

'Strangers in a strange land': A Rural Community's Experience With Italian Prisoners of War

By John Hall

This article is an extract from John Hall's PhD research on Italian POWs in the Inverell area of northern NSW. He has interviewed over 40 people and received written submissions from a similar number as well as conducting extensive research in northern NSW papers. At present, with the aid of an Australian War Memorial grant, he is conducting archival research in Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne. In early 1999, thanks to a University of New England scholarship, he will travel to Italy to conduct further interviews and archival research.

In July 1944, a meeting of the local branch of the Returned Soldiers', Sailors' and Airmen's Imperial League (RSSAIL) was held in Inverell, on the Northern Tablelands of New South Wales. There were no stirring speeches thundered out by the then Prime Minister, John Curtin, nor by any high ranking military leader. The meeting would most likely have been held in a nondescript room, the kettle boiling, tea and coffee ready to be consumed with a selection of biscuits and cakes. Nonetheless, the issues discussed at that meeting are representative of the many themes and arguments which swirled through a number of rural centres in the latter half of the Second World War. Those years witnessed Australians on the home front coming face to face with enemy soldiers, in the form of Italian Prisoners of War (POWs) who worked without guards on hundreds of farms and properties. Their presence, although initiated by the Commonwealth Government and supported by many farmers who employed them, caused debate on many levels. While the prisoners set about coping with the myriad of farm duties, their presence within these communities was both reviled and applauded.

With a wartime population estimated to be almost 6,200, Inverell slumbered as it always had, nestled between the Great Dividing Range and the western plains.¹ However, Inverell could claim something which many other rural towns could not — it was a centre for the distribution of Italian POWs for farms in the surrounding district. Despite the Government's calming reassurances concerning the prisoners, their place in the manpower scheme, and their suitability to help restore the depleted rural labour force, the citizens of Inverell were not averse to spreading rumours and gossip about the Italians. Thus the RSSAIL meeting on that cold winter's night.



A future prisoner. A confident looking Orfeo Campagner in Libya shortly after disembarking. Despite appearances, most Italian troops were poorly equipped and lacked even the most basic training. Orfeo remembers he was given a uniform, then immediately 'put ... on the boat ... to Libya!' Photo courtesy Orfeo Campagner.

The guest speaker for the gathering was Captain Gibbs, the officer in charge of the Inverell Prisoner of War Control Centre (PWCC) No.19. Captain Gibbs was new to the town, having only arrived the previous month.² His charges, the Italian prisoners, were also newcomers to the town, arriving in mid April 1944. The initial batch were described as 'a fine, alert, decent looking lot' by the Inverell Times, which then appealed to Inverell's citizens to 'make them welcome, as they have suffered much and are actually strangers in a

strange land to whom sympathy should be extended.³ But the plea had fallen on deaf ears.

'As an officer of the military forces,' Captain Gibbs told the assembled members, 'you know it is my duty, and it is your duty to stop false rumours.' Gibbs had identified that the branch was a focal point for the rumours, which had obviously spread throughout the town and district. He began by refuting suggestions that the prisoners would be allowed to remain in Australia after the war, causing the lowering of Australian working conditions. 'Nonsense is the answer to that!' he reprimanded those present, informing his audience that all POWs would be repatriated once the war was finished. Next he tackled the issue of the wages paid to the prisoners. Accusations abounded that the prisoners' wages (paid by farmers to the Government at the rate of one pound per week per prisoner) were a damning indictment that the Commonwealth was using the POWs to smash union award rates of pay and conditions. While Captain Gibbs did not deny the pay was low, he countered by arguing that hidden costs, paid by the farmer, inflated the cost of employing the prisoners. He further reiterated that manpower was at a premium, and the POWs 'are here purely as a temporary measure.' Gibbs, while touting the standard official attitude, injected his own opinions into his speech, adding, 'we can't use these coves to fight for us — they are not worth a bumper as fighters, you know that.' His opinions surfaced again when he said that most of the prisoners believed they would be allowed to stay in Australia. 'Let them have that opinion,' he proclaimed, 'but when the time comes they will be whipped out.'⁴

Gibbs then confronted the most contentious issue surrounding the Italians — the apparent lax attitude from both employer and prisoner towards the rules and regulations which governed the lives of the Italians. RSSAIL branches throughout the state, including Inverell, had complained long and loud that the Italians were enjoying freedoms to which they were not entitled, especially in light of the treatment of Australian POWs in Axis hands. Gibbs remarked that the prisoners were not allowed to 'wander through the town', nor were they permitted to attend any social functions, such as dances, parties or the pictures. Any breaches of the rules, he stated, should be reported immediately. Those at the meeting appeared to be placated by the officer's

assurances, and the general feeling of all present was made evident in the final words of the article: 'All were agreed that they did not want them [Italians] in Australia after the war'.⁵ As time progressed, however, what would have shocked Gibbs and his audience as to the exact nature surrounding some experiences of POWs in the Inverell district, together with the feelings of those who employed the Italians.

From the declaration of war by Italy against Britain and her allies in June 1940, attitudes of many Australians toward Italians often bordered on xenophobic. Inverell was no different. For example, in the first months of 1942 the *Inverell Times* reported a series of meetings which constantly called for the internment of the many Italians who owned and worked tobacco farms to the north of Inverell up to the Queensland border. The claims aired at these gatherings were reckless and unsubstantiated: Italians had refused to help fight recent bushfires and therefore 'could not be classed as good Australians'; and five thousand rifles, allegedly hidden in the district by Italian fifth columnists, had supposedly been unearthed.⁶ In May 1942 the *Inverell Times*, like so many other newspapers of the day, added to this atmosphere by reprinting a poem titled 'The Dago Man', part of which read:

When I get back to Queensland
I'll grow 'tobac' perhaps,
And I'll stay and make the money
While the Aussies fight the Japs,
And, if they ask for more money
I'll say, 'No unnerstan'.
And they won't take it from me then
'Cause I'm a Dago man.⁷

It was into this charged atmosphere that the POWs entered. The Inverell PWCC was established in March 1944 with a quota of 100 prisoners for the surrounding district.⁸ Before the arrival of the first prisoners in April, a meeting of prospective employers was told the prisoners 'were scrupulously clean ... all had some experience of rural work and practically all had a trade as well.'⁹ Such comments reassured farmers that the men were suitable for employment, although many were to face the reality that their prisoners spoke little or no English, were anything but farm workers, required constant supervision initially, with some even openly antagonistic towards the farmer and working in general.

If the farmers and their families were relying on the Government and Army to provide them with

sound advice and background on the prisoners, they were to be disappointed. To guide the employers, the Army issued a set of bewildering instructions, which read in part:

The Italian prisoner of war 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 lead.
2. Mentality is childlike; it is possible to gain his confidence by fairness and firmness.
3. Great care must be exercised from a disciplinary point of view for he can become sly and objectionable if badly handled.

... It is necessary that he be well and warmly clad, both in summer and winter.

... It appears that the Italian harbours no grudge or has no feeling of hatred for us as a race.

... The average Italian is keen on sport and likes nothing better than to go rabbiting (not with a gun).¹⁰

While they are grossly simplistic, patronising and full of misapprehensions, historian Gianfranco Cresciani believes they were a product of the era: 'One would assume that these idiotic generalisations were drafted to tranquillise simple people who had no experience in meeting foreigners, let alone enemy prisoners of war'.¹¹ As well, a Notice outlining the numerous rules and regulations was also handed to each employer. The Notice detailed working conditions, pay rates, living conditions and the like. Security matters were extensively outlined — prisoners could not attend social functions, they were always required to wear their magenta uniforms, they were not allowed into towns, nor were they encouraged to meet with other POWs. The final point was most clear: 'P.W. must not fraternise with members of the public — particularly with women.' While the Italians were allowed to read newspapers and listen to wireless broadcasts, they could not 'under any circumstances, be allowed to have alcoholic liquor in their possession'.¹² However, prisoners in the Inverell district, like many of their compatriots elsewhere, enjoyed a life which was not constrained by mere written words.

A former prisoner from the Inverell district, Alec Luciani, remembers his times as a prisoner with fondness, although much of it was in direct contravention of the rules. Many times he was given a gun, and allowed to go shooting for rabbits and birds, sometimes accompanied by the farmers' children. Did he and his employer know it was



POWs at a swimming hole. 'Alf', a POW on 'Nordale' near Inverell strikes a Tarzan-like pose while fellow prisoners laze in the background. Alf, although popular with the family, was to clash with the other prisoners and was reluctantly returned to camp. Photo courtesy Mrs Laurel McCosker.

against the rules? 'Oh yeah! ... but who was going to see us? And I was not to shoot the kids,' he reasoned, 'because sometimes ... well I used to look after them, you know, because I was the oldest.' Alec also recalled going into Inverell where he and other prisoners regularly wandered about town, sometimes buying flagons of wine (purchased with money they had earned from rabbiting or had been given by their employers) which they slipped beneath their coats. As for fraternising with women: 'Some [prisoners] they had a girlfriend, some they didn't'.¹³ Meanwhile, he and a fellow prisoner, Orfeo Campagner, were given a horse and sulky on one property and allowed to visit other prisoners or attend church by themselves. Orfeo recalls on another Inverell property where he worked that he and another prisoner helped construct a tennis court, which was used by the family, visitors and other prisoners after church each Sunday.¹⁴

Yet, as one family member recalled, trust between the farmer and his prisoner(s) 'certainly wasn't an instantaneous thing', but was earned over a period of time — on this particular farm near Inverell, the farmer lent one of his prisoners some civilian clothes so that he could visit a nearby female 'friend'.¹⁵ Fraternisation with fellow prisoners and the public (especially women) was possibly the most difficult rule to enforce, because often the prisoners were housed well away from the homestead, and night offered convenient protection for all manner of activities, if the Italians so wished.

However, had these prisoners been caught transgressing the rules, they would have been withdrawn from the farm and received detention back in camp at Cowra, while the farmer would have lost his prisoner labour. At other PWCCs, prisoners were apprehended attending dances and pictures, were seen being served and drinking in hotels, and caught at civilian's homes in borrowed civilian clothing. Each week, the army recorded numbers sent back to Cowra and the reasons. While many were on medical grounds, others were for disciplinary reasons. For example, one Inverell POW was returned for disobeying an order to work. Despite receiving the same meals as his employer's family, and being given morning and afternoon teas (as well as a thermos of coffee to drink when he woke up, a request he told the local priest to pass onto his employer), the prisoner still complained about his living conditions. His complaint cost him 28 days in detention.¹⁶ Another prisoner was more honest about his refusal to work on an Inverell farm, saying 'he had worked [so] well on farms he wanted to go back to Camp at Cowra for a holiday.' He was rewarded with a seven day holiday in detention — back at Cowra!¹⁷

Despite some problems on farms, the majority remember the Italians with affection. — 'We loved them ... they were the loveliest young men ... my brother and I just thought they were part of our family,' declared one member of a family who employed three prisoners near Inverell. The prisoners were so attached to this family that when this lady (then a school child) left for boarding school, 'they cried and so did I'.¹⁸

Despite fears to the contrary, the farmers soon realised that any thoughts of escape by the Italians were non-existent. The wife of one farmer remembers their prisoners stayed at home while they went to Church. 'Where would they go?' she asked, and besides, they 'didn't want to escape. They were very happy to be safe and warm and part of an Australian family'.¹⁹ For others, being 'part of the family' meant participating in normal family activities. The daughter of one farmer recounted when her father went to the owner of the local movie theatre at Delungra, near Inverell, and asked if his prisoners could attend. Upon receiving an affirmative reply (even though it was clearly not the responsibility of the owner to say yes), the father 'took them in when the lights went out', and retrieved

them before lights came back up. However, it was a double screening and the second movie was a comedy. In this feature, Laurel McCosker recalled 'they were making a terrible noise laughing. They were so excited, Dad had to go to them and quieten them ... everybody knew they were there but nobody cared'. While admitting the POWs were 'treated better than they should have been,' Mrs McCosker remembers them as 'just young men, lonely, away from home'.²⁰



A happy wartime picture. A group of female visitors to 'Springfield' near Inverell are flanked by two prisoners. Fraternisation of any description, even of this innocent nature, was strictly forbidden. Some POWs found with similar photographs were often placed in detention back in camp. Photo courtesy Mrs Rita Pollock.

These sentiments were echoed by many others, including Edward Fuller. The prisoners on their farm outside Inverell 'were part of the family', and there was no hesitation in allowing the POWs to eat with them at the family table. When the time came for the prisoners to return to camp in late 1945, one clung to his father, quite distraught, and cried: 'I will come back! I will come back! As soon as I can, I will come back!' However, this particular prisoner did not come back, although he was to meet up with the Fullers in Italy when they visited him in 1965.²¹ Clearly, there were fond feelings for the prisoners within many families, which in turn were reciprocated by the Italians. However, the Inverell district did witness a degree of orchestrated opposition to the Italians.

Apart from RSSAIL antagonism, the local branch of the Australian Workers' Union (AWU) objected to the use of prisoner labour, asserting that the scheme was an attempt to undermine award wages and conditions for Australian workers,

and further, that it displaced Australian workers — charges rejected by the Government, and continually denied by Army officials, as seen by Captain Gibbs's comments earlier. The Inverell AWU branch, following other district branches, passed motions that their members would refuse to shear sheep on properties where prisoners were employed, and threatened bans on properties where the Italians continued to be employed.²² The threats transformed into actual bans on two district properties in January 1945, resulting in the prisoners on one of the farms (where Alec Luciani and Orfeo Campagner were working with sheep) being returned and allocated to other farms in the area. The threat of bans was a potential death knell for the scheme, and forced the authorities and farmers to avoid confrontation with the union. Farmers were advised not to use prisoner labour for any work associated with sheep or shearing. As a result, many farmers' prisoners 'disappeared' for a few days while shearers worked on the properties, employed at locations well away from the unionists. Sometimes prisoners were even sent to a neighbour's property if the shearing lasted for more than a week.²³

The local community was certainly aware of the struggle between the farmers and the AWU, as reflected by letters to the editor of the *Inverell Times*. 'For Australia', a highly critical opponent of the Inverell AWU branch, stated 'the lack of patriotism on the part of the AWU is extraordinary,' considering the union's actions when labour was short was tantamount to sedition, because the war effort by farmers was being hindered.²⁴ In reply, 'Action Counts' countered by asserting that the AWU was far from unpatriotic, and shearers had completed all the shearing required of them, a feat achieved with one third less men.²⁵ Another letter supporting the AWU came from 'Ex-AIF', who believed the POWs should work, but in large groups in other industries. His concluding comment hinted that labour conditions were not the only consideration in the matter: 'our members are good Australians, and like myself, cannot work in harmony side by side with our past enemy as cheap labour'.²⁶ Another critic 'For Australia' believed that 'the work most of these Italian POWs are doing could have been done years before the war when there were thousands of men begging for work'.²⁷ Probably the writer was referring to the Depression, but his logic was flawed. Many said their farms were still

struggling in the wake of the Depression, a point not lost on the Commonwealth Government's Rural Reconstruction Commission, whose first report in 1943 painted a bleak picture of rural industries:

As supplies of farm necessities and labour became scarce the task of maintaining farm buildings and equipment became greater and dilapidations increased ... perhaps an apt picture of many farmers in 1943 is that of very tired men worried by ten years of difficulty, perplexed by doubts as to their future, but grimly carrying on with the task of the day²⁸

The attack on the scheme's advocates continued with 'Bush Worker', who wrote in December 1945 that many farmers continued to employ the Italians at a time when 'there are some 30 or 40 rural workers unemployed in the district ... amongst them are returned men with up to five years service overseas'. Further, the writer was supposedly told by one farmer that while experienced Australian labour could be hired, the cheap rates for the POWs meant he could save considerable sums of money. 'The loyalty of some employers of labour,' 'Rural Worker' wrote bitterly, 'is only loyalty to their own pocket'.²⁹ However, for Inverell and most other NSW towns, the controversy was soon to evaporate, since all prisoners were shortly to be withdrawn for future repatriation back to Italy.

Manpower authorities had informed the military in October 1945 of a schedule of closures for all PWCCs in NSW. Beginning in late October, all Centres were to close by the end of the year. The Inverell PWCC, together with 11 others, was scheduled to wind up by December 1945, and by early January 1946, the remaining fifty or so Italian POWs in the Inverell district, including Alec and Orfeo, had been returned to camp in Liverpool in Sydney.³⁰

However, for many prisoners, their stay in camp was to continue for another year before being repatriated back to Italy. Alec and Orfeo, qualified tradesman, together with hundreds of other prisoners, were used in various army quarters on a number of projects (including stacking ammunition, which was clearly against the Geneva Convention).³¹ The eventual return to Italy for many prisoners was marked by depression and anguish — post war Italy was in social, political and economic ruin. Both Alec and Orfeo were eventually contacted by one family, the Kemps at



Life in Liverpool camp, 1946. Orfeo (back row centre) poses with fellow prisoners who formed a soccer team to pass the days, weeks and months before repatriation back to Italy. The boredom saw many prisoners escape from the various camps after the war, security being virtually nonexistent. Most escaped POWs returned voluntarily, or gave themselves up, before the ships sailed from Australian waters.

Photo courtesy Orfeo Campagner

'Gowrie', who once employed them near Inverell, offering to pay for their passage back to Australia. Both agreed, bringing with them their young families. They returned to Inverell, now as trusted workers, with the respect and admiration of those who had met them while they had worn the magenta uniform of an enemy prisoner. Both paid their fares back, and brought more family members to Australia, all working on 'Gowrie'. For about seven years, they continued to work, until leaving for other jobs.

Orfeo, a qualified bricklayer, worked in the Inverell district for a number of tradesmen until he was employed in the Public Works Department, where he worked until his retirement. He still lives in Inverell. Alec was offered a chance to manage a property owned by the Kemps, near Ebor, 150kms southwest of Inverell on the Northern Tableland. He eventually purchased his own property in the area, bought cattle and expanded his property, and today lives in retirement near Coffs Harbour. Both he and Orfeo are still in contact with each other, as well as with family members of those who employed them during the war, including Kemp family members who helped them establish new lives in a country that had once labelled them as the enemy.³²

The story of Italian POWs in rural centres such as Inverell is a complex one, and has had an impact on the social and cultural fabric of Australia. The decision to alleviate the acute

labour shortage in many rural industries by placing Italian POWs on farms brought a contact and a cultural experience of the Old World directly into the homes of rural Australians, many of whom had never previously encountered foreigners. These experiences and encounters provided many with a means of escaping their isolation, and contributed to a breadth of awareness and understanding for both the prisoner and his 'captor'.

The impact of the POWs has resonated down to the present day, which probably would have shocked Captain Gibbs, his RSSAIL audience, and various AWU members. Mutual respect and friendship, qualities which were certainly not envisaged or encouraged by the authorities during the war, sprang up in Inverell on many farms where the prisoners were employed. While those who were opposed to the prisoners continued to be vocal at meetings and in the newspapers, those who employed the Italians in the Inverell area persevered and worked with the POWs for nearly 18 months. While they may have initially been 'strangers in a strange land', they are still fondly remembered in the memories of many as friends and *de-facto* Australians.



A new life. Orfeo proudly poses with wife Cesarina, sons Bruno (back) and Roberto at their home in Delungra, near Inverell in the 1960s.

Photo courtesy Orfeo Campagner.

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Notes

- ¹ NSW Government Bureau of Statistics and Economics, *The Official Year Book of New South Wales No.49 (1941-42 & 1942-43)*, NSW Government Printer, Sydney, 1946, p.52.
- ² *Inverell Times*, 10 July 1944, p.4.
- ³ *Inverell Times*, 12 April 1944, p.3.
- ⁴ *Inverell Times*, 10 July 1944, p.4.
- ⁵ *Inverell Times*, loc.cit.
- ⁶ *Inverell Times*, 23 January 1942, p.6; 4 February 1942, p.4.
- ⁷ *Inverell Times*, 25 May 1942, p.4.
- ⁸ A.Fitzgerald, *The Italian Farming Soldiers*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1981, p.173; Australian Archives Sydney (hereafter AA Syd.), Series SP191/1, Item 24989 Part A, 'POW Control Centres 25.11.44'.
- ⁹ *Inverell Times*, 20 March 1944, p.2.
- ¹⁰ Fitzgerald, op.cit., p.33; G.Cresciani, 'Captivity in Australia: the case of the Italian prisoners of war, 1940-1947', *Studi-Emigrazione / Etudes-Migrations*, Vol. 26, No.34, June 1989, p.207.
- ¹¹ Cresciani, loc.cit.
- ¹² 'Notice to Employers of Prisoners of War', Glen Innes & District Historical Society, World War Two file, n.d.
- ¹³ Mr A.Luciani: Interview on 22 May 1998.
- ¹⁴ Mr O.Campagner: Interview on 7 May 1997.
- ¹⁵ Interview No. I-3, May 1997.
- ¹⁶ AA Syd., Series SP1714/1, Item N45633, 'Intelligence Report No.109, POW Camp Cowra, 29.10.44 to 5.11.44'.
- ¹⁷ AA Syd., ibid., 'Intelligence Report No.123, POW Camp Cowra, 11.2.45 to 18.2.45'. It was not recorded if he was subsequently sent out to work on another farm. Often, prisoners were given a second chance after their detention if it was considered appropriate, and were dispatched to a different PWCC.
- ¹⁸ Mrs L.McCosker: Interview on 10 August 1997.
- ¹⁹ Mrs W.Fuller: Interview on 5 May 1997.
- ²⁰ Mrs L.McCosker: Interview on 10 August 1997.
- ²¹ Mr E.Fuller: Interview on 6 May 1997.
- ²² *Inverell Times*, 20 December 1944, p.6; 22 January 1945, p.2.
- ²³ Interestingly, the Inverell bans were not reported in the *Inverell Times*. One was, however, mentioned in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 January 1945, p.4. In a separate action, a farmer in Gunnedah, another northern NSW centre, had his farm and produce declared black because of comments he wrote in defence of Italian POWs. In part he said: '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': *Northern Daily Leader*, 17 March 1945, p.3. Of further note, a local man, Langley Onus, became the Commanding Officer of the Inverell PWCC during mid 1945, having been transferred from the Tamworth Centre. Unlike one of his predecessors (Gibbs), Onus is remembered as having a fair and respectful attitude towards the Italians.
- ²⁴ *Inverell Times*, 19 January 45, p.3.
- ²⁵ *Inverell Times*, 26 January 45, p.3.
- ²⁶ *Inverell Times*, loc.cit.
- ²⁷ *Inverell Times*, oc.cit.
- ²⁸ Rural Reconstruction Commission, *A General Survey (First Report)*, Commonwealth Government Printer, Canberra, January 1944, p.31.
- ²⁹ *Inverell Times*, 5 December 1945, p.3.
- ³⁰ AA Syd., Series SP459/1, Item 489/3/4451, 'Italian PW - Withdrawal from Rural Industry, 26 October 1946'.
- ³¹ See, for example, AA Syd., Series SP459/1, Item 489/3/5588, 'Distribution of Italian PW Employed at AMF Camps and Installations Without Guards as at 15/7/46'; AA Syd., Series SP459/1, Item 489/3/5680, 'Request for Supplies to HQ Eastern Command, 23/10/46'. Prisoners were also used on other projects which were of little military value, including top dressing sports ovals, preparing new tennis courts and cricket wickets, as well as the maintenance of gardens: AA Syd., Series 459/1, Item 489/3/5588.
- ³² Mr O.Campagner: Interview on 7 May 1997; Mr A.Luciani: Interview on 22 May 1998.