
RESEARCH

Identity and Remembrance in the New Zealand Ex-Prisoners of War Association after the Second World War

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Captivity was the antithesis of what soldiers expected to experience during the Second World War. New Zealanders who were captured had to reconcile the difference between traditional narratives of wartime heroism with their experience of confinement, which, for some, included assisting the enemy war effort through forced labour. This paper examines the New Zealand Ex-Prisoners of War (POW) Association's quarterly newsletter and argues that the association was instrumental to the development and promotion of a more positive POW experience. Ex-POWs were usually reluctant to share their stories, but within the confines of this support network they felt comfortable in the knowledge that they were surrounded by people who understood what they had endured. This paper also argues that the hesitancy of ex-POWs to talk about their experiences left future generations ignorant to what captivity had been like. This was partly rectified by the enquiries made by relatives during the association's final years.

Keywords: Captivity; identity; Second World War; Remembrance

Introduction

On 20 October 2002 the Waikato Branch of the New Zealand Ex-Prisoners of War Association hosted its final reunion event. As part of a wider national organization, the branch had promoted camaraderie between ex-prisoners of war (POWs), and provided them with emotional and financial support (Final Reunion, 2005, p. 1). At the reunion Flight Officer Ron Noice, who was the national president, expressed that while captivity was the antithesis of their expected wartime experience, "we should be thankful for the pleasures that we have reaped from something that had such a tragic beginning" (2005, p. 2). This paper begins by explaining that New Zealand POWs from the Second World War felt alienated by their captivity because it did not conform to the traditional wartime narrative. It argues that this disappointment, coupled with a sense that their experience was different to other servicemen, led to POWs forming the New Zealand Ex-Prisoners of War Association in 1949. While the association was central to re-establishing friendships which were formed in captivity, this paper examines the role its quarterly newspaper played in promoting a positive portrayal of captivity, which dispelled the perception that POWs should be ashamed of their ordeal. Although there was little evidence that the public viewed captivity as shameful, the men's reluctance to share their stories with non-POWs suggested a stigma, which continued to linger in their minds. This is highlighted by the final segment of the paper, which

discusses how relatives whose fathers had shared few or no details of their wartime experience tried to learn about their loved one's captivity.

The New Zealand POW Experience

More than 9,000 New Zealanders were captured during the Second World War, with the vast majority becoming POWs during the defences of Greece, Crete, and North Africa in 1941–1942 (Mason, 1954, p. v). A smaller number, approximately 377, were imprisoned by the Japanese and confined in camps across Asia (Mason, p. 160). While each man had his own personal experience of captivity, a common theme was his surprise at being captured. In a study of Allied soldiers who were captured by Germany, historian David Rolf noted that they had not considered the prospect of captivity, therefore were not prepared for the mental anguish of a prolonged imprisonment (1988, p. 4). This sentiment was consistently present in the accounts of New Zealand POWs. Noice remembered that, "All of a sudden you are thrust into another lifestyle with nothing but what you stand up in, and with no idea of what lays ahead of you" (2002, p. 2). Likewise, Brigadier James Hargest recalled, "The fact of being captured is so overwhelming a disaster that for a little while one's mind fails to grasp its significance" (1945, p. 21).

Prisoners also remarked that they, at least initially, viewed their failure to live up to their soldierly identities as shameful. When Warrant Officer R.H. Thomson recalled his

capture on Crete, he noted that, “Any troubles I had had in the past were mere ripple compared with this tidal wave. I was disgusted; I was deeply disappointed; I felt frustrated and shamed—above all, ashamed” (1964, p. 12). Private Alf Rawlings’ recollection of his transition from soldier to captive spoke to a loss of agency as he joined the, “long lines of prisoners, dragging your feet for mile after mile, wondering when a halt will be called. All the while trying to recover from the shock of being taken prisoner, and wondering what went wrong” (1991, p. 16). Moreover, Lance Corporal Arch Scott, who was captured near El Alamein, Egypt, in 1942, remembered that he “tried unsuccessfully to reconcile the realities of our war with some of the ideas we had previously held about glamour and glory” (1985, pp. 37–38). Similarly, James Bertram, who was a volunteer gunner in Hong Kong when he was captured by the Japanese, recalled that, “A military surrender is an unforgettable experience. Against all logic, it hurts you deep inside... Over-night we had been turned from men with a purpose into figures of ridicule” (1947, p. 135). While these were individual perspectives which were formed in the safety of post-captivity, therefore perhaps affected by memory, they illustrated a common belief that their wartime experience was different and, to some degree, lesser than those who had not been captured.

Although some ex-POWs appeared to feel a lingering sense of shame about their wartime service, when writing for the New Zealand official war history series, Major General Sir Howard Kippenberger rejected that captivity was dishonourable. He noted that POWs should be proud of their service because, “In every camp they bore up against adversity, defied and deceived their guards, maintained discipline, soldierly spirit and pride of race. Only a very few failed” (Mason, p. viii). However, in a later study historian Chris Pugsley argued that POWs had difficulties adjusting to life outside the wire because they “lived with the guilt of having been taken prisoner, and with the restrictions and frustrations of prison life” (2008, p. 242). Pugsley’s findings were similar to historian Oliver Wilkinson’s analysis of British POWs from the First World War who found it difficult to reconcile their experiences with the dominant wartime narratives, because they were neither successful on the battlefield nor were they among the “heroic dead” (2015, p. 36).

While there is little evidence that the New Zealand public viewed POWs as dishonorable figures, shame remained a recurring theme in captivity memoirs published in the decades after the war. Like Wilkinson’s argument that First World War POWs felt ignored in wartime narratives because they did not make the ultimate sacrifice, New Zealand POWs of the Second World War may have been disappointed that they had not lived up to the glorified ideals of their forefathers. Historian Peter Monteath argued that a similar sentiment was felt by Australian POWs who found it hard to reconcile their captivity with the “Anzac myth,” a stereotypical wartime experience “built around the figure of the warrior hero, an imposing physical figure of resolute mind, who had triumphed in combat” (2011, p. 430). Due to their prolonged captivity, New Zealand

POWs had few opportunities to connect their experience with these traditional elements of wartime service. Therefore, their stories were relegated to the footnotes of New Zealand war histories that often “reflect some macho side of the national character which glorifies the fighting man and puts down the supposed losers” (McGill, 1987, p. 205).

Warrant Officer Jack Elworthy suggested that he was mindful of this glamorised image of war when he recalled he had grown up “listening to stories from those who had been in the Great War 1914–1918, and wondering how I would compare if my courage was ever tested as theirs had been” (2014, p. 7). After spending time with returned soldiers he marvelled at the camaraderie they shared, but he also noted that it left those who had not experienced war “feeling very much like outsiders” (2014, p. 7). When New Zealand joined the Second World War, he was desperate not to be left behind. In February 1941 Elworthy arrived in Egypt, but he was disappointed that this place failed to live up to his expectations. He had “heard a lot about the glamour of the East” but the “streets were full of rubbish, and filthy from horse-drawn gharries, and there were smells and flies everywhere” (2014, p. 29). His view of war, and his identity as a soldier, was further subverted when he was captured on Crete in May 1941. Elworthy alluded to the failure to live up to the traditional image of wartime gallantry when he saw “the great contrast between a soldier’s usual appearance—swaggering, smart, cheerful and confident—and that of the freshly captured prisoner—dirty, exhausted, bewildered and bitter” (2014, p. 109). Reflecting on his release in 1945, Elworthy remembered his anxiety about how people would view his imprisonment. He was ashamed that he had “spent four years in reasonable safety while many thousands of soldiers had been fighting and getting killed to get us out... We felt we hadn’t done as much as others” (2014, p. 183).

When prisoners were liberated from their camps, it became apparent that they would face difficulties as they transitioned back into civilian life. Sergeant John Hogg remembered that the realization that he was “free was hard to grasp” (1992, p. 64). This disorientation continued as the men who were held in European camps were transported to Britain for rehabilitation. Lance Corporal Tony Vercoe remembered feeling overwhelmed by his liberation. He noted, “Outside, I felt a hint of hesitation. This was Britain and here began the world, true freedom, normality. How to deal with it?” (2001, p. 193) Similarly, Sergeant Pilot Jack Rae went to one of his favourite pubs in London to celebrate his freedom, but found that “It was filled with strangers” (2001, p. 168). He concluded that he and other prisoners “felt alienated from the world around us” (2001, p. 169). Bertram remembered feeling a similar sense of trepidation when he was freed from his camp in Japan. He noted that while he was in captivity he had few opportunities for “individual expression of any kind. Now we were going out into the world again. How much of our prison camp would we take with us? And what sort of world should we find outside?” (1947, p. 277).

Establishment of the New Zealand Ex-POW Association

The first New Zealand Returned Servicemen Association (RSA) was established after the Second Boer War, with later groups forming after the First World War. These organisations provided a place for veterans to socialise and an avenue to lobby the Government for pensions and other welfare related issues (Returned Services' Association, 1966). Perhaps continuing the belief that their captivity experience had fallen outside of the traditional wartime narrative, approximately 650 former POWs attended a meeting in 1949 to discuss the formation of a separate veterans association (Noice, 2002, p. 2). Subsequently the New Zealand ex-POW Association was founded with the intention of protecting "the character, status and interests of the ex-Prisoners of War and to promote the consideration and discussions of all questions affecting ex-Prisoners of War and generally promote good fellowship between or amongst them" (Updated rules 1982 for National Organisation, p. 1). It was unclear how many New Zealanders joined this organization, because some district branches destroyed their minute books and the group accepted members who were POWs from other Allied countries (Noice, 2002, p. 1). Additionally, the association offered memberships to spouses and mothers of ex-POWs, although they could only become associates with no voting rights (Updated rules 1982 for National Organisation, p. 3). The initial years of the association were fraught with disagreements about how funds should be distributed to members, with some branches going into recess until the organization became better organized. By 1967 the association was more stable and consisted of 33 district branches which were run largely autonomously with a total membership of 3,510 (Noice, 2002, p. 4).

From its establishment the ex-POW association believed that those who had experienced captivity deserved greater financial compensation than a standard war pension. Noice reported that there were no records remaining, but he remembered that in 1949 a delegate went to Wellington to argue that prisoners should be reimbursed for their forced labour (2002, p. 18). This was based on the amount of local or camp currency, which the POWs had sometimes received for their work. Furthermore, the association contented that POWs deserved compensation for the rations, which were paid for, but that they did not receive (Noice, 2002, p. 18). Neither of these requests was granted. Ultimately, Noice summarised that when the prisoners came home "there were promises from the Government at that time that we would be compensated for our time in captivity, but it has been 'deferred' ever since" (2002, p. 18).

With Government support difficult to procure, the association relied on grants from the Lottery Commission, affiliation fees, raffle sales, and member donations (Noice, 2002, p. 10). These funds were used to organize reunions, sports tournaments, and provide welfare. Additionally, Stan Shaw, a former president of the association, left approximately

\$20,000 to \$30,000 for welfare purposes. This endowment became the Stan Shaw Trust Fund and it was noted that there "were more committees set up, more correspondence, more arguments at meetings and more changes to the rules governing the distribution of this money than any other business" (Noice, 2002, pp. 10–11). One divisive use of this fund was a payment of \$200 for any member who spent more than four days in the hospital. However, this policy did not last, because "subsequent investigations found that the system was being abused" and the amount was reduced to \$100, with an emphasis on the branches to be more cautious about applying to the fund (Noice, 2002, p. 11). This willingness to seek financial assistance diverges from Christina Twomey's study of POWs in postwar Australia. Twomey suggested that some prisoners were reluctant to seek monetary assistance, because "Perhaps the disgrace of seeking help compounded the indignity that their sense of masculinity had already suffered as a consequence of imprisonment itself" (2018, p. 85).

Although the New Zealand ex-POW association continually had issues procuring sufficient funding, it was more successful in fostering fellowship among its members. One of the association's founding objectives was to:

diffuse information on all matters affecting ex-Prisoners of War, and to print, publish, issue and circulate such papers, periodicals, books, circulars and other literary undertaking as may seem conducive to any of these objects. (Updated rules 1982 for National Organisation, p. 2)

Various researchers have examined how the New Zealand RSA used newsletters to provide "forums for subscribers to both learn about, and comment on, the various issues confronting the returned soldier in New Zealand during the 1920s and 1930s" (Walker, 2013, p. 28). However, Sarah Neal cautioned that the comments in these circulars only "represent the experiences of those soldiers who joined the association" (2001, p. 6). Similarly, Coralie Clarkson argued that while the pieces may be interesting, they "must be read with some caution as it is unlikely that they always reflected the opinions of the majority of returned men" (2011, p. 10). The New Zealand ex-POW association used a similar platform to inform its members of developments in compensation claims, give updates on the health of members, and promote events. An early version of the publication was known as *Broadsheet*, which began in the late 1950s. This developed into the *POW WOW*, an essential resource for the association, which helped to bind the multiple district-level branches into a national organization. It was first published in 1961 and ran quarterly until the association disbanded in 2002 (Noice, 2002, 12).

Before analysing the *POW WOW*'s role in uniting former prisoners, some limitations need to be addressed. As Clarkson mentioned, those who wrote to veteran publications reflected their individual experience. This was

particularly important to the reflections of prisoners, because although it has been noted that the vast majority of New Zealand POWs experienced a prolonged captivity, their confinement could differ greatly based on their rank, service, and whether they were forced to work. Even these subsets of captivity could lead to drastically different conditions if one was assigned to work on an Italian farm compared to a Polish coal mine. Historian Clare Makepeace found in her study of British POW associations that these divergent captive experiences contributed to divisions within veteran organisations. She noted that those who had been held in the Far East forged a singular identity, but European POWs often “divided according to a prisoner’s camp, his activity during captivity, his branch of service or his rank” (2014, p. 264). Although it did not appear that the New Zealand ex-POW association formally fractured, there were hints in the columns of the *POW WOW* that men were more interested in surrounding themselves with others who had similar experiences. There were dedicated reunions for prisoners who had been captured in different campaigns or experienced specific events, such as the sinking of the *Jason* or the *Nino Bixio*. These ships were sunk in the Mediterranean while they were transporting prisoners; 162 New Zealand POWs were killed (Attack on the *Nino Bixio*, 2017). When survivors came together for the 50th anniversary of the *Jason*’s sinking, it was noted the event brought “some old Ex-P.O.W. members back into the fold as well as one or two who had never been members of any branch” (*POW WOW*, March 1992, p. 4). The reporting of this reunion suggested an informal club within a club. Attendees marvelled at the “togetherness” they experienced being around one another, with “Some of our ‘Jason’ mates ... keen to support the ‘Nino Bixio’ Reunion later this year” (*POW WOW*, March 1992, p. 4).

While these subgroups were largely informal and served as a way for prisoners to assert aspects of their individuality, New Zealanders who had experienced captivity under the Japanese featured more distinctly in the pages of the *POW WOW*, with many editions containing a separate section for them sometimes called “Far East (F.E.) P.O.W. Corner.” However, for the most part, this correspondence seemed to be reproductions of larger FEPOW associations in Britain or Australia (*POW WOW*, September 1990, p. 5). Occasionally there were personal anecdotes from those affected by Japanese confinement, but rather than discuss the past, these contributions usually lamented the prosperity and growing global influence of Japan. In a 1989 edition of the *POW WOW* one correspondent noted the increase in Japanese foreign investment had meant that the “Allies won the battles but Japan has won the war without firing a shot” (*POW WOW*, June 1989, p. 3). Moreover, these pieces were far more derogatory and unrepentant with their continued hatred of the Japanese. Mrs. E.J. McPherson, whose husband was a POW in Europe, but her brother was executed by the Japanese, wrote to the paper and noted that her “generation won’t forget. I get so annoyed when I hear that Japan is

buying over here. To me, they are going to get us one way or the other” (*POW WOW*, March 1991, p. 14).

There were continual reminders that ex-POWs viewed the Japanese as sub-human. This was most apparent in two separate editions of the *POW WOW*. The first shared a joke which depicted three men of different ethnicities arriving at a farm, but with there being only two beds inside, the odd man out had to sleep in the barn. When the Japanese man “went to sleep in the barn. A few minutes later there was a knock at the door and when the farmer opened it, there stood the pig and the cow” (*POW WOW*, September 1990, p. 5). The second story documented the staging of the play, *Shuriken*, in Hamilton, which depicted the murder of Japanese POWs at Featherston camp.¹ Noice noted that the association did not support the play because it “only depicted one side of the event and wondered how the Japanese would feel if a similar play was put on in Japan depicting the atrocities carried out on our POWs ie. on Burma Railways and Changi” (*POW WOW*, December 1995, p. 2). Rather than viewing the cases of brutality as separate incidents which were both worthy of condemnation, he dismissed the murder of Japanese POWs because people would “never understand how [Allied] prisoners were starved, tortured, shot etc. nor would they in the most part forget!” (*POW WOW*, December 1995, p. 2).

In a more positive light, the *POW WOW* was integral to success of the overall NZ ex-POW association, with Brownie Dann noting that it “held its own with any other ex-service-men’s journal [and] has also been instrumental in keeping the P.O.W. Assn. together” (*POW WOW*, December 2002, p. 5). With members spread across the country, it was difficult to stay in contact with one another, but the *POW WOW* was their main form of communication (*POW WOW*, December 2002, p. 8). It contained all manner of information relating to the POW experience such as book reviews, letters to the editor, obituaries, and advertisements for tour packages. Alone this information would have had little relevance, but when put together it provided “wonderful links [which were] perpetuated by its publication” (*POW WOW*, December 2002, p. 8). The *Lost Trail* and *Letters to the Editor* segments were particularly striking in their openness to re-establish what Ru Clarke characterised at a reunion event in 1989 as the

spirit that has kept us going. That spirit that fermented the bonds of comradeship that exist today. It is a spirit born in adversity in conditions of endurance that has forged the unbreakable links of sincere friendship. (*POW WOW*, June 1989, p. 6)

Ex-POWs wrote to the paper hoping for information about those who they had served with, and if possible to get reacquainted with one another. For example, L.P Low listed several of men with whom he had been imprisoned, hoping “that some of these chaps might see their names” (*POW WOW*, September 1989, p. 7). Although not among those listed, Rob MacLean, the editor, knew Low from captivity, thus a brief, but significant bond was remembered.

More than just catering to New Zealand POWs, it was apparent that the publication had an international audience. After receiving a copy of the *POW WOW*, John Wilson, a South African ex-POW, noted that it was “of considerable interest as there is no comparable organisation or publication in South Africa although many thousands of South Africans were captured at Tobruk and elsewhere” (*POW WOW*, March 1984, p. 15). Additionally, Patrick Grutzner wrote from Australia that he had travelled to Europe and had visited the site where Stalag Luft III had been. This camp became infamous for being the place of the Great Escape. A New Zealander, Flight Lieutenant Arnold Christensen, was among those POWs who were executed upon their recapture. Grutzner assured readers that the memorial for the men still remained and that care was being taken to preserve their memory, because fresh flowers and ribbons had been placed at the site. He noted that it was “a memorable experience” to pay his respects and wanted to share his experience with any relatives or friends of Christensen by offering photographs of his journey (*POW WOW*, June 1989, p. 5).

Narrative Reinforcement

While ex-POWs were conflicted about how to view their wartime service, the *POW WOW* tried to destigmatize their experience by promoting and reviewing the men’s captivity memoirs. There was an understanding among ex-POWs that their prolonged imprisonment, sometimes assisting the enemy’s war effort through forced labor, differed from traditional narratives. Nevertheless, memoirs functioned as a means of self-help by offering ex-POWs an avenue to make sense of their experience. While not directly related to prisoners, Lilie Chouliaraki noted that war often left participants confused, but writing was an opportunity to “place these fragments into a coherent pattern and produce a sense of self that invests their war experience with meaning” (2014, p. 603). Moreover, former soldier and scholar Samuel Hynes (1998) argued that for some veterans the desire to write a war memoir arose as means to reduce their isolation. These written accounts became “communications among the members of that secret army, the men who have been there and will understand, as other generations will not and cannot” (p. 6). Makepeace (2014) made a similar argument about the collaborative nature of war remembrance, noting that veterans associations “show us how a significant number of ex-servicemen retrospectively made sense of their wartime experiences” (p. 254). Furthermore, N. Hunt and I. Robbins (2001) suggested that veterans associations helped develop “a shared memory of particular events, a generally agreed story, or perhaps more realistically, a generally disagreed story, where the veterans constantly argue over details—thus avoiding the traumatic emotion” (p. 178). However, they cautioned that within veterans associations there was the possibility for vastly different experience. Even within a supportive environment there may still be some who “find it difficult sharing reminiscences with veterans who belonged to different units” (2001, p. 178).

Similar to the above literature, the columns of the *POW WOW* and quantity of written accounts from New Zealand ex-POWs evidenced the men’s willingness to share their personal stories. A request was made by the National Library of New Zealand for ex-POWs to donate material to their archive because, “Much of this material is scattered around the country and as the years pass there is a danger that important diaries and letters will be destroyed” (*POW WOW*, September 1990, p. 28). It was suggested that while it might not be obvious that these items were important, “Historians are increasingly interested in social aspects of the war” (*POW WOW*, September 1990, p. 28). However, a central concern for veterans who wrote memoirs was how to communicate to the general public an experience, which it was felt one had to live through to understand. Noice suggested that ex-POWs struggled to tell their stories, because

The average person has no idea what it feels like to come out of your tent in a “bivvy” and see a line of enemy tanks on the perimeter, or to be surrounded on the battlefield by a greater concentration of man and superior armament, to be woken up on board a ship in the middle of the night by the captain shouting, “we have been torpedoed, prepare to abandon ship,” or to be shot out of the air and crash land or come down by parachute. (2002, p. 2)

At a reunion event for the New Zealand ex-POW association, the deputy mayor of Hamilton echoed this sentiment when he opened the proceedings, stating that “there is no way that I and other members of my generation can really understand what you went through” (*POW WOW*, June 1989, p. 5). Private Jack Gallichan encountered a similar difficulty when reproducing the *Tiki Times*, a prisoner-run newspaper which was written and circulated at a working camp in Poland. He noted that the republication was designed to

take casual readers into the life of a P.O.W working camp, but it will never be able to take them into the hearts of prisoners-of-war, where only supreme optimism could crowd out the hopelessness and bitterness of a life full of hunger and scheming, of longing and hope, and of resignation to the over-lordship of a brutish foe. (1950, p. i)

Furthermore, in his own unpublished memoir, Gallichan hoped readers would be interested in his experience and be convinced that captivity was “a most exacting existence in which human beings grade themselves either as men or as rats, is full of monotony and privation, and a longing to regain the shelter of home that seems so far away” (n.d., p. 7).

The difficulties ex-POWs had in framing their experience was not unique to New Zealand or accounts of Second World War captivity. Wilkinson (2015) argued that British ex-POWs from the First World War “continued to feel ashamed and increasingly guilty, still conceptualizing their

captivity experiences against internalized expectations of what they thought they should have done in the war" (p. 36). Similarly, Twomey (2013) suggested that Australian ex-POWs were hesitant to share their stories because the public was unwilling to consider experiences, which did not fit within a "culture obsessed with the valorization of military service" (p. 322). This was particularly the case for those who had been imprisoned by the Japanese, because "Defeat, emasculation and shattered pride of the White race made commemoration of the war experiences of POWs in the 1940s and 1950s a difficult task and one that the state, at least, refused to countenance" (2013, p. 322). These narratives were neglected until the 1980s when an increased interest in traumatic memories facilitated an "extraordinary rise in eyewitness accounts of the POW experience" (2013, p. 323). While it took decades for more confronting memoirs to be accepted into wartime histories, Wilkinson argued that British ex-POWs from the First World War reclaimed aspects of self-worth by connecting their experience to "in an emerging, mythologised and soon to be dominant captivity narrative: the escape narrative" (2017, p. 281).

New Zealand ex-POWs took a similar approach in how they depicted captivity. They rejected suggestions that they simply waited to be rescued; instead, they recast themselves as resistance agents who were constantly working to destabilize the enemy from behind the wire. In this light, captivity was not shameful; instead it was a unique experience, which needed to be recorded. Captain Allan Yeoman (1991) realized his story was meaningful when he remembered, "quirks of fate directed my feet into adventures that were extracurricular to ordinary army life and which were shared by only a handful of men drawn from different parts of the Commonwealth" (p. vii). Furthermore, he noted that ex-POWs had a responsibility to "pass on to our grandchildren what it was really like to be a part of that history, which we hope will never be repeated" (1991, p. vii).

When writing his memoir, Brigadier George Clifton (1952) lamented, "Readers are only interested in the adventure and thrill of escapes, not the humdrum routine or the psychological reasons of a P.o.W. existence" (p. 255). Clifton noted that the POW experience was far more encompassing than the simplistic narrative of fighting the war from behind the wire, yet he participated in promoting this myth. Nevertheless, the desire to make his experience interesting was not the only reason why his memoir conformed to the escape narrative; he also questioned his competency to "write about such aspects of an abnormal way of life which entailed mental torture in varying degree and for an infinite variety of reasons to all who suffered it" (1952, p. 255). Other New Zealand ex-POWs would frame their experience in similar terms. Captain J.D. Gerard, who was captured at Sidi Assiz in November 1941, touched upon the subtler aspects of captivity in his memoir, *Unwilling Guests*, such as loneliness, monotony, and identity, but mostly he conformed to the resistance narrative. When introducing his book, he told readers that,

This is a story of that life, of the hardships and privations and the gallant determination to be cheerful with which these were faced, and of the continual attempts to escape. For all their boldness, these were seldom successful; yet they were persisted in because the prisoner longed for freedom and because such attempts were their only means of engaging the enemy. (1945, p. 11)

After the memoir's publication, H.J. Holmes wrote to the *POW WOW* to request a copy. He noted that he met Gerard during an escape attempt and wanted to read a familiar account, which may feature "many of the people (Italians) who helped us" (*POW WOW*, March 1991, p. 14). Other readers of the association's newspaper requested memoirs so they could give them to descendants of ex-POWs. Dann was successful in obtaining two such publications and wrote a note of appreciation to those who donated them, stating he thought the material would "satisfy the young lad requiring the information on his father's wartime history" (*POW WOW*, September 1990, p. 30). What was unsaid, but could be inferred, was that the information provided to the "young lad" would have likely depicted a version of captivity which ex-POWs deemed acceptable.

When the *POW WOW* promoted memoirs, there was a chance for ex-POWs to receive praise and, to some extent, validation for their experience. Gunner Jim Henderson noted that the "rewards of authorship, particularly financial, are scanty, except for that inner compulsion, almost a disease, to observe, feel, record and pass on" (*POW WOW*, 1991, p. 27). Without widespread acclaim, he stated that it was common to wonder if there was "anybody actually reading your stuff?" (*POW WOW*, 1991, p. 27) Nevertheless, Henderson was writing to the *POW WOW* to inform them that he had received a letter, which congratulated him on his book, *No Honour, No Glory*, which he co-authored with Spence Edge. Alex Rendall was from Scotland, but he had a brother who had served in the New Zealand army during the Second World War and was likely among those who lost their lives when the *Jason* and the *Nino Bixio* were sunk. Rendall noted that the book gave a "very vivid explanation of the loss of so many brave lads and you both should be praised for writing such a true and touching epitaph" (*POW WOW*, 1991, pp. 27–28). Henderson remarked that the uncertainty of what happened to a relative was a "cruel anxiety" and he was humbled that sharing his tale had given one family a sense of closure. (*POW WOW*, 1991, p. 27)

Some memoirists also directed some or all of their profits to veteran or charitable associations, which presumably increased their appeal to ex-POWs. It was noted that Private Alf Rawlings had "chosen to donate all profits from the sale of his book to Red Cross, and we are extremely grateful to him for his generosity" (*POW WOW*, March 1992, p. 12). The Red Cross delivered parcels, which were instrumental to the survival of POWs, with Henderson and Edge noting the "psychological boost these magnificent gifts gave us might even

have been more beneficial to our health than the wholesome food they contained" (1983, p. 152). Rawlings' charitable act was referred to over several issues of the *POW WOW*, with constant reminders that promoting the book was "the best opportunity available to me to sell additional books and add to the amount for the Red Cross" (*POW WOW*, December 1992, p. 28). By September 1993, \$3000 had been raised (*POW WOW*, September 1993, p. 25).

While ex-POWs welcomed captivity narratives, even those from overseas, they were more suspicious of letting others control how their stories were represented. Theo Durieux enquired to the *POW WOW* and its members to determine their willingness to give him memorabilia for an exhibition he was creating in Belgium. Dann was initially resistant to the idea and cautioned readers to question, "If he is making a business of it, and you have memorabilia you would like to sell, ask him what he is willing to pay for it" (*POW WOW*, September 1992, p. 18). Further responses made it clear that Durieux's intentions were more benevolent, with several ex-POWs expressing their support for his work. Jack Kelly noted that "He is a man of our own age who was exported to occupied France and Germany during the war years and had experienced ordeals as a forced labourer just as harrowing, if not more so, than our own" (*POW WOW*, March 1993, p. 15). Additionally, Paul Day assured his fellow ex-POWs that "This is to be a scheme to allow Europeans, in perpetuity, to remember the kind of conditions we all experienced and seems to me a worthwhile one" (*POW WOW*, March 1993, p. 16). Dann contacted Durieux to apologize, but the incident showed that the ex-POWs were concerned with how an outsider may portray their experience.

The *POW WOW* and the New Zealand ex-POW association both wound up in 2002. Ex-POWs continued to meet, but more informally and on a district-level. The *POW WOW* had been instrumental in tying the numerous branches together, but MacLean realised it had to end when he opined in its final issue that he was waiting "for some more copy to arrive but, sadly, I wait in vain" (*POW WOW*, December 2002, p. 14). And although the decision to stop the *POW WOW* was in part owing to a lack of content, Dann was given a diary in the last few months with the hope that extracts could be published in the paper. He lamented that the arrival of this account made him wonder, "how much material is still out there that will now most probably never go to print?" (*POW WOW*, December 2002, p. 4) In a strange twist, as the association was closing, the general public's interest in the POW experience was increasing. This renewed interest in the stories of New Zealand servicemen culminated in Megan Hutching's oral history program. Over several volumes, including one specifically about POWs, she recounted the wartime experiences of these men in their words. Prime Minister Helen Clark hosted the book launch in Wellington, noting that she hoped this would encourage future generations to learn about this neglected period of New Zealand's history (*POW WOW*, December 2002, p. 23). However, at the event to celebrate the publication of stories from captivity,

and to some extent the men's willingness to share their experience, Noice asked the organiser for a chance to speak, but was refused because "if I spoke, others would want to, so despite that fact that I was the National President she was unmoved" (*POW WOW*, December 2002, p. 24).

Familial Interest in the POW Experience

Although the *POW WOW* indicated that ex-POWs were willing to share their stories with one another, there remained a sense that they were reluctant to discuss captivity with those who had not been there. The camaraderie of the association may have provided emotional support, but unfortunately it left later generations without an accurate understanding of what they had endured. Historian Bruce Scates (2014) examined how Australian families reconnected with the past when they made pilgrimages to Second World War historical sites in Asia. Although Australia's memory of this period was "forgotten and neglected in the 1960s and 1970s," he argued, "Places of incarceration or forced labour have acquired the same mythic power, the same emotional purchase as the Somme or Gallipoli, as the focus of Anzac mythology realigns from one world war to another" (2014, pp. 206–07). Scates referenced Kit Nolan's journey to retrace the steps of her father-in-law, which featured in the Australian ex-POW association's magazine in 2005. He suggested that Nolan's experience was neither a travelog nor a recollection of what her father-in-law had been through; instead, it merged these two narratives into a deeply emotional account which verged on postmemory. These pilgrimages were important to relatives of ex-POWs because "traumatic memory does not end with the generation that experienced it... These wounding memories are passed down through families and communities" (2014, p. 209). Scates accompanied a tour group to similar sites, noting that one traveller reasoned that it was a chance to enter "a world from which he had always been excluded, a world glimpsed in the nightmares, illnesses, and long brooding silences of his father's all too short life" (2014, p. 212). Similarly, Nolan made sense of this previously closed off world when she "meticulously recorded the sites of atrocities; the cuttings carved through ancient limestone, the railway bridges 'where sick men were hit with wire whips and forced to work,' the burial trench which men fated to be executed were made to dig." (2014, p. 208) Visiting a site where a loved one had suffered, went some way to sharing an emotional connection across time. This link could be strengthened if, as in Nolan's experience, the later journey was physically gruelling because it was chance to "'feel something' of what he felt" (2014, p. 208).

The *POW WOW* featured an increasing number of letters during the final years of its circulation from relatives of ex-POWs who were seeking information about their loved one's experience. These inquiries were usually from the former prisoner's son or daughter and often began with a statement that their father had been unwilling to share his experience. Relatives suggested that this lack of understanding of what their fathers had endured had left their

own lives incomplete. Alister Burns wanted to learn about captivity because he felt as though his father was “almost ashamed of what happened to him as a POW. I now realise that he was a hero in his own modest way” (*POW WOW*, June 2001, p. 16). His “quest” to understand what his father endured had become particularly important because his “son and nephews are now part of the process.” (*POW WOW*, June 2001, p. 15) Similar to Burns, Mike Phillips wrote to the *POW WOW* hoping to “find out as much as possible about what happened to my father” (*POW WOW*, June 2000, p. 18). Phillips’s father had been captured in Greece in 1941, but had died in 1978 and “was always very reluctant to talk about his experiences” (*POW WOW*, June 2000, p. 18). This silence had lingered, perhaps unconsciously, in Phillips’ mind for more than two decades after his father’s death. Like Burns, he believed his father was “reluctant to talk about it partly because he felt that we could not possibly understand and might trivialise his and his comrades efforts and sacrifices” (*POW WOW*, June 2000, p. 18). Even though learning about the hardships his father endured may prove emotionally harmful, he remarked that “It is time I knew.” (*POW WOW*, June 2000, p. 18).

In more exhaustive attempts to learn about the New Zealand POW experience some relatives participated in pilgrimages, which were similar to those outlined by Scates. Graham McBride explained to *POW WOW* readers that his father had, “died suddenly in Feb 1970 without revealing much about those traumatic years,” yet he felt a need to retrace his “footsteps for reasons I cannot explain” (*POW WOW*, June 2001, p. 12). Another correspondent, Rosslyn Read, wrote an extensive recap of her travels to areas in Germany and Poland where her father had been imprisoned. She was only seven when her father died, therefore the only connection she had to what he experienced was “a box of mementos from that time that included letters home, receipts of Red Cross parcels signed for at Stalag VIII B and other assorted memorabilia” (*POW WOW*, December 2000, p. 18). When Read was in Poland, she used some of these letters to form a strong connection with the past. She noted that:

The countryside was flat and the landscape was dotted with farmhouses and barns just as my father had described it in his letter home some 54 years ago. In fact it took very little imagination to see these men walking, with little to no food, no medical help in atrocious winter conditions. (*POW WOW*, December 2000, p. 18)

While her visit to the site of Stalag VIII B was a “truly emotional time,” it failed to give her the closure she expected (*POW WOW*, December 2000, p. 18). Instead, when she stood on the same ground her father had, she realised how little she knew about the POW experience. Moreover, most of what remained of the camp was broken and merely consisted of “foundations, brick walls, earth mounds etc.” (*POW WOW*, December 2000, p. 18) Time had remade these sites

into something different, something that did not quite match the descriptions in her father’s letters. Makepeace experienced a similar disconnect with historical sites when she cycled the route that British POWs took on the Sandakan death march. She noted,

I would like to say that having been there, I can better imagine what they went through, but I can’t. Perhaps that is testament to the extremities of human endurance they experienced; so far from our lives today that it is impossible to envisage in the slightest, even when one is stood on the same physical spot. (Cycling the Sandakan Death March, 2018)

In a modest attempt to imprint some meaning onto the former camp at Lamsdorf, Read placed poppies at one of the camp’s memorials “hoping that one day someone will recognise them and know that Kiwis had been there” (*POW WOW*, December 2000, p. 18). Although the visit to Poland did not conclude her search for knowledge, she noted that, “it had been a huge privilege to have been there and somehow felt that I had paid my respects to JA Macpherson—a man I never knew except that he was my father” (*POW WOW*, December 2000, p. 18).

Conclusion

Traditional narratives of wartime service usually featured bravery, action, and sacrifice. Initially, ex-POWs felt that their experience did not fit within that framework. However, over time they began to feel more comfortable sharing their stories, even though they tended to over-emphasize acts of aggressive resistance. The New Zealand ex-Prisoners of War Association was central to ensuring the men felt comfortable and confident that their wartime service was meaningful. The camaraderie, which was evident at ex-POW sporting events, reunions, and in the columns of the *POW WOW*, was essential in binding the men together. Through an examination of the association’s quarterly publication, this paper has argued that ex-POWs reinterpreted their captivity and developed a shared narrative. The promotion of a more positive depiction of their experience continued throughout the association’s life, with Major R.D Short assuring those gathered at the group’s final reunion that “we know we did our job to the best of our ability, and we stand proud of the collective effort and our fallen comrades who didn’t make it home” (Final Reunion, 2005, p. 22). It was not only the ex-POWs who felt left out of New Zealand’s wartime history, but also there were suggestions that the effects of confinement stretched over generations. To remedy this gap in knowledge relatives sought out ex-POWs who may have served with their fathers, learned about the conditions they endured, and made pilgrimages to sites of former camps. While some ex-POWs were reluctant to speak about their captivity, their stories found some sense of closure through these familial efforts.

Note

¹ In New Zealand on 25 February 1943 Japanese POWs staged a protest, which spiraled into a riot, resulting in the death of one guard and 48 prisoners. Retrieved from <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/49-killed-during-riot-at-featherston-pow-camp>.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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