



'By the Seat of their Pants'
Australian Airmen and their Machines 1915-1918

One Day Conference
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RAAF Museum, Point Cook, Victoria

BY THE SEAT OF THEIR PANTS



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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

AAC	Australian Air Corps
AFC	Australian Flying Corps
AIF	Australian Imperial Force
AWM	Australian War Memorial
CFS	Central Flying School
DFC	Distinguished Flying Cross
DSO	Distinguished Service Order
KIA	Killed in Action
MC	Military Cross
MM	Military Medal
NAA	National Archives of Australia
NAUK	The National Archives of the UK
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer
POW	Prisoner of War
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RFC	Royal Flying Corps
RNAS	Royal Naval Air Service
SLNSW	State Library of New South Wales

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‘CAGED BIRDS’: THE CAPTURE AND IMPRISONMENT OF AIRMEN OF THE AUSTRALIAN FLYING CORPS, 1915–1918

MR AARON PEGRAM

The Australian Flying Corps (AFC) had its first air combat in France in the Saint-Quentin sector, shortly before midday on 2 October 1917. Four Australian Airco D.H.5 scouts from 2 Squadron¹ were patrolling the skies near the German-occupied city when they encountered an enemy twin-seater some 2000 feet below. With numbers and altitude on their side, the Australian pilots dived on the German aircraft, each firing long bursts from their forward-firing Vickers gun. The scouts pursued the twin-seater as it dived towards Cambrai, but their engines were no match for the faster enemy aircraft. The scouts broke contact and headed for home, and so ended the AFC’s first aerial combat on the Western Front. Fifteen minutes later, the AFC had its second aerial combat and 2 Squadron suffered its first operational casualty since its arrival in France just nine days before.² Twenty-five-year-old Lieutenant Ivo Agnew of Oatlands, Tasmania, was one of the four pilots returning to Baizieux airfield when a second enemy aircraft flew head-on into the Australian patrol. Two scouts followed the German twin-seater in its sharp dive, leaving Agnew and the patrol leader as top cover for the scrap taking place below.³ Agnew discovered his machine gun had jammed in the previous contact: he fell out of formation to clear the breach, but after remedying the problem, realised the other three Australian scouts were nowhere to be seen.

Agnew had lost his patrol, so he put the sun behind him and headed for home. Fuel ran low after flying some distance, so he put his machine down at the nearest airfield he could find. Only when he cut the engine did he discover that the airfield was not one occupied by the Royal Flying Corps (RFC)—it was an operational airfield of the German Air Service. A dozen German troops rushed from a nearby hangar and surrounded the Australian airman who had mistakenly landed his aircraft at Valenciennes aerodrome, some 30 kilometres behind German lines. With no means of escape, there was little point in resisting, and Agnew became a prisoner of war.⁴

¹ No 2 Squadron, AFC, was retitled No 68 (Australian) Squadron, RFC, in 1916 to avoid confusion with its RFC namesake. No 1 Squadron, AFC, became No 67 (Australian) Squadron, RFC; No 3 Squadron, AFC, became No 69 (Australian) Squadron, RFC; and No 4 Squadron, AFC, became No 71 (Australian) Squadron, AFC. All four squadrons reverted to their AFC titles in January 1918, which have been used throughout this paper as a matter of consistency.

² F.M. Cutlack, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918 – Volume VIII –The Australian Flying Corps in the Western and Eastern Theatres of War, 1914–1918*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1935, pp. 178 and 180.

³ AWM4 8/5/3, Squadron Record Book, No 2 Squadron, AFC, October 1917, Air Combat Report 2.10.17 for 11.45 am; Air Combat Report 2.10.17 for 12 noon.

⁴ AWM PR01229, Second Lieutenant Ivo Agnew, 2 Squadron, AFC, repatriated prisoner statement; diary entry for 2.10.17. The original, from which the repatriated prisoner statement in Agnew’s papers was copied, has been removed from the official record series AWM30.

Popular interest in aviation during World War I has concentrated on the deeds performed by the leading aces of the air war, while those airmen whose machines were chalked up as ‘kills’ by enemy pilots have received less attention than what they deserve. Among them were prisoners of war: airmen like Ivo Agnew who were forced to land their aircraft on the wrong side of no-man’s-land. Captivity plays such an important part in the Allied airman’s story of the World War II, but it barely registers in the memory of what air combat was like a generation earlier. This omission may be because captivity undermined the romanticised version of the air war portrayed in print and film in the postwar period, but also because comparatively few airmen spent their war languishing in enemy prison camps. Agnew was one of just 35 Australian pilots and observers of the AFC taken prisoner during World War I: 14 were captured in the Middle East by Ottoman troops, and 21 on the Western Front by Germans. These considerably small numbers reflected the extremely hazardous nature of aviation at a time when death was more a likely outcome for air casualties than capture by the enemy. A total of 410 pilots and 153 observers flew operations with the AFC, of which 110 died from combat related causes.⁵ Even in other air forces the number of captured aircrew was extremely few, because just 22 of the 500 or so Australians serving in squadrons of the RFC and Royal Naval Air Service were captured by the Central Powers in all theatres of operations.⁶

There was a fundamental difference between the wars that made captivity for airmen much more of a possibility in the latter conflict. Allied airmen of World War II could bail out of their stricken aircraft by parachute over enemy territory, whereas their forebears of the AFC who flew over hostile territory in less sturdier machines carried no parachutes at all. Parachutes were invented before the war, but the RFC had only permitted them to be used by crews of observation balloons operating behind Allied lines. Some airmen believed that the War Office, Air Board and RFC authorities thought air crews would fight less aggressively if they were tempted to abandon their aircraft. Pilots thought differently: as one British Camel pilot wrote ‘To know you had a sporting chance of escape from a break-up or flamer would make you much braver in a scrap’.⁷ Because most Allied air operations took place over German or Ottoman lines, the enemy could recover an aircraft wreckage, study it for intelligence or salvage it for parts, so not having a parachute was an incentive for pilots to return their aircraft to friendly airfields.⁸ But it must be said that any additional weight from heavy and cumbersome parachutes could also affect the combat performance of fragile aircraft already compensated to cope with the weight of fuel, ordinance, ammunition and the pilot.

Without the means to abandon an ill-fated machine, pilots and observers of the AFC therefore had to survive a crashlanding in enemy territory in order to be captured. This was extremely difficult in high-powered aircraft made of highly-flammable doped fabric, bracing wires and plywood, and in most cases proved fatal when flaming or structurally damaged aircraft fell

⁵ Michael Mol Kentin, *Fire in the Sky: The Australian Flying Corps in the First World War*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2010, p. 336; and A.G. Butler, *Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services in the War of 1914–1918 – Volume III – Special Problems and Services*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1943, p. 413, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1943, pp. 407, 409 and 424.

⁶ Thomas V. Roberts, *Wingless: A Biographical Index of Australian Airmen Detained in Wartime*, Thomas V. Roberts, Ballarat, 2011, pp. 20–38.

⁷ Arthur Lee, *No Parachute: A Fighter Pilot in World War I*, Jarrolds Publishers, London, 1968, p. 73.

⁸ Mol Kentin, *Fire in the Sky*, pp. 44–45; and Lee, *No Parachute*, pp. 219–225.

from the sky. But if an airman managed to survive a landing in hostile territory, and was captured, the chances of him surviving the war as a prisoner were remarkably high. Mortality rates among the 4044 Australians captured during World War I show that the vast majority (3647, or 90 per cent) survived captivity and the war. Some 3848 Australians were captured by the German Army in the fighting on the Western Front, of which 337 died (8.7 per cent), mainly from wounds received in battle. Conditions were more severe for those captured in the 'sideshow' theatres on Gallipoli, in Mesopotamia, Sinai and Palestine. A total of 196 Australians were captured by Ottoman forces in these theatres, of which 60 died (30 per cent), primarily from disease.⁹ Among them were seven mechanics of the Australian Half Flight captured in the fall of Kut-el-Amara in Mesopotamia in April 1916, who died from exposure and disease during a forced march across the hostile terrain of Anatolia. They were the only members of the AFC to die in captivity.¹⁰

Notwithstanding the hardships that prisoners of World War I endured in enemy hands, captivity was not the ordeal that Australian popular memory holds it to be. In the absence of misery equivalent to the Sandakan Death March or the Thai-Burma Railway of World War II, it was the war itself, and loss of 60 000 Australian war dead in the fighting that was the far greater tragedy of our nation's World War I experience. With one in five AFC pilots and observers being killed in training, air crashes or air combat, the survival rates were much better for a captured airman in the hands of the enemy rather than flying with his squadron.

CAPTURE

The capture of Australian aircrew reflected the diverse range of tasks the AFC performed against Ottoman and German forces in the three operational theatres. The Australian Half Flight comprised of four pilots and 20 mechanics that were sent to Mesopotamia in April 1915 to assist the Indian Expeditionary Force D to secure rich oil deposits in the Tigris Valley and prevent them from falling into the hands of the Ottomans. Originally equipped with two Maurice Farman Longhorns and one Shorthorn, the Half Flight was attached to 30 Squadron, RFC, at Basra, and participated in the advance up the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers towards Baghdad. The sweltering conditions were unsuited for the air-cooled aircraft that carried no form of defensive armament. Supplies for aircraft maintenance were virtually non-existent and tropical diseases were rife among the ground troops. But if there was one major concession, it was that the Ottomans possessed no aircraft in Mesopotamia. The Half Flight's role was to perform reconnaissance flights in support of the ground operations which it did without ever being harassed from the air.

Force D received aircraft and reinforcements as it advanced towards Baghdad, but the inadequacies of the aircraft used by 30 Squadron dogged the Half Flight airmen for the duration of the campaign. On 16 September, engine trouble forced Lieutenant William Treloar to land his Caudron G.III behind enemy lines while mapping Ottoman positions at Es-Sinn. Without any defensive armament, Treloar and his observer Captain Atkins of the Indian Army had no means to protect themselves from mounted Arabs who quickly assailed the stricken aircraft. The two airmen engaged in hand-to-hand fighting and would have been killed had it not been for the arrival of Turkish troops who stripped them of their equipment

⁹ Butler, *Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services in the War of 1914–1918 – Volume III – Special Problems and Services*, pp. 896–897.

¹⁰ Cutlack, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918 – Volume VIII –The Australian Flying Corps in the Western and Eastern Theatres of War, 1914–1918*, pp. 26–27.

before taking them to their commander.¹¹ Arabs mistreated Captain Thomas White and his Indian Army observer Yeats-Brown after their crashlanding deep behind Ottoman lines during a special operation near Ctesiphon on 13 November. White crashed their Longhorn into a telegraph pole attempting to land so that Yeats-Brown could blow up telegraph wires that connected Baghdad with Constantinople and Kifri. White fired on a nearby group of Arabs with a rifle while Yeats-Brown destroyed the telegraph wires with necklaces of guncotton, but the damaged aircraft was overrun before it could be ground-run to safety. Arabs spat at the captured airmen, beat them with rifle butts, clubs, axes and hammers, fired rifles and revolvers above their heads and made other threats and gesticulations before Turkish gendarmerie intervened and rescued them.¹²

Of the four Half Flight pilots sent to Mesopotamia, two were captured, and a third, Lieutenant Mertz, was killed by an Arab tribe after landing in Ottoman territory. Flying behind enemy lines was extremely dangerous in fragile, unreliable aircraft that possessed no form of defensive armament, but the experience of 1 Squadron in Palestine suggests that it was just as dangerous for airmen who were better equipped for air operations in the desert. No 1 Squadron carried out reconnaissance work in the Egyptian and Sinai deserts until the Allied advance into Palestine in January 1917. There, it performed photography, ground attack and liaison sorties in addition to its intended reconnaissance role, and had to contend with the German Air Service which maintained air superiority in Ottoman skies. Just as it had in Mesopotamia, the air war over the Palestinian desert took the airmen of 1 Squadron behind enemy lines where 12 of its members were forced from the sky.

Most 1 Squadron airmen were captured in 1918, having crash-landed their fast and manoeuvrable Bristol F.E.2b Fighter. The F.E.2b was the most successful twin-seater operated by the AFC; however, it was just as susceptible to anti-aircraft and ground fire as any other aircraft during ground attack sorties. On 20 January 1918, Alfred Poole and his observer Fred Hancock were forced to glide their F.E.2b about 10 miles towards Allied lines after heavy anti-aircraft fire put their engine out of action over Kalkilieh, about a kilometre behind Turkish lines. No Bristol Fighters had yet fallen into enemy hands, so after landing, Poole punctured the fuel tanks and fired a Very flare pistol into the fuselage to set it on fire. Turkish and German troops retaliated with artillery and machine-gun fire, then surrounded the airmen and forced them to give themselves up. Airmen could sometimes avoid surrendering to the enemy when downed airmen were rescued by their comrades, such as Frank McNamara's rescue of David Rutherford in March 1917, for which McNamara was awarded the Victoria Cross. But lesser known were the rescues that did not go according to plan. Ground fire forced Douglas Rutherford and Joe McElligott to land during a reconnaissance sortie near Amman on 1 May 1918. A second F.E.2b flown by Fred Haig and Ron Challinor landed to rescue the downed airmen, but a wheel collapsed on take-off under the weight of the additional crew and the second aircraft toppled on its nose. Alone, in the middle of the desert, a great distance from Allied lines, the four airmen were forced to surrender to Ottoman cavalry who then handed the stranded airmen over to the German Air Service.

¹¹ Keith Isaacs, 'Wings Over Mesopotamia', in *Defence Force Journal*, no. 2, January/February 1977, p. 51.

¹² T.W. White, *Guests of the Unspeakable: The Odyssey of an Australian Airman—Being a Record of Captivity and Escape in Turkey*, Little Hills Press, Crows Nest, 1990 (reprint of 1928 edition), pp. 49–53.

Downed aircrew in Palestine were treated considerably well on capture, and were able to walk away from a wrecked machine and into captivity with minimal displays of violence. Most noteworthy was the generosity shown towards Claude Vautin, who in July 1917 was forced to land his B.E.12 in Ottoman territory when his controls were shot away during a scrap with German scouts near Gaza. Captured by Turks, Vautin was handed over to the German Air Service where he became the guest of the Albatros pilot who had brought him down, *Oberleutnant* Gerhard Felmy of *Fliegerabteilung* 300. In a fine display of chivalry between the two airmen, Felmy took Vautin on a tour of Jerusalem, and later flew over 1 Squadron's airfield and dropped a photograph of the pair together, informing them that Vautin was alive and well as a prisoner. Felmy later dropped letters from Vautin addressed to his parents which then initiated a bizarre series of fraternising letter-drop exchanges between the German and Australian airmen.¹³

Other Australian aircrew had no such luck. Some were slapped or kicked by Turks and Germans on capture, but it was nothing compared to the ordeal that White, Treloar and Mertz of the Half Flight had endured in the hands of Arabs. This reflected life in the desert for tribes, such as the Bedouin, where scavenging and hunting was a means to an end and for whom the rules of international law did not apply. Monetary rewards offered by the Ottomans gave Arabs an incentive to bring in downed aircrew for the purposes of intelligence, instead of killing them out of hand. In Palestine, for example, Ron Austin recalls that there was a lot of argument among the Arabs who captured him and his observer, Oliver Lee. A Turkish officer came from the nearby garrison at Kerah and paid each of the Arabs 100 Turkish Lira if they handed the airmen over, which the Arabs promptly did.¹⁴

Things were much different on the Western Front where 21 AFC pilots were captured by German troops. Unlike the infantry, who always fought from static positions and had infrequent face-to-face contact with the enemy, pilots from the two Australian scout squadrons, 2 and 4 Squadrons, flew deep into German territory fulfilling the RFC 'air offensive' policy. In German skies, the scout squadrons conducted patrols and ground attack sorties, sought aerial combat with enemy fighters and escorted the slower bombers and photo-reconnaissance machines. They did this to ensure the twin-seaters from Corps squadrons, such as 3 Squadron, AFC, could go about their work artillery spotting and performing reconnaissance duties over the front-line area unmolested by enemy fighters. But taking the air war into enemy territory was extremely dangerous, and 21 AFC scout pilots were forced to crash-land their damaged aircraft in German territory. With the scout pilots taking the war into German skies, no aircrew from 3 Squadron were captured on the Western Front.

By the time Ivo Agnew cut his engine on the German airfield at Valenciennes, two AFC airmen were already languishing in the hands of the Germans. In the lead-up to No 2 Squadron's departure from Britain in August 1917, several pilots were selected to gain battle experience with RFC squadrons flying sorties in the Third Ypres campaign. Among them was Victor Norvill who was attached to 29 Squadron, RFC, at Poperinge, and Arthur Wearne who was attached to 19 Squadron, RFC, at Liétres. Norvill received a paralysing bullet wound to his shoulder when his patrol of five Nieuport 17s attacked a flight of German scouts near

¹³ Cutlack, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918 – Volume VIII –The Australian Flying Corps in the Western and Eastern Theatres of War, 1914–1918*, pp. 71–72; and AWM30 B3.3, statement by Lieutenant Claude Vautin, 1 Squadron, AFC.

¹⁴ AWM30 B3.3a, statement by Captain Ron Austin, 1 Squadron; and Cutlack, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918 – Volume VIII –The Australian Flying Corps in the Western and Eastern Theatres of War, 1914–1918*, p. 120.

Douai on 29 June 1917. Another bullet severed the aircraft's fuel line which stopped his engine, and at 11 000 feet the machine plummeted from the sky. Norvill was fired on from the air and the ground as he lost altitude, but managed to recover the aircraft in time to land upside down over a shell hole, four miles behind German lines. On releasing the safety belt he fell to the bottom of the shell hole where he was immediately recovered by German troops.¹⁵

No 2 Squadron did not fly any sorties during the Third Ypres campaign, but bombed and strafed ground targets ahead of the British Third Army's advance on the Hindenburg Line at Cambrai on 20 November 1917. Owing to the heavy fog that shrouded the battlefield, bombing and strafing attacks were made at extremely low altitudes that made ground fire particularly hazardous for AFC pilots. Les Ward's D.H.5 was hit by ground fire as he strafed trenches packed with German troops, at 1500 feet. The aircraft's rotary engine ploughed through the fuselage as it hit the ground, propelling Ward through the plywood coaming. He regained consciousness alongside the aircraft with a broken leg, and in the company of two Germans, with rifles shouldered, who demanded him to surrender.¹⁶

No 4 Squadron lost pilots as prisoners as soon as it began operations in January 1918. One of its first operations was to escort a flight of British twin-seaters on a photo-recon sortie over Lens on 13 January. German anti-aircraft fire hit and disabled Frank Willmott's engine over the target area, and he was set upon by two German scouts as soon as he separated from the rest of his flight. Willmott was forced to land his Sopwith Camel close to a small village where he was captured by German infantry before he had a chance to burn his machine.¹⁷ Australian airmen continued to be brought down and captured throughout 1918, mainly during stoushes with enemy aircraft and encounters with anti-aircraft and ground fire. Every now and then, Camel pilots developed engine trouble the moment it mattered the most. Bill Nicholls, for example, found it difficult to keep up with the rest of his flight during a patrol between Arras and Armentières on the morning of 16 March 1918. Because he was lagging a little distance behind the rest of the formation, he was set upon by six enemy scouts. He put his Camel into a steep dive to seek refuge beneath his patrol, but was attacked from below by another two enemy aircraft. He dived again, but his Camel's high-torque Clerget rotary engine stalled and forced the nose-heavy machine into one of its infamous spins. Nicholls recovered in time but ditched his machine in enemy trenches, where he was immediately seized by German infantry.¹⁸

Wounded and unconscious airmen were treated considerably well by German troops, who administered first aid sympathetically and in no way different from their own injured men. Ward wrote how he was treated 'splendidly' by his captors, who used their bayonet scabbards as splints for his broken leg before carrying him to the nearest dressing station. Brought down near Oppy in March 1918, Oscar Flight was also treated with kindness—he regained consciousness with German medical orderlies gently bathing his head.¹⁹ Pilots who climbed

¹⁵ AWM30 B3.10, statement made by repatriated prisoner of war, Lieutenant Victor Norvill, 2 Squadron, AFC.

¹⁶ AWM PR83/230, Lieutenant Les Ward, 2 Squadron, AFC, diary V, entry for 21.11.17. See also Charles Schaedel, 'Clipped wings: the experience of an Australian airman P.O.W.', in *The 14–18 Journal*, 1993, pp. 64–72.

¹⁷ AWM30 B3.17, Lieutenant Frank Willmott, 4 Squadron, AFC

¹⁸ AWM30 B3.9, Lieutenant William Nicholls, 4 Squadron, AFC.

¹⁹ NAA B2455, Personal Service Dossier, Lieutenant Les Ward, 2 Squadron, AFC, letter dated 2.12.17; and AWM30 B3.6, Lieutenant Oscar Flight, 2 Squadron, AFC.

out of their cockpits without injury, on the other hand, risked being lynched by German troops who had been bombed and strafed from the air and had no sympathy for a downed enemy airman. Archie Rackett was forced to land his S.E.5a near Villers-Bretonneux on 2 June 1918 after it was hit by anti-aircraft fire and assailed by two enemy aircraft. He was immediately ‘pounced upon’ by German infantry who were in no mood to kindly treat an enemy pilot. They formed a circle around him, kicking and slapping him across the face, breaking his goggles on his forehead.²⁰ A German officer prevented Oscar Flight a wreck-side execution when the medical orderlies who were gently tending his injuries allowed him to return to the aircraft to retrieve his wristwatch. He instead retrieved his Very flare pistol and fired it into the aircraft’s fuselage, setting it aflame, which then caused German troops to open fire at close range on the unarmed airman.²¹ One Australian pilot who flew in the RFC, Valentine Adams of 70 Squadron, is believed to have been shot and killed at Linselles on 4 May 1917 by German troops who deliberately ignored his attempts to surrender.²²

Above all, however, treatment depended on the branch of the German Army to which an airman fell captive, with the best treatment being given by those of AFC’s opponents in the air. Ivo Agnew wrote in his diary that he was ‘treated well’ by his captors of the German Air Service, who hosted a dinner in his honour in *Jasta 42* Officers Mess at Valenciennes. Afterwards, he was taken on a tour of the German aerodrome where he was shown their Albatros scouts and a collection of four captured British aircraft, ‘resplendent in black iron crosses’, before being sent to the nearest headquarters for interrogation.²³

INTERROGATION

Having survived a crashlanding and initial treatment by the enemy, Australian airmen were then interrogated for intelligence purposes. The RFCs policy in taking the air war over enemy territory meant that there was a significant chance Allied pilots would become prisoners of war, so airmen were trained and fully prepared for the interrogation process. Aircrew were highly skilled, were sound in operational knowledge, had a good sense of geography and navigation, and were equipped with some of the most advanced technology of the period. These qualities made them extremely valuable for intelligence purposes, and as such, they were informed and reminded of the techniques enemy intelligence staff used to extract information from prisoners. To prevent their machines from being captured, studied, salvaged or pressed into service by enemy forces, Australian pilots flew with a Very flare pistol in their cockpits so that a disabled aircraft and any maps, letters or operational documents could be set alight after a forced landing.²⁴ To minimise the likelihood of a ‘confidence trick’ being used during interrogations, airmen were routinely instructed to keep the enemy guessing on the identity of their squadron and the names their commanders and other pilots. In the event of being captured, no communications were to be sent direct to their squadrons. Instead, they were to address all communication from captivity to Cox & Co., the financial military agents in London, who then passed all incoming correspondence to the War Office and confirmed

²⁰ AWM30 B3.11, Lieutenant A. R. Rackett, 2 Squadron, AFC; and Private collection, Lieutenant Archibald Rackett, 2 Squadron, AFC, diary entry 16–18.6.18.

²¹ AWM30 B3.6, Lieutenant Oscar Flight, 2 Squadron, AFC.

²² ‘2nd Lt. Valentine Harold Adams RFC 1892–1917’, RFC individual stories, <http://www.misc.airwar1.org.uk/adams.htm>, accessed 8 November 2012.

²³ AWM PR01229, Lieutenant Ivo Agnew, 2 Squadron, AFC, diary entry 2.10.17.

²⁴ Royal Air Force, *Instructions regarding precautions to be taken in the event of falling into the hands of the enemy*, F.S. Publication, London, 1918.

with the Red Cross and the RFC that the missing airman was alive as a prisoner in the hands of the enemy.²⁵

Interrogations were conducted within one or two days of capture, with formal interrogations performed by intelligence staff of the German Air Service. German intelligence staff found that captured airmen were bound by a 'certain sporting spirit' and talked more freely about technical matters with their counterparts of the German Air Service. This was much more productive than being pressured into responding to questions by hostile and abusive Army officers who had limited knowledge of the air war.²⁶ Archival evidence suggests that the counterintelligence training received by AFC airmen was successful among some who fell into enemy hands. Despite the tremendous display of hospitality from the German pilots of *Jasta 42*, German documents record how Ivo Agnew was determined not to reveal any information of operational value. When questioned at German 2nd Army Headquarters at Le Cateau, Agnew revealed his nationality and civil employment but refused to answer questions about the identity of his squadron or the names of his commanders. He made 'a good military impression' on the officer that cross-examined him, who considered Agnew to be 'considerably better educated than the average soldiers who stem from the English colonies'.²⁷ Not all captured airmen were so determined, however. One German intelligence report from September 1918 states that an Australian pilot informed his examiner that 21 Australian aircraft had been written off in the past nine months. He also said there had been five crashes and emergency landings, two pilots captured and several others wounded in the three weeks before his capture.²⁸

Aircrew captured in Palestine were also questioned by intelligence staff of the German Air Service, and were often subjected to the same methods used on the Western Front. After their capture near Kalkilieh in January 1918, Poole and Hancock were sent by rail to a German headquarters near Nazereth where they were formally questioned on the Allied order of battle, aircraft variants, quantities of troops and guns along the British Front, names of commanding officers, and information about the Allied railway network. A German intelligence officer showed the men German aerial reconnaissance photographs of an Allied camp, and asked them if they knew how many men slept inside a bell tent, presumably to determine the number of troops based there.²⁹ As on the Western Front, subtle attempts were made to prepare captives for interrogation. Ron Austin and Oliver Lee were treated considerably well by Turkish officers at Kerah before they were handed over to German intelligence staff at Amman. There they were fed, given a bath and were provided clothes while the Turks deloused their flight suits, in the hope that the kind treatment might lull them

²⁵ John Allport papers, untitled extract published in the newsletter of the Society of Australian World War 1 Aero Historians, April 1971.

²⁶ Walter Nicolai, *The German Secret Service*, Stanley Paul & Co., London, 1924, p. 185.

²⁷ Baden-Württemberg Hauptstaatsarchiv (B-WürHStA) M33/2, XIII AK, Bü 582, *Vernehmung eines am 2.10. mittags südöstlich Valenciennes notgelandeten englischen Fliegeroffizieres*, 5.10.1917.

²⁸ McDermott Library History of Aviation Collection, University of Texas, Kerr Papers, Box 22, Folder 6, *Nachrichtenblatt der Luftstreitkräfte Nr 36, Wochenbericht*, 31.10.1918, *Englische Fliegerverluste in Flandern*. The pilot was most likely Lieutenant Len Taplin, DFC, 4 Squadron, AFC, who was captured at Billy-Montigny on 6 September 1918. Taplin makes no mention of interrogation in his repatriated prisoner statement on file at AWM30 B3.15.

²⁹ AWM30 B3.28, statement by Lieutenant Alfred Poole, 1 Squadron, AFC; and AWM30 B3.2a, statement by Lieutenant Frederick Hancock, 1 Squadron, AFC.

into a false sense of security and get them to talk.³⁰ Thomas White, on the other hand, received one week in solitary confinement at Baghdad for refusing to disclose anything during his interrogation.³¹

British airmen were fully aware they were only bound to give the enemy their name and rank, as anything else might reveal the strength, morale and disposition of Allied forces or compromise the success of future air and ground operations. Aircrew knew what to expect from their examiners, so German intelligence staff were forced to use more indirect means of inquiry to extract information from them. Australian pilots captured in France were often detained with British airmen before being transported to Germany—the idea being that prisoners would compare stories, discuss aircraft or operational matters much to the benefit of listening intelligence staff. Wentworth Randell of No 4 Squadron found two recording devices hidden in the wall of the locked room at Lille he shared with two other British airmen, as did Archie Rackett of 2 Squadron, who was detained at a large hotel at Karlsruhe in Germany.³² Most AFC and AIF officers were sent from France to Karlsruhe, where they spent several nights detained in a room of the hotel before being moved to the main processing and distribution camp in the centre of town. Knowing a recording device was concealed in the walls, Rackett found the situation quite amusing: he was locked in the room with a French officer who spoke no English, so the pair played cards for several hours without speaking.³³

THE PRISON CAMPS

After interrogation, captured airmen were transported to a prison camp in the homeland of their captors, where they remained until the end of hostilities.³⁴ When they were interviewed by clerks from AIF Admin HQ after their repatriation from captivity, AFC airmen talked very little about this part of their imprisonment. They spoke only about the camps in which they were held and the treatment they endured there, but nothing about how they passed the time. Frustrating though this may be for the historian studying their experience, it does, however, reflect the privileges of rank in the prisoner of war story. Prisoners were detained in camps appropriate to their rank, with AFC airmen being held in camps with other British officers. Unlike NCOs and other ranks prisoners, whose labour could be used for work unrelated to the war effort, officers were exempt from being put to work, and were paid at the same rate as officers of the corresponding rank in the country where they were detained. Other ranks prisoners were formed into work parties which carried out a multitude of labouring jobs, such as railway construction, mining and factory work, but mainly agricultural jobs. For them, work broke the monotony of camp life and was a good preventative of ‘barbed-wire disease’—a well-recognised form of neurasthenia caused by long periods of confinement. Officers, on the other hand, were not made to work. They did not regularly leave their prisons, had very limited contact with the outside world, and with little or nothing to do, fought a very different war of boredom, monotony and uncertainty in the hands of the enemy.

³⁰ AWM30 B3.3a, statement by Captain Ron Austin, 1 Squadron, AFC.

³¹ AWM30 B3.1, statement by Captain Thomas White, Half Flight.

³² AWM30 B3.12, statement by Lieutenant Wentworth Randell, 4 Squadron, AFC.

³³ Private collection, Lieutenant Archibald Rackett, 2 Squadron, AFC, manuscript: 35-36.

³⁴ Four AFC pilots captured in the final weeks of the war remained behind German lines until the Armistice: Captain Edmund Cornish, 2 Squadron, AFC; Lieutenant Melville Killsby, 4 Squadron, AFC; Lieutenant Edward Goodson, 4 Squadron, AFC; and Lieutenant Charles Rhodes, 4 Squadron, AFC.

White's experiences published in his memoir *Guests of the Unspeakable* were typical for AFC airmen captured by the Turks. After his capture at Ctesiphon in Mesopotamia in November 1915, White spent three weeks in hospital in Baghdad before being sent to Mosul, north-west of Baghdad on the Tigris River, where he and his observer Yeats-Brown were imprisoned for two and a half months. There, in a two-storied stone building near a military prison, White was exposed to the Turks' brutality towards their own. He wrote that 'The whole untidy structure, together with the lack of sanitation and the barbarity displayed in the treatment of [Arab] prisoners, reminded us of some scene of the Inquisition, or of the more remote period of the Assyrian kings'.³⁵ The facility was next to a training school for conscripted Arabs and was a transportation hub for Ottoman troops headed for the Mesopotamian and Russian Fronts. There, White saw Turkish officers intimidate Arab recruits into submission—the conscripts were spat on, beaten, struck with riding whips and verbally abused. White joined other British prisoners, including Treloar and his observer Aitkins, who had both come down with fever and dysentery and were barely recognisable from when White last saw them. Transit camps such as Mosul tended to be horrible places to endure, as they lacked proper sanitation and never received adequate provisions such as food and medical supplies for prisoners. Nothing could therefore be done to help the sick prisoners, but according to White, the arrival of familiar faces improved their condition and helped relieve the 'hopeless monotony' of captivity in the hands of the Turks.³⁶

All 14 Australian airmen captured by Ottoman troops passed through two camps for British officers: Afion Kara Hissa in modern-day western Turkey, and Constantinople, today known as Istanbul. There, they received mail, food and clothing parcels distributed by the Australian Red Cross Society, although conditions on the Austro-Hungarian frontier meant that parcels would often go missing or were delayed by several months. The camp at Afion Kara Hissa was located in an abandoned Armenian church that stood beneath a huge volcanic rock ringed by sharp cliffs. There, the Australian airmen shared quarters with a hundred British, French and Russian officers, including Australians captured on Gallipoli and the British and Australian submarine crews that had breached the Dardanelles. The stone church measured about 30 by 100 feet with a gallery on one end, in which the prisoners were locked behind a heavy door. Men slept on straw and improvised beds, and used scraps of timber to fashion pieces of furniture. Over time, messes were established in the corners of the church 'where kindred spirits could sleep, drink and curse the Turk together'.³⁷

Airmen imprisoned in Germany were better off than their colleagues in Turkey. Almost all captured airmen were sent from France to the large processing and distribution camp at Karlsruhe before being sent on to more permanent camps in Germany. Castles, sanatoria, high-school buildings, hotels, military barracks and vacated factories were all used as quarters for captured British officers in Germany.³⁸ After Karlsruhe, ten AFC pilots captured on the Western Front spent up to three months detained at Schloss Trausnitz, a 700-year-old castle perched on a mountain overlooking the Bavarian town of Landshut. There they joined 100 other captured British pilots and observers, in what appeared to be an attempt to keep all the captured airmen imprisoned together. Les Ward arrived at Landshut with other Australian pilots in May 1918 and wrote in his diary several weeks after how 'we are quite settled down

³⁵ White, *Guests of the Unspeakable*, p. 76.

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ *ibid.* p. 152.

³⁸ Daniel McCarthy, *The Prisoner of War in Germany: The care and treatment of the prisoner of war with a history of the development of the principle of neutral inspection and control*, Moffat, Yard and Company, New York, NY, 1918, p. 191.

here now'. With little to do 'the monotony is rather awful. There is absolutely nothing to do but read. There are no sports here because there is nothing to play with'.³⁹

Prisoners were sometimes allowed outside the prison walls, where they could enjoy long walks around the surrounding countryside under the careful watch of armed sentries. The monotony got too much for some who relieved the tedium by making an attempt at escaping. Cecil Feez arrived at Landshut around the same time, and along with Oscar Flight and several other British airmen, an attempt was made to dig a tunnel from Flight's room in the groom's quarters in the castle's stables to a crop of barley outside the prison walls. This they succeeded in doing, but a guard whom the prisoners had been bribing informed his superiors of the tunnel's presence and the escape attempt was foiled. Feez, Flight and their co-conspirators spent the next 11 days in solitary confinement, where they were given little food and water and denied their Red Cross parcels.⁴⁰

The captured Australian airmen in Germany were eventually moved to prisons at Holzminden in Lower Saxony, Ingolstadt in Bavaria, and Dänholm on the Baltic coastline. Conditions in German camps were harsh, but fair, with the treatment of prisoners depending on the temperament of individual camp commandant, orderlies and guards. Holzminden, for example, was run by *Hauptmann* Karl Niemeyer who was a strict disciplinarian verging on the tyrannical, whose punitive and arbitrary regimen once included the bayoneting of two British prisoners (things were just as bad at nearby Clausthal, where Niemeyer's twin brother was camp commandant). Escape attempts were frequent in harsh camps like Holzminden, and in July 1918, 29 British officers succeeded in escaping from Holzminden by digging a tunnel beneath the camp's walls. Of the 29 who made it out of the tunnel before its discovery, 10 succeeded in crossing the Dutch frontier and eventually made their way back to Britain.⁴¹ Several Australian pilots in Germany made escape attempts, such as Arthur Wearne and Alec Couston from Holzminden, and Feez and Flight from Landshut. None of them were successful: the only AFC airman to make a successful escape was Thomas White, who in June 1918 managed to stow away on a Russian merchant ship in dock at the Golden Horn in Constantinople bound for the Ukraine. White arrived in Odessa several days later, and was eventually able to make his way back to London where he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his action at Ctesiphon and was twice Mentioned in Despatches.

The war dragged on for those Australian airmen who remained behind barbed wire. AFC pilots held captive in Germany similarly received fortnightly consignments of food and clothing parcels from the Australian Red Cross in London, and some airmen had the luxury of being given parole on the understanding that they would not attempt to escape. By mid-1916, the effects of the Allied naval blockade was felt in Germany as the war consumed more and more of the country's resources. The economy was in ruins, and the German people went without: fats and oils, meat, bread, milk and all processed foods became scarce in the metropolitan areas where most Germans lived. Prisoners of war were given a ration of black bread, turnip soup, fish and ersatz coffee but, because most were receiving parcels from the Red Cross, it was not needed half as much as those Germans on the other side of the prison walls. With soap, chocolate, tinned meat, tobacco and other commodities making their way

³⁹ AWM PR83/230, Lieutenant Les Ward, 2 Squadron, AFC, diary entry 10.7.18.

⁴⁰ PR00857, manuscript, Lieutenant Cecil Feez, 4 Squadron, AFC; and Amanda Rebbeck, 'Tunnelling to freedom', in *Wartime: Official Magazine of the Australian War Memorial*, Issue 44, pp. 64–65.

⁴¹ See Hugh Durnford, *The Tunnellers of Holzminden*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1920.

into camps through regular consignments of Red Cross parcels, prisoners were able to secretly trade items with German guards and orderlies in exchange for escape equipment, parole, sporting equipment and items to make life on the inside tolerable.

CONCLUSION

When war ended on 11 November 1918, all 35 Australian airmen captured in Mesopotamia, Palestine and on the Western Front were alive. Not only had they survived aerial combat in fragile aircraft with no parachutes, they had also survived a crashlanding in enemy territory and had negotiated an awkward and sometimes violent transition from combatant to captive. After interrogation, for which they were fully prepared, Australian airmen went on to endure lengthy periods of incarceration deep in enemy territory, where monotony, boredom and uncertainty prevailed. Their humble experiences behind barbed wire were not as glorious or as well known as the deeds of the leading air aces of the war, many of whom like Richthofen, Mannock, McCudden, and Voss were killed in their pursuit of triumph. These Australian prisoners were not deliberately mistreated by their captors as were tens of thousands of Australians in the hands of a cruel and merciless enemy several decades later, but their captivity remains an important but understated episode of Australia's World War I story. If anything else, the experiences of the AFC's captured airmen reminds us of the harsh realities of aerial combat when aviation was in its infancy, and of the certainty that not all who took to the skies became the stuff of legends.