

**'Mr Foster was noble enough to defend our rights,
often getting himself into difficult situations':
One man's extraordinary relationship with his Italian POWs**

by John Hall

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During the last years of the Second World War, one farmer's actions were to have a profound effect on the lives of the Italian prisoners of war (POWs) he employed on his property in north-western New South Wales. In an amazing series of episodes, Frank Foster's attitudes and actions challenged the established prejudices of a small rural district and the wider community. In many respects, Foster's actions were unique, and must have caused him and his family to question who was the actual enemy during the war – the Italian soldiers he employed or his fellow citizens.

Frank Courtland Foster was born in 1892. He served with distinction at Anzac Cove and later in France, receiving the Gallipoli Star and the Meritorious Service Medal. After the war, Foster returned to Australia with his new Scottish wife, Jessica. They were granted a Soldier Settler's block first near Cowra, then moved to 'Garnock', approximately 30 kilometres west of Gunnedah. By the outbreak of the Second World War, Frank had purchased another block a few kilometres west of 'Garnock'. Together, the two properties occupied over 1850 acres (750 hectares), operated



POW quarters (right) on one of the Foster properties. Farmers were obliged to supply suitable accommodation. Courtesy of Mrs A. Finlay.

only by Foster, three of his four daughters and his son-in-law.¹

While Frank was foremost a farmer, his sense of duty saw him enlist in 1941, as a driver in the 8th Garrison Battalion, based at Newcastle. Meanwhile, 'Garnock' was left in the hands of two of his daughters, Jean (aged 16) and Heather (aged 17). *The Land* newspaper was so impressed with this situation that a January 1942 article proudly proclaimed: 'Girls Run 900-acre Farm as Their "Digger" Father Re-enlists'. However, the accompanying photograph of Frank and his two smiling daughters did not reveal the hard work that the girls had to do. Heather remembers that she and her sister took 'turns to farm all day and night', and were 'too afraid to turn off the tractor because they might not have been able to restart it'.²

In 1942 Frank was discharged from the army after the death of his wife and returned to his Gunnedah farms. Meanwhile, by mid 1943, a rural labour scheme involving Italian POWs had been initiated by the Commonwealth Government.³ Due to the contentious and radical nature of the scheme — unguarded enemy prisoners, living on the property and working with minimal daily supervision by the farmer — the government was keen not to attract opposition to the plan. After each district was chosen and enough applications for POW labour had been received, a small Army contingent quietly set up their headquarters in the town.

The first Prisoner of War Control Centre (PWCC) in Australia opened at Coonabarabran, NSW in June 1943. Thereafter, other PWCCs soon became established in districts where rural labour was scarce. The Gunnedah PWCC, the twenty-seventh in the state, was established in June 1944, and was allocated a quota of 100 POWs.⁴ Frank Foster was one of the first farmers in the district to apply for, and receive, prisoner labour. Family members believe Frank employed the Italians 'for financial reasons', although the shortage of personnel for farmwork was probably also a factor in the final decision.⁵ Like many other Australian families preparing to greet their new workers, the Foster family were 'concerned and nervous [and] viewed their [the POWs] coming with much trepidation.' However, this uneasiness soon evaporated as Frank and his family recognised the Italians to be 'personable, respectful, hard working', and soon 'the Italians' respect was reciprocated'.⁶

In the months following the placement of the prisoners, work on the Foster farms proceeded without trouble. In a questionnaire completed by Foster in October 1944 which was designed to ensure prisoners were engaged in genuine rural work rather than trivial jobs such as gardening or improvements to homesteads, he stated his three POWs were erecting their living quarters as well as undertaking a range of jobs including fence repairs, feeding stock, milking cows, drainage work to prevent soil erosion and erecting pig sties. Future tasks for the Italians included 'post splitting for fencing ... clearing for cultivation, harvest work, hay making.' All of these tasks were approved by the authorities.⁷



The staff of the Gunnedah PWCC. Front row, left: Joe Radin, the centre's interpreter. Staff at each PWCC only numbered about seven.
Courtesy of Mrs H. Radin.

In Gunnedah, as with other centres where prisoner labour was used, opposition appeared towards the scheme and was directed at those farmers who employed the Italians. The two main opponents were the union movement and the veteran's organisation, the Returned Soldiers', Sailors' and Airmen's Imperial League (RSSAIL), the forerunner of the modern RSL. The RSSAIL complained about the 'freedoms' given to prisoners while they were on the farms. Although each employer was obliged to sign a 'Notice' which outlined rules and regulations, the isolation of many farms from towns meant that, in reality, the prisoners could (and often did) engage in activities which were strictly forbidden.⁸ Frank Foster would have been a member of the RSSAIL, but it is not known if he encountered any problems from his local branch. However, it was no secret that the Fosters had a 'soft spot' for Italians, since the Sergeant interpreter attached to the Gunnedah



Italian born Sergeant Joe Radin, interpreter of the Centre. Courtesy of Mrs H. Radin.

PWCC, Joe Radin, an Italian-born Australian had married Heather, Frank's daughter. Welcoming a 'foreigner' into a family would have caused tongues to wag in a small conservative town.

Unionists, too, opposed the POW scheme, alleging it was a backdoor method by the government to break down hard-fought wages and conditions for union members. Moreover, it was argued (usually by the principal union, the Australian Workers' Union or AWU) that the scheme employed cheap, foreign workers at the expense of unemployed Australian workers. The last argument does not appear to have any solid basis, since all labour, especially those in rural industries, was scarce during the war. As with the RSSAIL opposition, the AWU resistance to the Italians can partially be blamed on a degree of racism. Before and after Italy entered the war in 1940, Italians were regularly subjected to racist attacks by some Australian publications, sentiments endorsed by many Australians who considered themselves staunch and proud members of the British Empire.⁹ Frank Foster was soon to feel the wrath of such people.

During the scheme's 18 month operation in the Gunnedah district, the Fosters employed at least four prisoners: Donato Capezio, Francesco Armodio, Umberto Baldantino and Domenico D'Aloia. The bonds between Frank and his prisoners gradually became unwavering. The work ethic of the Italians particularly impressed Frank. This respect became apparent in February 1945 when Frank forwarded applications for naturalisation for three of his prisoners, Donato, Umberto and Domenico. It was a risky, some might say courageous endeavour: an Australian supporting citizenship

bids for three enemy soldiers while the war still raged would have not met with universal support in the district. The documents were initially sent to the Gunnedah PWCC, then forwarded to the Army administrator for POW affairs. The applications no longer exist, but they must have been accompanied by supporting letters of recommendation from Foster. The commanding officer of the Gunnedah PWCC stated that Foster's 'opinion of their [POWs'] character and ability is very high'. Further, the officer envisaged another use for the applications: 'While I appreciate the fact that there must be enormous difficulties in the way of fulfilment of these applications, they should be of some propaganda value'.¹⁰

The applications then proceeded through the Army bureaucracy, eventually reaching the office of the Adjutant-General in Melbourne. The decision from this office was swift and predictable:

Applications for naturalisation will not be accepted from PW held in Australia. In accordance with Art[icle] 75 of the PW Convention it is intended that all PW will be repatriated to their own countries as soon as possible after the conclusion of the peace.

A mere three weeks after forwarding the applications on to higher authorities, the Gunnedah PWCC was informed of the decision, and instructed to return the applications to the prisoners.¹¹ The prisoners' reactions are not known, but it is likely they were disappointed and crushed by the decision. However, this was not to be the last word from Foster in support of the Italians.

In March 1945, Tamworth's *Northern Daily Leader* reported that a multitude of local, state and national unions had declared the produce of a Gunnedah farm 'black' after the publication of comments by a farmer in an article on the value of Italian prisoner labour. The farmer was Frank Foster. AWU branches throughout northwestern NSW had publicly declared their vehement opposition to the POW scheme. District branches had warned employers that industrial action would occur if union members, especially shearers, were forced to work on properties which also employed Italian prisoners. However, Foster's *thoughts*, rather than his actions were the cause of the union bans.

The *Leader* story ascertained that Foster had written an article in an unnamed journal, complimenting the work of Italian POWs, while denigrating the

work ethic of Australian workers. Despite hearing that 'some of the statements ... were not made by him [Foster]' the unions decided that 'Mr Foster's denial would not be accepted.' Foster was particularly blunt and direct:

The Italians I have employed are hard-working, cheerful men, who learn quickly and do not worry about hours, but the average Australian farm worker, nowadays, works for a few days a week for 25 or 30 shillings or more a day and then knocks off. Italian war prisoners in my district and other country districts have saved the day for the farmers.¹²



This concrete and brick storage building on 'Garnock' was one of a number built by the POWs. All work had to be approved by the authorities, ensuring the POWs were not engaged in 'trivial' tasks.

Courtesy Mrs A. Finlay.

For this indiscretion, his farm's produce was declared 'black'. Unfortunately, the full content of Frank's article is unknown, but a neighbour, Pat Studdy-Clift has described the article as a letter sent to a local newspaper, in which Foster wrote that antagonism against the prisoners 'was unwarranted, that they [the prisoners] were good workers and fundamentally peace lovers'. Studdy-Clift declares Frank 'would have been much wiser not to do that because other people were losing their sons in the war'.¹³ However, Foster is remembered as always prepared to express 'his opinions rather forcefully', as well as continually defending 'his Italian prisoner employees as being decent people'.¹⁴ Others admired his 'humanitarian outlook on life, his 'Stand up and be counted' attitude'.¹⁵ Therefore, it probably comes as no surprise that Frank deliberately chose a public forum to air his views. Foster's motivation for the letter or article may never be known, but, in part, he may have openly forced the situation because of the rejection of the prisoners' applications the previous month.

Studdy-Clift remembers that Foster's stock could not be sold at the local stockyards, while another believed Frank 'was refused service by many of the local shops'.¹⁶ Whatever form the ban took, it was severe punishment for a farmer struggling in the midst of a war. It is unclear when the ban was lifted, but Gunnedah's small wartime population of only 4,200 in the town and district, and the contentious issue of prisoner labour probably ensured that some type of animosity continued towards the Fosters after the ban was cancelled.

Foster's stance was defended by an editorial in the *Leader* a few days later. Whether Foster actually said the comment 'is beside the question' asserted the newspaper. 'Have we come to the pass,' asked a clearly exasperated editor, 'where anybody who dares to express opinions contrary to trade union ideas is to be branded as a dangerous person to be punished by the boycott?' The union was also questioned why it 'did not go to the root of the matter' and take action against the Federal Labor government — who approved the POW scheme — rather than against an individual who 'had the temerity to express views unpalatable to the unions'.¹⁷ Besides dividing the local community, the incident attracted comment from other districts where the union action was publicised. A farmer near Glen Innes wrote that it was 'gratifying to read ... of [the] just treatment [by unions] meted out to Mr Foster, an employer of cheap foreign labour'.¹⁸ Years later, Donato Capezio summed up his former employer's dilemma: 'Mr Foster was noble enough to defend our rights, often getting himself into difficult situations'.¹⁹ However, the Frank Foster story did not end at this time. The regard with which Frank and his family were held by their prisoner employees becomes apparent in a series of letters written to the Foster family after the POWs had left the district.

The first to write was Umberto, who departed from the farm in early February 1945, possibly because of illness, since he wrote from Cowra, and mentions returning after 'a month of rest'. While brief, Umberto's feelings are unmistakable about his time with the Fosters: 'I am very sorry [when I] left your place ... my thought is ever there [the farm], me never forget you and your family.' [sic]²⁰ While Umberto did not see the Fosters again, the authorities were not so certain. In September 1946, while awaiting repatriation, Umberto escaped from a POW hostel in Sydney. In a circular to the NSW Police, the Army noted

that Umberto had applied (once again) 'to become a British Subject.' Another rebuff from the government may have been too much for Umberto, and he escaped. The Army, courtesy of their scrutiny of all POW correspondence, noted that Umberto had:

received a letter from F.C.FOSTER on 6 August 1946 apparently in answer to a letter from him and FOSTER is alleged to have promised PW employment for 12 months, should he obtain permission in Australia.

Umberto's freedom was short-lived — he was recaptured mid September 1946 and repatriated at the end of the year.²¹

The next letter also suggests the Fosters wrote regularly to their former POW employees. Dated May 1946, a letter from Francesco arrived, thanking Frank for his 'wellcome [sic] letter', and further requesting that promised photographs be sent 'because we like to keep them for remembrance'. Francesco, like many other POWs, thanked his one-time employer on behalf of those who had worked on the Foster properties: 'Well Mr Frank you never caused any trouble to us ... you have been always [a] very good man for us', ending with the anticipation: 'hoping to hear from you soon'.²² Another letter from Francesco confirmed that he had received the photos and asked to be forgiven if the request 'have given you any trouble'. Small talk filled the remainder of the letter, including queries about the farm. 'We think you shall have much to do without any help,' Francesco confided, then asked if a building project, started by the Italians, had been finished, 'or is it the same as we left it'.²³ The Fosters must have been busy that year replying to notes sent by the Italians, because another arrived late in July.

A letter written by Donato reveals that like many other prisoners, he taught himself to write in English. It is an example of a typical chatty letter between friends. He tells of his work in a military camp at Wagga Wagga after initially being sent to Liverpool when sent back from Gunnedah. News from Italy occupies Donato's thoughts next: 'I am displeasing [sic] after a year of expectation of news from my wife', but then continues by saying a letter from Italy had arrived and 'alls [sic] are in good health'. Notwithstanding this news, Donato tells of the despair of the conditions back in Italy. 'They [his family] are in badly [sic] condition... no more dress nor shoses [sic]', he reveals, adding that while doing 'slave-work' in Australia he

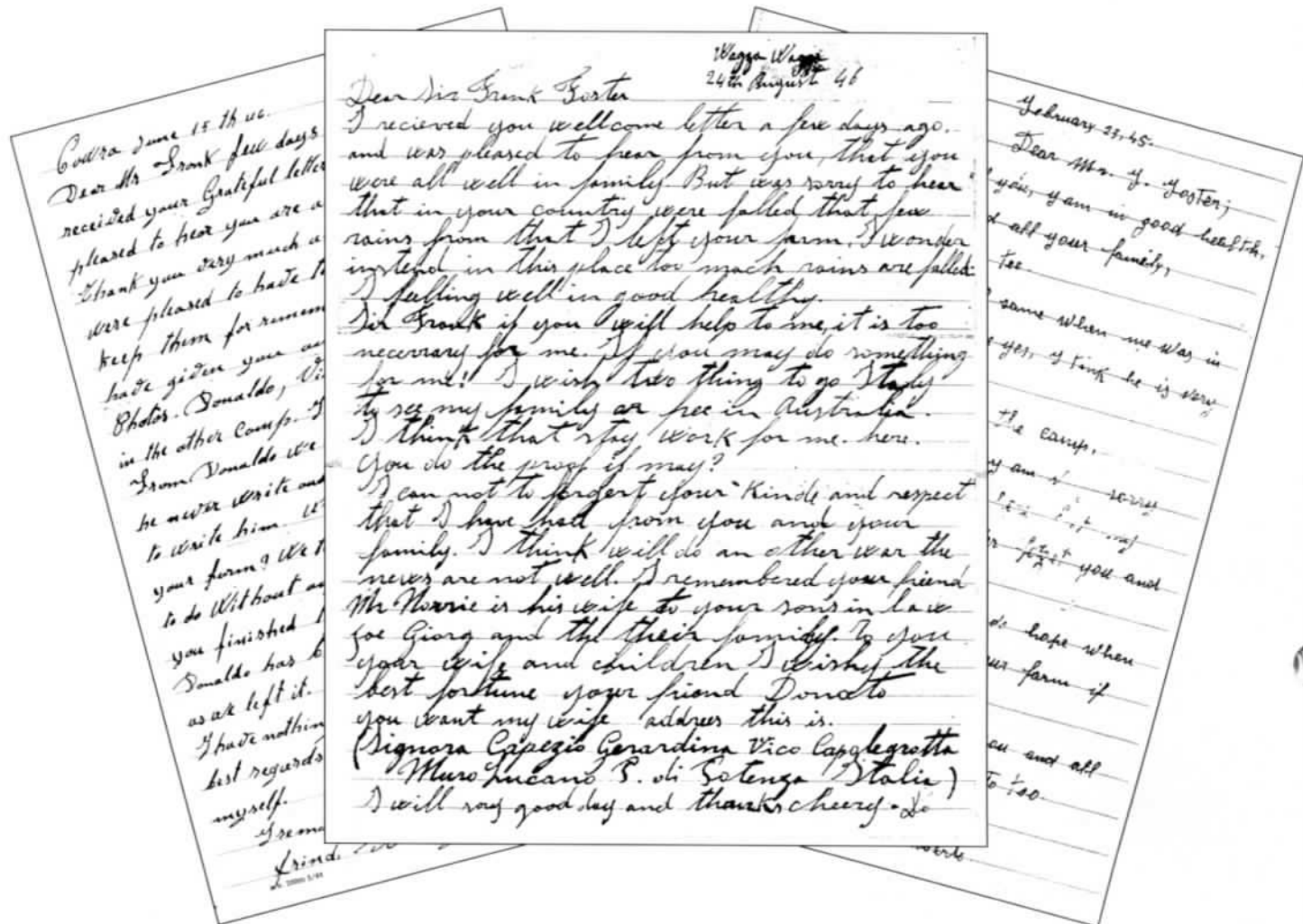
could not take care of his family.²⁴ A month later Donato was still in Wagga Wagga, and thanked Frank for his recent letter. However, he 'was sorry to hear that in your country ... few rains' had fallen, and went on to say that 'too much rains' had fallen where he was now located. Donato proceeded to then ask for a favour: while he had two wishes, the first was to return to Italy to see his family, but his main desire was to remain in Australia. Could Frank help in this respect by providing 'the proof' or arguments for his case to the authorities?²⁵ What the Fosters made of this request is not known, but previous dealings with authorities must have established that such requests were pointless.



Frank Foster (left) poses with his employee POW Don Capezio (right) and a group of school children near Gunnedah after the war.

In late November 1946, the Fosters received one last letter from Francesco. He, too, pondered his future back in Italy, explicitly stating that 'perhaps I will not stay long in Italy'. He proceeded to disclose his wish: 'I intend to return here [to Australia] when I have been allowed', and asked that the Fosters continue to write to him in Italy, because 'I will be very interesting [sic] to know Australia's future etc.' The drought at Gunnedah must have persisted, because Francesco, like Donato, sympathised with his former employer's plight, and said he was 'sorry that this year has been very bad ... I wish you no more like this'.²⁶

Frank's well-known liberal attitude towards Italians resulted in a request from another former POW some years later. Vincenzo Giancola had worked as a POW on a property next to the Foster's during the war, and while there became



Letters written by Italian POWs to their former employer Frank Foster.

friends with Francesco. From a mining camp in France, Vincenzo wrote in June 1950 asking if it was possible for Frank to help him gain a permit to work and live in Australia. Francesco had told him to write to Frank, 'as he has an excellent remembrance of his stay at your farm'.²⁷ However, Vincenzo's request could not be honoured, as Frank was already involved with the sponsorship of Donato, his former employee. It was an opportunity for Frank to realize a goal he could not achieve during the war.

Donato Capezio was born in Potenza, in Basilicata in southern Italy. A mason by trade, he was a corporal in the Italian army when captured in western Egypt in December 1940. Before arriving in Australia in April 1944, Donato had to endure over three years in an Indian POW camp. After only two months in Australia, Donato was sent to Gunnedah and was keen to escape the boredom of life behind barbed wire and use his skills. Arriving in Gunnedah, he was placed with the Fosters, and continued to work for Frank until early January 1946.²⁸ While on the properties, Donato used his considerable

building skills to help erect many farm buildings, including silos and underground water tanks.

His enthusiasm and hard work obviously made an impression on Frank, who agreed to sponsor Donato back to Australia in the late 1940s, and provide him with employment. Returning with his son, Donato worked for 18 months for Frank and his son-in-law on the Gunnedah properties. In 1950 Donato's wife and remaining children immigrated to Australia, setting up home in Gunnedah. In the early 1960s, the Capezios moved to Canberra where Donato became a prominent builder with over 30 employees (the Diplomat Hotel was one of Don's projects). As the years passed, Don also helped other members of his family immigrate to Australia. Members of the Foster family were 'treated like royalty' on visits to Canberra, and on Frank's death in 1976, the Capezio family chartered a private plane to attend his funeral as 'a measure of their respect for him and also of their success in this country'.²⁹ Although Don has since passed on, family members still live in Gunnedah and Canberra – enduring

symbols of the remarkable relationship between an Australian and his supposed enemy.

This series of incidents and correspondence between this Gunnedah farmer and his former employees should not be viewed in isolation. Many other Australians sponsored the immigration of former Italian prisoner employees after the war. The high incidence of former employers becoming benefactors suggests special relationships existed on many farms between prisoners and their 'hosts'. However, few farmers could claim to have spoken out publicly in the manner Frank Foster did in 1945. Fewer still paid the high price of censure and condemnation from fellow Australians which the Fosters endured. Frank's actions during the war, defending and supporting his Italian POWs, defied the standard thinking of the day. By sponsoring a former POW after the war, Frank was prepared to support his words with actions. While Frank's descendants indicate he was no saint, his accomplishments and beliefs in his Italian workmates as friends and potential citizens cannot be underestimated in the establishment of a multicultural Australia. Such actions surely mark him as an exceptional person who fought wartime prejudice and who was prepared to speak his mind. Many Australians are richer for his determination that labels and prejudice can be defied and overcome despite widespread opposition.

NOTES

¹ Mrs A.Finlay: Letter, 10 February 1998; *The Land*, 30 January 1942, p.3.

² *ibid*

³ The plan was given approval by the Australian War Cabinet on 6 April 1943: National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA) Melbourne, Series MP742/1 Item 255/21/33: 'War Cabinet Minute' 6 April 1943. The plan was based on a similar scheme operating in Britain. However, unlike this plan, the Australian government was not going to use POWs in factories and other industrial locations. The scarcity of rural labourers was viewed as critical and the prisoners were only to be used in rural industries.

⁴ NAA Melbourne, Series MP24/1/2 Item WOB 14 MD180A: 'Prisoners of War' file. Prisoners could be located on farms within a 60 kilometre radius of the town. PWCC staff were obliged to visit each farm on a regular basis. An interpreter (with the rank of Sergeant) accompanied each visit, checking on the prisoners and investigating any complaints from either the employers or the Italians. While the Gunnedah PWCC was allocated 100 POWs, this number was never filled. At its peak, the district had about 75 Italian POWs.

⁵ Pay rates for the POWs were determined by the

Geneva Convention. However, the rate of £1 per week per prisoners was well under the standard labourer's pay of approximately £4-£5 per week. The prisoners received 1/3d each day for a 5-6 day week, the remaining amount paying for administrative costs.

- ⁶ Mrs A.Finlay: Letter, 10 February 1998.
- ⁷ NAA Sydney, Series SP191/1, Item 24989 Part B: 'Review Activities POW Labour' 4 October 1944.
- ⁸ Glen Innes and District Historical Society, 'Notice to Employers of Prisoners of War', June 1944. The Notice outlined board and lodging conditions, rates of pay, hours of work and numerous security conditions.
- ⁹ It was regular for some publications to print articles that derided and ridiculed Italians. *Smith's Weekly* was perhaps the most infamous newspaper in this category — Italians were always referred to as 'wogs', 'dagos' or 'Luigi'. For the duration of the labour scheme, *Smith's* was its most vocal critic, often publishing wildly inaccurate rumours associated with the Italian POWs.
- ¹⁰ NAA Sydney, Series SP459/1, Item 489/3/3904: Letter, 12 February 1945.
- ¹¹ NAA Sydney, Series SP459/1, Item 489/3/3904: Letters, 17 February 1945; 22 February 1945; 2 March 1945.
- ¹² *Northern Daily Leader*, 17 March 1945, p.3.
- ¹³ D.Connell, *The War at Home 1939 Australia 1949*, ABC Enterprises, Sydney, 1988, p.105. The *Leader's* editorial states the offending words were written in a letter to a Sydney newspaper. An extensive search of various newspapers has failed to find the article.
- ¹⁴ Mrs A.Finlay: Letter, 10 February 1998.
- ¹⁵ Mr B.Forrest: Letter, 31 January 1998.
- ¹⁶ Mr B.Forrest: *ibid*; Pat Studdy-Clift, *Only Our Gloves On*, Courier Productions, Narrabri, 1981, p.86.
- ¹⁷ *Northern Daily Leader*, 19 March 1945, p.2.
- ¹⁸ *Glen Innes Examiner*, 22 March 1945, p.4. A total of 16 letters were sent to the *Examiner* over four weeks in February-March 1945 in a general debate over the use of POWs. Most local newspapers throughout the country printed letters for and against the Italians while they were located in rural districts. Correspondents ranged from housewives, former servicemen, union members to employers of the POWs. Readers were usually divided evenly over the merits of using the POWs, although the debates often descended to personal attacks and racist comments. Meanwhile, other readers suggested alternative jobs the prisoners could undertake rather than farmwork.
- ¹⁹ Studdy-Clift, *op.cit.*, p.86.
- ²⁰ Letter, 23 February 1945 (courtesy Mrs A.Finlay).
- ²¹ NAA Sydney, Series SP1714/1, Item N38319 Part 4: Letter, 4 September 1946.
- ²² Letter, 1 May 1946 (courtesy Mrs A.Finlay).
- ²³ Letter, 15 June 1946 (courtesy Mrs A.Finlay).
- ²⁴ Letter, 27 July 1946 (courtesy Mrs A.Finlay).
- ²⁵ Letter, 24 August 1946 (courtesy Mrs A.Finlay).
- ²⁶ Letter, 24 November 1946 (courtesy Mrs A.Finlay).
- ²⁷ Letter, 28 June 1950 (courtesy Mrs A.Finlay).
- ²⁸ NAA Melbourne, Series MP1103/1, Vol.89: 'Service and Casualty Form' Donato Capezio.
- ²⁹ Mrs A.Finlay: Letter, 10 February 1998.