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Halfway Home – The Rehabilitation of New Zealand Second World War POWs in Britain

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ABSTRACT

While suffering through monotony and deprivations, New Zealand Second World War POWs mentally escaped their confines by imagining their eventual return home. They envisaged returning to a world free from the woes of captivity and war. This paper examines their rehabilitation in Britain. While Britain was not New Zealand, the prisoners expected it to conform to their idealised version of home. However, this paper argues prisoners experienced difficulties during their rehabilitation, and they were destabilised when confronted with the continued presence of the war and captivity.

I suppose we will spend some weeks in England and then the boat for New Zealand. Have a pretty good time ahead I think, but then I've waited four years for it and that's a mighty long time.¹

During their monotonous captivity prisoners maintained hope for the future by envisaging what awaited them after their liberation. They dreamed of a life without restrictions, ample food and a return home. This paper examines the experiences of New Zealand Second World War prisoners of war (POWs) as they rehabilitated in Britain in 1945. Prior histories have neglected this period, but this study shows the men's return to a familiar environment was an important, albeit challenging, step in their recuperation. In the opening quotation, Private Stuart Wilson wrote to his family back in New Zealand letting them know he had been liberated from his captivity and noting his eagerness to have an enjoyable rehabilitation experience. While optimistic,

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¹Auckland War Memorial Museum Library (AWMML), MS-99-93, letter collection, Stuart Wilson, undated letter.

a sense of doubt lingered in his message. After years of living a restricted existence, it was almost as if he would not allow himself to believe his ordeal was nearing its end.

For the most part the prisoners featured in this study were captured early in the war and spent several years in POW camps in Italy and Germany. This paper uses a variety of sources, including diaries, letters and memoirs, to reveal the men's imagined version of home which helped them to endure their captivity and the reality they encountered when they were rehabilitating in Britain. Each of these sources has limitations, but each reinforces the men's desire to document their experience. While diaries and letters are often thought to be more "truthful" accounts because they were written closer in time to the event, the availability of these sources is limited because many were either destroyed or lost in captivity. Sergeant Pilot Jack Hardie recalled in his memoir that during their final days of captivity, 'Most of the prisoners found they were overloaded and had thrown away anything they thought was not essential. Books were the first to go and there were many handwritten journals of the owners' and others' experiences thrown away.'² Moreover, it was not uncommon for diaries which survived to have few details of the POWs' rehabilitation. This part of the men's experience features more prominently in their memoirs.

It was not until post-captivity that prisoners had time to contemplate their transitions from soldiers to captives to free men and turn their experiences into coherent accounts. These reflections were affected by memory and selectivity, but this does not disqualify their reliability as historical sources. Former soldier and literary scholar Samuel Hynes argues that the limitations of memoirs 'can be resolved if we think of the truth of war experience as being the sum of witnesses, the collective tale that soldiers tell.'³ Although this narrative remains incomplete, it is the closest history can come to describing 'the reality of what men did, and what was done to them, in this war or that one.'⁴ This paper briefly outlines the official procedures that were put in place to accommodate New Zealand POWs, but it agrees with Hynes' perspective by emphasising the men's individual experiences. The prisoners described a personal journey to rejoin the world beyond the wire, with many of these stories sharing common elements of anticipation, relief, and a sense of disillusionment when their experience differed from what they had imagined. In a similar way to how POWs were destabilised by their initial transition into captivity, this article highlights the difficulties they encountered as they adjusted to life outside the wire. Some of these complications were related to the men's continual fear that the public may have viewed

²Jack Hardie, *From Timaru to Stalag VIII B: A Kiwi Airman's Wartime Story* (Wellington: Steele Roberts Ltd, 2009), p. 118.

³Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (London: Pimlico, 1998), p. 25.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 25.

their imprisonment as shameful and this feeling of inadequacy reappeared when men were rejected for employment assistance or when their post-captivity experiences differed from their expectations.

The POW Experience of New Zealanders and Dreaming of Home

During the Second World War more than 9000 New Zealanders were POWs. The majority of these men were captured as they tried to halt the Axis advances during the defence of Greece, Crete and North Africa in 1941-42.⁵ The men's capture triggered a destabilising transition from soldier to captive. Historian David Rolf and sociologist Walter Lunden argue that few soldiers thought about the possibility of being captured.⁶ Padre John Ledgerwood summarised the feelings of many New Zealand POWs when he recalled his capture, noting that 'the suddenness of the physical change from active soldiering to prisoner of war life, left the mind in a torpor as to render one temporarily incapable of reminiscences [sic].'⁷ Sergeant Bruce Crowley was more disparaging in his recollections of his capture. Crowley remembered that his surrender at Greece was, 'A disgrace. We were prepared to fight and die – not to be captured.'⁸ The men's imprisonment had challenged their identities as soldiers. The transition from soldiers to captives was a seminal moment in their POW experience, where they left behind the familiarity of their expected wartime roles and entered a world of uncertainty. The strangeness the men encountered during this initial phase was amplified by the poor treatment from their guards, particularly the Italians. Corporal John Broad recalled that if he detailed the conditions of the transit camp at Benghazi, Libya, 'the world will be shocked and horrified at the treatment meted out by the Italians.'⁹ Similarly, Crowley remembered that, in his experience, the Italians were disrespectful toward the prisoners, and they often tried to dehumanise them. Crowley noted that when he was marched to his transit camp at Corinth, 'these bastards were lining up and spitting on us.'¹⁰ Although

⁵In Greece 1856 New Zealanders were taken prisoner, similar to the 2180 men taken on Crete. The campaigns in North Africa resulted in 3861 POWs. W. Wynne Mason, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-1945: Prisoners of War* (Wellington: War History Branch, Dept. of Internal Affairs, 1954), pp. v-viii.

⁶David Rolf, *Prisoners of the Reich: Germany's Captives 1939-1945* (London: Leo Cooper Ltd, 1988), p. 5; Walter A. Lunden, 'Captivity Psychoses among Prisoners of War', *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 39, 6 (1949), p. 725.

⁷Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand (ATL), MS-Papers-5644-3, John Ledgerwood, *Stalag XVIII A Wolfsburg*, p. 1.

⁸Julia Millen, *North to Apricots: The escape stories of Sergeant Bruce Crowley DCM, New Zealand Prisoner of War, Greece & Germany 1941-1943* (Wellington: Bocoman Ltd, 2012), p. xiii.

⁹John Evelyn Broad, *Poor People Poor Us* (Wellington: H. Tombs, 1945), p. 34.

¹⁰Millen, *North to Apricots*, p. xiv.

some New Zealand POWs also felt hatred toward their German guards, others expressed a begrudging respect, with Captain John Borrie recalling even though the Germans spoke in a '...strange guttural language. They seemed human, intelligent fellows, who could even smile.'¹¹ Nevertheless, the prevailing feeling in most men's accounts was that their treatment was adequate, with most complaints centred on the lack of food or the guards' incompetence. Outside of the occasional rough treatment, few men described acts of brutality.

When they were transferred to more permanent facilities in Italy and Germany the men attempted to familiarise the camps into more homely environments. These efforts often led to the introduction of leisure activities such as sport, theatre and educational projects, which could briefly lessen feelings of isolation and monotony.¹² However, not all prisoners could freely participate in these activities because non-officers were mandated by the Geneva Convention to be available for work placements.¹³ There were restrictions on the type of work prisoners could be assigned, but Simon MacKenzie notes that by 1941 these rules were often broken as POWs were employed in war related activities.¹⁴ In a similar way to how the men were destabilised by their failure to live up to their expected wartime roles, being forced to work for the enemy added an additional layer of strangeness to the POW experience. Even though they had little choice in complying with these regulations, POWs were aware that their efforts represented a moral dilemma. When Private Bill Soundy was assigned to a work placement at Stalag VIII B, Silesia, he reaffirmed a common belief that, 'most of us took the view that however innocent the occupation, we were releasing one civilian to work for their war effort, and that was not what we had joined the services for.'¹⁵

Even though individuals had differing experiences throughout their prolonged captivity, some POWs engaged in escapism by constructing an idealised version of home. In her study of British POWs, Clare Makepeace argues that these 'fantasies allowed men to

¹¹John Borrie, *Despite Captivity: A Doctor's Life as Prisoner of War* (New Zealand: Whitcoulls Limited, 1975), p. 12.

¹²Pamela Cohen, 'Behind Barbed Wire: Sport and Australian Prisoners of War', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 23, 1 (November, 2006), pp. 63-86; David Rolf, 'The education of British prisoners of war in German captivity, 1939-1945', *History of Education*, 18, 3 (1989), pp. 257-265.

¹³Peter Monteath, 'Australian POW labour in Germany in World War II', *Labour History*, 103 (2012), pp. 83-102.

¹⁴S.P. MacKenzie, 'The Treatment of Prisoners of War in World War II', *The Journal of Modern History*, 66 (1994), p. 499.

¹⁵Bill Soundy, *Sounding Off* (Whangarei: Aqualine Promotions Ltd, 1997), p. 41.

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return home to their loved ones of civvy street.¹⁶ This idyllic world not only represented hope for the future, but also a mental space where the men retreated from their oppressive surroundings. In this sense, home was more than a destination, it was a concept that was constantly being shaped by the men's experiences. Private Jack Gallichan confided in his diary how the notion of home helped him endure his captivity:

I dreamed of home last night. I do so quite a lot. I think of all those great things which await my return when this long, long trail has ceased winding. The hard job is to keep one's feet on that trail. I'll do so if it kills me.¹⁷

Gallichan was captured in North Africa in 1942, but by the time he wrote this diary entry in 1944 he was working as a coal miner and blacksmith in Poland. The grimness and monotony of this assignment could be overwhelming, with Gallichan vividly describing that, 'On and on we went, and I felt like a lost soul, dumbly, and faithfully, following a gloating guide into the depths of hell.'¹⁸ However, the prospect of returning to a familiar place was the light at the end of the tunnel. When he received news of the Normandy landings, he noted that, 'There is gladness now in the camp, and relief. We go to work with hearts that are much lighter. Our day is coming.'¹⁹ Home was a place where the deprivations of captivity would be forgotten. The strangeness he had endured would be replaced by array of enjoyable experiences.

Although recalling memories from home provided comfort for some POWs, others found imagining life back in New Zealand upsetting. Sergeant Pilot Jack Rae recalled in his memoir how he had difficulty forgetting he was a prisoner, noting that:

Dreaming of my beautiful Piha surf beach back in NZ was easy but drifting immediately off to sleep just didn't work for me. I remained acutely aware that I was lying on a very hard uncomfortable bunk, in a depressing wooden hut surrounded outside by menacing barbed wire.²⁰

Rae's memories of home reinforced what he was missing in captivity. The contrast between the peaceful beach and the menacing wire emphasised that his camp lacked

¹⁶Clare Makepeace, *Captives of War: British Prisoners of War in Europe in the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 136.

¹⁷ATL, MS-Papers-8910-01, Jack Gallichan, *Barbed Wire Days*, p. 354.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 311.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 356.

²⁰Jack Rae, *Kiwi Spitfire Ace: A Gripping World War II Story of Action, Captivity and Freedom* (London: Grub Street, 2001), p. 130.

the security of home. He idealised a return to a world of comfort; one where the hardness and bleakness of captivity were replaced by softness and beauty.

Reminders of home were not limited to mental fantasies, Captain Bruce Robertson remembered how small events in camp life provoked memories of home:

We have a regular issue of beer each day, if you could call it beer. Practically non-intoxicant, but it has however a faint suggestion of that glorious golden beverage I faintly remember consuming in the dim past. Maybe in the distant future I may again make its glorious acquaintance.²¹

While not available to all POWs, some were able to drink beer and enjoy a previously satisfying experience. Although the camp brew was inferior to those Robertson remembered back home, he was struck by the nostalgia this beverage generated. Drinking beer was a 'faint' reminder that helped him overcome his distance from home and awaken memories of the past. It was a small act of civility that encouraged him to anticipate his return to New Zealand. Similarly, Private Sydney Burns wrote to his family, wishing them a happy holiday. He stated, 'I hope you all have a happy one. Have a couple of quick ones on me just for old times, I'll have mine soon, I hope.'²²

The return to the familiar was a constant theme throughout the men's POW experience. This was magnified by the strangeness prisoners encountered during their last months of captivity in 1944-45. Most POWs were forced to walk westward from their prison camps to avoid being overrun by Soviet forces.²³ These marches were physically and mentally gruelling, but they represented the start of a journey that culminated in their eventual freedom. Gallichan noted his mentality on the march, 'We just have to keep our spirits up and realise that each step along these frozen highways is a step nearer home, and peace, and comfort, and the smell of good cooking.'²⁴ Gallichan's statement was brief, but it signified the desire to return to the warmth of civility. His simple idealised vision of home helped carry him through his darkest days of captivity. Like other POWs, Gallichan did not know what awaited him post-captivity, but he hoped he was returning to the world as he had remembered it.

²¹Bruce Robertson, *For the Duration: 2NZEF Officer Bruce Robertson on Active Duty and 'In the Bag'*, ed. by Rosanne Robertson (Wellington: Ngaio Press, 2010), p. 167.

²²ATL, MS-Papers-7156-1, letter collection, Sydney Burns, 6 December 1942.

²³John Nichol and Tony Rennell, *The Last Escape: The Untold Story of Allied Prisoners of War in Germany 1944-45* (London: Viking, 2002).

²⁴AWMML, MS 1145, Jack Gallichan, *From the Tunnel to the Light: Diary of a New Zealand Prisoner-of-War*, p. 17.

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While New Zealand was the men's desired destination, their longing for home, as described by Gallichan, included aspects of civility which were not limited to one place. Philosopher Alfred Schuetz argues for a broader definition of home, because a sense of belonging could be found beyond a fixed area. It was a feeling which could be felt through familiar elements such as language and food.²⁵ Likewise, philosopher Aviezer Tucker contended that 'Home is where we could or can be ourselves, feel at ease, secure, able to express ourselves freely and fully, whether we have actually been there or not.'²⁶ These arguments suggest that rather than purely a physical place, the feeling of being at home, or belonging, could be conjured through the presence of comforting elements. This belief was consistent with POWs' imagined version of home, the familiarity of their pre-war lives replaced the strangeness of captivity. In a poem written in captivity, Sergeant E.H. Everton noted that when dreaming of home, 'You think of love and laughter in an atmosphere more pleasant. You tread again the ways of life you know but took for granted.'²⁷ Everton described home in modest terms. He did not harbour grand ambitions, he simply wanted to return to a place where he was loved. After the restrictions and unpredictability of captivity, he envisaged his liberation would offer freedom and stability.

Arriving in Britain and Rehabilitation Efforts

In July 1942 the War Office set up a committee to plan for the rehabilitation of Commonwealth POWs.²⁸ The processes for their treatment were drawn from the experiences of those who had worked with previous repatriation drafts of sick and wounded prisoners, as well as information gathered from POWs who had successfully escaped.²⁹ Although there were initial discussions that New Zealand POWs should be repatriated through Italy and Egypt, it was later deemed more practical to evacuate them to Britain.³⁰ Many New Zealand POWs found this decision to be ideal, because they hoped to 'complete studies and examinations in England, to gain special knowledge or experience in some branch of their occupation, to see parents and other near relatives, or to rejoin their wives and children temporarily resident there.'³¹

When the war in Europe ended, the prisoners were transferred to transport hubs, where they were moved to Britain. While the men had anticipated returning to a

²⁵ Alfred Schuetz, 'The Homecomer', *American Journal of Sociology*, 50, 5 (March, 1945), p. 370.

²⁶ Aviezer Tucker, 'In Search of Home', *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 11, 2 (1994), p. 184.

²⁷ ATL, MS-Papers-10082-06, E.H. Everton, poem collection, 'Dreams'.

²⁸ Mason, *Official History*, p. 492.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 493-94.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 493.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 493

familiar environment, their initial thoughts were filled with trepidation, partly because some prisoners still struggled with their identity as defeated soldiers. Upon arriving in Britain, some POWs expressed their surprise that people were welcoming to them. The rigidity of captivity and the infrequency of contact with the outside world dulled the men's expectations. Hardie recalled, 'We still felt guilty about being prisoners and were amazed to find all these people were on hand to welcome us back to Blighty.'³² Staff Sergeant John Hobbs noted that it was the small touches of hospitality that made the biggest impression. He stated that when he arrived at Wing aerodrome, 'As each man stepped off the plane, he was met by a smiling W.A.A.F. girl who took him by the arm, and an R.A.F. boy who carried the baggage and who took the other arm.'³³ To Hobbs' surprise, the men were being welcomed back as heroes. Similarly, Warrant Officer Galbraith Hyde remembered his reception at Wing aerodrome:

The whole thing was emotionally terribly hard to handle. People being nice to you! It broke me up much more than anything I had experienced in the last few years.... After this off to a clean barrack, a bed with sheets! First I'd seen for years. A shower with a shower stall to myself, take my own time and a clean dry towel, heaven is made of such things!³⁴

Hyde found it difficult to understand why he was being treated kindly. It was common for prisoners to form strong bonds with one another, but these relationships were often limited to smaller combines which were based on economic and emotional reciprocation. Hyde was confused that those running the rehabilitation centres made him feel comfortable without expecting anything in return. Moreover, after years of living in filth, to be able to shower at one's leisure was overwhelming. Hyde's insistence that his new environment was clean alluded to the chance for a fresh start. This was a place he could cleanse himself of his unpleasant captivity.

Like Hyde, Gallichan was overwhelmed by the reception his group received at Westcott aerodrome. He noted that:

We saw the big sign 'Welcome to Westcott' and we felt the kindness, the friendliness and the willingness to help us of the Waafs who came to take us inside. They made a great fuss of us.³⁵

Furthermore, Gallichan recalled:

³²Hardie, *From Timaru to Stalag VIII B*, p. 136.

³³ATL, MS-Papers-3958-2, John Hobbs, diary, p. 139.

³⁴ATL, MS-Papers-5290, Galbraith Hyde, *The Personal Account of One Man's War 1939-1945*, p. 100.

³⁵Gallichan, *From the Tunnel to the Light*, p. 136.

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Inside the hanger we put our packs in a safe place and were then deloused in a room partitioned off for that purpose, given a packet of cigarettes each and sat down at tables which offered us tea, fruit-cake, biscuits and white-bread sandwiches, the things we had dreamed of while lying in the damp straw of the barns on our march. 'I've never felt so bloody welcome in all my life', said one fellow. And that was how we all felt.³⁶

It was common for POWs to feel pessimistic about how they would be received upon their return home. The men were aware that captivity had a connotation of shame and failure. However, the reception they received put some of those concerns at ease. Even though the New Zealanders were not home, they often remarked how welcome they felt. Gallichan mentioned that inside the hanger they were 'offered' tea and food. This choice was significant. In captivity, the men had limited food options, but at the rehabilitation centres they had the freedom to choose what they consumed.

Food played an important role in the men's expectations for their return home. In captivity they filled their scrapbooks with images of food and conceived their ideal menus, with accompanying recipes. Private Arthur Coe remembered the meal his group was given at his camp at Aylesbury:

The English cooks at Alesbury [sic] prepared a beautiful roast meal and sweets with cream because they heard we were going on leave next day. I'm sure they used their own precious food coupons. I'm equally sure, these generous souls were disappointed to see how little we were able to eat. We heaped them with praise and thanks for their kindness to us and hoped they could understand.³⁷

Coe noted two important aspects of his meal at Aylesbury. First, he suggested the cooks had sacrificed their own food coupons to put on the feast. In captivity, food was scarce and the perception that someone was getting more than their fair share sometimes led to disputes. It was strange to have someone give something without any desire for anything in return. Second, after dreaming of what they would eat when the limitations of captivity dissipated, they were disappointed that they were unable to consume everything that was offered to them. Still, the gesture of a well-cooked meal represented a warmth the POWs had not experienced for some time.

³⁶Ibid., p. 136.

³⁷Kippenberger Military Archive, Waiouru, New Zealand (KMA), 2005.291, Arthur Coe, unpublished ms, p. 44.



Figure 1. Locals provide hospitality to New Zealand POWs in Kent.³⁸

Preparations for how to accommodate approximately 8000 New Zealand POWs in Britain began in earnest in March 1944.³⁹ However, procuring sufficient housing proved difficult. In New Zealand's official war history, W. Wynne Mason states that the headquarters for repatriation was meant to be at Dover, but had to be changed at the last moment to accommodate a leave centre for other British troops.⁴⁰ Despite these setbacks, the fifty properties requisitioned at Folkestone, Margate and Westgate 'had far greater possibilities for the creation of the type of rest centre visualised for repatriates.'⁴¹ Many of these buildings were seaside hotels prior to the war, which

³⁸Imperial War Museums (IWM), D 24530, photograph, New Zealand Repatriates Arrive in England: Everyday Life for Repatriated POWs in Margate, Kent, England, UK, April 1945.

³⁹Mason, *Official History*, p. 495.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 498.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 498.

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suggested these camps prioritised the men's rehabilitation as civilians rather than military reintegration.⁴² Hobbs noted in his diary that he was grateful these measures were employed at his camp at Margate:

We were told that we would be disciplined as little as possible, and that we were being regarded as civilians awaiting transport home when we would be discharged from the forces after three months leave. Everything possible was done to make us feel at home, to make us forget what we had been through, to bring us back to full health and strength, and to give us a good time by arranging hospitality in private homes.⁴³

Hobbs suggests the staff were careful not to turn the rehabilitation centre into a different sort of prison. The men were treated as civilians, not captives, or even soldiers. This emphasis on forgetting their captivity was significant, because Hobbs' statement was underlined by a sense of brokenness. The need to bring them 'back to full health and strength' implied their experience had not only impacted their physically, but also it had left its mark mentally. Figure 1 shows New Zealand POWs enjoying the hospitality of a local family in Kent. As Hobbs indicates, these encounters provided a chance to fully immerse oneself in the civilian world again.



Figure 2. New Zealand POWs writing letters home at Margate.⁴⁴

⁴²Ibid., p. 498.

⁴³Hobbs, diary, p. 142.

⁴⁴IWM, D 24522, photograph, New Zealand Repatriates Arrive in England: Everyday Life for Repatriated POWs in Margate, Kent, England, UK, April 1945.

An important part of the men's rehabilitation was reconnecting with their loved ones back in New Zealand. During their captivity the men had intermittent correspondence with home. Makepeace argues letter writing was one of 'few ways in which P.O.W.s could achieve a sense of continuity between their past and future existences.'⁴⁵ Moreover, Makepeace contends that, 'It is also possible that the efforts made by prisoners to remain part of their civilian worlds were driven by fears of being usurped or forgotten.'⁴⁶ The desire for positive affirmation did not disappear once the prisoners were in Britain. If anything, stable communication meant they had more opportunities to reassert their presence in their families' lives. Gunner Bruce Brier wrote to his sister to let her know that he was doing well:

Well Merle, I've done it, I'm back in Blighty after four years and what a joy it is to be among people again who speak your own lingo, and no queue up for spud soup and black bread.⁴⁷

After the strangeness of captivity, Brier was overjoyed to be back in familiar surroundings. He was thankful that his diet no longer consisted of food he associated with his captivity. Brier also felt the need to reassure his sister that he was among people with a shared heritage. The English language was a comforting factor that made him feel welcome and safe. Geographer Marco Antonsich supports the concept that language affected a person's sense of belonging. He argues that 'language can be felt as an element of intimacy, which resonates with one's auto-biographical sphere and, as such, contributes to generate a sense of feeling "at home"'.⁴⁸ Even though Brier's message was short, being able to freely contact one's loved ones was marvellous. Similarly, Hobbs noted that when he re-established these familial connections, 'Instead of being on the outer edge of civilisation, it was just like having one foot on the doorstep of home.'⁴⁹

After the men had settled into their lodgings there were activities available to them before they were shipped home. In addition to allocating each man 28 days leave and a daily allowance, the Education and Rehabilitation Service (ERS) was tasked with

⁴⁵Clare Makepeace, 'Living Beyond the Barbed Wire: The Familial Ties of British Prisoners of War held in Europe during the Second World War', *Historical Research*, 86, 231 (2013), p. 160.

⁴⁶Makepeace, 'Living Beyond the Barbed Wire', p. 176.

⁴⁷KMA, 2005.438, Bruce Brier, edited letter collection, p. 31.

⁴⁸Marco Antonsich, 'Searching for Belonging – An Analytical Framework', *Geography Compass*, 4, 6 (2010), p. 648.

⁴⁹Hobbs, diary, p. 142.

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easing the men's transition back into civilian life.⁵⁰ The ERS offered educational courses and professional development to those men who wanted to spend their time in Britain productively. It also arranged work placements to local firms.⁵¹ While voluntary, the programmes offered by the ERS gave the men the opportunity to rehabilitate themselves in Britain. Back in New Zealand, the press picked up on this theme and enthusiastically praised the provision of these work placements. One report shared stories of the men's success and willingness to participate in these programmes:

One man, a warrant officer, who had been an Automobile Association employee before his service, was attached to the Automobile Association at Fanim House, in London. This man was being given experience in all branches, including local and foreign travel, insurance and the handling of vehicle transport and road services. Before being attached he was worried about the experience he had missed while being away. Now his confidence has returned and he says he intends to forgo leave on arrival in New Zealand and go to work straight away.⁵²

This report's optimistic portrayal of rehabilitation may have been an attempt to shape public opinion by reinforcing the men were not simply holidaying in Britain, they were working hard to ensure they would return home as productive citizens. The article noted how the work placement, and subsequent acquirement of knowledge and skills, had restored the man's confidence. Prisoners had feared that captivity may have impact their abilities, but it was reassuring to the man in the article, and those reading it, that some rehabilitation efforts were successful.

Although the ERS was charged with helping the POWs spend their time productively, Coe remembered the disappointment he felt when his rehabilitation officer refused his application to start a medical career:

My feeling was one of numbness and disbelief. I pictured myself fighting the system over this issue for perhaps months or years and losing the battle in the end. I had gone into the interview with hope of some reasonable assistance and now nearing my 27th year, to waste any more time shattered me. I felt trapped.⁵³

Coe had worked in camp hospitals and studied medical textbooks in his spare time. However, the rehabilitation officer placed no value on this experience; instead, he saw

⁵⁰Mason, *Official History*, p. 497.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, p. 497.

⁵²*Hutt News*, 26 September 1945, p. 3.

<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/HN19450926.2.5>, Accessed November 2019.

⁵³Coe, unpublished ms, p. 48.

Coe as a man who had no formal education.⁵⁴ The realisation that his time had been wasted was crushing. He had tried to make the best of his imprisonment, but these efforts seemed meaningless post-captivity. His liberation was meant to signal the chance to pursue his dreams, but he quickly found out the post-war world would have restrictions. While he was not bound by chains or wire, Coe still felt confined. Faced with this disappointment, he fled his rehabilitation centre and went AWOL. He remembered taking a train to London:

I sat gazing through the carriage window at the lovely English countryside patterned with hedges, majestic oak and elm trees and a church spire outlined here and there. It all looked so peaceful compared with the chaos, destruction and disappointment in life.⁵⁵

The contrast of the tranquillity of the outside world and his internal despair was striking. Although his vocational prospects were being constrained, his regained mobility restored some of his agency. The countryside was open and full of possibilities. However, there was a lingering prison motif of being trapped behind the carriage window. The peaceful world he had envisaged was so close, but still out of reach.

Tourist Experiences

Coe's rejection of the limitations he faced during his rehabilitation appeared to be common among other prisoners. The *New Zealand Herald* noted POWs seemed determined to venture as far away as possible from their camps. The article stated:

It has been noticed that most of them on leaving camp take out railway vouchers for Inverness, which is one of the furthestmost points to which they can travel, and many do in fact visit Scotland. It has also been observed that they return from leave not only with more self-confidence but also content to settle down to await a ship.⁵⁶

Whether the journey was near or far, POWs rejoiced in being able to move freely. At Brighton, Warrant Officer Charles Croall remembered how intoxicating it was to be able to go where he wanted, when he wanted:

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 48.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 48.

⁵⁶*New Zealand Herald (NZH)*, 18 July 1945, p. 5.

<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NZH19450718.2.27>, Accessed November 2019.

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Back on English soil for the first time after nearly three years and it now being dark the street lights were shining and it seemed such a marvellous sight to me after all the time I had been subjected to blackout conditions, so I walked the street just revelling in the sight of street lights at night and the freedom I felt just to be able to wander as I liked.⁵⁷

Croall described his journey as almost an out of body experience. Without the restrictions of guard towers and barbed wire, the world was suddenly open. Croall may have been walking aimlessly, but it was significant action that emphasised his freedom. The image of the street lights also contrasted the conditions that the prisoners endured in the prison camps. Against the darkness of captivity and war-ravaged Europe, these lights implied a return to civilisation.

Although most POWs had not been to Britain before, the shared heritage with New Zealand meant that they found the prospect of travelling the country comforting and exciting. In a poem featured in the *Tiki Times*, a prisoner-run newspaper at Milwitz work camp in Poland, one prisoner noted that, 'L stands for London, through which we shall roam, When we've left Milwitz and are on our way home.'⁵⁸ Felicity Barnes recognises that New Zealand First World War veterans had a similar affinity to Britain, noting, 'The pyramids might have been fine, but it was London, not Cairo, that Bill Massey's tourists really wanted to see.'⁵⁹ Furthermore, Barnes argues, 'When they arrived, soldiers brought their "imagined London" with them, and this may have made them feel more at home there than other places they visited.'⁶⁰ Similarly, the prisoners featured in this study framed London as a site of familiarity. It was a place where they hoped they could escape, or perhaps more accurately, return to a sense of normalcy. Hobbs noted:

Very far from feeling a stranger in a strange land, I felt just as much at home in London as I would in Wellington or Dunedin, although I can well imagine the truth in the saying that to a lonely person, London is the loneliest city in the world.⁶¹

⁵⁷Charles Croall, "You! Croall?" (Tauranga: Brian Riggier Computers, 2010), p. 193.

⁵⁸*The Tiki Times: A Souvenir Booklet of the Camp Newspaper for Prisoners-of-War* (Palmerston North: Keeling & Mundy Ltd, 1950), p. 80.

⁵⁹Felicity Barnes, 'Bill Massey's Tourists in the Big Smoke: Rethinking the First World War's Role in New Zealand's National Identity', *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 33, 2 (2015), p. 93.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁶¹Hobbs, diary, p. 148.

Hobbs presented London as more than a familiar environment; it was home. The lingering strangeness of captivity was replaced by a recognisable travel narrative. In addition to the accustomed tourist sites, even the mundane routines of life, such as traffic, were reminders of a long lost civility. Although far from New Zealand, Hobbs felt like he belonged, which was a powerful emotion after years of feeling isolated. He also mentioned how it was unnecessary to describe what he saw, because it was commonplace.⁶² Absent of watchtowers and enclosed compounds, he was simply enjoying a regular experience.

POWs created certain expectations in their anticipation of visiting London, and sometimes it was hard to reconcile that they had finally made it there. Although Hobbs described London as a familiar place, there were moments when he recalled how odd it felt to actually be there:

Being in London was a dream of a lifetime come true, and I found it extremely difficult to believe that this really was London, and not just another product of imagination. This is quite understandable when one considers the years we had spent behind barbed wire, the conditions under which we had lived, particularly in the last few months, and the suddenness of our release and repatriation to England – all within five days.⁶³

While the men's anticipation for home had been elongated, their liberation and subsequent release was sudden. Hobbs suggested it was hard to believe they were experiencing moments they had dreamed about for years. In some ways their captivity had conditioned them to expect the worst and this carried over to their initial travel experiences. Hobbs implied that he guarded himself against the possibility that this reality was too good to be true, and that it was a mere fantasy. His inability to fully enjoy himself showed even though he was free, his captivity tainted his experience.

Despite the POWs' eagerness to make the most of their reacquired freedom, it took some men longer to adjust to life outside the wire than they had anticipated. Makepeace notes that British POWs experienced similar feelings of disillusionment because they had 'developed overly romanticised pictures of home which contrasted distinctly from the reality that greeted them.'⁶⁴ When faced with the prospect of venturing outside the rehabilitation centres, Lance Corporal Tony Vercoe recalled,

⁶²Ibid., p. 148.

⁶³Ibid., p. 140.

⁶⁴Makepeace, *Captives of War*, p. 201.

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'This was Britain and here began the world, true freedom, normality. How to deal with it?'⁶⁵ Similarly, Soundy noted that:

We were basically let free into that 'Other World' that we had dreamed of for years.

To our amazement, we felt like a cross between Rip van Winkle and a shy country boy suddenly turned loose in the city. We were tongued tied and stammering in the presence of women, and many of us carried something such as a rolled up newspaper to give our hands something to do.⁶⁶

Vercoe and Soundy spent considerable time imagining their life post-captivity, but when faced with the reality of the situation, it was daunting. For Vercoe, the concept of 'normality' was too much to comprehend. He wondered whether he was still equipped to cope with everyday life. Similarly, Soundy noted how normal actions, like speaking to women, had become moments for nervous blunders. It struck him that while he was in captivity, he had been in a state of stasis, but the world had continued on without him. Upon his liberation, he was set loose into a different world than he remembered. Regardless of whether he or the world had changed, he felt out of place.

Like Vercoe and Soundy, Rae remembered feeling uncomfortable during his initial encounters with the world beyond the wire:

Once the euphoria of those first couple of days had passed we dashed off to the centre of London to kick up our heels and enjoy the delights we had been dreaming of for so long. Wine, women and song, we decided, that's what we've been missing all these months and years. The reality, alas, wasn't quite like that.⁶⁷

Moreover, Rae described his first attempt to visit a familiar pub in London:

It was filled with strangers. The world, I discovered, had not stood still while I was away. All my friends of those days were either somewhere in Europe or no longer with us.⁶⁸

Rae noted how his group had envisaged an enjoyable time in London, one which was filled with the things they did not possess in captivity. However, he was disappointed

⁶⁵Tony Vercoe, *Yesterdays Drums: Echoes from the Wasteland of War* (Wellington: Steele Roberts Ltd, 2001), p. 193.

⁶⁶Soundy, *Sounding Off*, p. 58.

⁶⁷Rae, *Kiwi Spitfire Ace*, p. 168.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, p. 168.

the reality did not live up to his expectations. On the surface, the world he returned to looked familiar, but upon further inspection, it was foreign. Unlike his static existence, life had continued in his absence. It was demoralising to discover there would be no homecoming.

For POWs who found it difficult to understand their new surroundings, simply finding a way to distract themselves was welcomed. And while there were moments of enjoyment, the hope that they could forget their captivity was disrupted by continual reminders of their ordeal. Simple, everyday moments could trigger an intense memory, mentally returning the men back to their prison camps. Captain Osborn Jones noted:

This morning I went for a stroll along the Embankment & other well known parts of London. A fine spring Sunday morning and standing by the Thames looking at the magnificent building of Westminster and listening to Big Ben strike the hour I had difficulty in believing I was awake. These moments of unreality stand over me still & I half expect ... to go out on parade in a square away in Germany.⁶⁹

Jones' statement shows how normal activities had greater significance after captivity. After monotony and restrictions, a peaceful Sunday morning, with a walk along a river and looking at landmarks was hard to fathom. The dreamlike experience culminated in the bell strike, and Jones described it as if it was an alarm clock reminding him to wake from his dream. For years his reality had been daily parades and head counts, it was unbelievable that the bell simply signalled the time. It was unreal to be free, but Jones was disheartened to realise that his captivity continued to distort his experience. He was pessimistic that those lingering restrictions would ever be lifted.

For some POWs, their return to London was tarnished by the continued presence of the war. When they imagined the outside world, it was one of peace and abundance. It was difficult to have these perceptions challenged. This contrast was even more apparent for Hyde, because he had spent time in London before his captivity. He was startled during his return to the city, because there was:

nothing in the shops and an absolute feeling of drabness. The feeling of an embattled city completely beaten to its knees but not yet giving in, I felt that London and the civilian population seemed more 'down at heel' than those parts of Germany I had seen.⁷⁰

⁶⁹AWMML, MS-2007-47, Osborn Jones, letter collection, undated letter from London, 1945.

⁷⁰Hyde, *Personal Account*, p. 101.

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Hyde was struck by the emptiness he encountered. It was not only the lack of consumer products, but also the absence of warmth. Against the bleakness of the men's prison camps and the destruction they saw as they marched through Europe, London had been positioned as an idyllic destination. It represented civilisation instead of barbarism. Hyde was unnerved that the war had impacted the city so severely. For him, London would not be a place where he could transition back into civilian life; the war's continuing presence loomed too large.

Like Hyde, Warrant Officer Jack Elworthy had been to England before his captivity. Elworthy was similarly disappointed it:

seemed to be every man for himself. If I hadn't seen England in the summer of 1940 and during the Blitz, and carried an idealised picture of it with me for four years, I probably would not have felt things in the same way.⁷¹

He had constructed an idyllic image of England, and he was shocked when it did not live up to his expectations. Captivity was a place of scarcity and restrictions and Elworthy endured these hardships with the belief that they were temporary. However, he was upset to find they were still present post-captivity.

While the above examples highlighted the disappointment prisoners felt as they were rehabilitated, most enjoyed their time in Britain. Some men formed lasting connections with those they met on their travels. Coe recalled meeting his future wife at an Armed Forces club in London:

I found her to be bright, pleasant company. Gladys and I spent whatever time we had together. I was fortunate to have a friend who could suggest the interesting places and sights in and around London. She asked about New Zealand and said 'I'd love to go there, it sounds lovely.'⁷²

More than offering a sense of stability during Coe's rehabilitation, the fledgling relationship between he and Gladys represented a fresh start. When Coe was with her he spoke about New Zealand with authority. It was a subject that was familiar to him, but unfamiliar to Gladys. These discussions were the inverse of what many prisoners experienced. They were usually the one's struggling to understand what had happened while they were in captivity. Talking about New Zealand, and a possible rendezvous there, was more than small talk; it was a reassertion that the future still held the hope and tranquillity that Coe had dreamed of during his captivity.

⁷¹Jack Elworthy, *Greece, Crete, Stalag, Dachau: A New Zealand Soldier's Encounters with Hitler's Army* (Wellington: Awa Press, 2014), p. 207.

⁷²Coe, unpublished ms, p. 49.

Even with the large number of prisoners needing to be processed and shipped back to New Zealand, most were on their way home after just a few months of rehabilitation.⁷³ This process began in May 1945 and by September only 300 repatriates remained in the Britain.⁷⁴ However, Elworthy had to wait over a year until he could return home. He remembered that:

It was another 16 months before I left England. They were not happy ones. I lived with rationing and moved from barracks to barracks. I was kept in the UK to be trained on some new equipment for the New Zealand Army, but I was not working with other New Zealanders and this made me feel even more isolated. When people remarked that I was a long way from home, I agreed, thinking not so much of the 12,000 miles as of the almost seven years I had been away.⁷⁵

Rather than the freedom of civilian life, his liberation was replaced by the return of military routines. While different from captivity, his actions were restricted and his food was limited. His inability to connect with other New Zealanders emphasised his remoteness and reinforced his feelings that he did not belong there. The delay highlighted how his life had been impacted by the war and his captivity. Elworthy's statement ended with an uncomfortable realisation that was tinged with doubt; since he had been away so long, he was not sure what to expect when he finally returned home.

Conclusion

In summary, the men's rehabilitation was a liminal period between their imprisonment and their return to New Zealand. When they arrived in Britain they brought with them expectations of an idealised version of home, one which they had constructed to help them escape the daily privations of captivity. However, the men's transition out of captivity was complicated by their lingering feelings of shame and a loss of confidence. It was difficult to enact the fantasies they envisaged for themselves when they felt almost overwhelmed by a world that had moved on without them. Moreover, although there were arrangements to ease the prisoners into professional and educational programmes, Coe's inability to obtain educational assistance reinforced his belief that his time in captivity had been wasted. Nevertheless, some prisoners regained their confidence by testing their physical boundaries. Whether they travelled to the outer regions of Britain or had a weekend in London, these excursions reinforced a sense of agency which had been restricted from them in captivity. Others

⁷³NZH, 18 July 1945, p. 6.

⁷⁴Mason, *Official History*, pp. 504-05.

⁷⁵Elworthy, *Greece, Crete, Stalag, Dachau*, p. 215.

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struggled to reconcile their imagined image of post-captivity with the reality of a world ravaged by war. These accounts expressed a desire to experience something familiar and to inhabit a space which inspired a feeling of belonging. However, the war's continuing presence could trigger unpleasant memories from seemingly everyday events. In these moments, some dreamed of their return to New Zealand, somewhere which was far from the battlefields and prison camps of Europe.