

## A POW in Italy

# Part 1 An Italian Experience

by Malcolm Webster

**This is a unique autobiographical story of Malcolm Webster as a prisoner of war in Italy. In 1943 he escaped from an Italian work camp and spent the latter part of the war serving as a member of the Italian Resistance Movement, combating the Nazi/Fascists.**

**Malcolm Webster was born on May 25, 1921. In the 1920s his family moved to a 10 acre farm in Glen Waverley, then a rural area. Malcolm and his 4 siblings contributed to make ends meet in the harsh depression years by helping their parents pick apples from their orchard, milk the cow, grow vegetables and strawberries and raise hens, chickens and ducks.**

**The announcement - made by the then Prime Minister of Australia, Robert Menzies, on September 3, 1939 - that Australia was at war with Hitler's Germany, had a profound impact on the 18 year old Malcolm who joined the Australian Imperial Forces (A.I.F.) soon after.**

On receiving his widowed mother's consent, Malcolm Webster volunteered to join the A.I.F., just after his 19th birthday. He sailed from Melbourne to the Middle East late in 1940 on the *H.M.T. Mauretania*.

Following the evacuation of the British and Australian troops from Heraklion, Crete, he was on the British destroyer *H.M.S. Hereward* which was disabled and finally sunk in the Kaso Straits, due to bombing by the Luftwaffe on the 29 May, 1941. The ship was abandoned at 6.45 am. After five hours in the sea without a life jacket, Malcolm was rescued by an Italian Navy torpedo boat. This action against the *Hereward* cost many lives, mainly through drowning. The air attack that day against the convoy caused the loss of two destroyers, *Hereward* and *Imperial*. Direct hits on the British cruisers *Orion* and *Dido* and the destroyer *Decoy*, resulted in over

one thousand casualties. The survivors of the *Hereward*, taken prisoner by the Italian Navy, were taken to Scapanto, in the Dodecanese Islands.

Many were naked and others scantily clothed. At Scapanto they were given food and water. Later that day they were transported to Rhodes on the Italian destroyer *Francesco Crispi*.

After three weeks on Rhodes recovering from their ordeal, and weakened somewhat by the tight food rationing, the POWs were shipped to Leros Island, where they boarded the *Caleno*, an Italian peace time liner which sailed to Italy via Port Piraeus and the Corinth Canal, finally arriving at Bari, Italy on 22 June 1941, the day Russia entered the war against Germany. At Bari, whilst marching to a railway station, the POWs were subjected to a hostile reception, with booing and stones being thrown. Fortunately, the Italian guards did a good job of controlling the situation.

From Bari they travelled across Italy by train to a POW transit camp at Capua, near Napoli, where, after a short stay, they were transported by rail to Bolzano and marched to Prato all'Isarco, close to the Brenner Pass. The concentration camp at Prato all'Isarco was a disused brewery, with old dusty buildings as barracks. It was situated on a steep mountainside overlooking the Adige River, the main road and the railway line which served the German forces operating in North Africa. Life and conditions, although somewhat primitive, were tolerable with sufficient food rations,



Australian troops aboard the British transport ship *Mauretania*, 29 December 1940. Webster is at far right (leaning on mesh).

augmented by food parcels arriving through the international Red Cross. The camp at Prato all'Isarco was vacated on 25 October 1941 and all POWs transferred by train to Campo di Concentramento P.G. 57 at Gruppignano, near Udine, close to the Yugoslavia border.

P.G. 57 proved to be a tough prison camp, efficient, well administered and strictly controlled. The Camp Commandant was a Sicilian Colonel named Calcaterra. He was an avowed Fascist who was formerly in charge of an Italian Police District. In time he would prove to be a very strict and ruthless disciplinarian. His office wall was adorned with a quotation from a Mussolini speech, which, translated, read: 'The English are accursed but more accursed are Italians who treat them well'.

In September 1943, contrary to the Armistice conditions, Calcaterra handed over all the POWs at the Concentration Camp 57 to the Germans. This action later resulted in his execution by Partisan forces. No doubt, this timely execution overcame his possible arraignment as a war criminal.

The camp, situated on the plains near Caporetto of First World War fame, was subjected to strong winds and extreme cold conditions not previously experienced by the Australians. The 1941/42 winter saw a record low of minus 23 degrees centigrade. Insufficient and unsuitable clothing was a problem and caused hardship for the prisoners. This was relieved during March 1942 with the arrival of personal clothing parcels from Australia and supplies through the Red Cross. In February 1942, food rations were dramatically cut by 60% and the Red Cross parcels also ceased for six weeks. Many suffered from malnutrition or Beri Beri, a disease caused by the lack of fruit and vegetables, necessary to maintain the correct body level of vitamin B1. Many prisoners ended up in Udine Military Hospital, including Malcolm Webster, who suffered from Beri Beri and blood poisoning from a foot infection that required surgery. Although existence in Camp P.G. 57 was hard, morale was maintained by many activities such as concerts, debates, education classes, quiz contests, card tournaments and sporting competitions of cricket, football, baseball and athletics between huts and

compounds. All sporting activity was discontinued for some weeks in 1942 due to insufficient food to sustain the body at a reasonable level.

April 1943 saw the despatch of POWs below the rank of Sergeant to work camps. Malcolm, in a squad of 50 men, was sent to a work camp at Oschiena, near Vercelli, in Piedmont, to work in the wheat and rice fields. Accommodation was bad, the wooden barracks were small and overcrowded, with little ventilation because the double doors were kept locked at night. As this situation caused much discomfort on warm nights, the Australians, in typical fashion staged a strike. Gradually conditions were improved, food supply was good with double issue of rations augmented by extra items from the farm. That, together with Red Cross food parcels, soon improved the physical condition of the Australians.

It became apparent that the Italian people were disenchanted with the Fascist regime and the alliance with Nazi Germany. Following the withdrawal from North Africa and the eventual Allied landing in Sicily and the invasion of the Italian mainland at Salerno and Anzio, it was no surprise that an armistice with the Allied forces was declared by Marshall Badoglio on 8 September 1943, enraging the Germans who felt betrayed by the Italians. This day was remarkable, a day of great rejoicing and festivities at Oschiena shared between

*Cascina Oschiena, the farmhouse near Vercelli in Piedmont. Malcolm Webster and other POWs were sent here to work in the nearby wheat and rice fields in 1943.*



*Malcolm Webster, aged 23 years, in the Italian uniform of the Partisans, 1944.*

the POW's, the Italian guards and the farm people. It was generally felt that at long last the fascist yoke was broken forever.

However, Malcolm together with his compatriots, quickly became concerned with the German troop activity in the Vercelli area, coupled with the news that all POW camps in Italy were being taken over and the inmates sent to concentration camps in Germany. Rather than let this happen the Australians decided to abandon the work camp and make their own way, some towards Switzerland, some southwards, and others to hide out with the help of farm workers in the vicinity, with the forlorn hope that the Allies would soon land in Genova and free them.

Malcolm joined up with four other Australians, one of whom was summarily executed together with four compatriots, all unarmed, in the mountains of northern Piedmont.

After remaining hidden near Oschiena for six weeks and being maintained with food and money by the people at Oschiena, it became apparent that it would be a tough and long drawn out battle to oust the German troops from Italy, and there was also no Allied landing at Genova. A guide, necessary to lead them through the Alps into Switzerland never arrived despite promises and hopeful contacts. The decision was made to head north from Oschiena unaided, with the hope that a suitable guide could be found in the mountains of northern Piedmont.

Travelling north for some days and finally reaching a refuge hut at an altitude of over two thousand metres, it was learnt that the risks were too great to find a suitable passage into Switzerland at that time of

year. Heading back to the foothills where it was warmer, Malcolm and his three companions were given information that passage to Switzerland was being gained through another area, so back they went into the Alps to find they were again too late, as the last batch had suffered badly with two men dying from "mountain sickness" brought on by the high altitudes.

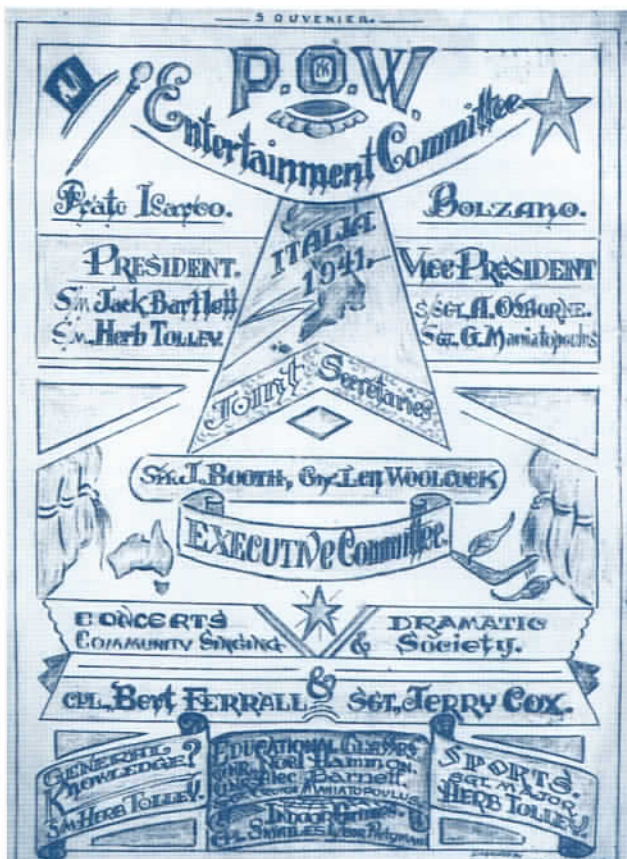
In desperation the four Australians turned south again, across the plains of Piedmont and over the River Po, into the province of Alessandria. Travelling dressed as civilians, the intention was to find or commandeer a boat and hopefully sail to the Island of Sardegna. The closer they got to Genova the German troops became more concentrated, no doubt expecting an Allied landing near Genova. It became difficult to move around without food or money, the local people were terrified and under constant threat from the Germans. In light of the grave situation in Alessandria, with the German Command offering rewards for information leading to the recapture of

POWs from concentration camps, a decision was made to return north.

Because of the difficulty of obtaining sufficient food for four people, they broke up into pairs by drawing a name from a hat. Malcolm drew William Wigglesworth, a former member of his army unit. The other two were Roger Wettenhall and Bert Ridgway. On 24 November 1943 each pair went different ways basically north.

After a few weeks Bert Ridgway gave himself up to the authorities because of ill health, Roger Wettenhall was stopped and arrested by the Italian Police on 17 January 1944 and after interrogation at the Fascist Headquarters in Vercelli, was sent to jail in Novara and later taken by the Germans to Stalag V11A at Moosburg in Germany.

Malcolm and his companion, Bill Wigglesworth, continued to roam the pre-Alpi area of northern Vercelli where they were fortunate enough to find compassionate people who were ready to help in their survival from a ruthless enemy.



'POW Entertainment Committee' brochure designed by Australian prisoners of war at the concentration camp at Prato all'Isarco in northern Italy, 1941.



Propaganda postcard published by the Axis Alliance during the Second World War and souvenired by Malcolm Webster during the war.