initially 'bundled' in with a number of other prisoners, many from the 2/8th Field Ambulance, O'Connor later noted that these men were 'very depressed indeed'.¹² Corporal Frederick Anderson, meanwhile, was with a group of sappers from the 2/3rd Field Company captured while sheltering in a wadi at 3am on 7 April. The Germans kept guard for the rest of the night, but at daybreak 'the air was thick with tracer bullets we all lay flat on the ground expecting the worst to happen'.¹³ With a confused and rapidly shifting front line, Anderson and the others could easily have become liabilities to the advancing Germans, as captured and wounded men were a drain on supplies and manpower for their captors. Although no harm came to these Australians, elsewhere there was at least one report of Germans shooting soldiers who had surrendered in the Salient on 1 May.¹⁴

The emotions Australian prisoners experienced when first captured transcended their nationality. Sergeant Luigi Bortolotti, for instance, serving with the Italian 69th Ancona Infantry Regiment, and captured in Tobruk in January 1941, despaired at becoming a prisoner and the futility of his own individual efforts. As a Fascist, he lamented in his diary, 'What have I managed to do for my beloved country?' Australian soldiers robbed him of his wallet, money and photographs, leaving Bortolotti 'demoralised' by the humiliation of defeat.¹⁵ Similarly, the Australian Private Brudenell-Woods described

his first day as a prisoner as the saddest and longest of his life. Loaded onto a vehicle for the drive to Tripoli and captivity, he felt 'utterly dejected and numb with despair'.¹⁶ Private James Giddins harboured similar sentiments when he and the 2/15th Battalion's headquarters company were captured on 7 April. What hurt most, he later confessed, was that after almost twelve months of training, he attempt to damage the enemy had probably resulted in nothing more than a few dents and scratches on some German armour vehicles and, he hoped, a few casualties. But Giddins thought the main German force had not even bothered to slow down.¹⁷

Mixed with the prisoners' fear and despair was often a sense of shame at their having surrendered. The 2/28th Battalion's Private Harold Gaby was taken prisoner in the Salient with Captain Conway's company on 3 August. Despite having fought in the bloody action, Gaby appears to have felt guilt at being captured. Perhaps his family's tradition of military service added to the young soldier's burden. Gaby's father had served as a sergeant in the Boer War while his uncle, Lieutenant Alfred Gaby, was posthumously awarded a Victoria Cross in World War I. Writing later from a prisoner-of-war camp in Italy, Harold Gaby's first letter began: 'Dear Dad, I must start this letter by apologising for any worry I may have caused you. By now you will have been told I am a Prisoner of War. I hope you are not too ashamed of me, but we took the only sensible course open to us.'¹⁸ As it happened, according to family sources, Gaby's parents felt no shame in their son's capture.¹⁹ Gaby's older brother, who served with him in the 2/28th Battalion, was captured at El Alamein in July 1942.

The decision to **surrender**, of course, was one that was taken by many men (though not all) when death seemed the only alternative. For example, when the Germans attacked Tobruk on 14 April, Ponath's Machine Gun Battalion 8 lost 280 men killed or captured when breaking through the outer perimeter and becoming pinned down in anti-tank ditches or wadis.²⁰ According to one German source, many of the battered survivors 'cried as they were led away into captivity' after surrendering to the Australians.²¹ Ponath, however, refused to surrender. When some of his men began to give up, he and another man rushed back into a trench and recommenced firing. Both were killed almost immediately. Their deaths, an

Australian sergeant reported, 'stopped any further resistance' from the remaining Germans.²²

A fortnight later, some two hundred Australians of the 2/24th Battalion were captured when Rommel ordered an attack on the high ground around Ras el Madauuar. Major Leonard Fell was among those captured. His diary entry for 1 May vividly described the moment when the decision to surrender was taken:

[illegible]

Major Leonard Fell's prisoner identification card, which the Germans compiled after his capture at Tobruk in May 1941. (AWM 3DRL/3064.003)

Terrific dust falls over everything. Could hear MG [machine-gun] fire all sides ... Verrey [sic] lights ... explosive bullets used by enemy ... No communications ... vehicles burning ... saw tanks in front both self [in Post S2] and Walker [Lieutenant Lachlan Walker in neighbouring Post S1] ... saw Walker come out and then we were for it. Shelled by tank guns then a grenade rolled down. All came out. [At this point Fell surrendered the post] ... officers separated from men ... [Fell was asked] 'You are an Australian you would fight for England' ... moved off under tank escort.²³

Exhausted and confused, soldiers could be overwhelmed at discovering they were prisoners. Sergeant Bill Williams, who was captured with Fell, afterwards likened surrendering to being in a state of shock: 'It was a totally unreal experience.' He continued: 'Our training had prepared us for death or incapacity', but not to become a prisoner of war.²⁴ Coming face to face with the enemy was similarly disorienting. Captured in a failed attack in the Salient on 17 May, the 2/12th Battalion's Private Pat Lattin was surprised by the courtesy of his English-speaking guards. One German even asked for a souvenir.²⁵

After surrender: Prisoners of the Germans and Italians

In keeping with the terms of the 1929 Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, British prisoners were usually evacuated quickly from the battlefield.²⁶ Since the *Afrikkakorps* was not organised to administer to, or care for, large numbers of prisoners of war, the captured British and Australian soldiers were handed over to the Italians after what was usually a brief interrogation.²⁷ From Tobruk, prisoners were evacuated by road through Derna and moved to either Benghazi or Tripoli for transport to Italy. Packed into overloaded lorries, prisoners stood exposed to the sun and dust-storms, and it was not uncommon for them to succumb to dysentery. Corporal Anderson, for instance, captured on 7 April, remained a prisoner in a wadi near Derna, weak with dysentery, until 12 April. Then, loaded into a lorry with thirty other men, he received a tin of bully beef for the trip to Benghazi, eighteen hours driving through the day and night. According to Anderson it was 'bitterly

cold', though he described his guards for the journey as 'thorough gentlemen'.²⁸

The treatment prisoners received in places such as Derna, Benghazi and Tripoli varied almost on an individual basis. Private Bill Cousins, another 2/24th Battalion prisoner, spent several weeks recovering from wounds in a German hospital in Benghazi. He found that the medical staff treated him just as they treated their own wounded, as the Geneva Convention required. Cousins' greatest causes for complaint were the poor quality of food and the 'real Nazi type' of Germans, who were bullies.²⁹ Captain Conway, however, had a very different experience. His troubles began as soon as the Germans handed the Australian prisoners over to the Italians. In a newspaper interview given during his repatriation to Australia in 1945, Conway argued that the Italians never forgave the Australians for the 'rape of Benghazi'—referring to the 6th Division's occupation of Benghazi in early 1941 when there were numerous reports of drunkenness, theft and bullying. (Members of the 9th Division committed similar offences in Derna in March, and, before his own capture, General Neame chastised Morshead for these 'numerous disgraceful incidents'.)³⁰ Conway thought this poor Australian behaviour gave the Italians cause to carry out retribution, 'and we shared in some rough treatment'. On one occasion he witnessed an Australian sergeant tied to the floor and beaten by his guards.³¹

If not hospitalised with wounds or injuries, officers tended to be transported to Italy quickly. The other ranks, however, could be used as labour for work parties. Here some Australian prisoners carried out various acts of sabotage in an attempt to frustrate the enemy. Working on the docks in Tripoli, the 2/15th Battalion's Private Garven 'Snowy' Drew recalled how he and his mates dropped the occasional artillery shell into the sea and slipped odd handfuls of sand into petrol and oil cans when working in a petrol dump. Stealing food was popular, too.³² Sergeant Williams and Private Cousins described how they would attempt to spoil rations or leak petrol from 44-gallon drums and 'Jerry cans'. With acts such as this, Cousins later commented, 'we at least felt that we were still contributing towards defeating the enemy'.³³

Eventually, like other Australian prisoners, Conway and his men were sent to camps in Italy and ultimately, when Italy broke with

Germany and joined the Allies, to Germany. When being transported to Germany in August 1943, Conway and the Australian fighter pilot Squadron Leader Nicky Barr escaped by jumping from the train. Conway broke his shoulder blade but remained free for eighty-eight days before being recaptured.³⁴ Barr evaded capture and eventually made contact with Allied forces. Private Gaby, however, died on 4 June 1944 in Poland, where he been employed as forced labour in a mine. The Germans permitted his brother to attend his funeral.³⁵

After surrender: prisoners of the Allies

Australian and British troops were not the only ones to be captured in the desert war. When the Australian 6th Division first took Tobruk in January 1941, twenty-five thousand Italians were captured. In addition to the more than two thousand prisoners who remained in Tobruk from the earlier campaign, from late-April to mid-October a further 2100 prisoners—319 Germans, 1754 Italians and 27 Libyans—were captured. Most of the enemy soldiers were taken prisoner in the first three weeks of the siege, in the Easter battle and in the early fighting for the Salient. Some 190 Italian civilians were also interned and evacuated, as were some 3,000 Libyans.³⁶

The Italians captured in January were herded together into a prisoner-of-war cage, measuring 700 metres by 400 metres near the junction of the El Adem and Bardia roads. Conditions in the exposed, over-crowded enclosure, originally established by the Italians, were miserable. Initially there was no sanitation and it took hours to distribute the daily rations.³⁷ Another prisoner-of-war cage was established in town, closer to the harbour, and by mid-April most of the Italians were evacuated to Egypt by road and by sea.

With the start of the siege in April it became a high priority to evacuate enemy prisoners as quickly as the availability of shipping allowed. This was as much a practical consideration as a humanitarian observance of the Geneva Convention.³⁸ As long as prisoners remained within the fortress they were not only a security risk but also exposed to some of the same dangers as the garrison. Anywhere in Tobruk could be bombed by German and Italian aircraft while the harbour was within the scope of a long-range German gun. During an air raid on 8 June, the 2/4th Australian General Hospital's prisoners' ward was bombed, killing two Italians and wounding two

others. The prisoner-of-war cage was nearly hit in another raid three weeks later.³⁹

Prisoners were most at risk when being evacuated by sea to Alexandria or Mersa Matruh. Taken out on destroyers and smaller merchant ships, these vessels ran the gauntlet of attacks by enemy aircraft, U-boats and sea mines. The armed boarding vessel HMS *Rosaura*, for example, was carrying four hundred Italian prisoners from Tobruk when it hit a sea mine. The vessel sank in just four minutes, and seventy-eight men were lost, including fifty-nine prisoners.⁴⁰ A less hazardous route was to Alexandria where prisoners of war were sent to camps in Egypt before being moved on to Britain or other parts of the Commonwealth.

In the weeks before the Axis prisoners were evacuated, Australians had personal encounters with individual prisoners in a way that shaped their attitudes to the enemy, both positively and negatively. Mark Johnston has concluded that the attitude of front-line Australian soldiers in World War II to their enemy was often based on his fighting ability and conduct on the battlefield.⁴¹ At Tobruk, however, Private Jack Barber from the 2/17th Battalion was in the front line during the Easter battle. The next day he was at battalion headquarters when German prisoners, many of whom were wounded, were interrogated by members of the battalion's intelligence section. Observing how a couple of Germans spoke English and had no trouble communicating, he thought they 'didn't look any different from the curious Australians who were speaking to them'. He watched them 'sitting in the dust, knowing they must be in a state of shock ... Most of the prisoners seemed to be surprised that they were being treated so well.'⁴² Meanwhile Lance Sergeant Joe Sturdy, who was a member of the 2/4th Australian General Hospital in Tobruk, encountered Italian medical personnel, mainly from the cruiser *San Giorgio*, which lay wrecked in the harbour, working in the hospital as stretcher-bearers and orderlies. He concluded that the Italians were 'the most unwarlike race of people on God's earth'.⁴³ The 2/28th Battalion's Private Douglas Le-Fevre, however, formed an opposite view of Germans, after speaking in Tobruk to a big man who had apparently been an Olympic sprinter. Le-Fevre thought him 'the most arrogant man', who refused to speak to those below the rank of colonel.⁴⁴ Elsewhere, the Australian official war artist Ivor Hele was

impressed by a particular German prisoner's ability to sit motionless for two hours, seemingly oblivious to the flies moving over his face as Hele sketched his portrait. Hele thought it 'typical of the harsh, disciplined character of these men'.⁴⁵



A soldier of the Australian intelligence section inspects a group of German prisoners captured at Tobruk, 1941. (AWM 040579)

For reasons that remain unclear, Australian soldiers approached Italians and Germans quite differently. At times this difference seemed like mere pettiness. In early May, for example, German soldiers in the prisoner-of-war cage in Tobruk stopped receiving a free issue of tobacco and cigarettes with their rations. These goods, however, continued to be issued freely to Italian prisoners.⁴⁶

Prisoners as an intelligence source

As the siege dragged on, the patrolling war fought along Tobruk's perimeter became more intense. Each night parties of Australians went out into no man's land to carry out reconnaissance, raid the enemy's lines, and capture prisoners and documents. Documents

such as maps, reports or personal diaries were often vital sources of information on an enemy's order of battle, the distribution of their forces or their tactics. Translating this material, however, could be a slow process, and prisoners were a more immediate and important source of intelligence. In addition to statements made during questioning, the insignia on a soldier's uniform, which identified him as infantry, artillery, armoured or other corps, provided hints as to the enemy's plans and intentions. The presence of an elite unit in the front line, for example, could be associated with plans for an offensive.

The 9th Division's intelligence bulletins frequently included updates on troop movements and activities gleaned from prisoner interrogations and captured documents. Prisoner statements, such as the following from an Italian captured in late July, were circulated with the stated objective of providing an insight into the enemy's morale while also encouraging the garrison: 'We have all been forced into the war—we do not want to fight and hope that it will end soon. We are suffering like Hell from fever and general stomach troubles caused by swallowing sand ... we are waiting for you to tell us to put our hands up.'⁴⁷ Sentiments such as this confirmed Morshead's personal view that the Italians 'were just poor fighters—they showed no enthusiasm'.⁴⁸

Other prisoners provided valuable tactical information. Corporal Hans Kuhl, for example, was captured on the night of 27 July in the Salient by a patrol from the 2/43rd Battalion. Interrogated at battalion headquarters, he mentioned he had been wounded during the invasion of France in 1940 and freely discussed the organisation and make-up of his Motorised Infantry Regiment 115. He pointed out and provided map references for the location of the regiment's units, including those for his battalion and regimental headquarters. Kuhl even sketched the layout of his battalion's machine-guns, barbed-wire entanglements and entrenched positions. Although the information provided by the German corporal was treated with 'reserve' by the interrogating officer, this case demonstrates the potential significance of prisoners of war as sources of intelligence.⁴⁹ Three months later, Kuhl was sent to Australia (minus a watch, jewellery or any trinkets he may once have owned).⁵⁰

As the *Afrikakorps* intelligence officer Captain Hans-Otto Behrendt has pointed out, German soldiers were not instructed on

how to behave under interrogation. It was not customary in the German army to dwell on the possibility of being captured. To address this deficiency, the captured British pamphlet, *The Answer is Silence*, was translated and reproduced as a leaflet. It was issued to all Germans serving in Africa in mid-May 1942, to be kept alongside their paybooks. The leaflet instructed German soldiers that as a prisoner of war their duty was to limit their answers to only their name, rank, date of capture, residence and place of birth. They were to reply: 'I cannot answer that' to any other question.⁵¹

In late April 1941, a routine order was issued to Tobruk's garrison on the conduct expected of British soldiers, if taken prisoner. 'All ranks are reminded', the order began, that in the event of their capture 'they will seriously endanger the lives of their comrades if they give any information to the enemy other than their number, rank and name'. British personnel were not to give any parole and it was 'their duty to try and escape'.⁵² The duty to escape was a new requirement of prisoners of war. It had not been expected of British and dominion soldiers in World War I, and Aaron Pegram has shown that some Australian prisoners of the Germans in this conflict spoke quite freely and openly to their captors.⁵³ The obligation to escape had been formally articulated only in late 1939 with the creation of the British intelligence section MI, one of whose aims was to develop 'escape-mindedness' within the military.⁵⁴ This notion was not formalised in the Australian army until October 1941, with the publication of the pamphlet, *Instruction and Guide to All Officers and Men of the Army Regarding the Duties of Perform and Precautions to be Taken by Prisoners of War*. This explicitly stated that escaping was a prisoner's 'most important duty'. The pamphlet's real focus, however, was on preventing prisoners from disclosing any information beyond their name, rank and service number. It suggested techniques to evade answering questions during interrogation and how to behave when under surveillance. These techniques included talking in whispers, and singing and whistling as much as the prisoners liked.⁵⁵ Issued in late 1941, this pamphlet was too late to have any influence on those Australians serving in Tobruk or for those captured in Greece, Crete and Syria. In July 1941 an Australian from the 9th Divisional Cavalry Regiment captured in the Syrian campaign is known to have given an outline of the regiment's structure and

organisation to his Vichy French interrogators. The soldier also discussed the technical specifications of the regiment's Vickers light tanks.⁵⁶

So what information, if any, did Australian prisoners reveal to their captors at Tobruk? From translations of the Panzer Group Afrika's war diary and other German sources, it is clear that prisoners from Tobruk revealed that the Australian 18th Brigade was relieved in October the 9th Division was relieved by a British division. Prisoners also provided information on the types and quantities of weapons issued to Polish infantry sections in a specific area of Tobruk. Rommel was even aware of Tobruk's inner 'Green Line', the third and final defensive line.⁵⁷

Since much of the existing literature assessing the role of intelligence in the Middle East and the Mediterranean concentrates almost exclusively on signal intelligence,⁵⁸ it is unclear as to how much Australian or British prisoners of war contributed to Rommel's appreciation of Tobruk or if they influenced the desert war in any way. Rommel's most reliable intelligence sources were intercepted wireless and radio signals.⁵⁹ He also used to good effect three captured British 1:50000 scale colour maps of Tobruk showing the layout and organisation of the fortress's outer perimeter. Originally based on an Italian map, the British maps were printed in mid-January 1941 and must have been captured in April. Rommel used these maps to mark known positions of Australian infantry and British artillery units, and to direct his own attack on Ras el Madauar on 30 April and 1 May.⁶⁰ More work needs to be done by scholars in Italian and German archives before the relative significance of intelligence from prisoners of war, as opposed to other sources, can be assessed.

Conclusion

The experience of prisoners of war, both Allied and Axis, is an integral, if overlooked, element to the story of Tobruk. Australians captured during the withdrawal towards Tobruk and during the siege itself made up the bulk of casualties for the 9th Division in 1941. More of the division's men were lost as prisoners of war than were killed. This fact needs to inform future histories of the siege, adding a

new complexity to what has often been a simply heroic narrative. For the men taken prisoner themselves, there was some commonality of experience across their national groups. Each had a potential value as a source of intelligence for their enemy. Each was also subject to feelings of fear, disappointment and even shame at the moment of capture. Although the encounters between prisoners and their captors varied, and at times simply reinforced existing prejudices, they also had the potential to invoke a sense of shared humanity. In a war that is far better known for its unrestrained brutality and violation of international norms, the treatment of prisoners in the Tobruk theatre therefore merits greater attention.

Notes

- 1 Copy of message from Captain Conway, 3 August 41, 2/28th Battalion war diary, August appendices pt 1, AWM52, 8/3/28, AWM; Philip Masel, *The Second 28th: The Story of a Famous Battalion of the Ninth Australian Division* (3rd edn), 2/28th Battalion and 24 Anti-Tank Company Association, 2000, p. 49.
- 2 Barton Maughan, *Tobruk and El Alamein*, vol. III, *Australia in the War of 1939–1945*, Series 1—Army, AWM, Canberra, 1966, p. 401.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 159.
- 4 9th Division General Staff war diary, May 1941, appendix G19, AWM52, 1/5/20/8, AWM.
- 5 I.S.O. Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, vol. III, *British Fortunes Reach Their Lowest Ebb*, HMSO, London, 1960, p. 26; Maughan, *Tobruk and El Alamein*, pp. 401, 96.
- 6 Gavin Long, 'The fortress of Tobruk', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 November 1941.
- 7 David Walker, 'The writers' war', in Joan Beaumont (ed.), *Australia's War 1939–45*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1996, p. 139.
- 8 Frank Harrison, *Tobruk: The Great Siege Reassessed*, Brockhampton Press, London, 1996; Robert Lyman, *The Longest Siege: Tobruk—The Battle That Saved North Africa*, Macmillan, London, 2009; Peter FitzSimons, *Tobruk*, HarperCollins Publishers, Sydney, 2006.
- 9 As a point of comparison, 175 soldiers were captured in Syria, although all but one (who died in captivity) were returned to their units after the surrender of the Vichy French. In Greece, the 6th Division lost 2065 men captured followed by 3109 on Crete. See A.E. Field, 'Prisoners of the Germans and Italians' in Maughan, *Tobruk and El Alamein*, pp. 475–822; Peter Monteath, *POW: Australian Prisoners of War in Hitler's Reich*, Macmillan, Sydney, 2011; Ernest Brough, *Dangerous Days: A Digger's Great Escape*, HarperCollins, Sydney, 2009; Ashleigh Gilbertson, 'Great escapees? Experiences of captivity and escape among Australian prisoners of war in Europe during the Second World War', SVSS paper,

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