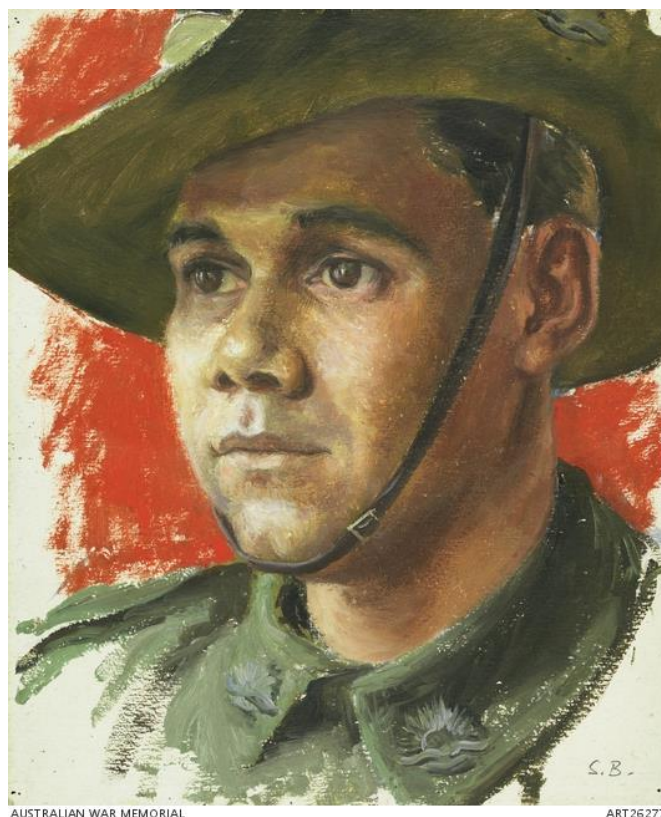


Memorial Box 3: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Wartime Service

Private David Harris



Stella Bowen, "Private, Gowrie House", c. 1945, oil on hardboard, 51.8 x 47 cm

Born in Toodyay, Western Australia, David Harris was 20 years old when he volunteered for service in the Australian Imperial Force in March 1940. Harris had been working as a farmhand, but soon set sail for service in the Middle East with the 2/11th Battalion.

For the first few months Harris was in and out of hospital with pneumonia, mumps, and measles, but he eventually regained his strength. He was a promising athlete and was selected to join his unit's boxing team.

In early April 1941 the 2/11th Battalion was sent to Greece. The Allies were unable to defend the peninsula against the rapidly advancing German forces, and were eventually evacuated to Egypt and Crete. Harris' unit took part in a desperate battle against successive waves of German paratroopers at an airfield in Crete, but after ten days of bitter fighting the Allies were forced to surrender.

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Some men from the 2/11th Battalion escaped into the mountains to evade capture, but most were taken prisoner, including Harris. He had been severely wounded during the battle and was captured while recovering in a casualty clearing station.

Harris spent the next four years as a prisoner of war, working up to 12 hours a day in coal mines, sawmills and stone quarries for around 30 marks per month. He described the conditions as “rotten”, accommodation as “bad”, and rations as “very bad”.

Harris was released at the end of the war and, like many other Australians imprisoned in German or Italian camps, was sent to Gowrie House in England. This was a repatriation centre, where the men received meals, accommodation, new uniforms, and a pay advance as they awaited departure to Australia.

While at Gowrie House Harris captured the attention of official war artist Stella Bowen, and she painted his portrait before he returned home in August 1945. Harris died in 1968, aged 49.

Activities for research and classroom discussion

1. How do you think Harris might have felt as he departed Australia? Write or draw a postcard from his perspective.
2. Painted by Vernon Jones, this work of art depicts the battle of Retimo, in which Harris and more than 3,100 other Australians were captured by the Germans in 1941. Imagine you are an Australian soldier in the foreground of this painting, and write a diary entry describing your experience.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

ART27776

Vernon Jones, "The battle of Retimo", c. 1972, oil on canvas, 152.3 x 244 cm

3. Around 8,000 Australians were held captive by German and Italian forces during the Second World War, and their experiences varied from place to place and camp to camp. What does this photograph suggest about the conditions endured by some prisoners of war?



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P10548.008

Prisoners of war on a forced march to escape Soviet forces, c. 1945

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4. This painting by official war artist Stella Bowen depicts a gathering of Australian prisoners of war in London after their release. Compare the atmosphere in this painting to the photograph above: what sort of mood has Bowen attempted to convey? What techniques has she used to achieve this?



Stella Bowen, "Reception desk at Gowrie House, Eastbourne", c. 1945, oil on canvas, 76 x 91.4 cm

5. When Bowen painted Harris' portrait, she failed to include his name in the title. A curator at the Australian War Memorial finally identified Harris in the painting some 70 years later. If you were trying to solve this mystery, what sources would you use?

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