To Hell and Back

Prisoners, escapers and their helpers in Thessaloniki's WW2 POW Camp

Military History & Heritage Victoria - 4th Biennial Conference

10th April 2022

Jim Claven

[SLIDE 1]

Thank you.

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are gathered and pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging.

Yesterday we heard speakers discuss the Greek campaign. Today I will outline the experience of the thousands of Australian prisoners after the end of the campaign focusing on the Thessaloniki POW camp. I will also make reference to some of those who escaped the camp, aided by brave local civilians.

My presentation draws on my research using primary and secondary sources, as well as my own field research in Greece.

[SLIDE 2-3]

Captured! – Allied troops at the moment of capture on Crete

Prisoner - Into captivity

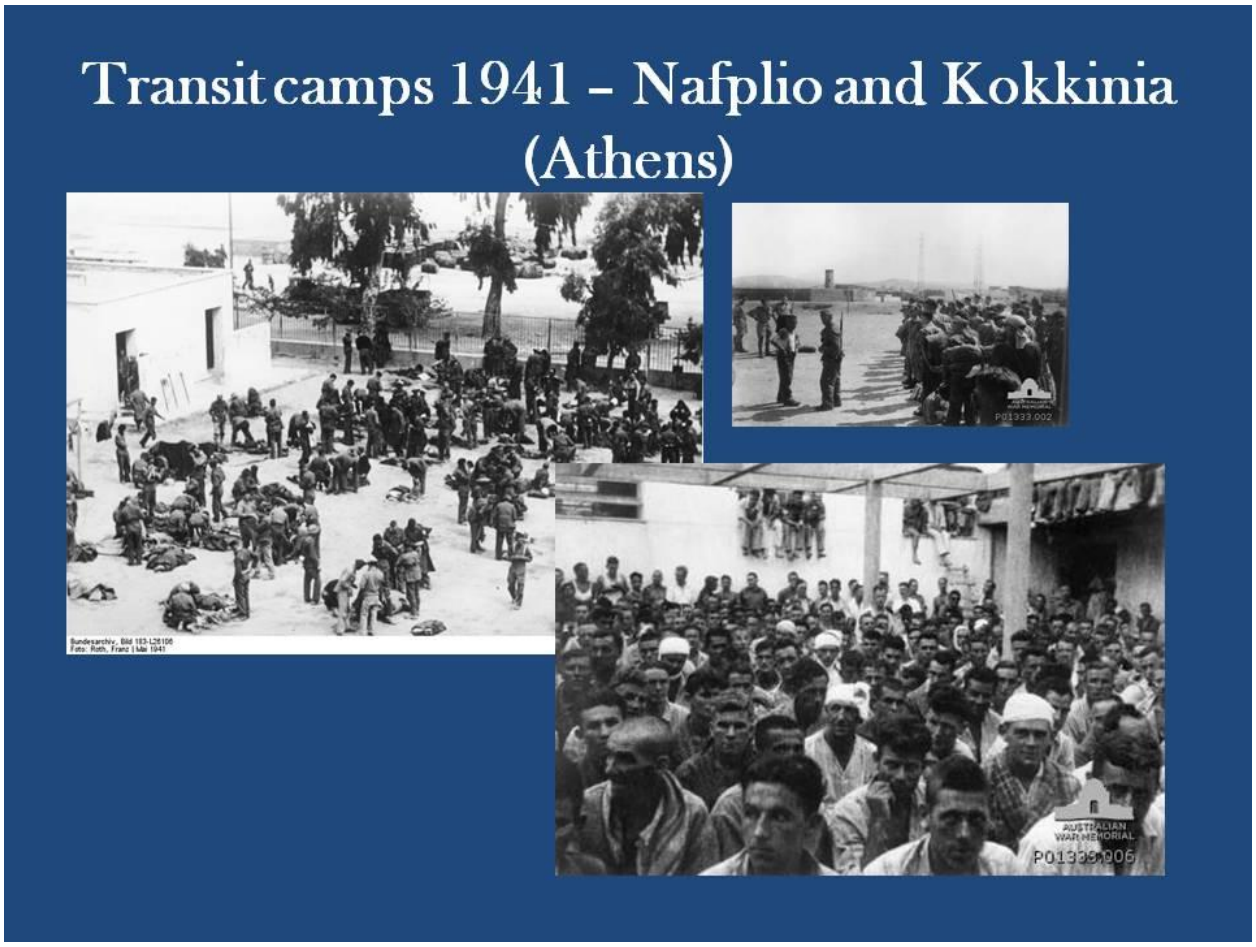
At the end of the campaign in June 1941 some 22,000 Allied soldiers remained in Greece as prisoners of war. Amongst these were over 5,000 Australians. This represented the largest group of Australian prisoners captured in the war to date – only to be surpassed later by those captured in Malaya.

In Greece and Crete, the final orders for surrender were often made on the evacuation beaches. As the last evacuation ships left, orders would be issued to prepare to surrender. Troops began destroying or disabling their weapons and contact was made with the advancing Germans to deliver the surrender order.

Troops would often be given the option of trying to escape capture. And this would be an individual and a brave decision. But despite the support of their Greek helpers, for many of these evaders their escape would be in vain.

For those left behind the feeling of defeat and capture could be overwhelming. Digger memoirs reveal expressions of shame and guilt, of failing their mates, of utter uselessness.

[SLIDE 4]



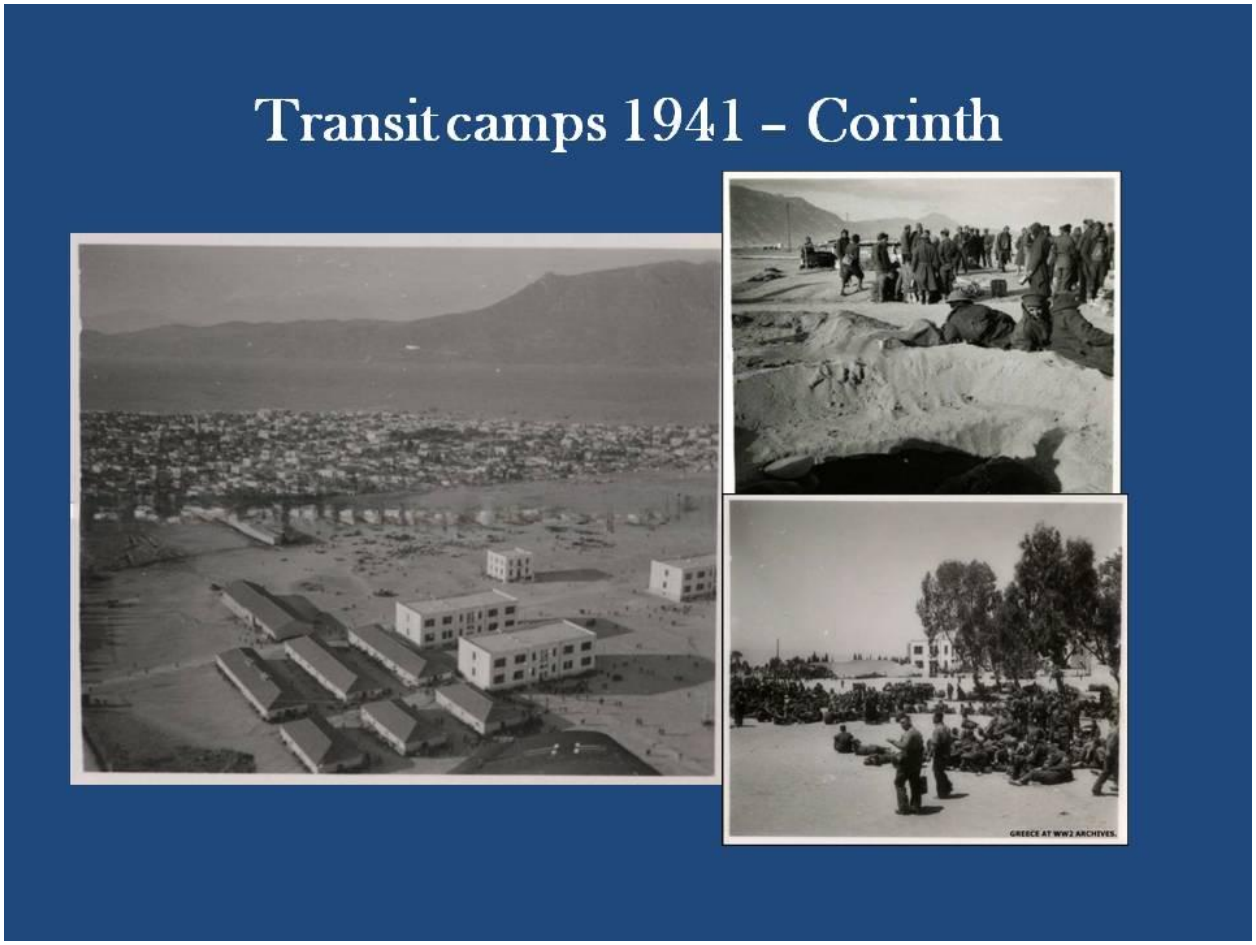
The captured diggers were held first in a variety of temporary and ill-prepared camps. These were usually established near where the major concentrations of troops had been captured - at Lamia and Larissa in central Greece, at Kokkinia outside Athens, at Corinth, Argos, Nafplio and Kalamata in the Peloponnese, and at Galatas, Skines and Chania on Crete. This slide shows the camps at Nafplio and Kokkinia.

Some were former Greek Army barracks or camps for holding Italian prisoners. Some no more than a field, a school ground or a cottage. All of these camps shared common features – poor sanitation and inadequate food. The camps were

rough and ready, and not very secure. Some captured Allied soldiers escaped easily from these facilities.

This slide shows some of the sites of the former transit camps – the schoolyard at Nafplio, where 3,300 Allied prisoners were held by the end of April, before their transportation to Corinth a few days later.

[SLIDE 5]



This slide shows the Corinth Camp, the photographs taken by a German war photographer. The conditions in the barracks of this camp were so unhealthy that many POWs preferred to sleep in slit trenches they dug into the grounds of the camp. You can see them in one of these photographs.

POW's were brought here from late April and by early May some 8,000 Allied prisoners were assembled at the Corinth POW camp, including between 900 and

1,000 Australians. The camp was a former Greek Army barracks described by prisoners as being filthy, old and full of vermin. The camp started to close from 5th June when the first prisoners made their journey north.

[SLIDE 6]

This slide shows the sites of three of these transit camps today – at Corinth, Nafplio and Skines on Crete.

The Way North

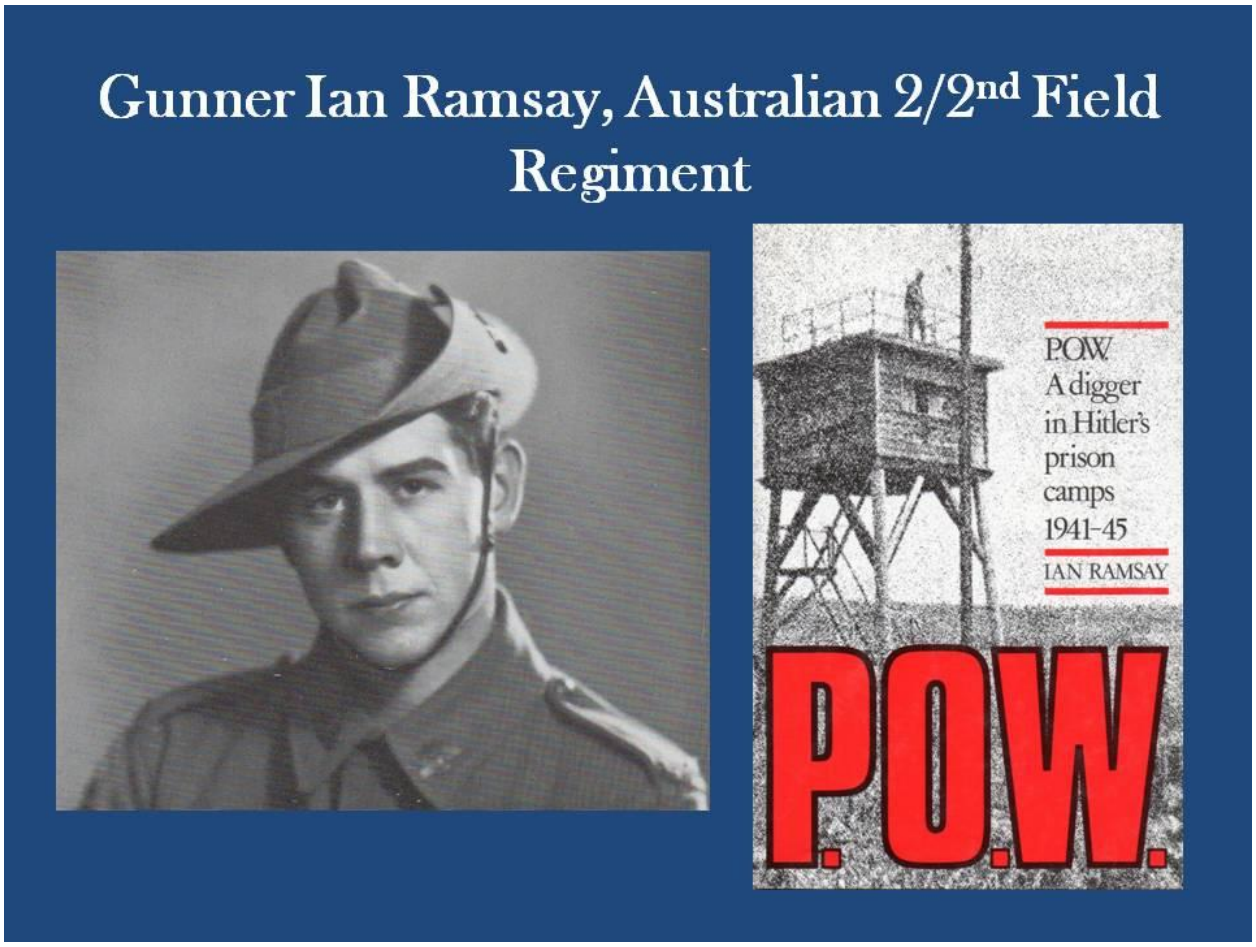
Gradually but steadily the prisoners were moved north from across Greece to Thessaloniki. Their journey was often tortuous, train journeys being interrupted by breaks in the railway line due to bombing and the lack of rolling stock. The weary and often sick or wounded soldiers would have to continue their journey – often across hundreds of kilometers - by truck or even on foot.

Australian Private Ralph Churches of Anzac Corps HQ remembered his long journey from Corinth to Thessaloniki, a combination of train journeys and long marches, made more difficult by the poor condition of the prisoners, some barefoot and all gnawed by hunger.

Yet as they were moved north, many of the prisoners would record later the kindness of the local population and their support when some made their escape.

Private Ralph Churches recalled how local women approached the prisoners in their cattle trucks, giving them food, despite the personal risk they faced from the German guards.

[SLIDE 7]



Gunner Ian Ramsay of the 2/2nd Field Regiment from Toorak, who had been captured at Nafplio, remembers how their Austrian guards warned the local

population to stay away from the prisoners as they assembled in the main square of Argos.

Yet as they marched through the town, an elderly woman threw a loaf of bread to the prisoners from her window. The bread was confiscated, the prisoner who had caught it violently dealt with and the elderly woman led away by the German guards to an uncertain fate.

Another young girl was more fortunate, thrusting some cigarettes into Ian's pocket as they left Argos. She dashed off down an alley before the German guards saw her. As Ian wrote:

> *"The girl had risked horrible and painful reprisals in showing her loyalty to the Allies and her sympathy for the prisoners. The Greeks are fine allies, loyal, brave and sympathetic."*

[SLIDE 8]

A few prisoners would seize opportunities to escape during the long march north.

Some would merely start to lag behind the column and make a dart to freedom. This is how Sydney-born Sergeant Richard Turner of the Australian Army Service Corps made his escape after being captured at Megara. Along with another prisoner, he left the column as it crossed a hairpin bend.

Others hid where they could during the short halts in the march, hoping not to be missed when the march recommenced. Three diggers from New South Wales hid in a drain during a stop near Florina and Warrant Officer Thomas Boulter, a Frankston-born lawyer, left his column near Lamia to hide in a bush.

All of these POW's would succeed in evading re-capture – but only with the help of local civilians. Richard was hidden by Ioannis Kallinikos from the village of Livanatas for a year and a half. The three diggers from NSW were helped by

villagers throughout central Greece until they were taken by Greek fishermen from Volos to Skiathos and on across the Aegean to Smyrne in neutral Turkey.

Thomas would be taken in by a local farmer, working in his fields in return for food and shelter. He would move from village to village, aided by local helpers, eventually reaching Evia and from thence to Skyros, Turkey and back to Egypt.

But the vast majority of prisoners remained in captivity.

Those who travelled by sea - the voyage took around five days, the transport and hospital vessels hugging the coast to avoid Allied submarines.

Some voyages could be enjoyable. A large batch of sick and wounded that left the Kokkinia hospital POW camp near Athens in late August 1941 travelled to the Piraeus docks in large passenger buses. They embarked on the Italian hospital ship *Gradisca*, enjoying good care and food from the Italian medical staff.

For others the voyage was less enjoyable. After marching to the harbor, the prisoners battened down in the ships hold for the night, sometimes for the whole voyage, with no light, and sharing the space with rats. Food was insufficient to avoid hunger, if they were lucky prisoners were issued with bully beef and dry biscuits each day. Others were thrown raw fish from the decks above – *"it was like feeding the seals"*, one digger remembered.

Even on the sea voyages, prisoners thought of escape. Western Australian railway worker Private Sam Stratton of the 2/11th Battalion recounted how the prisoners *"were always looking for a chance to go over the side"* as the transports hugged the coast on its way to Thessaloniki. New Zealand Lieutenant "Sandy" Thomas discussed taking control of his lightly guarded ship, only being dissuaded when informed by the Greek crew that the Germans would sink the ship – and its human cargo - if this occurred.

And so they travelled north – by land and by sea - to the once beautiful waterfront of Thessaloniki.

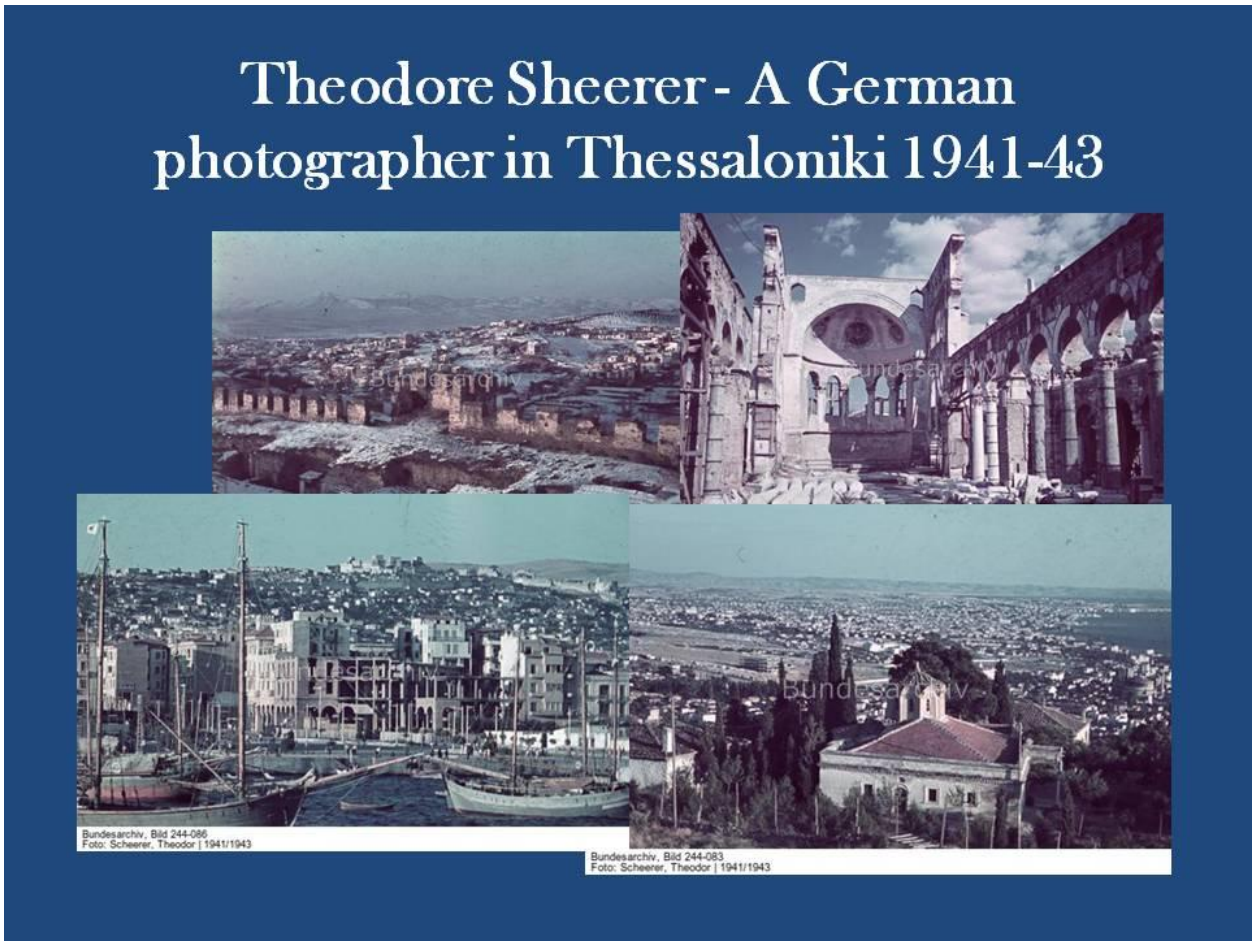
Thessaloniki

As they arrived they saw a city under occupation.

[SLIDE 9]

Thessaloniki had fallen to the German Army in early April 1941 and would remain occupied along with the rest of Greece for four long years. From its harbor, the Germans had quickly moved on to occupy many of the Islands of the northern and central Aegean.

[SLIDE 10]



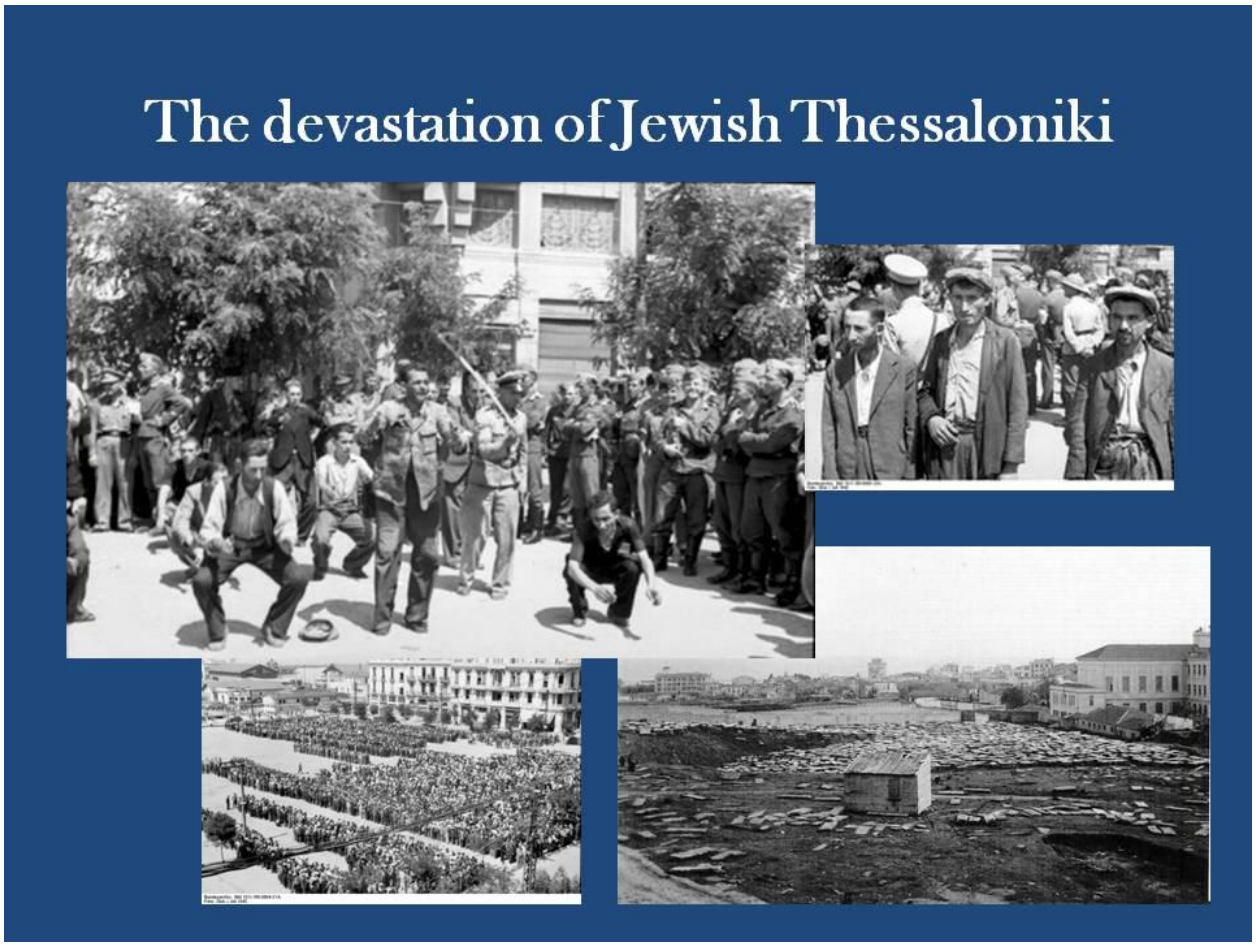
German army photographer Theodore Sheerer's colour photographs show nothing of the dark side of life under German rule.

The occupation fell heavily on its population. Like the rest of Greece, the locals suffered the looting of their goods and provisions by Germans.

Soon the German and other Axis occupiers would begin the formal commandeering of foodstuffs and essential supplies. As Greece was divided into occupation zones with different occupiers, with different rules, regulations and impositions, normal food distribution and commerce was disrupted. Combined with the war's disruption of the 1940/41 harvest, food production plummeted.

Added to this situation, 48,000 refugees fled or were expelled to Thessaloniki from the Bulgarian occupation zone to the east. By October 1941 some 100,000 residents were being fed by municipal soup kitchens. Across Greece, an estimated 450,000 civilians died of starvation during the occupation.

[SLIDE 11]



The years of occupation would also witness the devastation of the city's large Jewish community. From a population of 50,000 in 1943, fewer than a hundred remained in the city on its liberation in October 1944. 48,000 of this unique Sephardic community were murdered in Auschwitz. The Jewish Museum in Thessaloniki is a welcome reminder of the once large and thriving community that the Nazi's brought to an abrupt and violent end.

Those who joined the growing resistance or who helped their Jewish neighbours suffered severe punishment by the occupation authorities. Thessaloniki saw the foundation of one of the first resistance groups in Greece - called *Eleftheria* or Freedom.

[SLIDE 12]

Those caught would often be imprisoned in the German prison camp that was located at the former Pavlos Melas Greek Army barracks to the north-east of the city. For a time a small number of Allied officers would also be imprisoned here. Its ruined buildings stand to this day.

Arrival

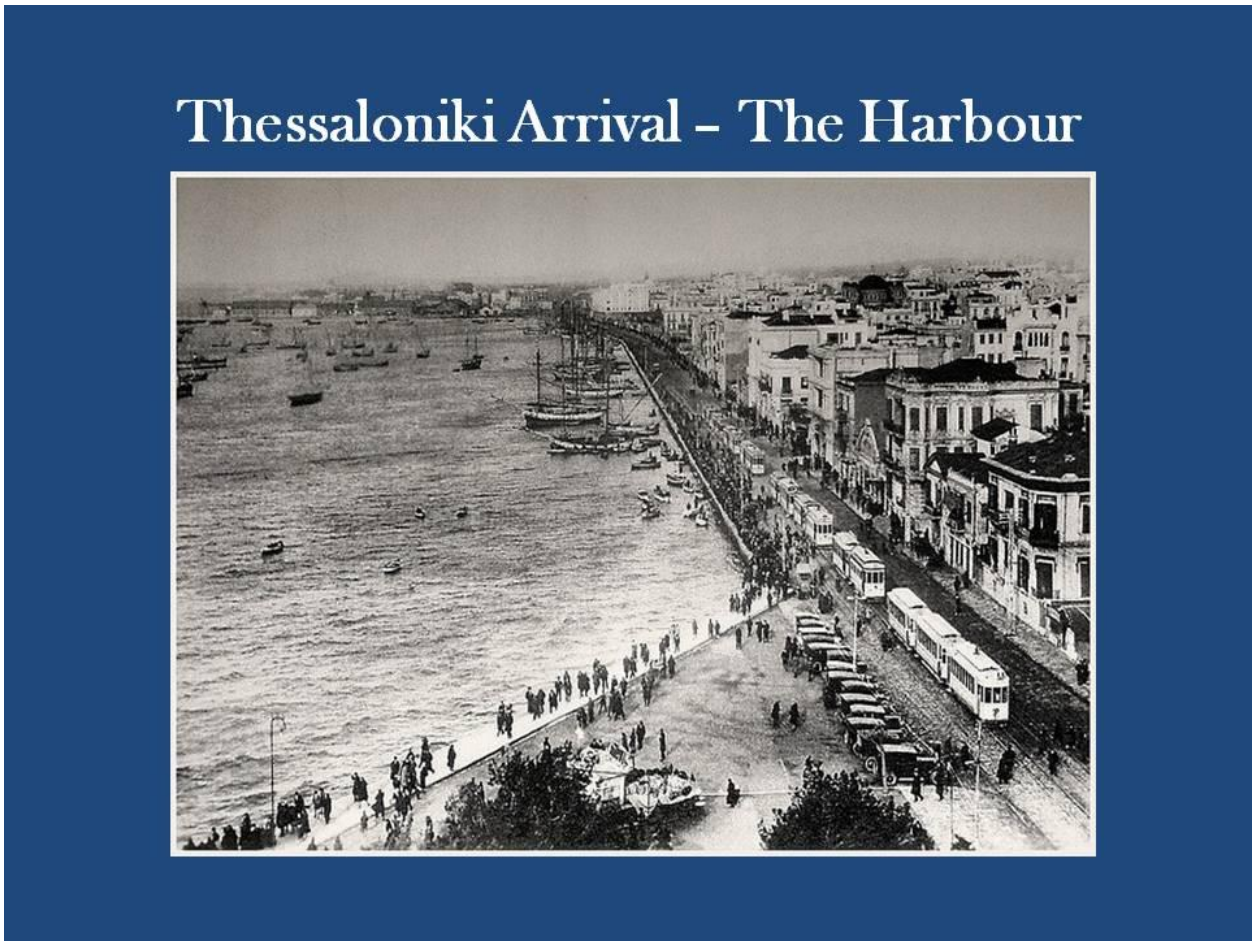
[SLIDE 13]

Thessaloniki Arrival – The Railway Station

Those Allied prisoners who arrived by train wrote of their arrival at the City's main railway station. From there, they were marched four miles, along its beautiful waterfront, to the famous White Tower and on to the camp where they would be housed.

British Trooper Ernest Chapman of the Royal Tank Regiment recounted the march from the station, with the exhausted men drawing on their reserves of pride, marching in formation as if on the parade ground.

[SLIDE 14]



Lieutenant "Sandy" Thomas - would write of his arrival at Thessaloniki's harbor on the small cargo steamer *Kreta* in late October 1941 along with another 50 Anzac patients from the hospital camp at Kokkinia near Athens:

> *"Soon after midday on 30th October, with snow capped Olympus on our left, we steamed up the Gulf of Salonika, to tie up in that historic port. Above the harbour the old stone city walls, the towers and fortresses standing out on the hill gave a medieval atmosphere but around the docks things were modern enough … German marines, none of whom seemed more than 18, paraded on the wharves. … everybody seemed busy … we were driven along the waterfront, past the great circular tower of Salonika, and in a few minutes were at the gates of the prison camp."*

[SLIDE 15]

Another New Zealand soldier who arrived by sea was Warrant Officer Jack Elsworthy. After days in the hold of a transport ship as it sailed to Thessaloniki from Athens, he recounted that many of the prisoners could hardly stand as they disembarked.

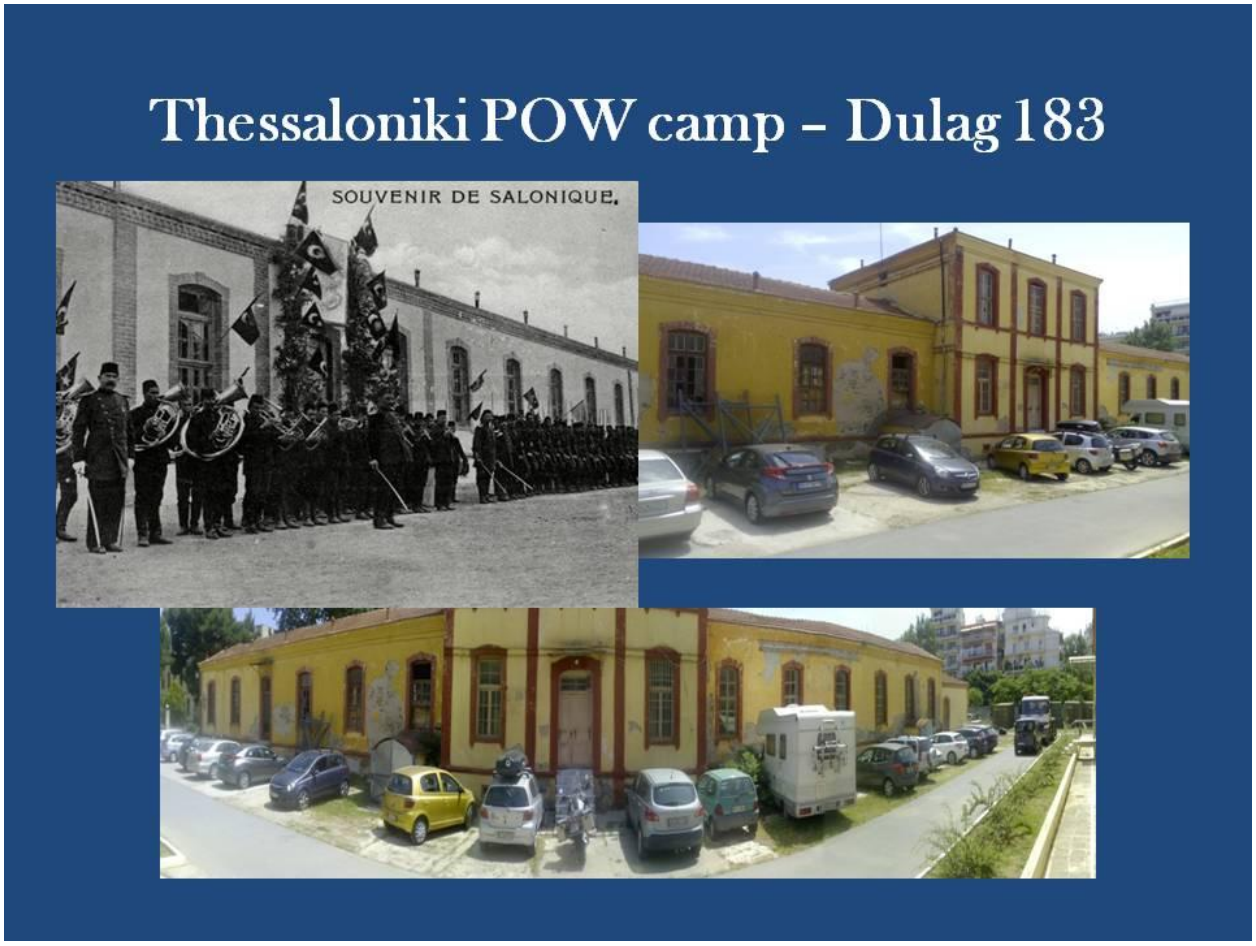
Some prisoners were forced to run along the waterfront, under the gaze of the local population who had been ordered to watch the procession. Machine-gun posts were placed at each intersection. Any civilians – male or female - who made the mistake of smiling, waving or throwing some food to the prisoners were beaten.

Pakenham-born Corporal Donald Watt of the 2/7th Battalion tells of a local woman being shot dead in the street for trying to give the prisoners food as they marched through the city. When he arrived at the camp Windsor-born Sergeant Keith Hooper of the 2/6thBattalion and his contingent of prisoners were instructed

to stand in the parade ground under the sun while the German officers had their lunch. Many prisoners collapsed.

Thessaloniki POW Transit Camp - Dulag 183

[SLIDE 16]

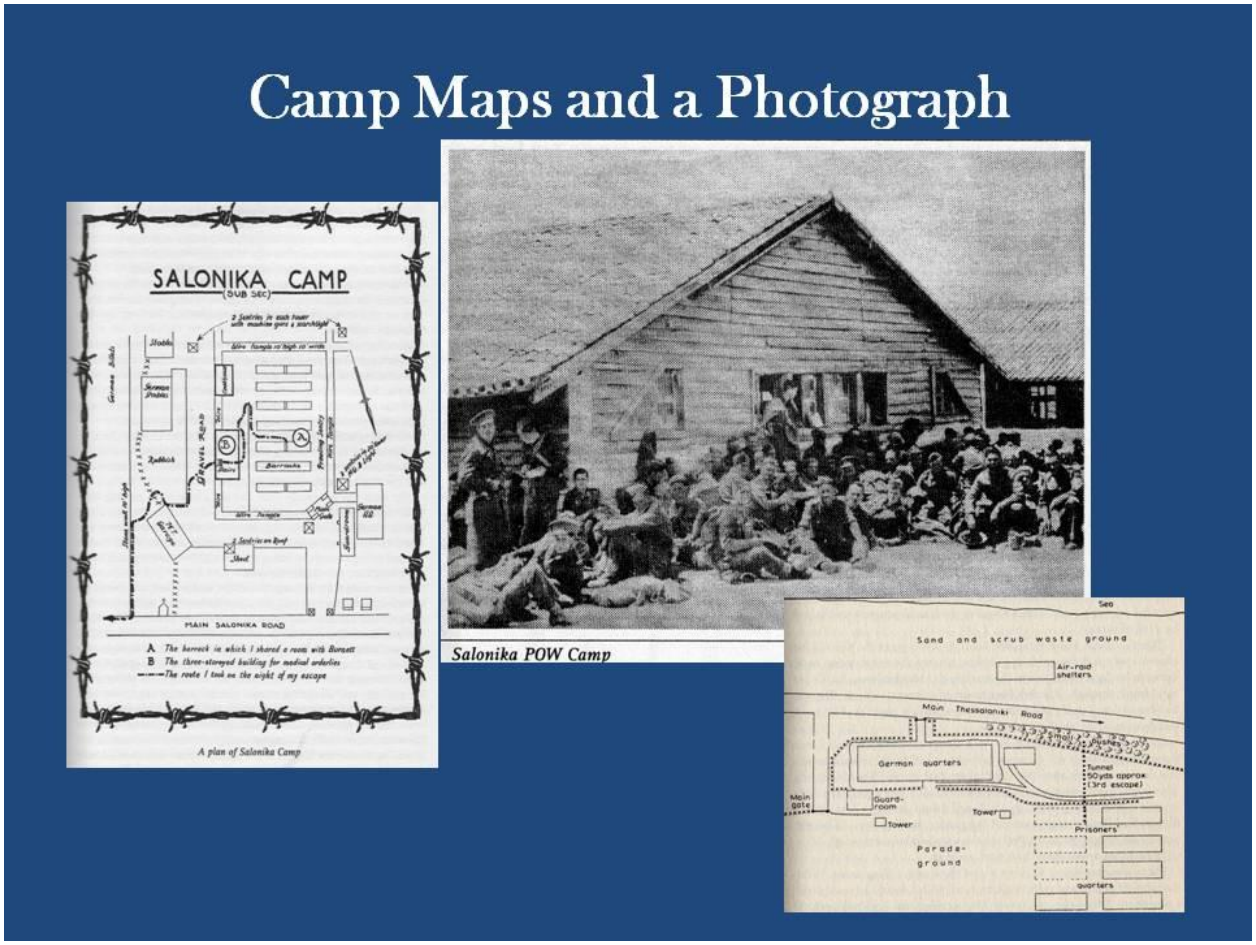


The POW camp they arrived at was designated Dulag or transit camp 183. It lay just to the east of the central area of Thessaloniki, on the site of today's War Museum and NATO military base. The area has been a military zone since Ottoman times, rising from the harbor and stretching in a large rectangle up to the hills that surround the city.

The camp was over one hundred years old, having been erected during the Greek War of Independence as an Ottoman Army barracks and subsequently used as a

Greek Army barracks following the city's liberation in 1913. By the outbreak of the Second World War the buildings had been condemned by the Greek authorities.

[SLIDE 17]



This slide shows some maps of the camp drawn up by former Allied inmates, along with a rare photo of one of the dilapidated barracks..

One wonders what went through the minds of the Allied prisoners as they arrived and looked on their new accommodation - a collection of broken down – mostly wooden – buildings surrounded by the bare clay ground and enclosed by barbed-wire and guard towers.

The camp would operate from May until November 1941, containing both officers and men. In May the camp held 300 Empire prisoners, along with 1,600 Yugoslav prisoners. This rose to 7,000 in June as the first drafts from Corinth and the

Peloponnese began to arrive. Later the prisoners captured on Crete would join those from other areas of Greece to swell the camp population until it rose as high as 12,000.

The duration of prisoners stay at the camp varied, some for three or more months, others two or three weeks and some just thirty-six hours.

A number of Greek policemen and civilians were also brought to the camp and kept in its dungeons, many under sentence of death for helping the Allied prisoners.

Over its six months of existence it would earn for itself an infamous reputation.

As I walked around the former camp site in 2016, accompanied by the Director of the War Museum - Colonel Panagiotis Tziridis - it was hard to imagine how the camps 12,000 prisoners fared in this small space.

The conditions for the prisoners in the camp were awful. Many of the prisoners arrived suffering from war wounds and the privations of weeks in the ill-provisioned temporary transit camps. Now they were subjected to unsanitary living conditions and a lack of adequate food. Soon many would be ill and some die.

In the words of one prisoner - Private Sam Stratton of the 2/11th Battalion - it was *"a Hell camp."*

Living in Vermin

The prisoners' accommodation within the camp was unhealthy to say the least. The prisoners lay on the hut floors without bedding. The camp authorities made little or no attempt to provide blankets or bedding on the floor on which rows of men had to lie. Some officers were given beds, but the crowded accommodation ensured the rapid spread of vermin and disease throughout the inmates.

Corporal Donald Watt described the bugs and lice which infected his clothes and burrowed into his scalp. Warrant Officer Jack Elsworthy, wrote:

"The block where we slept was a long stone building with a wooden floor, and as well as rats it was infested with every known form of insect. We slept on the floor and at night there was a constant sound of men moaning and fidgeting. Our hands were never still as we scratched our bodies or brushed our faces to get rid of bed bugs, mosquitoes, spiders and other pests."

Despite the infestations, it was only towards the end of the camp that prisoners would report the Germans introducing disinfectant and the accommodation barracks being fumigated.

Almost every barrack had a single water tap and four latrines for the use of its 250 or so inmates. The latrines were two holes cut in a concrete floor where prisoners had to squat. Balance was difficult amongst the mess and at night even worse as no lighting was allowed.

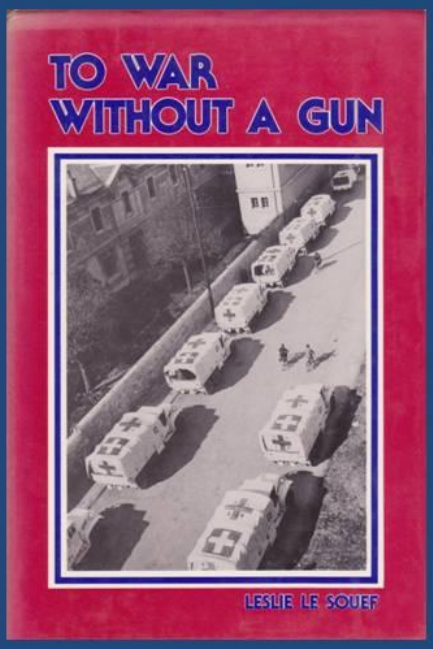
Lieutenant "Sandy" Thomas remembered that the lack of proper sanitation and drainage resulted in the camp and its inmates being deluged by millions of flies, swarming around the latrines and cookhouses and forming ugly black heaps where refuse was dropped. Scores of mangy cats slunk around the barracks. Such an environment was a recipe for ill-health and disease.

Starvation Diets

Added to their already weakened constitutions and poor living conditions the insufficient food provided and lack of water further undermined the prisoner's health. Food was the worst that the prisoners had yet experienced. Daily rations are described as having comprised three-quarters of a hard Italian army biscuit, about four ounces of mouldy bread, a pint of watery lentil soup with an occasional flavouring of horseflesh, and two hot drinks of German "mint" tea.

[SLIDE 18]

Lt Col Leslie Le Souef, 2/7th Field Ambulance – Camp Inmate



Perth-born Australian medical officer Lieutenant Colonel Leslie Le Soufe of the 2/7th Field Ambulance described the meat ration as *"a skeleton with the meat stripped from it."* Meal time was described by one prisoner as follows:

> *"The main meal of the day was served at 11.30am in the morning. Euphemistically called soup, it came in a large open container holding about 30 gallons. The clear liquid had grease floating at the top and a few beans at the bottom. The server was constantly urged to keep stirring as he ladled it out but few were lucky enough to find many beans in their portion."*

Some prisoners were so hungry that they fought for a piece of stale bread the German guards gave to the camp's horses. Prisoners became so hungry and desperate that the work details at the stables within the camp were regarded as a *"plum job"* as this provided the opportunity to eat some bran mash or grain – or even to suck on straw – all fodder provided for the horses!

Corporal Donald Watt wrote that constant hunger meant that some even feared cannibalism amongst the prisoners.

Some locals tried to sneak small articles of food, such as apples or tomatoes to the prisoners. If they were caught by the German guards, they would be brutally beaten with rifles – whether they were men or women, irrespective of age.

Yet later - after October - the Greek Red Cross led by a Mrs Riadis successfully petitioned the Germans to be able to distribute foodstuffs to the prisoners, and later in November as the camp was nearing closure International Red Cross parcels began to arrive.

The poor diet meant that men lost weight, suffered malnutrition and the incidence of famine edema and beriberi rose to hundreds of cases. One prisoner's weight fell from twelve to just seven stone in a matter of weeks. And despite its prevalence the German medical officer refused to recognize beriberi amongst the prisoners. However the outbreak of malaria in the camp did force the German authorities to make a daily issue of quinine.

When the medical staff of the captured 2/5th Australian General Hospital arrived for a brief thirty-six hour stay at the camp in summer they recorded the poor health conditions prevalent in the camp. They estimated that the food rations were *"at practically starvation level of about 1200 calories".* This compared to the average of 2,700 calories provided to German POW's in British camps.

Many prisoners like Sergeant Ron Phillips of the 2/6th Battalion felt the Germans starved the prisoners to reduce their will to resist – a conclusion supported by the Australian medical historian of the war.

Added to the poor diet and illnesses, many below the rank of sergeant – and even some non-commissioned officers and officers in defiance of the Geneva Convention - were required to undertake heavy work outside the camp whether sick or not.

Medical Services

Medical treatment was largely provided by Allied medical staff using whatever medicines they had managed to bring with them. The exception was a German dental service operating in the camp which also serviced prisoners.

Based in two brick buildings within the camp, the prisoner medical services in the camp would eventually provide beds for 160 patients. Originally staffed by Yugoslav doctors and orderlies, these would be replaced by British and other Empire medical staff as they arrived at the camp.

They would struggle to cope with the diseases prevalent in the camp. While statistics vary, evidence suggestions that the hospital tended to over 3,000 patients (including at one time 800 patients) and the medical inspection room treated 400 cases daily throughout June.

Some record the camp having a high mortality rate, with carts leaving the camp with the dead every day. Yet the official New Zealand POW historian estimated that deaths in the camp were limited to around eighty prisoners, no doubt due to the efforts of the Allied medical officers and orderlies.

Brutality and Murder

The brutality of the guards and violations of the Geneva Convention on the treatment of prisoners was a feature of the camp recounted often in prisoner memoirs.

As soon as Warrant Officer Jack Elsworthy arrived at Thessaloniki he noticed a difference in the guards. These differed from those who had captured and held them in the other transit camps in Crete.

They had been frontline soldiers who treated their prisoners with a degree of respect. The guards at Thessaloniki were different. They were too unfit or too young to serve in battle. As Jack said *"the guards at Salonika were second-rate scum and sadistic bullies."*

Another prisoner - Lance Corporal "Skip" Welsh of the 2/6th Battalion from Frankston - recorded the shooting of a thirsty British prisoner at the waterfront who sought to break ranks to drink from a water pipe.

In the camp there was much indiscriminate shooting by sentries, one New Zealander being shot dead without warning and another wounded for being allegedly too near the trip-wire inside the camp perimeter. As Ascot Vale-born Doctor Captain Alan King of the 2/7th Field Ambulance remembered, "*there was a lot of shooting going on*."

Some officers who tried sleeping at night outside the cramped, infested huts found it a dangerous activity, as they were subject to indiscriminate shooting by guards. One night a sentry threw a grenade into a barrack latrine because someone had lit a match, and three men were seriously injured. Far from being reprimanded, the camp commandant congratulated the sentry on his action.

And the bodies of prisoners who were shot while trying to escape were left for up to three days as a warning to others, some moved to the parade ground in full view of the camp inmates.

On at least one occasion the whole camp was ordered to stand on parade from dawn to dusk in 100 degree heat. Those on work parties were subjected to screaming, bullying, kicking and knocking about with rifle butts.

The camp authorities placed little check on such acts of brutality and delayed granting permission for delegates of the International Red Cross Committee or of a neutral power to inspect the camp.

"It was Hell"

The memoirs of many prisoners abound with references to the Hellish nature of the camp.

One digger – from NSW, Lance Corporal George Blanch of the 2/2nd Battalion – recounted that words could not describe the terrible nature of the conditions in the camp. If hell was any worse than Dulag 183, he sure didn't want to go there. Melbourne-born Private Reginald Lindley of the 2/11th Battalion wrote of the camp:

> *"At our concentration camp in Salonika it was hell. They were starving us. We could hardly walk about. We were living like dogs. You could not move*

around the compound at night without fear of being shot. A few boys have been shot. If we are here much longer we will be mad or dead."

Warrant Officer Jack Elsworthy concluded his story of the camp stating that he had *"not met a single person who had a good thing to say about Salonika or any of the Germans there."*

The End of the Camp – And Escape

By the end of September the camp had been practically cleared. Those who were too ill to be moved, together with the skeleton medical staff and a number of remaining prisoners were shifted to four barracks wired off in a smaller area. And in November the camp finally closed.

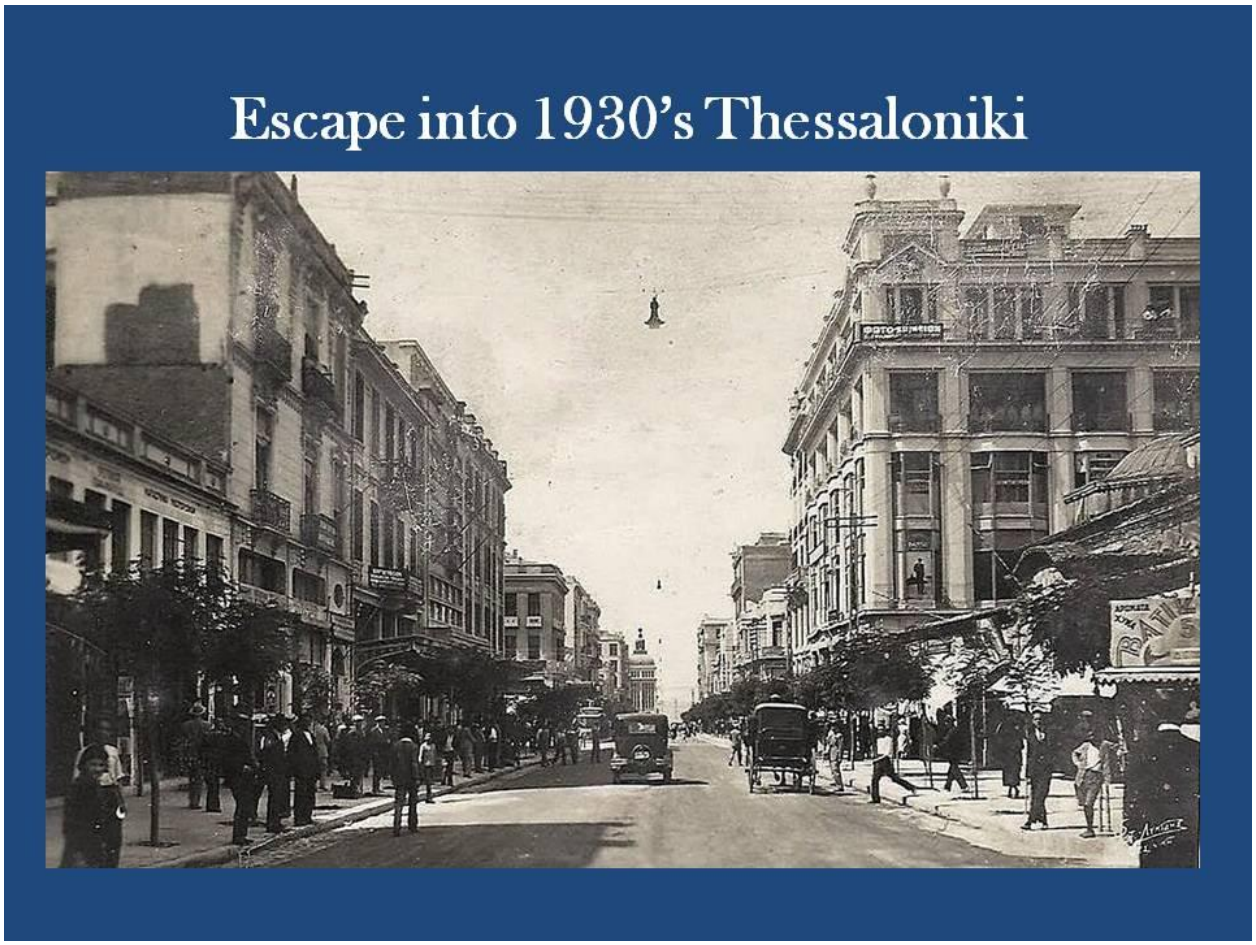
The conditions in the camp led many prisoners to escape almost immediately. And many succeeded – some via the camps sewers, some through the gates and others on the train journeys from Thessaloniki north – always aided and helped by the local Greek population.

Some joined the growing resistance but most made their way south in search of local boats – the famed Greek *caique* – to take them across the northern Aegean, first to Turkey and then back to the Allied bases in the Middle East.

Escape could be easy.

One British prisoner escaped on the march from the camp to the railway for the journey to Germany. During his time at the camp, **Private Ginger Rickson** had managed to secure a few items of civilian clothing – a beret and a jacket. As he marched through the city, Ginger changed his clothes and darted from the marching column of prisoners to safety out of sight of the guards. Another prisoner saw him wink in recognition as he casually leaned on a lamppost as the column marched on!

[SLIDES 19]



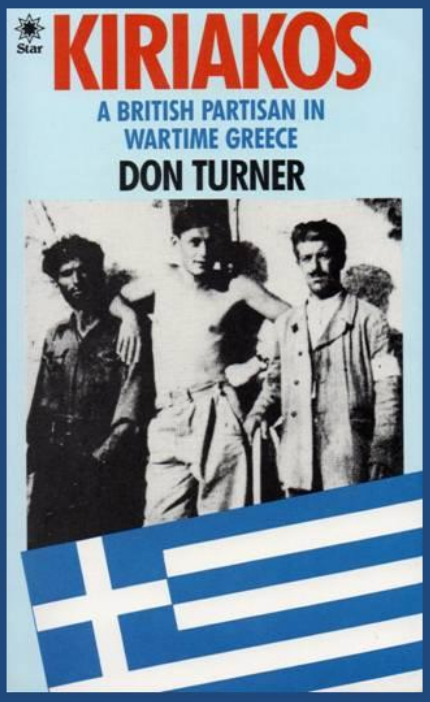
These images reproduce the city as it looked in the 1930's and as it would have been experienced by these young Allied escapers, seeking freedom and help in the streets of Thessaloniki.

Finding a safe place in the city required the help of sympathetic locals. Lieutenant Colonel Le Souef wrote that the local Greek civilian charged with maintaining the grounds of one of the First World War Allied War cemeteries in the city had successfully hidden a number of camp escapers within the cemetery. After the war he was decorated by the British government for his service.

[SLIDE 20]

The Escapers – Trooper Ernest Chapman

Trooper Ernest Chapman second from left with his Greek resistance comrades



British Trooper Ernest Chapman escaped a number of times from the trains taking him to Germany only to be re-captured. He would finally succeed by organizing an escape team and digging a fifty metre tunnel from the barracks to freedom.

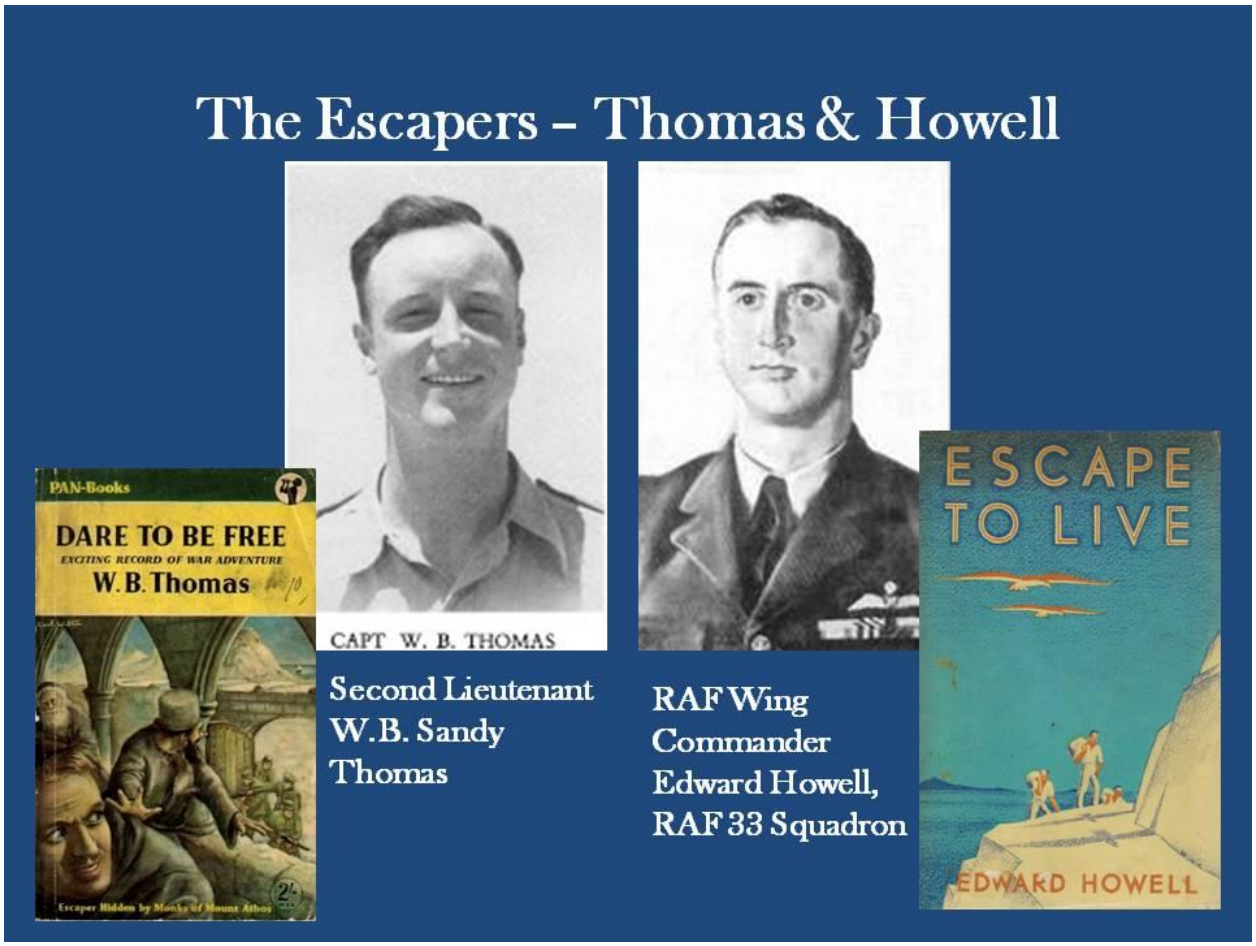
It would be on his third attempt that the tunnel would lead to freedom and a wartime life with the Greek resistance in northern Greece. And every time he escaped, he was helped by local villagers, like the black mustached Christo, his wife Amalia and the villagers of Pili.

Others would escape using the storm water and other drains of the camp. A number of prisoners escaped using the camp latrine drain, a narrow brick and cement pipe that stretched for 200 yards before exiting beyond the camp perimeter into a nearby creek. But the death of a poor Cypriot prisoner in the drain, overpowered by the fumes, would block this route and alert the guards.

Twenty or thirty Australian prisoners also escaped through a storm water drain in the compound, with the guards distracted by the diversion of other Australian prisoners playing a two-up game!

Two or three men at a time made their way into the drain and to freedom. However their success attracted the attention of other prisoners and then the guards, who stopped the flood by killing all then in the drain with bursts machine-gun fire.

[SLIDE 21]

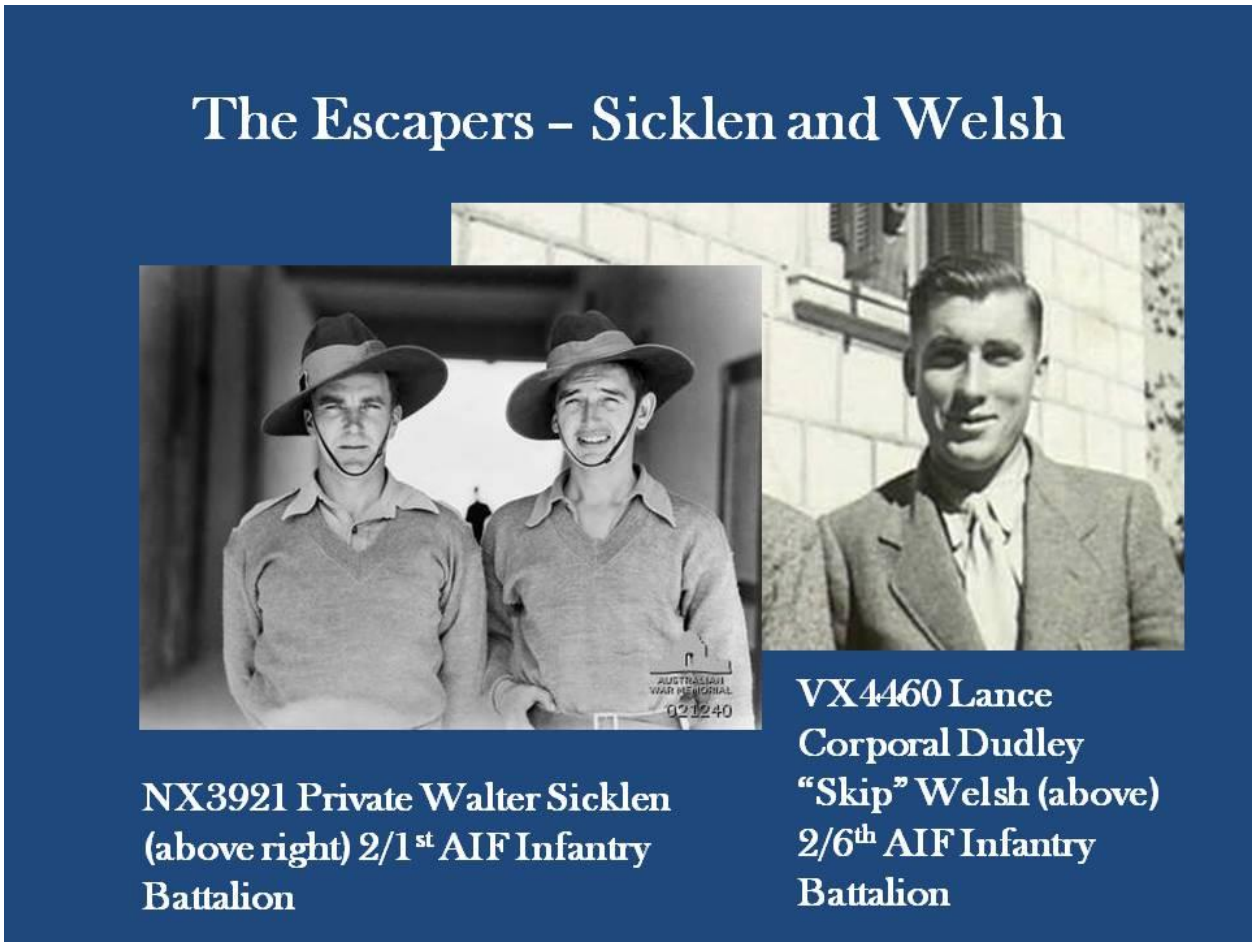


Lieutenant "Sandy" Thomas would weaken the fastenings on a camp gate, crawl through a wire fence and scale the outside wall to freedom. Wandering the city he was taken in and sheltered by poor locals, who shared their food with him. Sandy would evade capture for many months, being helped by various locals and

eventually the monks of the Khalkidhiki peninsula until he was able to reach Turkey.

Taking the same route was **British RAF Wing Commander Edward Howell** who had escaped from one of the camp hospitals. Again this escaper was helped by Greek villagers and a skipper who took him across the northern Aegean in his caique to Lemnos, Imbros and finally Chanakale.

[SLIDE 22]



Lance Corporal "Skip" Welsh, who had failed in his earlier attempt to escape using the camp latrine drain, was able to walk out of the camp a free man.

By August 1941, Skip had obtained an almost complete outfit of Greek civilian clothing. Wearing his prisoner clothes over these and unbeknownst to the guards, he joined a large working party of prisoners who were employed grooming horses

in the camp stables near an external gate of the camp. Hiding in a forage store and then hiding behind a horse at a water trough, Skip removed his uniform, revealing his Greek workman's clothes, and then walked out past the guard who assumed he was a local.

Walking free in Thessaloniki was particularly dangerous for Skip – if he had been caught in civilian clothes he risked being shot. He needed to get into a safe location and not wander the streets.

A poultry worker from Frankston, Skip felt he would be safer in the poorer part of the city, so he headed to the area near the railway station. After wandering around for two hours, he found safety and I quote:

> *"I went up to a … Greek lady who was sitting down with two little children in front of a row of cottages and said "I am an Australian prisoner", and without any further ado, she grabbed me by the arm, heaved me inside the house and slammed me in a room. Of course I got a bit nervy but within a quarter of an hour I was being overwhelmed … [with hospitality] and I was being called a hero …"*

He was moved to a safe house, where he was joined by four other escaped prisoners, including Katoomba-born Private Walter Sicklen of the 2/ 1st Battalion. This was the house of Enesta Costa, his sisters Despinis and Helen, and Enesta's mother and father. The family fed the prisoners and took them out each day to avoid the random German day-time house searches.

Skip stained his face with juniper berries, grew a moustache and tried to adopt what he thought were Greek mannerisms to avoid attracting attention during his outings. They walked the city and visited cinemas – as well as recording Axis shipping movements and coastal defence details.

Sadly, the family who helped Skip and his comrades would be discovered and only young Helen Costa escaped capture and death. Despite this terrible set back, their Greek helpers found other safe houses and eventually Skip, Walter and the others were taken by friendly guides south-east to Mount Athos.

Here a local hermit priest sailed with them to Imbros. Welcomed and fed, the local Turks took them to the Gallipoli battlefield, where Skip visited Lone Pine where his father had been wounded in 1915. And so on 10th October Skip and his comrades crossed into Allied-occupied Syria and freedom. On his return to Allied lines Skip would be recommended for the Military Medal but instead be merely Mentioned-in-Despatches for escaping and his reports on Axis defences and ship movements around Thessaloniki.

Skip never forgot the bravery of his Greek helpers and the terrible cost some of them were made to pay:

> *"The Greeks helped us to escape from the country. They guided us over the mountains, from village to village, each village supplying a guide to the next one. They helped us with food, Greek Orthodox priests gave us shelter and food in their churches and the police warned us of any approaching Germans on the route…. The Greeks were extremely kind to us. It amazed me that people who have everything to lose and nothing to gain could open their arms to us."*

Another Australian prisoner would escape and in the process find true love.

[SLIDE 23]

The Escapers - Slim Wrigley

Ioannis Papadopoulos, with daughter Xanthoula, before the war.

Slim Wrigley and Bruce Vary – escaped POW's ,Mount Pelion, Thessaly Greece 1943

Greek girl comes to wed soldier she sheltered

A YOUNG Greek girl who befriended a fugitive Australian soldier during the early fighting in Greece nine years ago, arrived in the Cyrenia yesterday to marry him.

We don't know how **Corporal Herbert "Slim" Wrigley** escaped from the camp, but escape he did in September 1941. A migrant from Lancashire in the UK, Slim was living in Yarraville when he enlisted at Caulfield in 1940.

Making his way safely through Thessaloniki, Slim made his way south to the remote village of Ritini, where he was sheltered for more than six months by the family of the school teacher, Ioannis Papadopoulos. It was while he was hidden with the Papadopoulos family that Slim noticed Ioannis' beautiful daughter, Xanthoula.

Like George Turner, Slim didn't just want to escape. Keen to continue the fight against the Germans in Greece, Slim joined the Greek resistance in the Mount Olympus area, taking part in various military operations.

Sick with pneumonia and malaria, Slim left Greece from Pelion on Christmas Day 1943 and soon arrived safely in Smyrne. For his work with the resistance, Slim was

granted the Italy Star – the Medal awarded to those Allied soldiers who served with the Greek resistance.

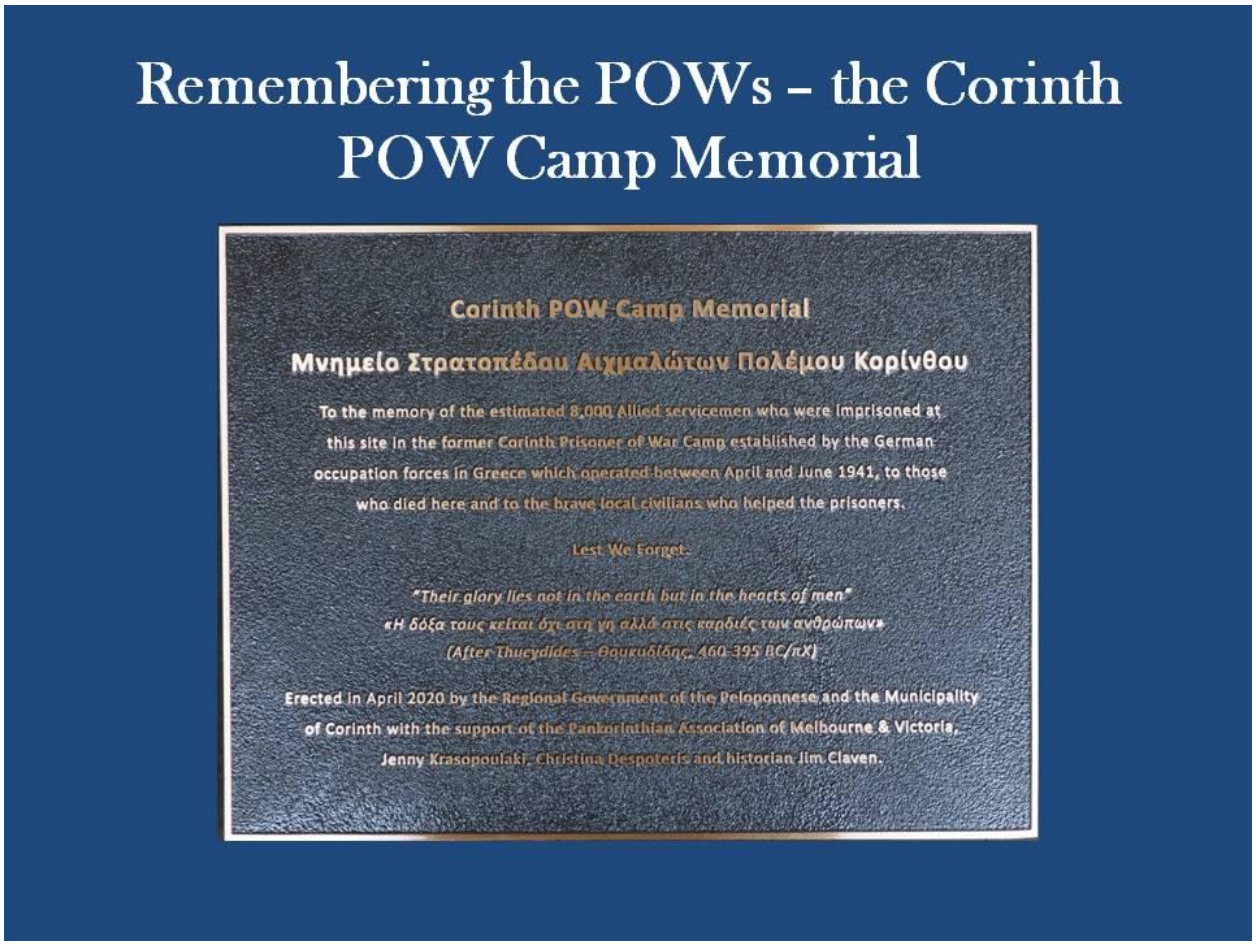
Ioannis Papadopoulos was not so lucky. While Slim was making his way to freedom, his protector had been arrested and executed by the Germans due to the actions of a Greek informer.

After the war Ioannis' daughter, Xanthoula, would begin a correspondence with Slim that would lead to their marriage in Australia, her arrival in Melbourne being celebrated in the press. While Slim passed away in 1995 aged 70, Xanthoula lives to this day in Melbourne's outer eastern suburbs, not far from this conference.

A number of Allied soldiers married Greek women who they had met during the campaign or while on the run. As far as I know, Slim is the only escaper from the Thessaloniki camp to have done so.

Conclusion

[SLIDE 24]



For all the reasons I have outlined, the story of Thessaloniki's Dulag 183 and its inmates is one that should not be forgotten.

I have had the pleasure of organizing the installation of a number of commemorative plaques in Greece – from Lemnos to Kalamata. That pictured here will be installed in coming months at the site of the former Corinth POW camp.

I look forward to the day when a new commemorative plaque is installed at the former Thessaloniki camp site to the memory of those incarcerated there, those who died there, those who escaped and those brave civilians who helped them.

[SLIDE 25]

In ending, may I refer you to my soon to be published book - *Grecian Adventure*. Not only does this deal with other aspects of the campaign but also the prisoner experience, including the Thessaloniki camp, in more detail. It also reproduces nearly 100 little known campaign photographs from the collection of two diggers who were there – some of which you can see in this slide.

I have also brought some copies of my earlier publication – *Lemnos & Gallipoli Revealed* – sales of which will finance more commemorative Anzac plaques in Greece.

Thank you