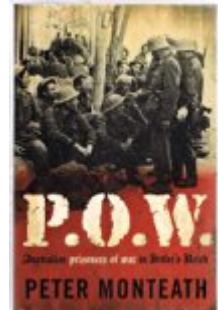


**Peter Monteath.** *P.O.W.: Australian Prisoners of War in Hitler's Reich.* Sydney: Macmillan, 2011. 523 pp. AUD 35.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-74261-008-5.



**Reviewed by** Stefan Geck

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**Commissioned by** Alexander Freund (The University of Winnipeg)

In a lively and knowledgeable manner, the author of this book traces the history of the AN-ZACs, soldiers of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps, who went into German captivity in the European theater of war between 1939/40 and 1945. Against the background of the history of the Second AIF (Australian Imperial Force) and the units of Air Force (RAAF) and Navy (RAN), all of which were deployed in the fight against the Third Reich under British High Command, Peter Monteath exhaustively documents the history of war imprisonment in its central aspects. By evaluating numerous interviews with war veterans, he manages to present more than just another “story from below.”

It is exactly this perspective which, in the context of the sheer amount of ego-documents published by veterans of the Allied forces since 1945, has had the greatest influence on the public perception of prisoners of war. In many of such “POW yarn” memories, historians encounter numerous repetitive topics of “life behind barbed wire” engraved in the collective memory of Anglo-

American postwar society until this day. The problem with these memories is that few of them are empirically verifiable or can claim general validity. It is therefore even more notable that Monteath presents a study that is not limited to a critical evaluation of recollections and/or to Australian and British sources. Instead, the author includes material from German archives, which allows him to draw attention to the institutional meta-level of the prisoner of war system of the detaining power. A synoptic national study, his work closes a significant research gap.

Monteath presents an overview of the “progress” of a soldier from the moment of his capture (“for you the war is over”) until his repatriation. In this context, the author touches on the lesser known fate of Australian POWs, whose camps were taken over by the Red Army in 1945. Although the Yalta accord called for the instant repatriation of the POWs, the Soviets were reluctant to comply. Including all Australian services as well as the relevant deployment areas of North Africa, Greece, and central Europe, *P.O.W.* man-

ages to highlight the particularities of “Kriegie” life, including those in the Axis camps run by Italy and Vichy France. Most importantly, this view allows a deep insight into the German camp system, ranging from POW collection points behind the front to camps for other ranks (Stalag) as well as officers camps (Oflag) within the Reich. The analysis integrates the perspective of the POWs and inspection reports by delegates of the protecting power as well as diplomatic correspondence; many camps are presented individually.

The study also deals with “Göring’s Empire” and its intelligence centerpiece, the main interrogation camp of the Luftwaffe—Dulag Luft/Auswertestelle West. The memories of Australian Air Force crews not only offer an interesting starting point for further research into the intelligence cycle. They also shed light on cultural patterns among the German staff: some had lived abroad and built up their prewar lives in Australia. In 1939 these individuals had to return to Germany. Tracing back whether they did so voluntarily or involuntarily might offer insight into military mentalities on the eve of war.

Continuing with the formative elements of the POW experience, the author treats lesser known aspects, all of which show the susceptibility of the Wehrmacht’s POW system to political and administrative influences. The so-called holiday camps (run by the German Foreign Office) served to indoctrinate British and Commonwealth prisoners who were supposed to serve the German cause after a four-week recreational sojourn. One aim behind this strategy was to recruit volunteers for a British Free Corps to fight the Soviets, a project of Heinrich Himmler’s that dramatically failed. The book also deals with the transfer of Allied POWs to the concentration camp Buchenwald—cases of transfers to Auschwitz, Majdanek, and other camps have also been reported—as well as the committal of twenty-seven Australian POWs into the “Kleine Festung Theresienstadt” (Terezín), a Gestapo torture prison.

In another part of the book, Monteath focuses on the “Great Escape” from Stalag Luft III and follows the fate of several Australians who were among the executed. Besides, the post facto notes of the later Generalmajor Westhoff, who shortly afterwards became chief of the POW administration (Chef Kriegsgefangenenwesen), offer an excellent basis for a critical debate on the position of the Wehrmacht in the context of the execution of fifty escapees that was decided in March 1944 based on a proposal by Himmler.

Monteath uses the example of the campaign against “terror pilots” and “air gangsters” started by Joseph Goebbels in 1943-44 to show the increased radicalization of German POW politics as first described by Rüdiger Overmans. Monteath studies this process from an Australian perspective, including the issue of POWs used as human shields, a problem that has been examined in previous research. It is an asset of this study that it continuously relates conditions of the Australians living in the relative safety of the military “cage” to the external unpredictability of the Nazi system. Its corrective factor was reciprocity, which held “western” camps in a fragile balance. However, this balance was vulnerable to periodic bureaucratic infighting. During the chaotic last days of the Reich, international law did not protect Anglo-American POWs from spontaneous assaults or the consequences of unspeakable exertion. Monteath documents this phenomenon by analyzing the evacuations of eastern POW camps that began with the collapse of the Army Group Centre at Stalag Luft IV (Heydekrug in present-day Lithuania) in the summer of 1944. Against the background of the forced marches during the spring of 1945, the author describes under which conditions Australian prisoners died so shortly before the end of the war.

As a cultural history of the POW experience, the study provides a counterweight to the dominant public discourse in Australia and draws attention to a topic that has been relatively

marginalized in recent years. For a long time, two topoi blocked the view on the deployment of Australian troops in Europe and detention by the German Reich. The first is “ANZAC Day,” commemorating the 1915 landfall of the First Expeditionary Force on Gallipoli in present-day Turkey. The battle is deeply engraved in the collective memory of Australia and New Zealand; this stands in stark contrast to Verdun, for example, which nowadays hardly remains in the memory of German society. The tremendous losses of the “diggers” in relation to the Australian population—60,000 dead soldiers and 167,000 wounded, which amounted to the highest percentage of losses within the British Empire during the Great War—have left their mark on Australian society to this day, and they have founded the myth of the “warrior hero” that prevented a focus on the fate of prisoners of war. The second is the a long period of almost exclusive focus on the fate of 22,000 soldiers taken into Japanese captivity during the Second World War, of whom 35 percent did not survive the brutal regime in the camps while the death rate of Allied POWs in German hand lay at 2 to 3 percent. The memories of those surviving Japanese camps told stories of daily demise, terrible deprivations, hunger, brutality, and humiliation and dominated the public perception as well as the professional discourse to an extent that overshadowed the fate of 8,400 returnees from Germany.

Another advantage of *P.O.W.* is that the book gives constructive impulses towards a comparative exploration of national cultural patterns and mentalities of Commonwealth soldiers in captivity during the Second World War. The author accomplishes much by outlining individual and collective reflections of “Kriegies” which clearly display genuinely national components. Concerning national minorities, a heterogeneous picture emerges: indigenous Australians (Aborigines) served in mixed units with their European-heritage comrades while Maori from New Zealand served in separate battalions. Concerning the perception of war, however, only individual results

are available. Monteath also shows that “British” camp society was far from homogenous despite the common language, and that Australian POWs did not integrate smoothly into the British self-administration established in the camps. ANZAC soldiers, for example, regularly complained to their German guards that they were considered as British detainees.

The reader finds ample material concerning the psychological impacts of war captivity. These ranged from the trauma of capture—at the root of feelings of impotence, guilt, and shame—to individual survival strategies when facing a forced long-term detention behind barbed wire as part of an unstable male society. The book also informs readers about the impact of post-traumatic stress disorder of ANZAC veterans: as a long-term consequence, 37 percent suffered from anxiety attacks, 31 percent from high stress levels; this was complemented by sleeplessness and a higher than average divorce rate. A not clearly definable number of Kriegies only saw suicide as the ultimate coping strategy.

Finally, *P.O.W.* presents impressive visual material, including the cover photograph, that has been well selected by the editors. In addition, the book contains a useful index and several maps, one of which lists prisoner of war camps with Australian inmates. With his book, Peter Monteath gives a voice to the ANZAC veterans whose fate as POWs of the Axis powers threatened to be overshadowed by the fate of their comrades in Japanese captivity. Most interestingly, this important book offers starting points for combining military questions with cultural history in the context of research on prisoner of war captivity.

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