

**Bringing them all back home:
Prisoner of war contact, recovery and reception units, 1944–45.**

Bryce Abraham

Abstract

During the Second World War more than 30,000 Australian soldiers, sailors, airmen, and nurses endured captivity as prisoners of war. When the conflict came to an end in Europe in May 1945, and in Asia the following August, specially organised units were tasked with the recovery and repatriation of the surviving prisoners. However, while strong historical scholarship has emerged on the Australian experience of captivity and postwar readjustment, the work of these units has yet to receive critical attention to bridge this historiographical gap. Contact, recovery, and reception units played an integral role in recovering personnel, investigating war crimes, and discovering the fate of the many missing personnel in Asia. This paper examines the organisation and operation of these units and the political issues inherent in their task, and ponders their success in light of the ex-prisoners' responses to the recovery process.

Introduction

In May 1945, Gunner Lawrence Eager, formerly of the 2/3rd Australian Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, was liberated after four years as a prisoner of war of the Germans. Captured on Crete in 1941, Eager had taken part in a forced march across eastern Germany before he was recovered by a unit of the United States Army, having spent his last two years of captivity at *Stalag* 334 (formerly known as *Stalag* VIII-B) in Silesia.¹ Writing of his experience later in life, he noted the lack of

¹ Lawrence Eager, unpublished memoirs, AWM, PR84/106, pp. 158–60; Service and casualty form, NAA, B883, VX37369.

celebration, almost nonchalance, he and fellow former prisoners experienced at their newfound freedom: "It was hard to realise you were no longer a P.O.W. There was no great demonstration, there was a lot of quiet talk, many continued with their cooking and eating – it was too hard to comprehend, we were just numbed by events."²

Such an experience of shock and disbelief was common among recovered prisoners of war. After extended periods of captivity, it was almost hard for them to believe they were finally free. Recovery, however, was only the first stage in the repatriation process. Eager and the other Western Allied prisoners in his group were sent to a Canadian transit camp in Brussels, to be registered as recovered prisoners. From there, he and the other Australians were emplaned to Eastbourne, Sussex, and the AIF Reception Group UK.³ Established in 1944 as an Army administered unit, its sole purpose was to process, provide medical treatment, and arrange the repatriation of Australian prisoners of war recovered in Europe.

The experience of Lawrence Eager serves as a poignant reminder that Australians endured captivity in Europe, and not just Asia, during the Second World War. It also brings up the difficult yet vital role undertaken by prisoner-of-war contact, recovery and reception units from 1944. More than 30,000 Australian soldiers, sailors, airmen, and nurses endured captivity between 1940 and 1945. Of these, 8,591 were taken prisoner by Germany and Italy, while the Japanese captured a further 22,376 in the Asia-Pacific.⁴

The contact, recovery and reception units were raised to retrieve, rehabilitate and repatriate Allied prisoners of war on the cessation of hostilities. Yet, while the experience of captivity and the process of readjustment postwar has been the subject of strong historical scholarship, the operations of these units have yet to be considered. In bridging this gap in historiography, this paper examines the

² Lawrence Eager, unpublished memoirs, AWM, PR84/106, p. 159.

³ Lawrence Eager, unpublished memoirs, AWM, PR84/106, pp. 160–62.

⁴ Gavin Long, *The final campaigns*, vol. VII, Australia in the war of 1939–1945, Series 1 – Army, Canberra, Australian War Memorial, 1963, pp. 633–34.

operation and organisation of these Australian units in Europe and the Pacific, with the political issues inherent in their task, and ponders their success in light of the ex-prisoners' responses to the recovery process.

Initial discussions and the AIF Reception Group UK

The War Office in London was quick to realise the difficulties inherent in prisoner-of-war recovery and repatriation, and initiated discussions as early as 1942.⁵ The timing is understandable, as over 150,000 British and Commonwealth military personnel had been captured by this stage after the disasters in France, Greece and Singapore. The British government sought Dominion agreement on plans drawn up by the Imperial Prisoners of War Committee. This envisaged British control of the repatriation of Commonwealth prisoners in Europe, whereas the Pacific would be divided into "convenient areas of Dominion responsibility, with some measure of United States control in Japan proper and the Philippines".⁶

The Commonwealth governments consented to this, but as war in the European theatre progressed through 1943, the British government revised the arrangement. With recent operational success in North Africa and Italy, the War Office anticipated a significant increase in the rate of prisoners recovered in future advances. Initial proposals raised questions of a repatriation scheme through the Middle East, where there had been a number of prisoner exchanges on medical grounds.⁷ However, it was deemed more practical to use the lines of communication established by the invading Allied armies in Western Europe, and for recovered

⁵ Lionel Wigmore, *The Japanese thrust*, vol. IV, Australia in the war of 1939–1945, Series 1 – Army, Canberra, Australian War Memorial, 1957, p. 632.

⁶ Wigmore, *The Japanese thrust*, p. 632.

⁷ Under the conditions of the Geneva Convention, exchanges of wounded or ill prisoners of war could be arranged between states. This took place fairly frequently between the Allies and the Axis powers of Europe during the Second World War, and was administered by the International Committee of the Red Cross. Japan, however, not being a signatory to the Convention, was under no obligation to engage in prisoner exchanges and, aside from a swap of civilian internees through Mozambique in August and September 1942, declined to initiate any such scheme during the conflict. Cablegram P 26/14, S.M. Bruce to Department of External Affairs, Canberra, 8 January 1944, AWM52, 1/13/4; Greg Swinden, "Sailors behind the wire", *Wartime*, 62, 2013, p. 26; Christina Twomey, *Australia's forgotten prisoners: civilians interned by the Japanese in World War Two*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 36.

personnel to be despatched to the United Kingdom. The British government therefore directed the Dominions to raise and staff camps in Britain so as to provide for their own nationals recovered from prison camps in Europe.⁸ In response, General Sir Thomas Blamey, Commander-in-Chief of the Australian Military Forces, approved the formation of AIF Reception Group UK on 1 May 1944.⁹

The specific composition of the group, however, was the subject of significant discussion. Up to this time, the Australian military had limited experience in the recovery or repatriation of prisoners of war. During the First World War the British Army had administered the recovery of Commonwealth captives, while the repatriation of Australian ex-prisoners had occurred alongside that of other soldiers in the Australian Imperial Force.¹⁰ The Australian Army's first practical experience in prisoner recovery arose following the Syria–Lebanon Campaign of 1941. On the defeat of the Vichy French forces there, Lieutenant General John Lavarack, commander of I Australian Corps and the senior Allied officer in the field, orchestrated an exchange of personnel captured during the campaign, which included 175 Australians.¹¹ But these men had only experienced a short period of imprisonment. The AIF Reception Group UK required adequate administrative and structural arrangements to cope with up to several thousand recovered prisoners, the majority of whom would have endured extended periods in captivity.

The composition approved by the army provided for a group headquarters, a transition camp, and four reception camps.¹² The staffing and configuration of these camps had attracted some debate, as estimates on the number of personnel to flow through the group were based on educated guesses about the number of Australians

⁸ Cablegram P 26/14, S.M. Bruce to Department of External Affairs, Canberra, 8 January 1944, AWM52, 1/13/4.

⁹ War diary, AIF Reception Group UK, 1 May 1944, AWM52, 1/13/4.

¹⁰ Charles Bean, *The Australian Imperial Force in France during the Allied offensive, 1918*, Official history of Australia in the war of 1914–1918, vol. VI, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1942, pp. 1060–61.

¹¹ Kent Fedorowich, "The 'forgotten' diggers: Australian POWs in Europe, 1939–1945", *Annali dell'Istituto storico italo-germanico in Trento*, 28, 2002, pp. 553–54; David Horner, "Lavarack, Sir John Dudley (1885–1957)", *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, accessed 10 March 2015, <<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/lavarack-sir-john-dudley-10790>>.

¹² Maj M.P. Crisp, "A.I.F. (U.K.) Reception Group: revised plan", 9 March 1944, AWM52, 1/13/4.

thought to be prisoners in Europe. The structure established, however, provided adequate staffing for the transition camp to handle up to 1,500 enlisted rank and 75 officer ex-prisoners at any point, which was thought to be the maximum that would be recovered at one time.¹³ The transition camp acted as an initial staging area, which received and processed all recovered personnel. Individuals were then allocated to one of the reception camps, with each equipped to cope with up to 1,000 enlisted personnel and 50 officers.¹⁴ With almost 6,000 Australians known to still be captive in Europe in January 1944, this staffing arrangement might have seemed inadequate.¹⁵ However, in the event that all four reception camps reached capacity, the transition camp was to act as a fifth.¹⁶ This was an administrative precaution that was not needed.

The group itself was raised in Melbourne in June 1944 and, under Brigadier Eugene Gorman, embarked for Europe in July.¹⁷ Aside from bouts of seasickness and a series of lectures – including the “probable physical and mental condition of released PWs” – the initial voyage was uneventful.¹⁸ The journey was via the United States, with a four-night stopover in San Francisco before the men went to New York. They rounded out a week in the city with a march down Broadway on 15 August, and were received by Mayor Fiorello La Guardia on the steps of City Hall.¹⁹

¹³ Maj M.P. Crisp, “A.I.F. (U.K.) Reception Group: revised plan”, 9 March 1944, AWM52, 1/13/4.

¹⁴ Maj M.P. Crisp, “A.I.F. (U.K.) Reception Group: revised plan”, 9 March 1944, AWM52, 1/13/4.

¹⁵ Maj M.P. Crisp, “Accommodation in UK of repatriated Aust PWs”, 31 January 1944, AWM52, 1/13/4.

¹⁶ Maj M.P. Crisp, “A.I.F. (U.K.) Reception Group: revised plan”, 9 March 1944, AWM52, 1/13/4.

¹⁷ War diary, AIF Reception Group UK, 14–15 June 1944, AWM52, 1/13/4.

¹⁸ War diary, AIF Reception Group UK, 16 June – 30 July 1944, AWM52, 1/13/4.

¹⁹ War diary, AIF Reception Group UK, 30 July – 15 August 1944, AWM52, 1/13/4.



Members of AIF Reception Group UK march down Broadway, 15 August 1944. (AWM 042507)

Re-embarking for Britain, the group docked at Gourock, Scotland on 27 August and established camp at Hazlemere in Buckinghamshire. This location was intended to be only temporary, and the unit moved to permanent quarters at Eastbourne, a coastal town in south Sussex, in late September.²⁰ Nonetheless, during the short time spent at Hazlemere the initial Australian prisoners began to arrive for processing, Private E.J. Scully being the first, just two days after the group disembarked.²¹

As recovered prisoners arrived in Eastbourne, they were processed through the transition camp. This served to change the individuals from prisoners into able-bodied military personnel once more. The men were given a thorough medical and dental check, and were treated or hospitalised as necessary. Each man submitted his pay book for checking and payment, was granted one free cable home to Australia, and was fitted out with a complete new uniform, signalling the effective return to

²⁰ War diary, AIF Reception Group UK, 27 August – 30 September 1944, AWM52, 1/13/4.

²¹ Memorandum, B. Gorman to 1 AIF Transit Camp UK, 29 August 1944, AWM52, 1/13/4.

military service.²² All ex-prisoners were also granted immediate leave.²³ However, before leave was permitted, the recovered prisoners were subject to an interrogation, to use the terminology of the day.



Repatriated prisoner of war is processed by war artist Stella Bowen, 1945. (AWM ART26272)

The interrogation was closer to a debriefing, at which former prisoners would relay information about their experience in captivity. The military hierarchy pragmatically viewed this as the most vital aspect in the recovery process. It provided information about command and battle performance through the circumstances of capture, details of potential war crimes and possible enemy collaborators, and particulars of missing personnel. Interrogation functioned similarly in the Pacific. Indeed, based on the experience in Europe, administrative

²² Memorandum LHQ SM 27759, Col A.M. Sheppard, "Instructions on procedure - prisoners of war repatriated or returned to Australia", 15 December 1943, AWM52, 1/13/4; Memorandum, Assistant Adjutant and Quarter Master General AIF Reception Group UK, "Instructions to AIF Transit Camp United Kingdom", 13 September 1944, AWM52, 1/13/4.

²³ Memorandum LHQ SM 27759, Col A.M. Sheppard, "Instructions on procedure - prisoners of war repatriated or returned to Australia", 15 December 1943, AWM52, 1/13/4.

instructions issued by Blamey's headquarters to the Pacific reception units in September 1945 prioritised the completion of war crimes questionnaires, and forms related to capture and prisoner casualties, over those about pay and the individual experience in captivity.²⁴ The primacy granted to such information reflects the practical and perhaps politicised nature of the recovery process, as details of war crimes and operational performance given precedence over the prisoner experience itself.²⁵

Only small numbers of personnel initially flowed through the transition camp, as prisoner recovery in late 1944 and early 1945 came chiefly from operations, escapes, or exchanges of wounded and ill personnel. The situation altered with the defeat of Germany in May 1945, when the reception group was required to process and repatriate a mass of recovered prisoners. For instance, the group handled 168 ex-prisoners in the period between August 1944 and January 1945.²⁶ This figure rose to 3,892 in May, and a further 429 personnel arrived throughout June and July.²⁷ However, there was not sufficient shipping to transport the ex-prisoners back to Australia. Waiting periods of two to three months were not uncommon, as the men did not rate highly enough for priority transportation, with war continuing in Europe and the Pacific. Victory in Europe did free up some shipping to expedite repatriation, but the process still required a three-week wait on average.²⁸

To suppress discontent with this delay, events and recreational activities were organised. The Australian branch of the Red Cross established Gowrie House in Eastbourne to provide support services to ex-prisoners awaiting repatriation, including the arrangement of accommodation for personnel on leave, and the

²⁴ Advanced Land Headquarters administrative instruction no. 72, 14 September 1945, AWM54, 779/9/13.

²⁵ Rosalind Hearder, *Keep the men alive: Australian POW doctors in Japanese captivity*, Crows Nest, Allen & Unwin, 2009, p. 182.

²⁶ War diary, AIF Reception Group UK, 1 August 1944 – 31 January 1945, AWM52, 1/13/4.

²⁷ War diary, AIF Reception Group UK, 1 June – 31 July 1945, AWM52, 1/13/4.

²⁸ War diary, AIF Reception Group UK, AWM52, 1/13/4.

provision of sports, game and cinema equipment.²⁹ Dances were popular, attended by 250 ex-prisoners and locals weekly, while short courses in a range of theoretical and academic pursuits were organised at several universities – such as Oxford, Cambridge and St Andrews – and classes in practical interests, including welding, construction and brickwork, were offered locally.³⁰

The Victory Cricket Tests between Australia and Britain from May to September 1945 were also a source of entertainment. Several players on the Australian Services Team were seconded to the reception group's headquarters in order to play, including the Test cricketer Lindsay Hassett.³¹ The team's main strike bowler, Warrant Officer Graham Williams, a navigator in the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), was also with the group. Williams was billeted in one of the reception camps, having been liberated from *Stalag IX-B* in Hesse a matter of weeks before, walking out to bat at Lord's Cricket Ground on 21 May to a crowd of 30,000.³²



The Australian Services Cricket Team in England, June 1945. (AWM P02218.001)

²⁹ Memorandum, Assistant Adjutant and Quarter Master General AIF Reception Group UK, "Instructions to AIF Transit Camp United Kingdom", 13 September 1944, AWM52, 1/13/4.

³⁰ War diary, AIF Reception Group UK, AWM52, 1/13/4.

³¹ Chris Harte, *A history of Australian cricket*, London, Andre Deutsch, 1993, p. 386.

³² Ed Jaggard, "Forgotten heroes: The 1945 Australian Services Cricket Team", *Sporting Traditions*, 12:2, May 1996, p. 61; Record of service – airmen, NAA, A9301, 407052.

In his postwar memoirs, Brigadier Ian Campbell, commander of AIF Reception Group UK from May 1945, wrote favourably of the Australian Services Team and their positive influence on the ex-prisoners, noting the former were “a great lot of sportsmen [who] performed very well in England that summer”.³³ Not everyone shared Campbell’s sentiment, however. Gunner Eager was scathing in his assessment of the reception group and the cricket connection. Eager thought the group “very inefficient”, and lamented that many of its personnel “were apparently picked for their cricketing prowess ... I supposed our arrival interfered with cricket practice.”³⁴

While recreational activities were likewise organised for recovered prisoners of the Japanese – primarily cinema and musical performances – and the men were similarly critical of perceived inefficiency, the repatriation of Australian prisoners in Europe was very different from that effected in the Pacific just four months later.

Recovery in the Pacific

Prisoners of the Japanese presented a problem on a much greater scale. Almost three times as many Australians were captured in the Asia-Pacific than in action against the Axis powers of Europe.³⁵ The geographical spread of the prisoners, and the fundamental lack of knowledge about the men and women while they were in captivity, created further issues. To place this into context, in 1980 the Medical Research Committee of the US service organisation Ex-Prisoners of War published a map of known Japanese-run prison and internment camps during the Second World War. The back of the map listed 677 camps, spread throughout south-east Asia, Japan, Korea and Manchuria.³⁶ But this was published 35 years after the

³³ Ian Campbell, “Life of I.R. Campbell”, unpublished manuscript, AWM, PR82/186, p. 158.

³⁴ Lawrence Eager, unpublished memoirs, AWM, PR84/106, p. 163.

³⁵ Long, *The final campaigns*, pp. 633–34.

³⁶ Medical Research Committee of American Ex-Prisoners of War, Inc., “Japanese prisoner of war camps during World War II, 1941–1945: know locations of camps where American, British, Dutch, Australian, Canadian, Indian, and other Allied military and civilian personnel were imprisoned by the Japanese”, 1980, accessed 12 March 2015, <<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/32/JapanesePowCamps-WWII-front.jpg> and <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/f/f4/JapanesePowCamps-WWII-back.jpg>>.

war ended. The number and distribution of Allied prisoners was uncertain during the conflict and in its immediate aftermath. In fact, very little was known about prisoners of the Japanese.³⁷

The 1929 Geneva Convention stipulated the treatment to be accorded to prisoners of war, which included sharing the particulars of detainees between warring nations and the right of prisoners to send and receive letters.³⁸ However, unlike Germany, Japan was not a signatory to the convention, and was under no obligation to provide information about prisoners, nor to maintain communications. This uncertainty and lack of information was the harsh reality presented to the Allied powers.³⁹ As a prime example, the Australian government was aware of the number and identity of the personnel attached to the 8th Division before the fall of Singapore. But no one knew how many had been killed during the fighting in Malaya and Singapore, nor how many were held as prisoners of war.

Minimal information about the prisoners came to light during the ensuing three years, and contact from them was subject to Japanese censors. For the majority of families, lettercards provided by the Japanese afforded the only contact from loved ones in prison camps. A few fortunate relatives received three of these cards over the years, but the majority just one or two. The lettercards, restricted to 24 words, primarily gave a positive perception of captivity. A card sent by a Private Michael Edwards to his mother in March 1945, for instance, read: "Healthy, strong, still smiling..."⁴⁰ Some prisoners were able to hint at their conditions, however, by using colloquial language that would fool their captors. One soldier, writing to his father in 1942, recorded: "Our sleeping quarters and food are good, but not as good

³⁷ Michael McKernan, *This war never ends: the pain of separation and return*, St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 2001, p. 19.

³⁸ Convention relative to the treatment of prisoners of war, Geneva, 27 July 1929, accessed 12 March 2015, <<https://www.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/INTRO/305?OpenDocument>>.

³⁹ McKernan, *This war never ends*, p. 6.

⁴⁰ Lettercard, M. Edwards to E. Bichard, 21 March 1945, AWM PR01123.

as Dudley Flats.”⁴¹ These flats were a group of shacks near Flemington Racecourse, used for shelter by the homeless.⁴²

Survivors from the sinking of the Japanese transports *Rakuyo Maru* and *Kachidoki Maru* in September 1944 provided the first authentic accounts of captivity under the Japanese. The *Rakuyo* and *Kachidoki* were part of a convoy ferrying Allied prisoners from Singapore for use as labour in Japan. Loaded with 2,300 prisoners, including 649 Australians aboard the *Rakuyo*, the ships were sunk in Luzon Strait by a pack of three United States Navy submarines on 12 September.⁴³ Japanese destroyers picked up the Japanese survivors and a small number of the prisoners within two days; the remaining prisoners spent three to five days afloat in the oil-slicked sea.⁴⁴ These men were only discovered after the submarines returned to the site of battle to survey the damage, unaware the *Rakuyo* and *Kachidoki* were being used as prisoner transports. Over the next two days, the submarines recovered 151 surviving prisoners, including 91 Australians.⁴⁵

⁴¹ C. Brand, adjournment speech, *CPD*, Senate, 18 September 1942, p. 523.

⁴² C. Brand, adjournment speech, *CPD*, Senate, 18 September 1942, p. 523.

⁴³ *Rakuyo Maru survivors 1944*, Gardenvale, Mostly Unsung Military History Research and Publications, 2000, p. 1; McKernan, *This war never ends*, pp. 45-46; C.E. Loughlin (Commanding Officer USS *Queenfish*) to the Commander Submarine Force, US Pacific Fleet, 25 September 1944, NAA, MP729/6 63/401/728.

⁴⁴ *Rakuyo Maru survivors 1944*, p. 1; Report, Capt D. Tufnell RN to Adm C. Nimitz, 3 October 1944, NAA, B6121 20S.

⁴⁵ Report, Capt D. Tufnell RN to Adm C. Nimitz, 3 October 1944, NAA, B6121 20S; McKernan, *This war never ends*, p. 49.



The submarine USS *Sealion* recovers British and Australian survivors of the sinking of the *Rakuyo Maru*, 15 September 1944. (AWM 305634)

After a period of hospitalisation and recovery, the survivors were sent to army headquarters in Melbourne in February 1945.⁴⁶ They spent two months recounting their experiences, the conditions of fellow prisoners, locations of camps, and allegations of war crimes.⁴⁷ The men were the first to provide an authentic account of imprisonment under the Japanese, as well as details of the now infamous Burma–Thailand Railway.⁴⁸ This information formed the basis for the extensive planning of prisoner-of-war recovery throughout 1945.

However, the lack of specific knowledge about prisoners of the Japanese meant Australian authorities were unaware of precise numbers and distribution. Rough estimates, nonetheless, were produced, based on details provided by the *Rakuyo* survivors and approximations from the headquarters of General Douglas

⁴⁶ Report, Capt D. Tufnell RN to Adm C. Nimitz, 3 October 1944, NAA, B6121 20S; McKernan, *This war never ends*, pp. 50, 58–59.

⁴⁷ “Aust PW survivors ex SS ‘Rakuyo Maru’”, 1945, NAA, MP729/8 44/431/73.

⁴⁸ *Rakuyo Maru survivors 1944*, p. 1; McKernan, *This war never ends*, pp. 49–50.

MacArthur, Supreme Allied Commander South-West Pacific Area. As at August 1945, the spread of Australian prisoners was believed to be as follows: over 8,000 on the Japanese mainland; 5,000 spread throughout south-east Asia; 2,000 on Borneo; 500 on Java; and a further 2,000 scattered across so-called “sundry locations”.⁴⁹ The estimated total to be recovered, 17,500, was thought to be a low assessment. The Australian government still expected to recover close to 20,000 Australian personnel.⁵⁰ These estimates were far from the reality.

Preparation for prisoner recovery in the Pacific was informed by these flawed distribution estimates and the experience in Europe. In a June 1945 memorandum, Sir Frederick Shedden, the Secretary of the Department of Defence, noted: “It appears likely that Australian Prisoners of War will be liberated by or as a result of a number of independent operations.”⁵¹ Basically, prisoner recovery in the Pacific was anticipated to occur alongside offensives, in which case the repatriation process would have functioned in a manner similar to AIF Reception Group UK.

This was known as incremental operational recovery. With this in mind, the Allied powers decided that theatre commanders would be “responsible for the recovery, welfare and repatriation of Allied prisoners of war and internees held by Japan”.⁵² The preparation for prisoner-of-war recovery from late 1944 was predicated on the Pacific being divided in line with the theatre commands established from 1942 for offensives against Japan; for Australian repatriation, this meant South East Asia Command and the South-West Pacific Area. Under Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, South East Asia Command was in charge of operations in India, Burma, Malaya, Sumatra and Java. South-West Pacific Area, responsible to General MacArthur, covered the regions around New Guinea, Borneo, and the

⁴⁹ Memorandum, F. Sinclair to F. Shedden, “Appendix A: recovery of Australian prisoners of war held by Japan”, 27 August 1945, NAA, A816, 54/301/294.

⁵⁰ Memorandum, F. Sinclair to F. Shedden, “Appendix A: recovery of Australian prisoners of war held by Japan”, 27 August 1945, NAA, A816, 54/301/294; McKernan, *This war never ends*, 61.

⁵¹ Memorandum, F. Shedden to F. Sinclair, 13 June 1945, NAA, A816, 54/301/294.

⁵² Memorandum, “Recovery of Australian prisoners of war held by Japan”, statement prepared for Frank Forde, Minister for the Army, 26 August 1945, NAA, A816, 54/301/294.

Philippines. It was in step with these command regions that the Australian reception groups were established.

2nd Australian Prisoner of War Reception Group

Under the command of Brigadier John Lloyd, 2nd Australian Prisoner of War Reception Group was raised in Melbourne on 2 August 1945.⁵³ The group was designed to operate from India, and under the direction of Mountbatten's headquarters. The intention was for the unit to be supported and maintained by British matériel as it operated in incremental prisoner recovery in Malaya and Singapore, at least once Operation Zipper – Mountbatten's planned invasion of Malaya – was put into action.⁵⁴ In which case, according to military planning, the group would need facilities for at most only 2,000 ex-prisoners at any time.⁵⁵

Although the experience in Europe influenced the intended operations of 2nd Group, its specific composition differed from that of AIF Reception Group UK. Owing to its limited capacity, the group was to host only two reception camps, numbers 5 and 6, while headquarters, echelon, pay, provost and dental units were also attached.⁵⁶ No. 2 Contact and Enquiry Unit (CEU), the 2/14th Australian General Hospital (AGH), and a graves detachment augmented the group.⁵⁷ The formation of the latter units would indicate that some were not quite so optimistic about the numbers to be recovered. Rumours of Japanese atrocities spread during the later stages of the war, and the Australian military were well aware of the effects of tropical disease following the experience in New Guinea, so the precaution proved necessary. It should be noted that the prisoner of war experience in the

⁵³ Draft report, Brig J. Lloyd, "Note on the activities of 2 Aust PW Reception Group", AWM, PR00305.

⁵⁴ Draft report, Brig J. Lloyd, "Note on the activities of 2 Aust PW Reception Group", AWM, PR00305; McKernan, *This war never ends*, p. 89; Memorandum, "Recovery of Australian prisoners of war held by Japan", statement prepared for Frank Forde, Minister for the Army, 26 August 1945, NAA, A816, 54/301/294.

⁵⁵ F. Forde, War Cabinet agenda 304/1945, "Recovery and reception of Australian P.O.W. in south east Asia", 10 July 1945, NAA, A816, 54/301/294.

⁵⁶ Report, Brig J. Lloyd, "Report by Brig. J.E. Lloyd, C.B.E., D.S.O., M.C. Comd. 2 Aust P.W. Reception Group. (covers period Aug – Nov 1945.)", AWM, PR00305.

⁵⁷ Report, Brig J. Lloyd, "Report by Brig. J.E. Lloyd, C.B.E., D.S.O., M.C. Comd. 2 Aust P.W. Reception Group. (covers period Aug – Nov 1945.)", AWM, PR00305.

Pacific differed between camps, commandants and guards, and was far from uniform. While many prisoners did experience harsh conditions and violence, the circumstances in other areas could have been more favourable.⁵⁸

The sudden capitulation of Japan on 15 August 1945, however, came as quite a surprise, and threw planning of prisoner repatriation into disarray. Lloyd and an advance party from 2nd Group had emplaned for Colombo on the morning of the capitulation, to make arrangements for the unit's establishment in India.⁵⁹ But the surrender meant that incremental liberation had to be replaced with mass processing and repatriation. On the advice of Mountbatten and his staff, Lloyd made arrangements to move the group's base of operations to Changi, on the eastern coast of Singapore.⁶⁰ As Lloyd noted in a later report to his superiors, the move was arranged as "it had become obvious that to function efficiently the Group would have to operate in an area adjacent to the main body of Australian" prisoners.⁶¹ This was in Singapore, where – contrary to the flawed prisoner distribution estimates – 5,549 Australian personnel were held in the nearby region, the majority at Changi Prison, while a further 4,830 Australians were scattered throughout nearby Thailand and Burma.⁶²

Though the internal situation on Singapore and the Malay Peninsula was quite unknown, it was clear that the group would no longer be in a position to rely on British matériel.⁶³ The composition of 2nd Group was consequently expanded to create an appropriately self-contained unit, so a signals section, transport company

⁵⁸ For an account of the varied experiences of Australian prisoners on the Japanese mainland, see Lachlan Grant, "The end of the line", *Wartime*, 68, Spring 2014, pp. 44–49.

⁵⁹ Draft report, Brig J. Lloyd, "Note on the Activities of 2 Aust PW Reception Group", AWM, PR00305; Maj A. MacKinnon, "Report on activities of 2 Aust Contact and Enquiry Unit", 15 November 1945, AWM52, 25/1/9.

⁶⁰ Memorandum, "Recovery of Australian prisoners of war held by japan", statement prepared for Frank Forde, Minister for the Army, 26 August 1945, NAA, A816, 54/301/294; Draft report, Brig J. Lloyd, "Note on the activities of 2 Aust PW Reception Group", AWM, PR00305.

⁶¹ Brig J. Lloyd, "Report on the activities of 2 Aust PW Reception Group", AWM, PR00305.

⁶² A.J. Sweeting, "Camps in Borneo, Japan and elsewhere", in Wigmore, Lionel, *The Japanese thrust*, vol. IV, *Australia in the war of 1939–1945*, Series 1 – Army, Canberra, Australian War Memorial, 1957, p. 633.

⁶³ Draft report, Brig J. Lloyd, "Note on the activities of 2 Aust PW Reception Group", AWM, PR00305.

and supply depot were added. The size of the hospital was tripled to 600 beds, and the group's personnel was increased to 1,468.⁶⁴

Once appropriate arrangements had been made for the unit's expansion, 2nd Group embarked for Singapore on 27 August and arrived on 13 September.⁶⁵ Lloyd's advance party had landed five days earlier to organise the group's establishment at Changi. As few public utilities were operational at the time, conditions in the area were "bordering on chaotic".⁶⁶ The group was further hindered by an acute shortage of transport, as the unit's transport company had been placed aboard the stores ship *Murrumbidgee River*, which had experienced loading delays in Sydney and did not dock in Singapore until 18 September. In the meantime, "unreliable and unsuitable" local civilian vehicles were requisitioned, while British stores were drawn upon for rations.⁶⁷



Members of the 2nd Australian Prisoner of War Reception Group disembark from the MV *Duntroon* in Singapore, 13 September 1945. (AWM 117237)

⁶⁴ Brig J. Lloyd, "Report by Brig. J.E. Lloyd, C.B.E., D.S.O., M.C. Comd. 2 Aust P.W. Reception Group. (covers period Aug - Nov 1945.)", AWM, PR00305.

⁶⁵ Draft report, Brig J. Lloyd, "Note on the activities of 2 Aust PW Reception Group", AWM, PR00305.

⁶⁶ Draft report, Brig J. Lloyd, "Note on the activities of 2 Aust PW Reception Group", AWM, PR00305.

⁶⁷ Draft report, Brig J. Lloyd, "Note on the activities of 2 Aust PW Reception Group", AWM, PR00305.

Given these conditions, Lloyd directed that the Australians in Changi remain accommodated at the prison during the repatriation process. The directive proved unpopular among the ex-prisoners as, in the general view of the men, they had expected to be “liberated” and not remain confined to the place of their wartime imprisonment.⁶⁸ As Sergeant Stan Arneil recorded in his diary for 7 September, “we were supposed to be free men and yet we are still behind barbed wire.”⁶⁹ In the meantime, the 2/14th AGH was established at St Patrick’s School only a short distance away, while the two reception camps were located in the area immediate to the prison to streamline repatriation.⁷⁰

The reception group, nonetheless, discovered an unexpected benefit in the state of the records maintained by the 8th Division’s 2nd Echelon.⁷¹ For the men of the 8th Division captured in Singapore, the 2nd Echelon was able to function “in much the same manner” as it had before the Allied surrender.⁷² Even after the prisoners began being sent out on working parties from March 1942, reports were sent back to 2nd Echelon on numbers, location, casualties and, in the case of deaths, details of the man’s identity, date of burial, and a map reference.⁷³ Consequently, the division’s staff was able to provide to the incoming 2nd Group a mostly complete, up-to-date and accurate record of personnel, both living and dead, and their location.⁷⁴ This accelerated the process of repatriation as nominal rolls were compiled and checked under the direction of contact teams.

⁶⁸ Brig J. Lloyd, “Report by Brig. J.E. Lloyd, C.B.E., D.S.O., M.C. Comd. 2 Aust P.W. Reception Group. (covers period Aug–Nov 1945.)”, AWM, PR00305; Roland Oakes, unpublished memoirs, AWM, MSS0776, p. 339; Stan Arneil, *One man’s war*, Sydney, Vaughan Douglas Printers, 1980, p. 258.

⁶⁹ Arneil, *One Man’s War*, p. 258.

⁷⁰ Brig J. Lloyd, “Report by Brig. J.E. Lloyd, C.B.E., D.S.O., M.C. Comd. 2 Aust P.W. Reception Group. (covers period Aug – Nov 1945.)”, AWM, PR00305.

⁷¹ “2nd Echelon”, AWM, 3DRL 369, 50/7/14.

⁷² “2nd Echelon”, AWM, 3DRL 369, 50/7/14.

⁷³ 2nd Echelon staff, however, noted that the reported identity of deceased personnel was often incorrect, as identity discs rotted in the tropics, pay books were frequently missing on bodies and the men tended to share or swap clothing, making positive identification difficult. “2nd Echelon”, AWM, 3DRL 369, 50/7/14.

⁷⁴ “2nd Echelon”, AWM, 3DRL 369, 50/7/14.

While No. 2 CEU remained headquartered in Ceylon before the move to Changi, its seven contact teams were attached to various British and Australian formations as they moved into Malaya, Singapore and Thailand.⁷⁵ Composed of one officer and one non-commissioned rank, the contact teams' purpose was to obtain information on the whereabouts or fate of prisoners of war, to make contact with the men and women, and to locate the graves of deceased personnel.⁷⁶ For the Australian forces, enquiry units and contact teams were unique to the Pacific theatre. In part, this may have been a response to the unknown status and spread of prisoners in Japanese captivity, whereas in Europe the AIF Reception Group UK was able to rely on other Allied units and the lines of communication for the recovery process. Nonetheless, by the time the enquiry unit moved to Changi, a further seven contact teams had been despatched throughout the regions around Malaya, Saigon, Rangoon, Bangkok, Sumatra, and Java.⁷⁷ This included one contact team from the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) and one from the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) that operated as interrogation and enquiry units for their respective service personnel.⁷⁸

The initial task of the teams after making contact with prisoners was to oversee the compilation of a nominal roll of prisoners in the camp, with numbers and location sent to the headquarters of the enquiry unit. In the case of Changi, two contact teams were parachuted in with medical orderlies on 30 August to initiate processing.⁷⁹ Due to 2nd Echelon's well-maintained records, complete nominal rolls and casualty information were available when Lloyd arrived nine days later. As Major Alan MacKinnon, Officer Commanding No. 2 CEU, later noted, the repatriation process was "greatly facilitated" by 2nd Echelon's "utmost efficiency",

⁷⁵ Maj A. MacKinnon, "Report on activities of 2 Aust Contact and Enquiry Unit", 15 November 1945, AWM52, 25/1/9.

⁷⁶ Maj A. MacKinnon, "Report on activities of 2 Aust Contact and Enquiry Unit", 15 November 1945, AWM52, 25/1/9; Report, Capt J. Punch, "3 PW Contact and Enquiry Unit", 11 December 1945, AWM52, 25/1/8.

⁷⁷ Maj A. MacKinnon, "Report on activities of 2 Aust Contact and Enquiry Unit", 15 November 1945, AWM52, 25/1/9.

⁷⁸ Maj A. MacKinnon, "Report on activities of 2 Aust Contact and Enquiry Unit", 15 November 1945, AWM52, 25/1/9.

⁷⁹ Diary, Maj C. Tracey, 30 August 1945, AWM, PR03469; Arneil, *One man's war*, p. 254.

with the first batch of prisoners embarking for Australia just four days after the group's arrival in Singapore.⁸⁰

The process for prisoners in outlying regions was more complex. In these areas, the prisoners were emplaned to Singapore once nominal rolls were complete, to undergo interrogation and wait to be shipped home.⁸¹ As the men recovered in Changi were processed and repatriated swiftly, the two reception camps relocated on 22 September to a residential area two miles (3.2 kilometres) to the east of the prison to receive personnel from the surrounding islands.⁸² The two-stage repatriation for these prisoners, however, caused some problems. In late September, a group of prisoners embarked at Rangoon, believing they were destined for Australia. The men were surprised when the ship docked in Singapore Harbour, and angered to discover another group of prisoners would take their place on the ship. Warrant Officer Fred Airey, among the Rangoon party, noted there "was near mutiny" until the men were assured their repatriation would only be delayed by a few days.⁸³ The situation in this case highlights the lack of communication between the reception staff and recovered prisoners, which was common. Nonetheless, the last of the outlying prisoners to arrive embarked for Australia on 29 October, by which time 2nd Group had recovered and processed 10,955 prisoners in six weeks of operation in Singapore.⁸⁴

The swift nature of prisoner repatriation in the Pacific presented a marked contrast to the experience in Europe just months earlier. Lloyd acknowledged that the speed of repatriation presented a challenge, as it limited the amount of personal service that could be provided.⁸⁵ This was certainly the case with supplies, as the

⁸⁰ Maj A. MacKinnon, "Report on activities of 2 Aust Contact and Enquiry Unit", 15 November 1945, AWM52, 25/1/9.

⁸¹ An unspecified number of the 385 Australian prisoners in Java presented a slight exception to this, as they were routed home via Balikpapan in Borneo instead. Report, Maj A. MacKinnon, "Report on activities of 2 Aust Contact and Enquiry Unit", 15 November 1945, AWM52, 25/1/9.

⁸² Brig J. Lloyd, "Report by Brig. J.E. Lloyd, C.B.E., D.S.O., M.C. Comd. 2 Aust P.W. Reception Group. (covers period Aug - Nov 1945.)", AWM, PR00305.

⁸³ Fred Airey, *The time of the soldier*, South Fremantle, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1991, p. 207.

⁸⁴ Draft report, Brig J. Lloyd, "Note on the activities of 2 Aust PW Reception Group", AWM, PR00305.

⁸⁵ Draft report, Brig J. Lloyd, "Note on the activities of 2 Aust PW Reception Group", AWM, PR00305.

rate of repatriation outstripped the arrival of stores such as clothing. Large numbers of ex-prisoners embarked with incomplete or piecemeal issues of uniform, which drew critical comment in parliament.⁸⁶ The fact remained that the policy regarding the repatriation of recovered prisoners was that, in the words of Lloyd, “subject to having a minimum standard of physical fitness, no man would be retained in Singapore”.⁸⁷ As the Japanese camp guards had significantly increased rations following the capitulation, the reception staff judged the prisoners to be in better health than anticipated, so the standard of fitness was easily met.⁸⁸

Even the process of interrogation did not halt the speed of repatriation. While casualty information and war crimes allegations remained of primary importance, interrogation for pay details was regularly postponed until the men were on the voyage to Australia.⁸⁹ The only exception to rapid repatriation was for personnel needed to assist in locating war graves. As the Australian government deemed the location of missing personnel and war graves of vital importance, ex-prisoners with such knowledge were retained briefly to assist the war graves detachment. The departure of Warrant Officer Airey from Singapore, for instance, was delayed by several days as he unsuccessfully attempted to find the burial sites of two prisoners, having been the last Allied man to see them.⁹⁰

3rd Australian Prisoner of War Reception Group

Operating out of Manila, 3rd Australian Prisoner of War Reception Group experienced a similar fate to its counterpart in Singapore. Swift repatriation remained the primary focus of the group’s staff, as they acted to recover and accommodate a greater number than the unit was originally intended to hold.

⁸⁶ War diary, No. 6 Prisoner of War Reception Camp, 15 September 1945, AWM52, 30/3/16.

⁸⁷ Draft report, Brig J. Lloyd, “Note on the activities of 2 Aust PW Reception Group”, AWM, PR00305.

⁸⁸ Draft report, Brig J. Lloyd, “Note on the activities of 2 Aust PW Reception Group”, AWM, PR00305.

⁸⁹ Advanced Land Headquarters administrative instruction no. 72, 14 September 1945, AWM54, 779/9/13.

⁹⁰ Airey, *The time of the soldier*, pp. 207–08.

Raised on 16 August 1945, 3rd Group came under the command of Brigadier Hugh Wrigley.⁹¹ The unit was raised to operate alongside MacArthur's forces, its task to receive all Australian prisoners of war "recovered by the US Forces in the vicinity of Japan".⁹² MacArthur's headquarters and the Australian government believed that 8,000 Australian prisoners were held on the Japanese mainland. The actual number, however, stood closer to 2,700, including those scattered throughout nearby Korea and Manchuria.⁹³ With the significant influx of ex-prisoners through 2nd Group in Singapore, someone must have realised the fault in the distribution estimates, as the scope of 3rd Group was expanded soon after. The unit was tasked with the recovery of all Commonwealth personnel in Japan and the surrounding regions, with Canadian prisoners and British women the only exceptions, as alternative arrangements were in place for their repatriation.⁹⁴

To this end, 3rd Group was rationed and supported in matériel by the United States Army. The specific composition of the group – informed by its European and south-east Asian counterparts – comprised only two reception camps, each intended to accommodate 50 officers and 1,000 enlisted ranks. However, with the extended scope of recovery, United States Army replacement battalions were added to the reception camps to increase the total capacity to 6,000 personnel.⁹⁵ Access to United States field hospitals was also provided, while Australian dental, echelon, postal, and canteen units, along with the 105th Mobile Bacteria Lab, augmented 3rd Group's organisation.⁹⁶ To assist in the processing of other Commonwealth persons, a small contingent of British personnel and a four-man team from the British Indian Army

⁹¹ Brig H. Wrigley, "Report on activities: 3 Aust PW Reception Gp", AWM54, 329/11/1; Advanced Land Headquarters administrative instruction no. 57, 16 August 1945, AWM54, 721/1/18.

⁹² Brig H. Wrigley, "Report on activities: 3 Aust PW Reception Gp", AWM54, 329/11/1.

⁹³ Sweeting, "Camps in Borneo, Japan and elsewhere", p. 633.

⁹⁴ The Canadian government provided its own recovery team, while recovered British females (both military and civilian) remained the responsibility of the British Consulate. Brig H. Wrigley, "Report on activities: 3 Aust PW Reception Gp", AWM54, 329/11/1; Deputy Assistant Adjutant General 3rd Australian Prisoner of War Reception Group, "Report of 'A' Branch – HQ 3 Aust PW Reception Group", 17 October 1945, AWM54, 329/11/1.

⁹⁵ Commanding Officer No. 7 Australian Reception Camp, "Joint report on activities 7 Aust PW Reception Camp and British PW Reception Camp", AWM54, 329/11/1.

⁹⁶ Advanced Land Headquarters administrative instruction no. 57, 16 August 1945, AWM54, 721/1/18.

were seconded to the group. In a later report, Wrigley labelled the addition of such small numbers as “hopelessly inadequate”, as they required assistance from the already overstretched Australian resources.⁹⁷ To cope, the group had to rely further on support from the United States Army.⁹⁸

While Wrigley and an advance party emplaned for Manila on 19 August, the main body of the group continued to be formed out of Morotai, Dutch East Indies.⁹⁹ The personnel comprising the unit, however, were a little unusual, as the majority were voluntarily seconded. The Army administration was eager for this to be the case, and only long-serving personnel eligible for discharge were prevented from volunteering.¹⁰⁰ The composition of the unit thus presented a contrast to 2nd Group, which had contained a large number of inexperienced personnel and recent enlistees. Indeed, officers from No. 6 Reception Camp had criticised the apparent lack of forethought in the selection of 2nd Group’s personnel. This criticism was particularly apt after it was discovered that one private had spent twelve months in detention after being absent without leave for 922 days.¹⁰¹

As elements of 3rd Group arrived in Manila throughout late August and early September, the unit was able to move swiftly into operation, although not without difficulties. Like the experience in Singapore, 3rd Group was hindered by the delayed arrival of stores from Australia, placing further pressure on the United States units.¹⁰² Further, while AIF Reception Group UK and 2nd Group had enjoyed semi-autonomy in their operations, 3rd Group was required to operate in a cooperative international environment, with the United States as the lead nation.

The recovery teams despatched to Japan reflect this situation. Primarily operating out of Yokohama Harbour, the recovery teams served to process and

⁹⁷ Brig H. Wrigley, “Report on activities: 3 Aust PW Reception Gp”, AWM54, 329/11/1.

⁹⁸ Brig H. Wrigley, “Report on activities: 3 Aust PW Reception Gp”, AWM54, 329/11/1.

⁹⁹ Brig H. Wrigley, “Report on activities: 3 Aust PW Reception Gp”, AWM54, 329/11/1.

¹⁰⁰ Advanced Land Headquarters administrative instruction no. 57, 16 August 1945, AWM54, 721/1/18.

¹⁰¹ War diary, No. 6 Australian Prisoner of War Reception Camp, 25 August 1945, AWM52, 30/3/16.

¹⁰² Brig H. Wrigley, “Report on activities: 3 Aust PW Reception Gp”, AWM54, 329/11/1.

interrogate all Allied personnel as they were recovered from the 130 camps scattered across Japan.¹⁰³ In all, 79 teams were raised for this task, with each unit composed of three officers and three enlisted ranks. Australians were attached to 26 of these teams, where the general composition was two American, two Dutch and two Australian personnel.¹⁰⁴ However, while archival reports suggest the majority of the recovery teams were able to operate efficiently and cooperatively, inter-service and international friction arose with the small number of naval teams raised. In a letter to his commanding officer, Lieutenant Alexander Steel of the RAN lamented the inefficiency and lack of cooperation he had experienced with the army units in Japan, complaining: "I ... have 'had' the Army, both U.S. and Australian, in very large lumps."¹⁰⁵ As the army assumed the primary responsibility for prisoner recovery and repatriation, friction did occasionally arise between the services, as the navy was viewed as occupying a secondary role.

¹⁰³ Maj N.S. Thomas, "Report on activities of personnel of 1 Aust PW Contact and Enquiry Unit attached to US Army forces occupying Japan", 27 September 1945, AWM54, 779/1/21; Maj G.B. Massingham, "Report on the activities of 1 Aust PW Contact and Enquiry Unit: 8 Aug 45 to 10 Oct 45," 11 October 1946, AWM54, 779/2/5; Grant, "The end of the line", 44.

¹⁰⁴ Maj N.S. Thomas, "Report on activities of personnel of 1 Aust PW Contact and Enquiry Unit attached to US Army forces occupying Japan", 27 September 1945, AWM54, 779/1/21.

¹⁰⁵ Lieut A.G. Steel to Cmdr R.B.M. Long, 12 October 1945, NAA, A7112/1.



Australian ex-prisoners of war en route from Japan to Manila. (AWM 119002)

The most prominent issue to develop, however, involved the communication of nominal rolls. The Australian recovery teams were instructed to forward nominal rolls of processed Commonwealth prisoners to 3rd Group headquarters daily. However, due to the sheer number of prisoners, American personnel frequently had to process Commonwealth personnel, without the Australians being informed of numbers or identity.¹⁰⁶ This was only part of the problem. The existing channels of communication meant nominal rolls of Commonwealth prisoners were handed to a United States unit for despatch to 3rd Group. This indirect route meant extended delays were common. Major Noel Thomas, a liaison officer attached to the United

¹⁰⁶ Lieut R. Winter-Irving, "Report to 1 Aust PW Contact and Enquiry Unit", 9 October 1945, AWM54, 779/1/21; Capt E.V. Shaw, "Report of Recovery of PW & Internees", 3 October 1945, AWM54, 779/1/21.

States Army, complained that prisoners often arrived in Manila days before 3rd Group had been advised of their recovery.¹⁰⁷ The presence of war correspondents in Japan exacerbated this situation. Frequently, the press reported the recovery of Australian prisoners before even the Australian government had received official advice.¹⁰⁸ The system thus proved inefficient and, as Thomas argued, would have been improved had communications been sent direct from Japan.¹⁰⁹

Complications also arose over the prisoners in Korea and Manchuria. Prisoner recovery in these regions proved slow, owing to uncertainty about the location of camps, and the division of territory into Soviet and American zones of responsibility. In Manchuria, the majority of prisoners had been concentrated near Mukden (now Shenyang), a city in north-east China, by August 1945. The rapid Soviet advance into Manchuria meant swift liberation for these prisoners: the men were freed on 18 August after an inebriated tank crew drove through the camp's wall.¹¹⁰ However, the prisoners were largely left alone by the Soviets, and received no news about how and when they would be sent home. This caused some concern as, according to Flight Lieutenant Clarence Spurgeon, an RAAF pilot in the camp, supplies were running short while the number of sick was increasing.¹¹¹ United States forces eventually recovered the men in September, but even then, the Australians in the group were not sent home until October, spending two weeks in Manila in the meantime.¹¹²

A similar situation emerged with prisoners in the Soviet zone in northern Korea. Once again, liberation proved rapid, but not so repatriation. Friction between the Soviet Union and United States appears to have been the primary cause for this

¹⁰⁷ Maj N.S. Thomas, "Report on activities of personnel of 1 Aust PW Contact and Enquiry Unit attached to US Army forces occupying Japan", 27 September 1945, AWM54, 779/1/21.

¹⁰⁸ Maj N.S. Thomas, "Report on activities of personnel of 1 Aust PW Contact and Enquiry Unit attached to US Army forces occupying Japan", 27 September 1945, AWM54, 779/1/21.

¹⁰⁹ Maj N.S. Thomas, "Report on activities of personnel of 1 Aust PW Contact and Enquiry Unit attached to US Army forces occupying Japan", 27 September 1945, AWM54, 779/1/21.

¹¹⁰ Hugh Clarke and Colin Burgess, *Barbed wire and bamboo: Australian POWs in Europe, North Africa, Singapore, Thailand and Japan*, St Leonards, Allen and Unwin, 1992, pp. 154-56.

¹¹¹ Interview, Air Cdre C.H. Spurgeon by M. Kingdon, Year 12 history interview assignment, 17 March 1991, AWM, PR91/124.

¹¹² Clarke and Burgess, *Barbed wire and bamboo*, pp. 157-59.

delay. Certainly, the onset of the Cold War is evident in accounts by former prisoners recovered in Soviet-occupied territory. Corporal David Allcock, for instance, recorded being informed by American supply aircrew that they were ordered not to land in Soviet zones following the armistice.¹¹³ Disquiet had also surfaced among the Australian prisoners in eastern Germany, with Warrant Officer Eric Woolmer more than once diarising that he is “worried about the Russian attitude” during the recovery process.¹¹⁴ In the Pacific, however, the Soviet government considered the value of recovered prisoners for propaganda purposes, and briefly contemplated a repatriation scheme through the Soviet Union to Britain. Although that did not eventuate, the discussions about it delayed the prisoners’ repatriation. The Soviet forces ultimately consented to shipping Western Allied prisoners to the US zone in southern Korea from late September.¹¹⁵

Despite the international friction, the operations of the Australian reception staff and recovery teams maintained a high tempo as the prisoners were processed and despatched to Manila to await repatriation. While a lack of shipping in the Pacific remained a distinct issue in the immediate aftermath of the war, this does not appear to have affected the repatriation of recovered British personnel. Wrigley recorded that the shipping of such ex-prisoners “has not caused any worry” owing to the efficient arrival of adequate transport.¹¹⁶ The situation for Australian prisoners, however, “caused some discontent”.¹¹⁷ No vessel was available for the Australians until 2 October, and even then Wrigley and his staff had to secure space on “every type of transport offering, whether by air or sea” to ensure the prisoners’ repatriation.¹¹⁸

¹¹³ David Allcock, *‘Mister, here’s your hat’: the story of a boy from Cranemore Street Nechells, Birmingham*, self published, 1990, pp. 130–31.

¹¹⁴ Eric Woolmer, unpublished memoirs, AWM, PR00918, pp. 25, 26.

¹¹⁵ Allcock, *‘Mister, here’s your hat’*, pp. 130–35.

¹¹⁶ Brig H. Wrigley, “Report on activities: 3 Aust PW Reception Gp”, AWM54, 329/11/1.

¹¹⁷ Brig H. Wrigley, “Report on activities: 3 Aust PW Reception Gp”, AWM54, 329/11/1.

¹¹⁸ Brig H. Wrigley, “Report on activities: 3 Aust PW Reception Gp”, AWM54, 329/11/1.

In all, 3rd Group was responsible for the recovery and repatriation of 14,684 ex-prisoners, of which 2,683 were Australian.¹¹⁹ By mid-October, only 816 of the Australians remained to be repatriated.¹²⁰ The group had achieved the bulk of its objective in less than two months of operations, in spite of the inefficient communication channels, deficient stores and lack of transport. Certainly, the rate of recovery and repatriation in the Pacific had been so rapid that, having completed their roles, 2nd and 3rd Group were disbanded by November 1945. The swift processes, however, did little to pacify recovered prisoners, with heavy criticism laid against all three reception groups.

Prisoners' responses, health and the politics of repatriation

The responses of former prisoners to the recovery process are reflected in the range of diaries and memoirs that have emerged since the Second World War. The general consensus is rather negative. The basic thrusts are related to inefficiency, supplies, and delays in repatriation. For instance, frustrated with 2nd Group's administration, Major Charles Tracey labelled its staff "the greatest lot of duds the world has ever seen gathered together".¹²¹ Similarly, Sergeant Stan Arneil criticised the "shocking maladministration" of his voyage home, lamenting: "We were promised mail and beer and we received *none*."¹²²

The most significant complaints were reserved for delays in repatriation. This was especially felt in Europe, where, despite being liberated months earlier, the Australian prisoners arrived home around the same time as those in the Pacific.¹²³ With the shortage of shipping, such a delay could hardly be helped. The European prisoners, however, were unaware of the cause and attributed it to perceived

¹¹⁹ By nationality, 3rd Group recovered 11,504 British personnel, 2,683 Australians, 160 Indians, 131 Malays, 123 Burmese nationals, 48 Chinese citizens, 37 New Zealanders, and 8 Portuguese men. Brig H. Wrigley, "Report on activities: 3 Aust PW Reception Gp", AWM54, 329/11/1.

¹²⁰ Brig H. Wrigley, "Report on activities: 3 Aust PW Reception Gp", AWM54, 329/11/1.

¹²¹ Diary, Maj C. Tracey, 20 September 1945, AWM, PR03469.

¹²² Arneil, *One man's war*, pp. 247, 267.

¹²³ Letter, N. Freeberg to P. Ashe, 23 May 1945, AWM, PR87/112.

inefficiency of the reception staff.¹²⁴ Such an issue reflects the primary problem: deficient communication. In the Pacific, inadequate communication led to similar disparaging remarks over delays, though in contrast with repatriation in Europe, such a charge in the Pacific is perhaps unfair. The real cause for delay was the sudden end to the Pacific War and the absence of Allied forces in occupied territories. MacArthur effectively caused a two-week delay in prisoner recovery, as he deferred the official Japanese surrender until 2 September. With war technically still ongoing, recovery staff were prevented from entering Japanese-occupied territory and, thus, prison camps. However, given that the prisoners were told little or nothing about their recovery for weeks after the war was meant to have ended, the complaint is understandable.¹²⁵ The situation is perhaps best reflected in the pages of Arneil's diary. On 19 August he wrote: "I expect to be on the way to India or Australia before the end of the month."¹²⁶ Yet ten days later, after nothing had happened and no contact with Allied forces had been made, Arneil recorded feeling "let-down".¹²⁷ He was far from alone in his anticipation of liberation, and his confusion resulting from the delay.¹²⁸ Adequate communication with the prisoners would have improved this situation.

The context in which the reception groups operated must be considered when considering the prisoners' complaints. The groups were hastily raised as specialist units that had received minimal training. AIF Reception Group UK had been better prepared for its task and operated more efficiently in terms of resources, supplies and organisation, though that may also reflect the environment in which the group operated. That is a significant factor. In the Pacific operating environment, the distribution and precise number of prisoners in Japanese captivity were quite unknown. The Pacific groups also had to cope with more prisoners than anticipated,

¹²⁴ Lawrence Eager, unpublished memoirs, AWM, PR84/106, p. 163; Letter, N. Freeberg to P. Ashe, 23 May 1945, AWM, PR87/112.

¹²⁵ McKernan, *This war never ends*, p. 67.

¹²⁶ Arneil, *One man's war*, p. 250.

¹²⁷ Arneil, *One man's war*, p. 253.

¹²⁸ McKernan, *This war never ends*, p. 66; Hearder, *Keep the men alive*, pp. 180–81.

and in a much shorter timeframe. This discrepancy between the theatres reflects the political factors inherent in prisoner recovery.

In the Australian context, by war's end prisoners in Europe did not register as the political issue that those in Japanese captivity did. The sheer numbers captured in the Pacific, and the lack of information as to their fate, ensured that this was the case. Germany's commitment to the Geneva Convention – at least where Western Allied prisoners were concerned – meant reasonably regular correspondence was possible with prisoners in Europe.¹²⁹ This was not the case for prisoners of the Japanese. The uncertainty surrounding these men and women plagued the successive Labor governments of John Curtin and Ben Chifley. The number captured in the Pacific, coupled with the absence of information, meant that prisoners of the Japanese developed into a significant political issue. Indeed, the Labor governments were frequently questioned, and even accused, by the public and the Federal Opposition over their supposed lack of initiative in liberating the imprisoned Australians. In a December 1942 speech, for instance, Senator Charles Brand of the United Australia Party urged greater effort toward operational offensives in the Pacific. Invoking the prisoners to reinforce his argument, Brand posed the questions: "What will [the prisoners] think of any half-strength efforts to release them? Is Australia to stand by and see the constitution of these splendid specimens of manhood undermined?"¹³⁰ Sectors of the public were similarly critical. A Mrs Murison, in an April 1944 letter to Curtin, accused: "It is now over two years since the Fall of Singapore and Malaya and not a finger raised to help those brave boys that were let down like sheep."¹³¹ One can see the public anxiety Pacific prisoners elicited, and their use as an instrument of politics.

The gradual operational recovery envisioned for the Pacific was rendered politically infeasible by the Japanese capitulation. Previously, any dissatisfaction over the delay in repatriation could have been dismissed with an argument that

¹²⁹ McKernan, *This war never ends*, p. 28.

¹³⁰ C. Brand, review of war situation, *CPD*, Senate, 10 December 1942, p. 1657.

¹³¹ R. Murison to J. Curtin, 2 April 1945, in McKernan, *This war never ends*, p. 36.

delay was unavoidable because of operational sensitivities. However, with war at an end, and a federal election looming in 1946, the public would have deemed protracted repatriation unreasonable. The government's principal focus was thus the "immediate return [of the prisoners] to the homes of the people", and granted priority repatriation to recovered prisoners of war, even over long-serving front-line personnel.¹³²

From the medical perspective, the swift nature of recovery in the Pacific further explains why European prisoners were in a better state when they were repatriated. The longer recovery period and attention to health ensured that prisoners in Europe were in superior condition just after the war, despite many being malnourished on liberation. From 1944, the health and well-being of recovered prisoners had been the subject of significant discussion. That year the Army's Director General Medical Services (DGMS) was commissioned to prepare a paper on the medical and psychiatric factors affecting repatriated prisoners of war, while the RAN appointed an officer to prepare policy for the recovery of naval personnel.¹³³ The two officers questioned the physical and psychological fitness of the prisoners on liberation, and recommended extended periods of recovery be arranged so they could "undergo physical and mental reconstruction".¹³⁴ At the political level, the Secretary of the Department of Air questioned whether leave should be granted to recovered prisoners, as without close medical monitoring, lengthy leave "may have harmful results on [the men] as well as being, in effect, an evasion of the Services' responsibility."¹³⁵

However, no defined medical program was created to deal with these issues. For prisoners in Europe, no psychological program eventuated, while mass repatriation in the Pacific rendered anything beyond basic physical care impossible.

¹³² McKernan, *This war never ends*, p. 88; A. McDonald, armed forces question and response by F. Forde, CPD, House of Representatives, 12 September 1945, p. 5290.

¹³³ McKernan, *This war never ends*, pp. 84–86.

¹³⁴ Letter, Lt Cmdr W. Seymour to Naval Board, 31 August 1944, in McKernan, *This war never ends*, p. 86.

¹³⁵ Letter, Secretary of the Department of Air to Secretary of the Department of Defence, 3 January 1945, in McKernan, *This war never ends*, p. 88.

In September 1945, the Deputy DGMS, Brigadier Walter MacCallum, expressed concern over the lack of medical and psychiatric assistance in the repatriation process, arguing that “such a policy is unsound, medically, and should be rigidly opposed.”¹³⁶ It appears MacCallum’s objections went unheeded. The government’s priority was to return the captives to their homes, no matter their psychological or enduring physical state.

Final assessment

Reception Group	Base	Areas of operation	Prisoners recovered
AIF Group UK	Eastbourne	Europe	5,668
2nd Group	Changi	Singapore, Burma, Thailand, Malaya, Indochina and the Netherlands East Indies	10,955
3rd Group	Manila	Japan, Korea and Manchuria	14,684 (2,683 Australian)

Sources: War diary, AIF Reception Group UK, AWM52, 1/13/4; Draft report, Brig J. Lloyd, “Note on the activities of 2 Aust PW Reception Group”, AWM, PR00305; Brig H. Wrigley, “Report on activities: 3 Aust PW Reception Gp”, AWM54, 329/11/1.

The contact, recovery and reception units served a vital role in the repatriation of Australian and Commonwealth prisoners in the aftermath of the Second World War. The units recovered over 30,000 Allied prisoners throughout Europe, south-east Asia, Japan, Korea, and Manchuria, often under difficult circumstances with minimal resources. To this end, the three Australian reception groups were successful in achieving their prescribed tasks, and did so effectively. However, the operations of these units must be placed in the cooperative international context in which they operated. Whether directly or indirectly, British and United States units supported the groups as part of a global recovery and

¹³⁶ Letter, Brig W.P. MacCallum to Director General Medical Services Land Headquarters, 11 September 1945, in McKernan, *This war never ends*, p. 96.

repatriation process. While the recovery of Australian prisoners was significant to the state and its citizens, they assumed a small part in the wider recovery process, and occupy a minor role in the global narrative of repatriation.

The process of prisoner recovery also reflected the social and political agenda of the time. Recovery in Europe, a theatre far removed from Australia, occurred under operational conditions with significant support from Allied armies. The process was thus gradual, and repatriation slow. War in the Pacific, conversely, had witnessed the imprisonment of a far greater number of Australians – a situation typified by a complete absence of information, generating heightened social anxiety. The sudden capitulation of Japan spurred a politicised repatriation process, with rapid recovery in the Pacific paramount. The primary failings of the reception groups – such as in transport and supplies – therefore resulted from the political and administrative levels above, and reflected the situation in which the units operated. Nonetheless, the reception groups successfully repatriated all surviving Australian prisoners in both Europe and the Pacific at the end of the Second World War.