

“She Was Still On”: The Many Endings of the Second World War

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On 15 August 1945, an Australian soldier at Bougainville wrote: “JAPS SURRENDER AND WAR ENDS. The greatest news of the century.”¹ An Australian sailor off the coast of Japan was being bombed by four Japanese aircraft. A 12-year-old school student in Adelaide wrote “AT LAST!”. One woman’s celebrations in King Street in Sydney were interrupted by the news that her husband had been killed in Borneo. Australian prisoners of war near Nagasaki had inklings that the war was over. Prisoners of war in Johore had no inklings; they were on the brink of starvation. An Australian pilot cared only for when his sweetheart would arrive from the UK.

On 8 May 1945, that pilot was in London, standing below the King at Buckingham Palace on VE Day. The prisoners of war in the Pacific did not know the war in Europe had ended. Celebrations in Sydney were brief. Sailors looked out for Japanese mines. The soldier serving in Bougainville raised a toast to his Allied comrades and watched a film in camp. A prisoner of war in Germany was on a train to the UK.



**The dancing man (above) celebrating VP Day in Melbourne. The creator of the footage of was never identified, and the man’s identity remains contested.
Photograph courtesy of Wikimedia commons**

¹ Diary of Keith Lindsey Lewtas, 2/2nd Field Regiment, Wewak (AWM2019.22.64, PR06252) 50



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL P02018.226

**Lois Anne Martin, who knitted the VP Day sweater, was also celebrating in Melbourne.
Photographer unknown, P02018.226**

In popular memory, the end of the Second World War is often viewed as an incarnation of jubilation, delight, relief, camaraderie, a celebratory fever of strangers kissing and public squares becoming impromptu dance floors. VP Day is the dancing man, footage captured in Melbourne and enshrined in public memory. VP Day is the novelty knitted sweater, worn by Lois Anne Martin, now in the Australian War Memorial's collection. A 12-year-old child in 1945 could conceive of nothing but the war. Populations were being warned of further casualties incurred in an invasion of Japan. Far from the front lines in the Pacific, these people knew only of the struggle at home, of the interminable wait for news of their loved ones, and of the threat of Japanese invasion. For them, VP Day was a wave of sheer relief: "Kids were running around banging garbage bin lids – everyone was shouting and singing, everyone waved – lots whistled – some were getting drunk, but everyone was deliriously happy!"²

Yet history is more complicated than that; 15 August was not the crescendo, with everything dying down after a fateful day of Japanese surrender. It was not universal deliverance; a simple act which finally ended the grief and privation. The end to the Second World War was a long, slow build-up, it was tense, it involved fighting and death well beyond 15 August, and it was

² P. Richards as quoted in: *Letters to Sunday Telegraph relating experiences of Victory in the Pacific Day, 1995* (AWM2020.22.232, PR00625)

not simply one moment, but several. There were moments of celebration in Sydney, moments of relief in Tokyo, moments of struggle in Borneo, on ships, in prisoner of war camps, on front lines, in city streets. To ascribe a simple feeling of relief and jubilation to the end of the Second World War is to disregard not only its complexity, but how profound an impression it left on those involved.

This paper will present an understanding of the end of the Second World War among Australians, from the home front to the Pacific and London. There are two key dates – VE Day (Victory in Europe), and VP Day (Victory in the Pacific) – but to focus solely on these would be to ignore the nuance of the experience of war. The gravitas of the Second World War is best explored through the kaleidoscope of emotions visible in its ending; relief was commonplace, but hardly definitive of the experience. As this paper will explain, relief was quite quickly replaced with a variety of emotional reactions, entirely dependent on the person and their surroundings.

Lieutenant Stirling Tuckey of the 8th Battalion, who was stationed in Bougainville, was on patrol in the jungle on 15 August 1945: “We just stayed there, waiting for something to happen, and something did happen. A runner came tearing along the track and told us to come back to camp – the war was over. But ... was it?”

Tuckey wasn't going to tempt fate, in case he and his unit were followed and attacked by Japanese forces when they least expected it. “The boys were quite relieved and didn't think any the less of me hanging around a bit. As you will see, ‘she’ was still on.”³

“SHE WAS STILL ON”

Those who could claim that the war ended on 15 August were fortunate. Sergeant Arnold Lockyer, No. 24 Squadron, RAAF, was shot down near Borneo, and captured by the Japanese in a camp in North Celebes, where he was murdered, five days after the war was declared over, by Japanese guards who would be convicted of war crimes.⁴ Lockyer's fate was indicative of the struggle which remained among those serving in the Pacific, and neuters the impression that VP Day was the only ending.

³ War Diary of Stirling M. Tuckey, 8th Battalion, Bougainville (AWM PR00440)

⁴ Australian War Memorial, Aaron Pegram, *The Last Post Ceremony commemorating the service of (80471) Flight Sergeant Arnold Lockyer, No.24 Squadron RAAF, Second World War* (AWM2017.1.186)

15 Aug 45.
Last night, got news that Eric
was going home tomorrow
on the 5-year release
plan, so I went down to
canteen and they gave him
a send-off party on the
beach in view of the
large ships in the Harbour.
JAPS SURRENDER &
WAR ENDS
The greatest news of the
century - Japan accepted
surrender terms and
war is officially over,
and we return to peace
again. It is good to
know that millions

Extract of diary of Keith Lewtas, 2/2nd Field Regiment, Wewak. PR06252

JAPANESE SURRENDER

“Despite the end of the war, Jap gun fired several rounds ... a peculiar situation – they were sending up rockets to celebrate the Peace and at the same time sending missiles to kill the Japs.”⁵ It should not come as a surprise – Australians had become all too familiar with the zealotry of Japanese soldiers who would feign surrender only to detonate a hidden grenade – that the Australian soldiers stationed in the jungle would treat any Japanese surrender with suspicion. In July, a month before the end of the war, Stirling Tuckey wrote of his friend Ronnie Webb being killed, in a routine entry which appears myriad times throughout his diary in terse, matter-of-fact wording. One entry reads: “Captain Ogden blown to bits.”⁶ When people in Brisbane were pre-emptively celebrating peace, having been tipped off to possible Japanese surrender, Tuckey’s unit on Bougainville weathered a night of 96 shells.⁷ It is no surprise that when news of peace reached him on 15 August, he wrote that he and his comrades were “physical wrecks – ready to jump down burrows at slightest opportunity.” Similar occurred at

⁵ Keith Lewtas, 15 August 1945

⁶ Stirling Tuckey, 7 July 1945

⁷ Stirling Tuckey, 13 August 1945

Wewak, where the men had nothing to celebrate with, nor were they willing to forsake their vigilance with a hostile enemy.⁸

Those serving on ships in the Pacific, kept abreast of the war situation with regular news, were similarly jaded and exhausted by their experience as to curtail the stereotypical Australian reaction of euphoria as the war looked to end. Those closer to Japan noted the waning Japanese war effort, while simultaneously being devoid of the celebratory fervour. Keith Lewtas, 2/2nd Field Regiment, on Wewak, reflected after hearing that a nuclear bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima that “for the sake of all peoples of the world, we hope this will be the end of the years of death, misery, hunger, and heartbreaks which a proportion of the world’s populace has been so unfortunate to endure.”⁹ Able Seaman Bob Skinner on board HMAS *Napier* wrote that “at present all we realise is that it is the most devastating of any war invention and I personally put the end of the war down to a few weeks now, instead of months as before.”¹⁰ When peace was declared eight days later, Skinner wrote that the news they’d been waiting for had finally arrived, and then, of the precariousness of being stationed in the middle of the Pacific, surrounded by enemies who believed their empire would never capitulate.

The only trouble was that some Nips didn’t believe this, and at 1115: we had an air-raid. The first we knew about it was 4 aircraft overhead, a near miss on K.G.V. on our port bow, and then one of these planes crashing in flames followed by a couple of Sea-fires.¹¹

Other sailors did allow themselves a celebration upon hearing the news, including Howard Stevenson, Able Seaman on board HMAS *Pirie*, but it was more to do with the rumours of being granted four days’ leave. “Hearty cheers” went up, although they were ultimately sent back to work: “so we celebrated [VP] Day by working in the rain just off the coast of Japan.”¹² Stevenson wrote of the feeling once that initial glee had subsided: “A bloke just can’t realise yet that the war is over, we are still in the middle of the Pacific.”¹³

⁸ Ian Fraser as quoted in *Letters to the Sunday Telegraph*

⁹ Keith Lewtas, 9 August 1945

¹⁰ Diary of Bob Skinner, Able Seaman, on board HMAS *Napier*, Tokyo Bay (AWM PR00908) 7 August 1945

¹¹ Bob Skinner, 15 August 1945

¹² Letters of Howard Carthew Stevenson, Able Seaman, on board HMAS *Pirie* (AWM PR04306, 2020.22.217) 31 August 1945

¹³ H.C. Stevenson, 16 August 1945

People's reactions to the end of the war were largely defined by their surroundings. Those at home were free of the anxiety of Japanese invasion, and could look to a future outside of a wartime economy and rationing. It is no surprise that their reaction to the war's end came with such overjoyed relief, to the extent that Bob Skinner was jealous of their experience.

Heard broadcasts of the good times the people at home are having and can't help feeling a trifle sad. Not that we begrudge them their good times, but we feel we'd like to be with them. I'd give anything to be back with Gwen right now, so that we could both come to fully realise that the war has really finished.¹⁴

Others were in painfully different situations, such as those in a prisoner of war camp on Johore. They had been so deprived of food that their daily meal involved a stew of tapioca and roots foraged from nearby ground.¹⁵ When Red Cross parcels fell from the heavens following their realisations of freedom, they weren't to know that the worst thing to treat starvation is an abundance of food. "Our eyes are bigger than our bellies and one poor chap last night ate a pint of sugar and died during the night", Stan Arneil, prisoner of war in Johore, wrote in his diary.¹⁶

It took days for the men in Johore to stop feeling hungry. Concern turned from hunger to restlessness within a matter of days. While people at home were heading back to work after days of celebration, these former prisoners of war were getting impatient. On 28 August, leaflets were dropped over the gaol they had now made their camp, telling them that the war was officially over and they would be going home. A day later, more men had perished from the simple relief itself. According to Arneil, they succumbed to exhaustion having lived on their nerves for so long under Japanese captivity.¹⁷

In the Fukuoka prisoner of war camp near Nagasaki, far closer to nucleus of the Japanese surrender, it still took three days for confirmation of the ending of the war. Work details in the

¹⁴ Bob Skinner, 17 August 1945

¹⁵ Letters of Stan Arneil, L/Sgt 2/30th Bn, Prisoner of War Camp in Johore (PR88/076) 13 August 1945

¹⁶ Stan Arneil, 23 August 1945

¹⁷ Stan Arneil, 29 August 1945

mine stopped, and newspapers told them of the declaration of peace, but only on 17 August did word reach them that the war was officially over.

“The war must surely be over. Excitement everywhere. Four fights this morning. They are becoming almost international contests. Dutch against the Australians. Aussies are well ahead.”¹⁸

These men were tense, at the end of their tether, and often bore visible scars which reminded them of their captivity. They soon began celebrations in earnest, mirroring the celebrations in the Pacific back home. They partook in a concert, with flags displayed prominently and national anthems bellowed. Even the camp commandant gave a speech telling them that all would be well now that the war was over.

On 1 September, the Dutch contingent in Fukuoka put on a great party in honour of their Queen Wilhemina. After the feast, men made speeches about Holland and the Queen, to the chagrin of the Aussies in attendance. “The Aussies soon had enough of it and eventually one, in a loud voice, said ‘fuck old Wilhelmina’, and a Dutchman hit him and then it was on. They are still repairing the damage.”¹⁹ Tension was rife.

On hearing the news confirmed for them, civilian internees of a camp in Japan processed their liberation with a profoundness which summed up their experience. “Instead of cheering and screaming, the emotions were so deep that they dumbfounded us and we were completely silent.”²⁰

THE EMOTIONS BACK HOME

Australians on the home front were living with daily anxieties regarding the war, and had endured a war economy, uncertainty about their loved ones dying in the jungle, and the threat of Japanese aircraft and submarines hitting them at home. Places around the country were full of celebratory crowds, Hyde Park and Martin Place in Sydney, Collins Street in Melbourne. Soldiers at an army base in Wagga Wagga got their pet kangaroo drunk and dressed it in a girl's

¹⁸ Papers of John “Jack” Nevell, Sgt 2/10 Field Regiment, Prisoner of War Camp in Fukuoka (AWM File 93/0258, Series acc. No. PR00257) 17 August 1945

¹⁹ Jack Nevell, 1 September 1945

²⁰ C. Twomey, *Australia's Forgotten Prisoners: Civilians Interned by the Japanese in World War Two* (Port Melbourne, VIC: Cambridge University Publishing: 2007) 121

uniform.²¹ Telephone operators rung everyone they knew to deliver the good news, briefly bringing the system in Sydney down. Strangers were singing and dancing and kissing each other in packed out streets. A seven-year-old girl was aghast that people were entering church without hats on. “That’s okay dear,” was her grandmother’s reply, “the devil isn’t working today.”²²

Women had been enlisted into the war effort. Women working in the city were among the first to pile onto the street after hearing the announcement of the cessation of hostilities. Nola Taylor, making jungle green uniforms for Australian soldiers in a clothing factory in Sydney, was told by her boss to go out and celebrate the news in the middle of her morning shift. “One couldn’t move in George St traffic making for the city. Horns blowing, people cheering and embracing.” She and her co-workers jumped on a table top truck to get into the city, and returned home by train well into the night with “shoes in hand, feet sore and weary.”²³ Others, working on a military base, heard the news from a group of RAAF officers they were initially intending to chastise for being noisy: “Come in, have a drink! They have bombed the bastards!”²⁴ That was how those women learnt that the war was now over. Mary Stephens, who was 12 years old when she wrote herself “A Letter to my Old Age” detailing the events of VP Day, described the jubilation: “While I was on the tram the sirens wailed, and we knew that it was all over. When I reached school many of the girls were outside waving and cheering everybody.”²⁵ Hers was an experience of relief, exhilaration, and curiosity, noting how in the middle of the city she saw a man give flowers to a stranger, another on a balcony celebrate by pulling his false teeth out and waving them in the air, and yet another eliciting cheers with an impersonation of Adolf Hitler.²⁶ Yet there was also reflection that it was “hard to realise that the war is over after all these years. I cannot remember what it is like without war. I hope that all the troubles will be cleared up ... I hope that I never see another war.”²⁷

Those overseas enquired as to the celebrations back home. One sailor asked, “How did V.J. celebrations go Gwen?”, another had a reply from his sweetheart in Melbourne: “People went

²¹ Mrs L. Smith as quoted in Letters to the Sunday Telegraph

²² Mrs Mary Sweeney as quoted in Letters to the Sunday Telegraph

²³ Nola Taylor as quoted in Letters to the Sunday Telegraph

²⁴ G. Payne as quoted in Letters to the Sunday Telegraph

²⁵ Mary Stephens as quoted in Letters to the Sunday Telegraph

²⁶ Mary Stephens, ‘A Letter to My Old Age’ (AWM 2021.215.1)

²⁷ Mary Stephens

really mad; they threw anything in the line of papers out of the windows and in a short while the streets were carpeted with paper. It was inches deep in Collins Street ... I have never seen such crowds on the trains, people seemed to swarm in from every direction.”²⁸ Celebrations would develop from impromptu parades into formal ones, into victory marches and victory balls and days of thanksgiving.

Yet even in those swarms of people, there was a far greater range of responses to the war’s ending than collective memory gives credit. To suggest these throngs of people constituted the emotions of everyone on the home front, and Australia as a grouping, is to miss the sheer mental and physical weight put upon these people by the Second World War, be it exhaustion or isolation.

In a pub for sailors, a woman went from drunken revelry to holding her mother close: her younger brother, who was 17 years old, had been lost at sea on a ship in the Atlantic convoy the year before. “He was not coming home again”, she thought, while watching the fireworks.²⁹ For Anne Drayton there was “an overwhelming sense of sadness because my father wouldn’t be coming back.”³⁰ Iris Hogan, 20 years old and celebrating on Flinders Street, wondered when she would be reunited with her fiancée of three years, who was serving in Borneo.³¹ F.E. Couch, who had begun the day celebrating in the streets, found her sister, who had been called home with an urgent communication. Upon arrival, she was informed that her airman husband had been shot down and killed over Borneo in his first and last raid on 8 August. “There were no celebrations on VP Day for us”, she recounted.³²

In Daniel Connell’s *The War at Home*, a man named Harry Flower recalls how “there was one man in particular that I remember. His only son had been killed in the air force and I remember he shook hands with Dad and said, ‘It’s a good day for *you*, Fred.’”³³

²⁸ Letters of Pete Russell Mayor, Able Seaman, on board HMAS *Shropshire*, (AWM2016.441.10) 17 August 1945 & Letters of James Lawrence Perry to Gwen Haylor, Able Seaman, on board HMAS *Shropshire* (AWM PR03032, 2020.22.202) 31 August 1945

²⁹ Mary Snell as quoted in Letters to the Sunday Telegraph

³⁰ Anne Drayton as quoted in Letters to the Sunday Telegraph

³¹ Iris Hogan as quoted in Letters to the Sunday Telegraph

³² F.E. Couch as quoted in Letters to the Sunday Telegraph

³³ Daniel Connell, *The War at Home* (Crow’s Nest, NSW: ABC Enterprises: 1988) 129

The more nuanced response, of collective relief and personal grief, was echoed in the newspaper coverage at home. Headlines like “Peace – World Hails Jap Surrender”, “Enthusiasm Such as Never Known”, and “Delirious Joy in Australia” speak for themselves. But on page two, beyond the initial celebrations, there would be articles with headlines like “When Does the War Really End?” and “Early Lifting of Rationing Not Expected”.³⁴ This was, still, just a moment – it was one echoing throughout every newspaper in the land, sure, but beneath the headlines, relief was interspersed with the reality of the war. One moment, however cathartic, could not define the ending of something as seismic as the Second World War. In fact, to truly gauge the emotional heft of that reaction, Australian experiences closer to the war’s hubs; those serving in the front and in prisoner of war camps, are far more telling.



The Herald (Melbourne), 15 Aug 1945 <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/249164292>



Sydney Morning Herald 16 Aug 1945 <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/17950203/993452>

THE OTHER ENDING

While VP Day was the release valve on an extreme amount of pressure, the liberation of Europe and surrender of the Nazis was received in Australia with significantly less commotion. In the

³⁴ See: *The Herald* 16 August 1945 & *The Argus* 15 August 1945

streets of Australia's cities on VE Day there were no knitted sweaters. There was no dancing man. Celebrations were, given the ongoing Japanese threat, altogether rather muted.

Able Seaman Pete Russell Mayor, whose experience was shared by other servicemen in the Pacific, wrote, "By the papers I see that Melbourne was even quieter than we were on VE Day, but flared up to some extent same as we did after tea. I don't think many people really had their hearts in it though for obvious reasons."³⁵

Able Seaman Bob Skinner, on board HMAS *Napier*, was less enthusiastic: "Everybody is happy and celebrating while we are just more or less on edge, waiting for the next suicide to drop out of the skies." The European threat, while still important to the support of the Japanese and the outcome of the war, was peripheral. Keith Lewtas in Bougainville didn't note the end of the war in Europe in his diary. On 8 May 1945 he was recovering from being bombed by four US Army Lightnings which dropped their load over incorrect coordinates. "I walked about afterward and saw one poor chap with side and half legs blown away and dying ... Somebody blundered and the above was the tragic consequence."³⁶

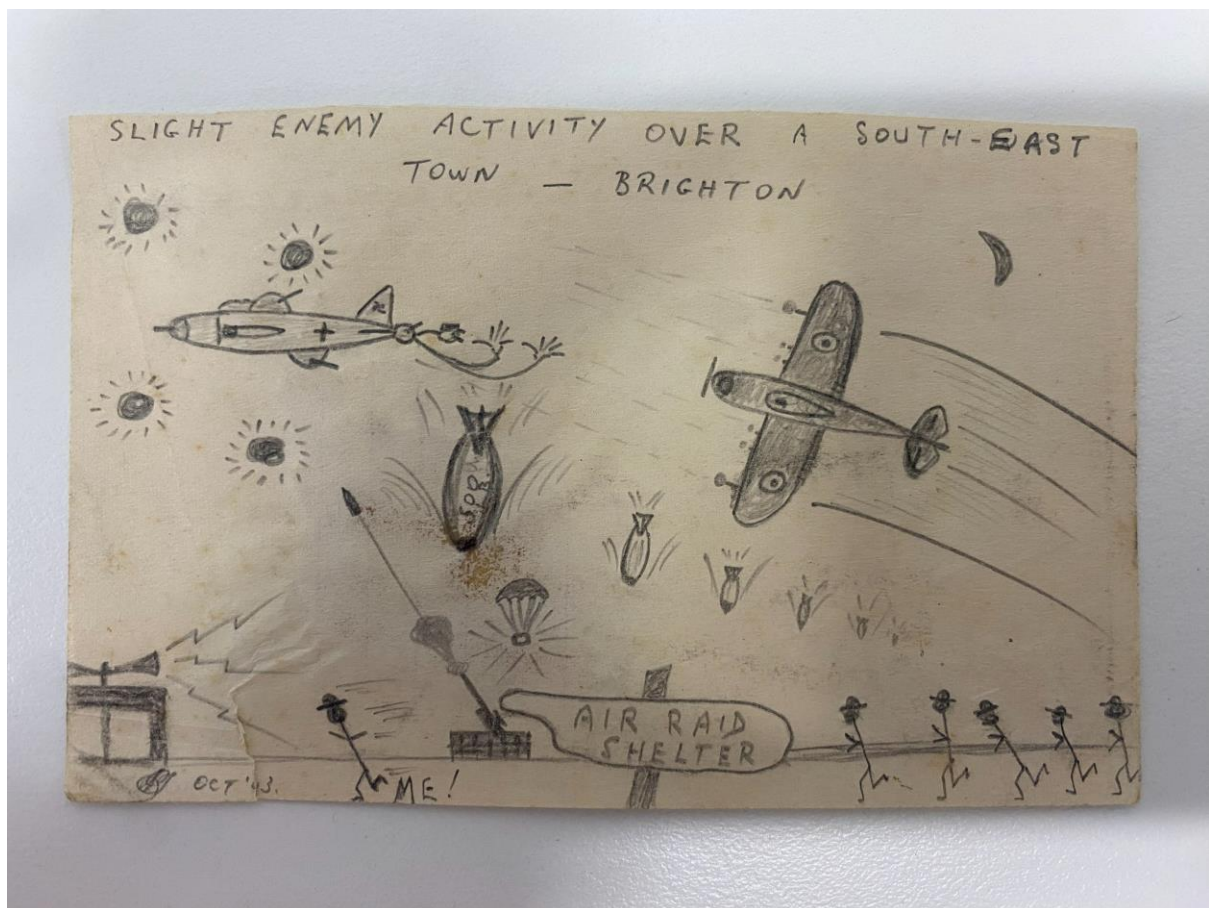
Prisoners of war in the Pacific, meanwhile, knew nothing about the war ending in Europe. Their diary entries remained monotonously beleaguered. Yet, for some, the war was over. RAAF Flying Officer Jim Sullivan describes his air operation over Duisberg on 14 October 1944.

Here go the T.I.'s [Target Indicators] – "bomb doors open" ... our timing was perfect. We bombed dead on the second as the T.I.'s fell ... More kites are hit and burn furiously, twisting all over the sky before plunging. Another explodes with a huge welling flash, emitting thick black oily smoke. What a terrible show this is. Beautiful colours. A fairyland of the wrong sort. "No more Guy Fawkes nights for me" shouts George over the intercom. For miles away now we can see flak, scarecrows, bomb bursts, the blazing city, T.I.'s and kites going down.³⁷

³⁵ Pete Mayor, 11 May 1945

³⁶ Keith Lewtas, 7 May 1945

³⁷ Jack Sullivan, 14 October 1944



A drawing from Jack Sullivan's diary, representing the experience of being bombed by German planes in Brighton.
AWM File 93/0258, PR00257

Jack Sullivan bombed German cities, and was bombed. He had met his sweetheart while on leave in London. With bombs falling around him in Brighton, all he could think was, "If I have to die soon, what could be nicer than dying in Germaine's arms?"³⁸ He wrote vividly of the experience of surviving those bombers: "I hate the - Buzz - zz -zz -zz - silence - BANG. They all seem to be cutting out just above you."³⁹ He also survived the "lucky miss" of watching flak come between himself and the engine bay more than once. When VE Day was declared, and he found himself in London, he went down to see the King. "People were fainting all over the place. Everyone shouted, whistled and sang, and waved flags. Songs band of hope and glory, God Save the King, For He's a Jolly Good Fellow." He then travelled to Whitehall, where he saw Winston Churchill appear on the balcony.⁴⁰ Days later, he took part in the victory march in Brighton, along with hundreds of other members of the RAAF, most of whom did not get to

³⁸ Jack Sullivan, 4 October 1944

³⁹ Jack Sullivan, 14 August 1944

⁴⁰ Jack Sullivan, 8 May 1945

see the King deliver his speech. By VP Day, he was in Australia, more interested in writing about missing his beloved than detailing the celebrations in the streets.

Distant from homely beds and sweethearts, some Australian prisoners of war in Europe were in the middle of a political power-play by VE Day, “either trekking west to avoid the Red Army or, bit by bit, ... falling into Soviet hands.”⁴¹ As Peter Monteath writes, even with the elation of liberation, high politics “continued to raise its ugly head”, as Australians were informed they wouldn’t be allowed to return to Britain; the Soviets required their labour.⁴² They were effectively being ransomed for those Soviets in Britain who were similarly engaged in labour arrangements for the war economy. The crucible of these liberated prisoners of war, forced to navigate another trial after their internment seemingly ended, is instrumental to show just how tricky is to say the war ended.

For escaped or freed prisoners of war in Europe, however, their travails had been weathered, and all that awaited was the long journey home from London. In Australia, celebrations on VE Day were necessarily muted; they still had a war to win. Similarly, on VP Day, former prisoners of war in Europe could not have a party like there was in Melbourne. John Leslie Boyle, one of those former prisoners of war in Europe, wrote on VP Day, “down here in Eastbourne I did not see any signs of celebrations except a few flags hung out. This place is more like a graveyard than a seaside resort anyway.”⁴³

This is the complexity of the war’s end in 1945: never before had Australians been so widespread across the globe; defining the Australian experience of the end of the Second World War requires more than parties and celebrations in Australian streets.

THE LONG ENDING

The truth of the complexity of the war’s culmination is most visible within the Pacific theatre. Two days after VP Day in Australia, people went back to work, and sent letters to their loved ones overseas, while newspapers spoke of the “THOUGHTS THAT COME WITH PEACE.” Two days after the announcement of peace in the Pacific, men on ships heading for Tokyo Bay

⁴¹ P. Monteath, *P.O.W.: Australian Prisoners of War in Hitler’s Reich* (Sydney, NSW: Pan Macmillan Australia: 2011) 397

⁴² Monteath, *P.O.W.* 397 & 403

⁴³ Diaries of John Leslie Boyle, in England, 15 August 1945

were bored, or dealing with remnants of the Japanese navy, or writing letters home yearning to have their own parties in the streets. As Able Seaman H.C. Stevenson wrote, “A bloke can’t realise yet that the war is over, we are still in the middle of the Pacific”.⁴⁴

These people were still so far away from home, and still in the recent warzones. For prisoners of war, it was worse; they couldn’t just leave the camp and find a ship home. There were no ships, the Japanese were negligent in tending to their prisoners of war during the conflict, let alone after it; they were disinterested in the logistics of their freedom. In most cases, no prisoners of war even knew where they were. A group of nurses who had been taken from Rabaul and held on the Japanese mainland remained isolated in their camp for two weeks. Three of them went into town and waved down an American officer, bringing him to camp. Jean McLellan’s 31 August diary entry reads: “Eventful day – most of my life – we were FOUND!!”⁴⁵

Prisoners of war around the Pacific experienced the outpouring of relief, while simultaneously experiencing a far more complex set of emotions; grateful relief, shame at their incarceration, rage at their captors, longing for home, trepidation at returning to normalcy: these were all emotions written down in diaries by newly liberated prisoners of war. Geographical proximity to the fighting did not mean news reached them; while some Australians were returning to their jobs and families after days of celebration, these Australians remained in limbo. When they were told of their freedom, they could not return to their everyday lives; they had experienced beatings, watched friends succumb to starvation, and some had been marched to their death.

Stan Arneil, at Johore, wrote of his regimented prison life: tea at 7:30, lights out at 10:30 pm, work shortly after dawn, “chasing time all the while.” Rations were irregular and unreliable; in April 1945 a working man was sustained daily on 400 grams of rice and corn.⁴⁶ Any perceived slight against their captors or the honour of Imperial Japan would see those rations reduced: “the axe fell with a vengeance today”, Stan wrote in April 1945. By June, men were rejoicing at the prospect of half an ounce of chillies each: “We repeat to each other, of course, day in and day out that the war must end and we all agree on that, but as we have been repeating the same

⁴⁴ H.C. Stevenson, 16 August 1945

⁴⁵ Jean McLellan as quoted in R. Miller, *The Lost Women of Rabaul* (Newport, NSW: Big Sky Publishing: 2022) 235

⁴⁶ Stan Arneil, 5 April & 10 April 1945

things for three years we are not getting very far.”⁴⁷ They were not aware of that ending, working as they were from 9 am to 7 pm in tunnels, and they couldn’t afford the hope: not when only two men out of 20 were deemed fit enough to work. By August, men were scrounging tapioca from the rubbish of Imperial Japanese Army quarters. “It is frightful of course to think that men have been reduced to such a state but still even the pigs at a local piggery eat much better tapioca and greens than we.”⁴⁸

On the Japanese mainland, prisoners were regularly beaten not only by their captors, but by members of the Japanese navy looking to take out some frustration.⁴⁹ Men who stepped out of line could have their skulls split with their work tools by a Japanese guard.⁵⁰ At Hainan, the prisoners had dug a pit between the huts where they were to be shot and dumped in the event of an Allied landing. By 15 August, out of 273 Australians who had been shipped to Hainan, 130 had survived, and only eight were strong enough to bury their dead.⁵¹

Then, there was the Sandakan Death March, in which British and Australian prisoners of war in Borneo were forcibly marched from Ranau to Labuan. Two marches, consisting of 450 of the fittest prisoners first, and a subsequent 530 prisoners, were ordered through 260 kilometres of marshland, jungle, and mountain tracks. Six prisoners escaped during the march; they were the only six survivors of the Sandakan camp. Those who collapsed were left to die, those who made it to camp were exterminated, for fear that their meagre numbers were evidence of a war crime.⁵²

The ending to the Second World War could not be simple for these people. Many, on hearing of the war’s end, did not react with jubilation or delight; they had been holding onto their nerves by a tether, any radical emotion risked a full emotional collapse. Those emotions were complex, and relief could only last so long.

⁴⁷ Stan Arneil, 22 June 1945

⁴⁸ Stan Arneil, 12 August 1945

⁴⁹ L. Grant, *Australian Soldiers in Asia-Pacific in World War II* (Sydney: NSW; New South Publishing, 2014) 161

⁵⁰ Jack Nevell, 12 June 1944

⁵¹ H. Nelson, “‘The Nips are Going for the Parker’: The Prisoners Face Freedom” *War & Society* (vol.3, no.2, 127-143, 1985) 130

⁵² G. Fitzpatrick, T.L.H. McCormack, & N. Morris, *Australia’s War Crimes Trials 1945-51* (Boston: BRILL: 2016), 429-432

For some in Fukuoka, near Nagasaki, the follow-up to relief meant going out and getting revenge for the ill-treatment of nurses. Ten men went out to, in their words, “even things just a little.” When they crossed 15 Japanese ex-soldiers, the fists started flying, and the Japanese broke and ran away.⁵³ These were a beaten people, and the Australians, after delivering the initial punches, “picked up the two they had knocked over, brushed them off and set them on their way.” Revenge among these prisoners of war was a reaction, not a doctrine.

Most prisoners of war cherished regular food and a bed with sheets, or were too frail to attempt acts of revenge. But as victory settled in, some Australians came to the realisation that they were the victors, and they chose the victor’s right to plunder. Australians on ships moored in Tokyo Bay regularly took trips onto the Japanese mainland. “Our group commandeered 3,700 bottles of this beer from a local store, and most of it was gone by the time we left ... call us drunkards if you will” wrote Able Seaman Bob Skinner.⁵⁴ Liberated prisoners also sought out alcohol, having been deprived for nearly four years. They were now issued a bottle of beer a day, but some would take matters into their own hands and write their own requisitions for additional beer, signing the requisitions “General MacArthur”. “Someone remarked last night that old Macarthur is due for a shock when he goes to collect his back pay”.⁵⁵

Men on sojourn from their navy vessels on the mainland went souveniring (collecting) objects from the Japanese population: a crew of sailors was “proud of the fact that nearly all of us had a Hari-Kari Dirk to display”.⁵⁶ Former prisoners of war on Nagasaki were similarly active collectors:

Cars and trucks have been borrowed, requisitioned, or taken by force. The latest mania is the collection of Nipponese swords. Some chaps are making a business of it. They just dash off a receipt for a sword. Most of the Nips accept that. Others object strongly, but all with the same result.⁵⁷

⁵³ Jack Nevell, 12 September 1945

⁵⁴ Bob Skinner, 30 August 1945

⁵⁵ Jack Nevell, 12 September 1945

⁵⁶ Bob Skinner, 30 August. Hari-Kari Dirks were Japanese ceremonial short swords held by every Japanese family

⁵⁷ Jack Nevell, 12 September 1945

Others went in different, more ambitious, directions. Jack Nevell, at Fukuoka Camp near Nagasaki, recalled that “some of the lads have just landed back from robbing a bank. They have rice bags full of money. They had been drinking all the morning. When that started to pall, they decided they would go rob a bank to see if that would give them a kick. They had rather a hectic time the night before and wanted something to follow it up.”⁵⁸

Why rob a bank? Because the war was over, and nobody had come to fetch them. Because the existence as prisoners of war revolved around a strictly implemented routine, which had disappeared. Because nobody had prepared these men to run their own camps, and, chiefly, because they were bored. In the words of one of their comrades in camp, the men were “feeling their way gingerly along and finding they can get away with nearly anything.”⁵⁹

These ventures didn’t go unnoticed. Nine Australians in a camp on Kyushu went exploring the day after peace was declared. They went down to the village and “had a marvellous time pinching chickens, spuds and cigarettes.” Before they could get back to camp, they were met by an English wing commander, who confiscated their loot. “It still seems unreal that he confiscated our loot and saw to it that our second night of freedom after three and a half years of prison life was spent in the clink.”⁶⁰ To describe this as an Australian reaction would be to misinterpret it; these were the actions of men of all stripes and colours: British officers commandeered luxury cars from the locals days after having been prisoners of war. American officers, not to be outdone, sought similar vehicles.⁶¹ In Johore, the Japanese who had formerly been their taskmasters were being put to work in town doing cleaning work.⁶²

More of the men simply wanted to go home. In Johore, each man fell silent when presented with a pen and paper to write a letter home.⁶³ After describing an American avenging a friend who had been beaten to death by hanging a Japanese guard from a tree, and a group of Chinese prisoners who beat their camp commandant to death with hammers, Jack Nevell wrote, “I am afraid I have not the stomach for the way a minority of the lads are carrying on, especially

⁵⁸ Jack Nevell, 18 September 1945

⁵⁹ Jack Nevell, 15 September 1945

⁶⁰ Gerry Shannon as quoted in Hugh V. Clarke, *Twilight Liberation* (Sydney, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1985) 97

⁶¹ Clarke, *Twilight Liberation*, 86

⁶² Ernest Doscar as quoted in C. Twomey, *Australia’s Forgotten Prisoners*, 133

⁶³ Stan Arneil, 6 September 1945

regarding the civilian population. I just want to get home and forget about it all.”⁶⁴ Such was the sentiment among these ailing men.

Sacre Coeur nuns had a moment to write of their shock at the firebombing of their city. Kathleen Bignell wrote from Totsuka Camp: “Told peace treaty signed. 6 cities wiped out. German Dr came. One bomb 14,000 people.”⁶⁵ In Australia, the majority saw the atomic bomb as the means to achieve victory. Those closer to the devastation couldn’t ignore it. “Two-thirds of the population of Nagasaki are dead”, Sister Regina McKenna wrote to a friend.⁶⁶

For most Australians in the Pacific, going home would be a long process. Soldiers and servicepeople went home in stages, defined by a points system determined by the length of service, family at home, and feasibility of transport. These points scores were studied and discussed among the service “like form guides”.⁶⁷ The seemingly interminable wait gave time to process complex and differing emotions. The Second World War was experienced by Australians in a vast array of locations around the world. It follows, then, that Australian reactions would be diverse.

One of the principal events to follow VP Day was the Japanese surrender ceremony on USS *Missouri*. Prior to the official surrender, Australian seamen were stationed on ships moored around Tokyo Bay, watching for signs of Japanese aggression. Australian soldiers remained on islands in the Pacific, attempting to enforce peace terms on Japanese soldiers who may not have believed their nation had surrendered. When surrender terms were arranged, these soldiers had the tasks of ensuring the terms were met and Japanese prisoners were taken. In some cases, Australians were intent on arranging justice for Japanese war crimes. At the Kuching prisoner of war camp, Brigadier Thomas Eastick of the 9th Division wept at the state of the Australian men inside.⁶⁸ He felt an obligation to continue working, collecting evidence and taking photographs at once. The 9th Division used the huts, the state of the Allied prisoners of war, the cemetery, and the coffins as evidence for a war crimes trial which they hoped to begin on 15 November. Lack of legal imprimatur and proper process delayed the trial until 3 December,

⁶⁴ Jack Nevell, 15 September 1945

⁶⁵ Kathleen Bignell as quoted in R. Miller *the Lost Women of Rabaul*, 245

⁶⁶ Sister Regina McKenna as quoted in C. Twomey “Australia’s Forgotten Prisoners”, 127

⁶⁷ S. MacIntyre, *Australia’s Boldest Experiment: War and Reconstruction in the 1940’s* (Sydney, NSW: NewSouth: 2015: e-book) 317

⁶⁸ Fitzpatrick, McCormack & Morris, *Australia’s War Crime Trials*, 434

but the insistence upon justice in Kuching and Sandakan, as well as places like Singapore and Wewak, was indicative of an urge to delay their service in the Pacific until justice was seen to be done.⁶⁹ In this way, the war did not end with surrender, but with administrative justice as quick as was legally and logistically possible.

On Balikpapan, it took until 12 September for Japanese forces to fully surrender. Quiet jubilation turned into cautious sweeping up of Japanese forces as the days went by; nobody wanted to be a victim of a war that had supposedly ended. On Fukuoka, Japanese inhabitants who did know the war was over soon found themselves starving; and Australians had locals assisting them with cooking, cleaning, and washing, paid with wet cigarettes and foodstuffs.⁷⁰

The notion that all serving Australians were eager to return home is too simple. There were plenty of men in the front lines who dreamed of home while trudging through the jungle, and prisoners of war wrote most often in their diaries recollections and imaginings of Sunday morning breakfast, holding their beloved close while never again taking simple pleasures for granted. But there were others, including soldiers in the Pacific who signed up for the Japanese Occupation Force without seeing Australia in the meantime. On 24 August, Keith Lewtas, who had been strafed by those four American bombers on Wewak, applied to remain with the Japanese Occupation Force; his yearning for home was absent.

Others, including sailors on board vessels near Tokyo, were in no rush to return home: “I wouldn’t mind a couple more months so that the weather would have time to warm up. I shall be very dismayed if I don’t get home during the summer,” Pete Mayor wrote in a letter home.⁷¹ Mayor had a day off between VP Day and Japanese surrender on USS *Missouri* on 2 September, on which he wrote, “I feel glad to be alive; that describes it pretty well I think.”⁷² His only complaint was the stricter discipline and attention to detail of peacetime. Howard Stevenson, aboard HMAS *Pirie*, wanted to go see Yokohama: “What a city it is, most of it has been reduced to rubble but you can count 400 factory chimneys still standing. I’d like to go ashore and have a look around the place, but I don’t think it would be wise unless you were well armed, because the people don’t look too happy about it.”⁷³

⁶⁹ Fitzpatrick, McCormack & Morris, *Australia’s War Crime Trials*, 433-436

⁷⁰ Jack Nevell, 5 September 1945

⁷¹ Pete Mayor, 2 September 1945

⁷² Pete Mayor, 1 September 1945

⁷³ H.C. Stevenson, 31 August 1945

While those at home went back to their daily routines, those in the Pacific had the chance to interact with their enemy. The Australians were victors, engaging with their Japanese counterparts on a different level.

When the Japs formally surrendered, we did not allow ourselves to take any risks, and always carried a rifle, or a weapon of some sort, around with us because of the fear of being sprung upon by a fanatic Jap who had been in hiding and didn't know the war had ended.⁷⁴

Australian soldiers in Bougainville took the surrender of Japanese forts at the Bonis Peninsula, and saw their vanquished foes. For many, this meant coming to terms with their enemy, and coming to terms with the reason they had fought in the first place. At the Bonis Peninsula, soldiers saw two lines of Japanese soldiers: the officer class, and the ones who had “absolutely nothing”. The sick ones were on the brink of collapsing, to the extent that the Australians taking the surrender felt the need to evacuate them. Stirling Tuckey of the 8th Battalion remarked in his diary, “I could sum them up in a dozen words, all amounting to the same thing – bland, obsequious, servile, docile, cooperative, and indifferent.” One Japanese soldier reached down and plucked a piece of fluff from an Australian officer's trousers.⁷⁵ This meeting reveals a more curious side to Australian soldiers, presenting a more nuanced relation than simple scorn and hatred for the defeated enemy. That Japanese culture involved a level of obedience and deference alien to the Australians was not examined thoroughly by the soldiers; but here were Australians with more than a simple tunnel vision of home.

Tuckey pondered exactly how they could make these people atone for their crimes: “So far as this theatre of operations is concerned, they are doing obedient and very willing things which, had our positions been reversed, we would have been forced to do at the point of their bayonets. Their docility is amazing and they are carrying out judiciously the terms of the surrender to the letter, and in a manner which we could never have possibly dared hope.”

⁷⁴ Stirling Tuckey, Comment on Diary entry of 13 August

⁷⁵ Stirling Tuckey, “Will We Ever Understand the Japanese?” Section of Diary

Bob Skinner reported that some Japanese people were arrogant, while others were incredibly deferential. “They bowed and scrapped to all and sundry. Fair dinkum, in five minutes we received more bows and salutes than an admiral during the whole of his career.” Yet his comments were hardly laden with admiration for the Japanese people; they were, in his eyes, “yellow rats” to whom one look was “enough to make one want to have a spot of bayonet practice”.⁷⁶ These were human interactions laden with the experience of war and cultural parochialism.

But not every man was like Bob Skinner. Charles Edwards, a former prisoner of war and member of the 2/19th Battalion, wrote after the war that “the Japanese people were beautiful, and they still are. They’re courteous, kind, they laugh a lot – so my opinion of the Japanese people has never altered. It was only the IJA – the Imperial Japanese Army – that were brutal to us”⁷⁷

Near Wewak, Japanese soldiers who did not know the war was over were still quite hostile. But Australians soon changed their suspicion of Japanese soldiers to observing their polite deference. When peace was declared, some prisoners of war were even asked to retain their arms as guards because the Japanese commander feared a civilian rebellion.

One summed it up nicely: “Human nature is a funny thing and it’s hard to believe that only two weeks before this we would have taken the skin off any Jap, we could get our hands on, but when our bellies were full, we actually gave some of our food to the Japs who were hanging around the billets.”⁷⁸

Sailors became tourists, prisoners of war became voyagers in limbo, and soldiers became diplomats. By the time the official surrender was signed on 2 September, newspaper headlines only briefly highlighted the goings on in the Pacific. Active fighting stopped in Europe, but continued in the Pacific. Men near Nagasaki were robbing banks, and emptying their sacks at camp so that everyone could partake in the spoils, though the heist did not go unnoticed. The Japanese mayor rode his bike down to the liberated camp, demanding compensation, and every former prisoner of war was called to parade. The camp commandant told them that the

⁷⁶ Bob Skinner, 30 August 1945, 60

⁷⁷ Grant, *Australian Soldiers*, 167

⁷⁸ Gerry Shannon as quoted in Clarke, *Twilight Liberation*, 100

“frivolities must cease”. The mayor gave a speech: “I quite understand these happenings. When the men were under the Japanese control, they were knocked about and treated badly. Now it is our turn to be knocked down and kicked. We expect it. There are no hard feelings.” He drew up a bill for 3,000 yen, which was passed around the men. By the time it had reached its end point, the men had contributed 6,000 yen. Everyone had satisfaction, except the mayor, who had to walk home as “one of the lads had stolen his bicycle”.⁷⁹

For some, there was a date, for others, an interminable wait. For some, there was peace, for others, the fighting continued for days, weeks, even months. For those at home, there was glee, victory parades, vast swathes of relief, but also incredible grief, pain, and uncertainty. To sum up the end of the Second World War with footage of a dancing man or a novelty sweater is to undersell the sheer weight which the Second World War put upon these people. It could not be removed by a simple moment, or a parade, or an announcement that now there was peace. Australians had been changed far too much for that.

⁷⁹ Jack Nevell, 18 September 1945

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