



## In the Bag: Prisoners of War: 1915-1945

One-Day Conference Saturday 12 November 2016  
Pompey Elliott Memorial Hall, 403 Camberwell Road, Melbourne  
Keynote Speaker - Dr Michael McKernan  
Historian and author

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# “IN THE BAG”: PRISONERS OF WAR 1915 - 1945



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**THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE CONFERENCE HELD AT  
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**12 NOVEMBER 2016**

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## **This War never ends: Australian Prisoners of War come home**

**Dr Michael McKernan**

It was about a year after my book *This War Never Ends: the pain of separation and return* had been published. So possibly sometime in 2002 or maybe a little later. I was at work in my study when the phone rang. A female voice launched straight into her story. 'I always knew', she said, 'that I would eventually find a book that would help me in my grief. And I did. Your book. And I wanted to speak to you and to thank you directly for what you have given me.' Authors love feedback from readers but I had never had a conversation with a reader like the one that now unfolded. I was humbled and deeply moved.

As I listened to the woman's voice I was desperately trying to work out if my reader had been the wife of a former prisoner of war or the daughter. In other words, I was trying to work out how old she was. And I wasn't having much success. Eventually I could not bear it any longer and I finally said, 'I'm sorry to have to ask you, but it is important to our conversation, are you the wife of a former prisoner of war, or the daughter?' 'Oh no,' she replied, 'it's not that at all. About two years ago my daughter was killed in a car crash and I have been in awful grief ever since. Your book is about coming to terms with grief, that is how it has helped me so much.' Regardless of how many copies of *This War Never Ends* were sold, this conversation alone was reward enough for the labour and pain of writing the book.

I'd learnt something about grief in my working life at the Australian War Memorial and in one of my businesses, subsequently, The Australian Battlefield Tours. On one particular tour I knew that two of my battlefield tour group members had recently lost a son killed in an RAAF training accident. We were just about to go into the Beach Cemetery at Gallipoli which was where I would begin to tell the story of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and the awful but important work of providing and maintaining the millions of graves in their care. I would usually talk of the remembrance of one Melbourne family of their son, killed on the first morning on Pine Ridge, dead, in all likelihood before midday on 25 April. From 1916 to 1948 the 'sorrowing mother, father, brother and sisters' of Jack Fothergill had placed a newly written twelve or fourteen line poem each and every year to their son in Melbourne's main morning newspaper, the *Argus*.

Spotting the father of the dead airman I suggested to him that he and his wife might not want to hear this part of my commentary as it may be a little too sensitive for them. I 'd been speaking in the cemetery, beneath the beautiful tree there, for a few minutes when I looked up to see the bereaved couple both deeply engaged with the group. A couple of weeks later, in the last days of the tour, now in France, the mother said to me, 'it was kind of you to suggest that we skip what you would be saying about Jack Fothergill and grief. But I learnt then, what I had not known until then, that my grief for my son would never lessen and would be with me until I die. Thank you for that.'

That experience was in my mind when I came to write *This War Never Ends* but the actual genesis of the book lay elsewhere. Never before or since has a book topic and title been as clearly presented to me as this one was.

As part of the 'Australia Remembers 1945-1995' program the government had arranged for a 'pilgrimage' as they were consistently called to take former prisoners of war to places of significance to them. One of those on the pilgrimage to Borneo was Owen Campbell, one of the six Australian survivors, of the more than 2000 Australians murdered at Sandakan, or on the death march to Ranau, or at Ranau itself. We would visit Sandakan on the pilgrimage and even before we arrived there I wondered what courage Owen Campbell would need to confront this place again. Or had the survivors been able to return to something approaching a normal sort of Australian life: love, work, friendships, community, routine?

We had a brief but powerfully moving ceremony at Sandakan. Russ Ewin spoke. He had been at Sandakan but, as an officer, he had been moved to Kuching before the disaster began unfolding. By chance, I had sat next to Russ on the bus that was to take us from Lady Davidson Hospital in Sydney, where the pilgrimage had assembled, to Sydney Airport. It was a long journey because we were travelling in an ancient bus as would have been used in Sydney during the war and so we had plenty of time to talk.

Russ talked, I listened. He told me something of his time at Sandakan and of his life as a soldier generally. He is a softly spoken man but I don't think I missed a word of what he was saying. When we reached the airport Russ looked at me in amazement and said, 'I don't think I've ever told anyone some of the things I've told you.' I'd heard this from other Australian veterans of wars, whom it has been my privilege to meet across the years and I stored Russ's stories away.

After the ceremony at Sandakan I wanted to get away by myself for a while to let my emotions settle down. It is now a lovely place, a beautiful garden. Peter Harvey, a long-time journalist with Channel Nine, had just completed a piece to camera, and joined me with an urgent question that he had to ask. 'Why has this story been kept from us?' he asked. 'I grew up in Australia immediately after the Second World War and yet until now I knew nothing of what went on here. Why has this not become one of the defining stories of the nation?' I had no answer but I knew that I needed to find an answer just as urgently as the questions Peter Harvey was firing off.

Some former prisoners wrote a book or several books about their experiences and occasionally I had the opportunity to talk with the authors. One of them, Hugh Clarke, became a friend of mine in the later years of his life before his death in 1996. Hugh's books about captivity were, *Last Stop Nagasaki*, *Twilight Liberation*, and *A Life for Every Sleeper*. He told me of his return to Brisbane after being released from captivity in Japan. He and his mates had been taken by the Americans to the Philippines immediately after they were freed and spent a couple of weeks in a camp there, being fattened up. Hugh thought he looked in pretty good shape as he made his way back home. He came from a large extended Irish-

Catholic family and naturally most, if not all, were on hand when he walked through the front door of the family home after years away. People were gathered in the living room and when Hugh walked in a couple, at least, of his aunts began to cry. He realized that they saw a very damaged man and he kept on walking, to the kitchen, out the back door, and into Brisbane where he hooked up with a mate and the two of them went outback for at least a couple of months. He couldn't stand the pity with which his family had reacted to him.

Another writer of a very successful account of his time as a prisoner of war was Russell Braddon who wrote *The Naked Island*. Published in 1952 it was on its 18<sup>th</sup> reprinting by 1954. Eventually *The Naked Island* sold more than two million copies. Braddon wrote an equally exquisite book, *The End of Hate*, published in 1958. There was a story he told me at the War Memorial during a pause in the filming of *Images of Australia*, the ABC's big bicentennial documentary in 1988. He was in a flat in London (Russell had left Australia in 1949, quite unable to cope with his peacetime life) tying his shoelaces, as he remembered. A thought came to him which was so powerful that he had to sit down on his bed to recover. A thought he had never had before.

He was on a route march somewhere with a body of Australian prisoners and the Japanese guards were tiring of the slow pace and the inability of the prisoners to keep on their feet. So it was decided to massacre them instead of marching them about. The small party of prisoners was lined up on the side of a road and a firing party assembled. Russell knew this was the end. One of the Australians fell to the ground screaming in fright and terror, to the utter astonishment of the Japanese and the deep humiliation of the other Australians. The Japanese ordered those near the stricken man to pick him up so that they could get on with the gruesome business. Again the man fell to the ground screaming. The guards, sickened by this, lost their appetite for the execution and told the prisoners to resume their walk. In his London flat, years after this appalling event, Russell Braddon suddenly thought to himself 'that bloke saved my life.' Yet for all these years he had condemned the Australian in his own mind as a coward and a man who disgraced the image of Australia and the understanding of the dignity of Australian soldiers.

These stories from two mature and experienced writers convinced me of one important thing that I had learnt from observing Owen Campbell and talking with Russ Ewin. The story of the return of the prisoners of war to their homes and to Australia was both complex and contested.

Australian prisoners of war in the hands of the Japanese, like many other Australian soldiers in the Second World War had enlisted freely and voluntarily. They would serve their country loyally, serving wherever they were sent. They would be well paid and well cared for. That was the compact. If they were wounded or became sick the army, ultimately the government, would provide medical and hospital care until they were well again. That was understood.

With the prospect of a large numbers of prisoners returning to Australia when the war ended the government needed to know how many were likely to need medical and hospital attention. From mid-1944 onwards various branches within the services began to study the

problem of the health and well-being of returned prisoners systematically. All of this doctrine was proposing that there was a significant problem for the government and the defence forces. In view of this it is surprising, as 1945 unfolds, that no defined and rigorous program eventuated that would have been the logical outcome of the doctrine of the prisoners' likely psychological and medical condition. Confronted with the fact of the return of the thousands of prisoners from the Japanese camps, it is as if the belief of the probability of persistent psychological damage was quietly but comprehensively forgotten.

The government was in an awful bind. The families of these men had lived in the agony of their absence and with a complete lack of knowledge of their fate since February 1942. The dearest wish of mothers and fathers, wives, brothers and sisters was for the return of these men to their family homes. If there were mental or medical issues, it was believed, who was better placed for the long term care of the men but their mothers or their wives. It is easy to understand the logic of this thinking although, of course, it was so wrong-headed.

There had been a proposal, briefly considered, that on liberation all former Australian prisoners would be transported to hospitals in India where for six months or so, they could be monitored, assessed and physically and mentally renewed. But the families would not have stood for it and the former prisoners themselves may well have mutinied. The program would also have indicated to the world that these men were severely unwell and were in need of constant and long-term care. That was a true statement but the issues lying behind it were immense and probably unsolvable.

The first prisoners to return to Australia, after peace was declared, reached the Rose Bay Flying Boat Base on Sunday 14 September 1945, almost exactly a month after the war had ended. These returning men were the fittest of the recovered prisoners, all 132 of them, and they needed to be fit to withstand the rigours of the long flight home. They came to the flying base in a flight of eight Catalinas. What a dramatic sight that must have been and with what keen anticipation the watchers would have been scanning the skies and straining their ears for the first indication that the flight was soon to arrive. There were 50 000 people packed into the area around the Base and along the driveway to the wharf the crowd was twelve deep. 'No human noise ever surged over the harbour like that which surged out from the shore to greet the first men . . . rousing cheers and coo-ees went up, car horns were tooted and a spontaneous roar of welcome greeted the men as they stepped ashore.'

Most of the journalists dashed off, following the buses that would take the men to Concord where they would finally be reunited with their families. A journalist, perhaps with more experience and more insight than the others, working for the *Bulletin*, stayed behind and recorded a different scene: 'They were gone in a minute. What followed seemed as touching as themselves. The composure of group after group along the footpath seemed to collapse . . . [nothing moved me more] than the spectacle of these silent people, standing on the edge of a Sydney pavement in the dusk, their faces crumpled, their hands grasping bags, hat, little children as their tears fell unashamedly.' These people understood something of the suffering the former prisoners had endured and something of the immensity of the problem their recovery to health presented.

There was another reunion, of a returning prisoner and his sister. While he was away she had married and moved from her home in Sydney, and his, to Melbourne. Knowing that his troopship would call there she and her husband went down to Port Melbourne to see if they could find him. So far, this is such a nice family story. The former prisoner had no idea he had family in Melbourne and was idly standing on the deck with nothing much to do. He and some of his mates heard his name being called out from the wharf and he was quickly reunited with his sister and introduced to his new brother-in-law. They had arranged to take him into town, to a city hotel, for a lovely slap-up meal. Other friends joined them to expand the celebration and make a real party of it.

At one point in the meal the returning former prisoner of war asked, in general, how people had reacted when they heard of the disaster at Singapore and the capture of almost the entire Eighth Division. One of the party replied: ‘we were astonished and amazed. We had never thought that Australian soldiers would throw in the towel.’ The man who told me this story said that he felt so humiliated that he never again, willingly, admitted to anyone that he had been a former prisoner of war. Throughout his life, until right near its very end.

We know that many former prisoners suffered breakdowns in the years after the war, that many found it hard to settle down to steady jobs. And that the men’s wives were required a great deal of caring and nurturing. Hugh Clarke returned to Brisbane after his time in the outback, and after many months of restlessness he finally returned to his old job as a surveyor. He later admitted that his erratic behaviour – including, in his words, “a hasty marriage doomed from the start” was the despair of family and friends. This story has a happy outcome. Clarke moved to Canberra, discovered himself as a writer, worked in public relations for the government, married a wonderful young journalist, Patricia, and fathered four sons and a daughter. He retired early in 1977, aged 58. His writing showed, in the words of one obituary, ‘a cathartic preoccupation with the dreadful wartime experiences of his 20s’.

While I was researching *This War Never Ends* a former prisoner’s wife told me a story about a recent reunion, most likely in the late 1990s. The reunions were different by then, she told me. They’d book a nice motel on the coast somewhere and the men and their wives would stay together for a few days of outings, and meals and reminiscences. One night after dinner only the wives were left at the table, the men had gone off somewhere. My informant told me that she was almost at breaking point and she had decided to ask for help. ‘Do any of your husbands still have nightmares,’ she asked, not daring to look up but staring at the table. There was a profound silence as no-one spoke. Thinking she had certainly spoken out of turn she looked up at the other women. Every one of them was in tears as they admitted, yes, from time to time the nightmares still occurred. Some still most violently.

We now know of the awful, disabling consequences of post-traumatic stress disorder. Major-General John Cantwell’s *Exit Wounds* is the finest account of some of the consequences of personal involvement in war that I have ever read. His eloquent, honest testimony reveals the dangers, isolation and terror of PTSD. It would be reasonable to assume that many, possibly most, of the returning diggers from the first and second world wars suffered PTSD to some

extent. It is possible that returning prisoners of war were even more vulnerable to this dreadful but treatable mental illness. The admittedly slow release of First World War repatriation records to the general public will throw significant light on this issue across the coming years. How and when we will begin to understand the extent of PTSD on Second World War personnel is not yet entirely clear.

I have already described the impact that Russell Braddon’s *The Naked Island* made on a generation of post war readers. Braddon was a celebrity of real significance in Britain for at least thirty years. A very prolific author with fifteen novels and fourteen non-fiction works and much else besides, a quality BBC broadcaster and newspaper columnist, Braddon became both rich and famous. He was a very nice person as well.

And yet that is not the whole story. When he returned from captivity in 1945 he sought to resume the life he had left for the war. He re-enrolled in law at the University of Sydney and as he acknowledges, through the kindness of the staff there he managed to pass the first two years of his course. But by the third year the gig was up. He could do no work, he didn’t even buy the course text books, and he simply could not possibly pass. Russell Braddon then attempted suicide in his room at his university college and only survived because a friend came looking for him, knocking on his door at precisely the right moment.

Russell was then placed in the Concord Repatriation Hospital in the psychiatric section where he lived for five months. His biographer Nigel Starck *Proud Australian Boy* tells how Braddon described his treatment: ‘of being able to see a psychiatrist only once a month; the incessant weaving of scarves as an enforced form of therapy; shambling around the hospital in pyjamas with the cord removed; the repeated warning that electro-convulsive therapy would be automatic punishment for failing to co-operate with the regime . . . he met an old acquaintance in the ward, too. An officer from his regiment who had also, three years after the cessation of hostilities, found the peace unbearable.’

Eventually Russell Braddon discharged himself from Concord Hospital although his psychiatrist told him that he found his lack of purpose and direction profoundly concerning. Russell Braddon left Australia in 1949 for Britain and through a combination of good luck, hard work and skill he changed the course of his life. Nigel Starck’s biography is an uplifting account of one former prisoner’s struggle.

Not all former prisoners suffered as Russell Braddon did but until we have open access to the repatriation records of former prisoners we will never know the proportion of those who struggled. *This War Never Ends* was a sad book and a hard book to write. So many people gave me the intimate details of their lives or the lives of their loved ones. There are so many examples in the book of true heroism and courage, of men telling the truth to themselves and those they loved. Of men working so hard to restart lives that had been so damaged. There are no villains in the book and the choices faced by those in authority were impossible to balance. I conclude that the balance was not very successful.

Ultimately it all boiled down to just one question. Would it have been right to deprive former prisoners of their liberties, their rights, and their highest desires, to seek to return them, to their families, in good health, those who had suffered so grievously. Or would the public condemnation of such enforced hospitalisation have been so great and so unanimous that the retreat from the policy might have caused more harm than the simple and speedy return of the former prisoner to their loved ones. Who can say?