

AUSTRALIAN PRISONERS OF WAR IN KOREA

"PHIL" GREVILLE

Service Details

Brigadier Phillip J. Greville, CBE graduated from RMC in December 1944. He served with 2/8th Fd Coy and other RAE units in Wewak and Rabaul in 1945-46 before attending Sydney University. He served with [1RAR](#) as Assault Platoon Commander in 1951-2. He served in various RAE appointments until appointed Commander 1ALSG in Vietnam in August 1971. From December 1971 to March 1972 he was Acting Commander 1 ATF. His last appointment was Commander 4th Military District.

Historically the fate of the prisoner of war has been a function of his value in a financial, political or military sense. Earlier civilizations valued the prisoner for his labour and thus he became a slave. In the 1939-45 War the Japanese treated their prisoners as slaves, but unlike earlier civilizations, they did not value them and consequently starved and beat them to death. Since then Australians tend to measure the fate of prisoners of war against those of the 8th Australian Division and others who were captured in Singapore and the Netherlands East Indies.

There were twenty-nine Australians listed as prisoners of war in Korea, only one of whom died in captivity. The small numbers involved, the loss of only one in captivity, and the lack of criticism of their behaviour (in contrast to that of the US POWs) have all tended to keep hidden the nature of their experiences. As with other UN prisoners, the experiences of individual Australians depended upon the period in which they were captured, the circumstances of their capture, their rank and military role, whether they attempted to escape and the degree of overt opposition to their captors which chance or choice thrust upon them. Captured individually or in small groups, incarcerated haphazardly in numerous camps and annexes, their experiences are a series of individual sagas. They did share some common experiences, and these will be dealt with first.

During the nineteenth and twentieth Centuries, there were attempts made to establish the ways in which prisoners of war should be treated. Just prior to the outbreak of war on the Korean peninsula, the 1949 Geneva Conventions were signed by most nations, two notable exceptions being the United States of America and the Chinese Peoples Republic. On the outbreak of war, both belligerents - the United Nations Command and the North Koreans - declared their intention of abiding by those conventions. When the Chinese entered the war in October 1950 they also declared their intention to adhere to the Geneva Conventions. Four of the many clauses of those conventions are worth quoting to demonstrate the shortfall in performance over that stated intention as revealed in the stories of individual Australians which appear later:

Article 13 states: Prisoners of war must at all times be humanely treated. Likewise, prisoners of war must at all times be protected, particularly against acts of violence or intimidation and against insults and public curiosity.

Article 17 states: *No physical or mental torture, nor any other form of coercion, may be inflicted on prisoners of war to secure from them information of any kind whatever. Prisoners of war who refuse to answer may not be threatened, insulted, or exposed to unpleasant or disadvantageous treatment of any kind.*

Article 38 states: *While respecting the individual preferences of every prisoner, the Detaining Power shall encourage the practice of intellectual, educational, and recreational pursuits, sports and games amongst prisoners, and shall take the measures necessary to ensure the exercise thereof by providing them with adequate premises and necessary equipment.*

Article 71 states: *Prisoners of war shall be allowed to send and receive letters and cards. If the detaining power deems it necessary to limit the number of letters and cards sent by each prisoner of war, the said number shall not be less than two letters and four cards monthly.*

The first UN prisoners in Korea were captured by the North Koreans and their treatment was uneven and to no obvious pattern. At times the North Koreans summarily executed American and South Korean prisoners. It was a similar story with the Chinese at first. For example on 21 January 1951, Lt A.P. McDonald and the four members of his patrol were captured. After three weeks indoctrination, Lt McDonald, Cpl L. Buckland and Pte E.G. Light were released to make their way back to their own lines, while the other two, Cpl D.P. Buck and Pte T.H.J. Hollis remained prisoners.

When the Chinese entered North Korea, they took over the accommodation occupied by UN prisoners and the POWs were forced to march to other locations during a very severe winter. During this period many POWs died from malnutrition, dysentery, pneumonia, frostbite and neglected battle wounds. When talk of an armistice began in January, 1951 the Communists, appreciating that the UN prisoners they held would be politically useful in the Truce talks, set in train some means of coping with the prisoners in their custody. Permanent camps were constructed and those who showed some sympathy for the communists were sent to Camp 12. The Koreans set-up a *United States-British War Prisoners Peace Organization*; prisoners in death camps such 'The Caves' or 'The Bean Camp', were offered succour should they join. Once in Camp 12, they were threatened with return to the death camps if they failed to comply with the Koreans' wishes.

The Chinese, despite their declaration to adhere to the Geneva Conventions, declared all UN POWs war criminals and therefore not entitled to be treated in accordance with those conventions. On the other hand, should the UN prisoners confess to having been duped by their governments (the capitalist states) they would be treated in accordance with the Chinese 'Lenient Policy'. Chaplain S.J. Davies of the 1st Battalion of the Gloucestershire Regiment described in his book *In Spite of Dungeons*, how the Commandant of Camp 2 described the Lenient Policy:

We give you warm clothes for the Korean winter; we feed you; we give you medical attention and regular inoculations; we look after you; we have even been known to return sick prisoners to your lines; we give you religious freedom.

....there are a few of you who are real enemies of the peace-loving people, and who wish to organise subversive activities against the camp authorities, and disrupt the study program ... Our Lenient Policy is not limitless. It cannot be extended for ever to those who are deliberate reactionaries with a hostile attitude towards us.

Despite some individual experiences to the contrary, there was no real medical attention available to POWs in most of the camps, the only inoculations given were just prior to the prisoners going south for repatriation. Despite many POWs being sick and wounded, none of the doctor prisoners were permitted to practice. Chaplain Davies was jailed on charges of 'illegal religious activities and a hostile attitude' He was the only Chaplain to survive captivity.

Once truce talks began, there was a marked improvement in the treatment of UN POWs, especially in food and accommodation, although neither were lavish. The North Koreans were forced by the Chinese to yield the custody of all POWs. It was during this period July 1951 to May 1952 that the Chinese introduced compulsory indoctrination, in a drive to 're-educate' the prisoners and to enlist them in the 'peace campaign'. The Chinese made every effort to identify those who were sympathetic to them and those who were anti-Communist. The former they labeled "Progressives" and the latter "Reactionaries". In October 1951, officers were put into a camp of their own, Camp 2, and NCOs labelled as 'reactionaries' were separated from private soldiers and installed in penal camps (such as Branch 2 to Camp 2) where discipline was severe, rations harsh and punishment frequent. The Communists permitted mail to some POWs and not to others - some never getting a letter despite relatives keeping up a flow of mail throughout their captivity. Similarly, if POWs wrote in glowing terms of their captors and the treatment they were receiving, such letters would be delivered into the international postal system. In no way did the Chinese conform to the spirit of the Geneva Conventions.

The study program was not a voluntary scheme as envisaged in the Geneva Conventions. It was an attempt to re-educate the prisoners in Marxist philosophy as interpreted by Lenin, Stalin and Mao Tse-tung. All prisoners, not in solitary confinement, were forced to participate in lectures and protracted discussions. When the re-education program was at its height, lectures lasted for as long as eight hours per day.

Typical subjects were "The Democratic Reformation and Democratic Structure in North Korea and the Peaceful Reunification Policy of the North Korean Government" and "The Strength of the Democratic Camp, led by the great Soviet Union, is Incomparably Greater than that of the Imperialistic Camp, Led by the American Imperialists". The regulations of Camp 1 set the tone for the program "everybody must be serious and in orderly manner. The bad behaviours of disobedience, free action, making noises, joking and dozing are strictly forbidden".

Group discussions, a common technique in communist societies, were used which put great pressure upon prisoners to conform, because opinions contrary to the official ones were discussed until all conceded to the official view, no matter how long it took. Periodically, prisoners were examined on such illuminating issues as:

- Give the reasons for the ever-deepening crisis of world capitalism.
- Why does the Soviet Union head the world peace camp?

- Who is the unjust aggressor in Korea?
- Give Lenin's five contradictions within capitalism.

How successful was the re-education program? The fact that the Chinese gave it up themselves is stark evidence of its ineffectiveness. About 10 percent of UN POWs may have been affected by the re-education programme, many of those affected had been communist or socialist prior to capture. The majority of POWs (say 80 percent) were unaffected by the program although they did not violently oppose it as did the remaining 10 percent. The 80 percent used their vast reserves of humour and ridicule to oppose the program.

In the face of such stodgy stuff as Marxist propaganda, humour was the best antidote and British officers made use of schoolboy pranks to harass the captor. They called it Crazy Week. All the POWs acted as though they had gone mad for example at 0200 hrs one night, three hundred of them dashed to the toilet. By day some walked around the compound fondling imaginary females, riding imaginary bicycles, motor cycles or horses. One American officer clipped his hair into a mohawk warlock, did a war dance and demanded protection as an oppressed minority. Although the Chinese were not devoid of humour, they did not understand such craziness and it clearly worried them. In Branch 3 Camp 2, the prisoners noted the Communist world-wide program to save the Rosenbergs from electrocution; and drafted a sarcastic petition to save L (Love) P (Peace) Beria. Everyone signed it and it was presented to the Camp Commander but it was never referred to again. It certainly did not save Beria - nor was it meant to.

As the Truce Talks waxed and waned, the Chinese realized that they could make political capital out of the prisoners of war in their keeping, in addition to their ransom value during the negotiations. In fact the fate of the POWs on both sides became the last stumbling bloc before Truce was achieved. Initially, the Chinese hoped to convert UN prisoners to communism so that when released they would have friends in the Western world. The economic and cultural gap was far too great and very few were affected despite some alarm in the United States, which was generated by a US Army psychiatrist Major William Mayer. His findings were sensationalized by a journalist Eugene Kinkead, firstly in an article in the highly influential magazine, "The New Yorker", and later in a book, "In Every War But One". This line of thought was widely distributed through the Armed Services and the communist presses of the world.

The Communists waged a psychological war from 1951 to the Armistice to persuade the uncommitted nations that the US Government and its servants - the US Armed Services were evil. As General Mark Clark wrote, "The basic objective of all [their] propaganda was to plant the idea in men's minds that Americans were the new Nazis".

There are varying versions about how the Germ Warfare allegations originated, but they were quickly taken up by Communist propagandists world wide, but none more enthusiastically than the Australian journalist Wilfred Burchett. Captured airmen in particular were subjected to a pattern of intimidation, deprivation of basic physical needs, isolation, physical and mental torture - the pattern varied. Many prisoners became filthy, full of lice, festered wounds full of maggots, unshaven and without haircuts for months on end were faced with squads of trained interrogators, bullied, deprived of sleep and browbeaten. Of the 100 odd flyers subject to this treatment, 38 signed "confessions" believing them so silly that no one would believe them.

These confessions were "cleaned up" by Burchett and the British Communist journalist Alan Winnington and paraded before a Communist nominated Scientific Commission, the members of which stated their satisfaction with the evidence. The success of this program can be measured by the fact that, in the General Assembly of the United Nations, the Americans and others had to refute these claims, even though the Chinese would not give the International Committee of the Red Cross access to the evidence.

An Australian, Private Horace William Madden was captured at Kapyong. Like many other soldiers in 3 RAR at the time, Madden had served in the second world war and on BCOF. He was discharged in 1947 and worked as a nursing orderly in the Morrisett Mental Hospital. He re-enlisted on 19 August 1950 to join 3 RAR in Korea. He joined the battalion in November and volunteered to become a linesman in the Signals Platoon. During the battle of Kapyong he was with battalion headquarters when it was shelled and he suffered concussion. When the Signals Platoon was ordered to withdraw, Madden dropped behind, probably being stressed from his concussion. He was surrounded by Chinese and forced to surrender.

Madden was slightly built and was known as "Slim", he nonetheless recovered fairly quickly and demonstrated his fitness by helping other prisoners as they marched to the rear. He shared the little food he had with others but refused to cooperate with his captors and was beaten by them. Together with two other Australians captured at Kapyong, Madden eventually arrived at the "Bean Camp", which his mate Bob Parker described in these terms:

Bean Camp was a mining town. Quite a lot of POW here. All sorts. (Slim pretty crook now). Met the other Australian. What a sight! Great big monstrous red beard. Don Buck had been captured prior to Kapyong, captured with three had been released. They kept him and Tom Hollis as they had not been very good boys. Tom had separated from Don some where along the line.

My sunstroke and dysentery etc playing up bad now. Meeting Don has brightened me up a bit; he is quite a bloke. There are some blokes here. One a Turk, has been shot through the testicles. No treatment but he doesn't complain. Also a Belgian, he has been shot in the neck and a Korean doctor sort of fixed him up a bit by clamping a medical clamp on the artery. He was staggering around with the clamp sticking out his neck. Eventually one day I heard he died. Then there was the young American, He has both legs cut off. Had frost bite and someone cut them off with an old saw blade. Didn't do too good a job. Bones still showing. I feel a bit of a fake with my paltry ailments. Am learning a lot and I believe most others are as well. One mustn't cry or whinge. Eat anything no matter what. Laugh at things not funny etc.. Like the other yank here. Been shot in the jaw and has a .45 bullet stuck between his upper and lower jaws, with the result he can't close his mouth - to talk or eat. Very funny!

Madden was by this time so ill he could not join the other Australians as they marched off to Camp 5. In late October all the sick and wounded prisoners were collected at Kandong and forced to march to Pingechong-Ni a distance of 250 km. Madden collapsed and had to be moved by cart as winter closed in. He survived this journey but died some days later of malnutrition.

'Slim' Madden was awarded posthumously the George Cross, part of the citation reads:

Testimonials have been provided by officers and men from many units of the Commonwealth and allied forces which showed that the heroism he displayed was outstanding. Despite repeated beatings and many other forms of ill-treatment inflicted because of his defiance to his captors.....although becoming progressively weaker, he remained undaunted in his resistance. He would in no way cooperate with the enemy. This gallant soldier's outstanding heroism was an inspiration to all his fellow prisoners.

Corporal Buck, captured earlier was now at the "Bean Camp" and together with the other Australians, Pte R. ("Bob") Parker and Pte. K.W. ("Mo") Gwyther were marched off to Camp 5. As they moved northwards their minds turned to escape. Don Buck and Bob Parker and a Frenchman made their plans while Keith Gwyther and an American made theirs. The latter dropped out of the column somewhere to the east of Pyongyang on the seventh day of the march. They moved north towards the Taedong River. the course of which they followed for some distance until they found a small boat. They set off for the far shore, but unknowingly struck an island and having cast off the boat, were then forced to swim to the far shore.

They headed westward for the coast, moving along the flats by night and aiming to reach a high feature where they could lie up during the day and observe the route for the following night's march. They were detected by an alert Chinese sentry, recaptured and gaoled along with delinquents from the Chinese Peoples Volunteers. After a month in that gaol they were transferred to Camp 5, where they met Buck and Parker, as well as Tom Hollis.

In the meantime Don Buck and Bob Parker had dropped out of the march on the second night and set off for the coast. They had scrounged a few vegetables and some bran, and with this managed to keep going for eleven days, when they took refuge in a hut occupied by an aged Korean. He professed to dislike the Chinese and gave them every assistance, but they decided to move off. Not long afterwards they were intercepted by a North Korean patrol and after a brief but energetic pursuit, they were overtaken and forced to surrender. The POWs were bound tightly with wire and subjected to many indignities. Chinese troops "rescued" them, untying them and taking them to Camp 12 via Camp 9. Surprisingly they were not punished but eventually were moved to their original destination, Camp 5.

On 25 June 1952, all four Australians were involved in a break-out of twenty four UN POWs. It was organised by Corporal Buck. The parties escaped in small parties, intending to converge on a selected rendezvous. Keith Gwyther using civilian skills magnetized some wire for compasses. Unfortunately one UN POW withdrew at the last moment and informed the Chinese of the intended break-out. the Chinese were waiting at the rendezvous, capturing all of the escapees. The foiled escapees were punished by being gaoled in the "sweat box", a small cell 4 metres square and 2.5 metres high, with small windows set high on three sides and a heavy door with a grill on the fourth side.

Guards, following the example of the Provost Marshal of Pyongyang, would push a pencil through the grill and force one POWs to hold it between his teeth. The sentry, occasionally and suddenly, would knock the outer end sideways, causing split mouth and loss of teeth. Alternatively, the stick was driven quickly inwards to damage mouth or throat. Because of his

part in organizing the escape Corporal Buck was taken into the Guard House and beaten frequently over a period of two weeks.

The four Australians Cpl Donald Buck and Pte Tom Hollis not repatriated in January 1951, together with two Australians captured at the Battle of Kapyong on 24 April 1951, were eventually released during the main POW exchange ("Big Switch") in August 1953. All four were mentioned in dispatches for their uncompromising conduct during their long period of captivity. The Officer Commanding the British Repatriated Prisoner of War Interrogation Unit made this observation of these four determined Australians:

As long as men such as these are to be found, the British Commonwealth has nothing to fear from any foe. Their indomitable courage in the face of terrible hardships, and their steadfast refusal to give in to their captors, even when threatened with death, are an inspiring example of loyalty and devotion to duty.

On 23 April 1953, in an Operation known as 'Little Switch, some sick and wounded prisoners of both sides were exchanged including five Australians - Ptes Brown, Davis, Davoren, Donnelly and Mackay. They had all been captured during operations in January 1953 and severely wounded. Eric Donnelly's experiences are typical.

Editors' Note

Two Army officers were captured;

. Captain P.J. Greville of 1 RAR was captured together with Pte Denis Condon on the evening of 22/23 August 1952. He was kept in solitary confinement under severe interrogation for 90 days, first at a field interrogation centre where he was kept in a packing case, into which was eventually packed a South Korean soldier and a civilian. His next incarceration was at the "Caves" where he was put in a small lean-to attached to the side of a Korean House. A number of other POWs under extensive interrogation were kept in similar accommodation. He was forced to sit to attention all day unless under interrogation. He was eventually taken north to Annex 3 to Camp 2, until he was moved south to Kaesong for repatriation on 1 September 1953.

The other officer was Lieutenant Charlie Yacopetti a platoon commander of 3 RAR. On 25 May 1953, he was leading a patrol near Hill 355 when it was attacked by two groups of Chinese. Yacopetti was hit in both arms and legs, his right ankle being badly shattered. He lost consciousness and was captured. For about a month he was held in the front line being interrogated up to eight hours a day. He was promised medical treatment provided he gave information. He was eventually sent north to the Caves where he had his wounds dressed for the first time. During a UN air attack on the Caves, Yacopetti, who could only crawl, assisted by a British NCO, dragged some UN POWs, who had been wounded in the raid, to safety. When the Armistice was announced by the camp authorities, Yacopetti gave orders that the prisoners were not to join in the festivities arranged by the Chinese. He agreed that each prisoner could accept a glass of 'peace wine'. When each POW had some wine he was assisted to his feet and he proposed a toast to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth. Irrespective of nationality, all the POWs sprung to their feet and joined in the toast. Charles Yacopetti was awarded a Military Cross for

his bravery leading the patrol on which he was captured, and was mentioned in dispatches for his leadership as a prisoner.

We should not forget our RAAF comrades, six of whom were captured, Flight Lieutenants G.R. Harvey, J.T. Hannan and RD Guthrie, Flying Officers V. Drummond and B.L. Thomson and Sgt. D.W. Pinkstone. Gordon Harvey was the first Australian to become a prisoner in Korea being captured two days before Lt A.P. McDonald and his party. Harvey escaped with two Americans from Pyongyang, but they were apprehended some days later. Ron Guthrie escaped with Captain Tony Farrah-Hockley, the adjutant of the Gloucesters. Their story is well told in Farrah-Hockley's "The Edge of the Sword".

All the Australian prisoners who were exchanged in Operation Big Switch had kept themselves fit and mentally alert. All had lost weight, but not their self-respect. As the official report on their behaviour stated:

Credit must be given to all Australian Prisoners of War for their conduct and their very sensible attitude to their imprisonment.

Their experiences and those of other UN Command prisoners gave fair warning of the way future prisoners of Communist countries could be treated regardless of the provisions of International Law.

The Australian POWs in Korea missed a great portion of the active service of their units but whilst in captivity fought battles of their own with great honour and individual courage unsurpassed by any unit operation. Not many of us have experienced the terror and pain of interrogation whilst wounded and separated from our comrades. The Battle honour "POW Korea" is carried by the Regiment not on the Colours but in the hearts of our serving soldiers.

(SOURCE: <http://koreanwaronline.com/history/Ron/Reports/chapter24.htm>)