

ITALIAN PRISONERS OF WAR IN GIPPSLAND

by Philippa Watt and Elizabeth Brooks

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The Society also holds material relating to Italian Prisoners of War.



A group of Italian prisoners of war with a local priest at Yarram (Courtesy Mr. D. Moore)

In August 1943, the Director General of Manpower received an average of 275 letters per day from farmers in the Gippsland district. These letters, according to the journalist reporting for the *Leongatha Great Southern Star*, requested the release of soldiers who had previously worked as farm hands, to help farmers maintain production levels - labour was desperately scarce. Melbourne's fuel supplies were also threatened due to labour shortages, since firewood could not be harvested in sufficient quantities to satisfy the city's needs. Contrasting the plight of farmers desperate for labourers with the image of thousands of prisoners of war idling their time away in various Victorian camps, the journalist proceeded to pose the question: "Why should they be behind bars getting fat and Australians sweating with work?"¹

In fact, months earlier in May, the War Cabinet had approved a scheme which utilised the labour of Italian Prisoners of War, but directed that no publicity be given to the scheme in its infant stages.² The scheme was innovative and well planned, satisfying Geneva Convention guidelines

on the treatment of prisoners and minimising both the expenses incurred by the army and their manpower output while simultaneously maximising the number of farmers and other employers able to access it. Initially prisoners could be employed on private farms without military guard. Employers were to pay the army one pound per week per prisoner with the prisoner being accredited fifteen shillings of this sum. Within twelve months the scheme was adapted to allow the State Forests Commission to employ larger groups of prisoners (50-200) to carry out essential forestry work.

Also, at this time, there were other labourers used, such as internees, and members of the Civil Construction Corps.

The March 1943 plan made provision for the employment of one to three prisoners on farms without guards. Bi-weekly inspections were to be carried out by Control Centre personnel. The army considered German and Japanese prisoners to be an unacceptable security risk to work in this manner, primarily because they still had an

active interest in the outcome of the war. It was only the Italian POWs, 'excluding ardent Fascists and the few non-cooperative and lazy types', who were allowed to participate.³

In promoting the scheme, the army claimed that among the Italians were:

*skilled and partially skilled tradesmen whose services can be especially valuable on Australian farms. After all [they explained] many Italian prisoners of war are of the same type of Italians who migrated to Australia before the war and who have shown a marked capacity for hard work ... His attitude towards Australians is by no means unfriendly. It appears that the Italian harbours no grudge or has no feeling of hatred for us as a race.*⁴

Like the prisoners, employers were also screened to determine their suitability for the scheme, and terms of employment were strict. 'The hectoring bullying type of employer' was considered a potential source of trouble⁵ and could have his labour withdrawn, since an unhappy prisoner was more likely to attempt an escape. Prisoners were to be handled firmly but with humanity and understanding.⁶ The scheme was not compulsory; only those who volunteered could be billeted out and there were various means by which a prisoner could effect a transfer if he found his environment not to his liking. Compared to the drudgery and boredom of the camps, many considered farm labouring preferable, especially as it offered the chance to acquire new skills and earn some money.

Official correspondence concerning the prisoner labour scheme reflects the army's remarkable determination to ensure its success. A small amount of publicity was allowed as the army did not want public hysteria caused by ignorance to jeopardise the operation. Each employer was thoroughly briefed as to the ethnic personality of his new farm hand, how to treat him, told of the restrictions placed on his movements and activities and issued with an English/Italian phrase book. The Army explained:

The Italian POW is a curious mixture, in that he can be made to give of excellent work if certain points are observed:

- 1. He cannot be driven, but can be led.*
- 2. Mentally is childlike; it is possible to gain his confidence by fairness and firmness.*

3. Great care is to be exercised from the disciplinary point of view, for he can become sly and objectionable if badly handled.

*Italian POW must be well fed, not necessarily on the Australian ration. He can do with very little meat, but prefers more softer types of food, such as bread, spaghetti, macaroni, soups and vegetables*⁷

Employers were assured that their decision to employ prisoner labour was justifiable to the public eye - Australian and British captives were being put to work similarly overseas.⁸ They should do everything possible to maintain the level of food supply to the city and the troops.

At the height of its operations the Control Centre of Leongatha coordinated the work of approximately 280 prisoners,⁹ yet little dissatisfaction or even comment about the scheme was voiced through the local newspaper. In the correspondence column of the Leongatha *Great Southern Star*, 10 December 1943, a farmer wrote:

*I am convinced that the great majority of people in South Gippsland would not have an Italian POW near their farm let alone sitting at their table or around their fireside. All members of my family have long since voluntarily joined the fighting forces, but if any official suggested that I should fill their place with Italian prisoners then I would consider that 'common decency' demanded that I should emphatically say 'No Thanks' - Bellambi*¹⁰

Bellambi was wrong. The 1944 Control Centre report for Leongatha recorded that 194 farmers in the region employed a total of 258 prisoners.¹¹ In reply to Bellambi, "Progress" wrote that he was 'wondering if by any chance the writer had meant to sign his name 'Boloney'.' 'Progress' believed that the Italians were not that bad (it was their leader who was mad) and that he employed Italian prisoners in order to contribute to the war effort:

*While prisoners are behind barbed wires, it costs our country valuable sums of money ... the majority of people in South Gippsland know that by employing prisoners they are getting the best out of the land to produce cheese and butter for Britain.*¹²

The *Argus* reported that POWs were a valuable addition to the manpower resources of the Commonwealth. 'Farmers were pleased with the work of the Italians particularly with the help they had given during the Victorian bushfires'.¹³

Though newspapers alone are not a reliable indicator, approval does appear to have been widespread. The Director General of Security reported:

*... public opinion in the district, particularly amongst the more reputable citizens and farmers, is overwhelmingly in favour of the scheme. There is however a small body of opinion which is opposed to it, the basis of their opposition being usually a personal prejudice against Italians. The opposition is however, unorganised and negligible in extent.*¹⁴

It would appear that on farms in many cases prisoners were incorporated into the small farming communities reasonably smoothly. Bonds in some cases became quite strong, as the following case study suggests:

Sam Puccio and the Moore Family

Sam (Salvatore) Puccio was an Italian prisoner of war who, after World War II, returned to the community where he had been assigned as a prisoner-labourer. He was captured in Tobruk, and sent via Egypt to Australia, arriving in August 1941. After time spent in Cowra, his group was transferred to Murchison, where he established himself as a market gardener. In 1943 Sam Puccio was offered the chance to participate in the scheme of assigning POWs to Victorian farmers, and accepted readily, mostly to pass the time, and to 'get out of camp'.

His first assignment was on a farm near Colac, where he was expected to work from dawn to dusk clearing ferns in the rain, and after some months of complaining about the conditions, he and his fellow prisoners managed to convince their interpreter/inspector that there was truly a problem. They did this by going on strike, an action which achieved its purpose and had them returned to Murchison in disgrace. On their return, they were offered the chance to try again, and were sent to Tooloonook, a property near Yarram belonging to the Moore family. Their conditions were 'very good', and the Moores became friends as well as employers. The belief was 'If you do right, they do right by you', and Puccio and his fellow prisoners of war must have

done right by the Moores, because they not only fed them, but arranged for them to receive canned fruit, which made a very strong impression on the prisoners.

Their wages were low and paid with a prisoner 'scrip', as were the prisoners in the camps, but the Moores encouraged the prisoners to socialise with some of the eighty or ninety prisoners in the area, and treated them in general more as hired hands than as prisoners. Once, when the prisoners at Tooloonook were given a case of wine, and another visiting prisoner drank too much of it, Des Moore drove him home so his boss wouldn't find out and get angry.

They worked for about eight hours per day at all types of tasks - stock work, building, clearing, repairs - and had Sundays off, for Mass and relaxation. Since the Moores were also Roman Catholic, the POWs often went to Mass with the family, but sometimes were permitted to drive the horse-drawn jinker into town alone. As a rule, though, they were not permitted to go into town, nor more than three miles from the edges of the property, without their employer. The only contact they had with the Australian government was the 'supply truck', staffed by army personnel (including an interpreter), which brought tobacco, sweets and other goods around once a fortnight for the prisoners to buy, and which took away with it the reports of the prisoners' (and the employers') conduct.

Des Moore was a young adult during the war, and with his father and an orphan boy assigned to them by the Department of Children's Welfare, was attempting to run the (then) 4,000 acre property at Tooloonook. He had employed immigrant Greek labour, but when the war began, these labourers headed for town, and the money to be made in munitions plants. As Des Moore said:

... it got to the stage where we just couldn't carry on, and someone said to me, 'Oh, why don't you get a prisoner of war?' and I said 'I would if I knew where to get 'em' and I went and asked somebody and they said 'Put your name down ... how many would you like?' ... I just ... hope these blokes won't murder me in me bed or anything' ... 'Oh, no, but let us know if they do.'

He found the prisoners who worked for him to be 'real gentlemen', and was particularly impressed with Sam Puccio, whom he would send alone to the far edges of the property to move stock.

'I could say to Sam what needed to be done and he'd go and do it. The dogs worked for him, and the horses, and he shut gates after him.'

Des Moore considered that the labour of the prisoners saved his property from bankruptcy, and was grateful to them. And the prisoners sent to him must have been extremely grateful to have him as their employer. He was interested in them, even taking the trouble to learn some of their language, housed and fed them as if they were normal employees, in an annexe to the main house, and even wrote letters to their families to help circumvent the censors. A letter from a prisoner could take months to reach home, but a letter written by an Australian citizen took half the time to reach Italy. The Moores received one letter in response which said in part:

*... we are glad to know that our son lives and is well in your farm ... this letter you gave to a mother who for six years don't see her son, tranquillity and hope. We are glad to know Enzo is with you, and your family, all these months, while we believed him a prisoner in a camp with little health ... we shall remember you in our prayers to the Good Lord.*¹⁵

He allowed the prisoners a great deal of freedom, and he and his father even gave them permission to try some market gardening. Sam Puccio and the others planted a crop of potatoes, hoping to be able to sell them at a profit, which they would then have divided with the Moores. Unfortunately, the market dropped and they all ate potatoes for months, but the incident shows the level of mutual respect which flourished. When Des Moore's mother died, the prisoners on the property insisted on being the pallbearers, and when his father died six months after, Des Moore was given a great deal of comfort by their presence.

Des Moore remembers more about the official routine than Sam Puccio, and recalled the monthly official visits from the local commandant, Kenneth Brown. Captain Brown was stationed in Yarram, and required only verbal assurances from the farmers on the prisoner labour, and from the prisoners through an interpreter. However, he or one of his drivers made far more regular, unofficial visits to Tooloonook, bringing flowers to Mr. Moore's gravely ill mother. They felt that he was often too threatening to the prisoners, telling them if they didn't behave he would assign them 'back of Foster, right up close to God'. Captain Brown made it clear that he considered the Moores too lenient for letting the prisoners go to church so

often, since those at Tooloonook would often attend several times a week. Even Des Moore admitted that often they went more for the companionship than the religion.

After World War II, Des Moore sponsored the return to Australia of Sam Puccio and his family, and of Tony Alliberti, who had also been a POW at Tooloorook, and of many, many others. This comment from a letter in 1948 in which Sam indicated that he would like to come back summed up the relationship between gaoler and prisoner:

*Am I and family willing to sail to Australia? ... If you really ... want me to return, put into my hands the general means ... [I want] to reach Tooloonook. ... and enjoy your kind friendship.*¹⁶

NOTES

1. *Great Southern Star* 13 August 1943, p.6.
2. Alan Fitzgerald, *Italian Farming Soldiers*, Melbourne University Press, 1981, p.33.
3. Department of the Army, 'Procedure for the employment of P.W. without guards' n.d. p.10. Aust. Archives file MP 742/1 255/13/154.
4. *ibid.*, pp.10-11.
5. *ibid.*, pp.10 pt 4.
6. War Cabinet Agendum 'Transfer of POW from India for employment in Australia' 21 March 1943.
7. Department of the Army, *op cit.*, pp.10-11.
8. The Army had a comprehensive list detailing the type of work Allied prisoners were employed to perform. AA file MP 742/1 255/13/109.
9. Memo contained in AA file MP 742/1 255/30/4 'Employment of POW without guards-Leongatha', dated 9 February 1945, requesting a decrease in the C.C. allocation of prisoners, as administration was too difficult.
10. *Great Southern Star*, 10 December 1943.
11. Inspection report on Prisoner of War Control Centre (PWCC) V4 Leongatha, Vic, 1 March 1944. AA file MP 742/1 255/30/4.
12. *Great Southern Star*, 17 December 1943.
13. *Argus*, 18 April 1944.
14. Director of General Security's Report on Employment P.W. without guards in Gippsland district, 23 December 1943.
15. Letter from Maria Pinchonetti to Des Moore, undated. Enzo Pinchonetti was the cook for the Moores, assigned when Des Moore's mother was dying.
16. The case study information comes from an interview conducted with Sam Puccio at the Yarram and District Hospital on 21 April 1991. Sam's son Charlie was also present to assist with translation. The interview with Des Moore was conducted on the property Tooloonook, near Yaram, on 5 May 1991.