Australian Defence Heritage

The buildings, establishments and sites of our military history that have become part of the national estate

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Fort Queenscliff, Victoria

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The good life
(or ‘Concentration Camp Capers’)

The end of World War I must have been received with trepidation by some inmates of Australian concentration camps. For them the end of hostilities also brought to an end an almost idyllic lifestyle, and for others an end to lucrative business enterprises.

Where else in the world during those four terrible years of death and destruction could enemy aliens and prisoners live such a comfortable life as those fortunate enough to be ensonced in Australian camps?

Where else but in Australia could internees enjoy the comforts of their own private dwellings with flower and vegetable gardens, run their own shops and cafes, work only if they took their fancy, illegally brew their own grog and enjoy orchestral concerts and stage shows almost nightly?

In a word, the answer is: Nowhere.

Perhaps Australia’s isolation as an island continent in the southern hemisphere, far removed from the internees’ homelands, contributed to the relaxed atmosphere of the camps. Perhaps the internees realised that even if they escaped they could never get back to their homelands. Whatever the reason, the Australian policy of minimum discipline appears to have worked remarkably well.

Of course, many of the internees had spent years in Australia and were hard-working citizens; their alien status had been forced upon them by the war.

Following the outbreak of World War I, enemy aliens, particularly men of German, Austrian and Turkish nationality, were taken into custody all over Australia and the Army was charged with the responsibility of guarding them.

On 7 March, 1913, the Commonwealth Gazette had announced that approximately 80,000 acres of land had been set aside in the parishes of Holsworthy and Eckersley for an Army training area and artillery range. It was in bushland and open country south of Liverpool and about 15 miles south-west of Sydney. In 1914, a few acres of this land at Holsworthy was enclosed by a wire fence and became the headquarters for Australia’s concentration camps.
Smaller camps were established at Berrima to the south west, at Bourke in the central north of New South Wales and at Trial Bay near the township of Jerseyville on the north coast.

Holsworthy camp housed nearly 6000 internees, mostly German and Austrian civilians; however, there were some prisoners of war, including many of the survivors of the German cruiser *Enden* which was beached at Cocos on 9 November, 1914, following a battering from the cruiser *HMAS Sydney*.

Lieutenant Edmond Samuels was an officer of the guard at Holsworthy and recorded his impressions of life in the concentration camps. Adequate housing, good hygiene, wholesome food, physical fitness and proper recreation facilities for the prisoners were the main concerns of the authorities.

The internees were allowed unlimited correspondence within Australia and overseas and parcels could be sent overseas, registered, insured and dispatched via neutral Switzerland. All costs were borne by the Australian Government. Money orders were sent free of commission.

At Holsworthy (Lieutenant Samuels spelt it ‘Holdsworthy’), wooden barracks were erected, each housing 60 men with a company commander of their own nationality who was responsible for their administration. The roll was called twice daily — in the morning and evening.

Enterprising ‘prisoners’ soon had their ‘concentration’ camp turned into what could better be described as a holiday camp.

Samuels reported: ‘All sorts of shops and buildings are erected by the internees. There are dozens of small cafes, run on continental style where the richer internees are able to buy the best of sweet dishes, sausages and a most varied assortment of cakes made on the premises.

‘There are several theatres where every night shows are held, also open air picture shows, gymnastics halls, massage chambers, hot baths, vapour baths and billiards tables.’

There were also many hobbies, such as wood carving, a school, various clubs and a library.

The tennis courts at Holsworthy — AWM H17.345.

Internees dressed for a theatrical production — AWM H17.346.
Lieutenant Samuels wrote: 'All prisoners are well clothed and looked after. There is a bi-annual issue of clothing - pants, shirts, white hat, boots, overcoat, three blankets, straw tick, towels and singlets are the major issue.'

Daily work parties under escort took part in such activities as road-making, timber-cutting and saw-milling. The men were paid one shilling a day for their work, but work was entirely optional.

'Those who do not desire to work simply lounge about all day occasionally taking a walk in the recreation ground provided for the purpose, or playing football, tennis, etc - a life of ease,'

Lieutenant Samuels wrote.

'Excellent food is prepared by cooks nominated by the internees and consists of porridge and coffee for breakfast, meat and vegetables in various forms for lunch, and the evening meal consists of bread and jam and tea and coffee.'

Vegetables were grown in the camp garden and top quality fresh meat was supplied daily. The camp bakery, operated by detainees, supplied fresh bread for the entire camp each day, the bakers being paid five shillings a day for their labour (an Australian private soldier on active service was also paid five shillings a day, plus one shilling deferred pay). The camp hospital had a permanent staff of Australian Army Medical Corps personnel, including two resident doctors, a chemist and a dentist. Of course, treatment was free of charge. The hospital was surrounded by nice gardens which contained a special sleeping out compound for prisoners with lung infections.

The men were keen on gymnastics and clubs were set up for various body-building sports such as weight lifting. Strength exhibitions were popular.

The camp guards were invited to attend concerts arranged by the prisoners. Lieutenant Samuels described one of the concerts: 'There was music and singing in German. Supper was served on long tables covered from end to end with fancy cakes made by the camp cooks, all nicely iced. It was hardly possible to imagine that these men, seated at various tables eating and making merry, were interned as prisoners.'

Lieutenant Samuels also described how internees used home made stills to make liquor from jam.

A hat made from mud-filled jam tins — AWM H17329

Internes in the Holsworthy camp hospital — AWM H2259

Actors of a German theatre
One of the buildings at Holsworthy Concentration Camp was a small cell block to house internees who displayed arrogance or continually misbehaved. It was built by the camp inmates and soon became known as 'Sing Sing', the name of a well known gaol in the United States. The little gaol is now used as an ammunition store, but graffiti and initials scratched into the concrete walls by the prisoners remain as a legacy of the times.

Apart from the cell block, only two other buildings remain as relics of Holsworthy Concentration Camp. One is the former recreation centre for the guards which was administered by the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA). It is now the officers’ mess of No. 2 Cavalry Regiment. The other is the former camp headquarters — the commandant’s administration centre — but this building has fallen into disrepair. A railway spur line served the camp but there is little evidence of this today apart from what appears to have been a concrete siding.

Holsworthy today is a major Army training centre.

The solitary confinement cell block

The former YMCA recreation centre, now the officers’ mess of No. 2 Cavalry Regiment

Berrima

At Berrima, on the Hume Highway 87 miles southwest of Sydney, 329 prisoners were housed in Berrima Gaol. These men included ships’ captains, engineers and officers, superintendents of shipping companies from Shanghai and Singapore, wireless station constructors, a few military officers (some of them titled men), musicians, many of the non-commissioned officers from Ender and German officers taken prisoner by the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force at Rabaul (the German wireless station at Rabaul was seized on 11 September 1914. During the brief action Australia suffered its first casualties of the war — one Navy officer, one Army medical officer and four sailors killed).

From Lieutenant Samuels’ description of Berrima it must have been a marvellous place for internees to while away four wartime years. Following a comfortable night’s sleep, the inmates were free to leave the old prison at 6am and they could stay away until roll call at 6.30pm.

The Wingecarribee River, below the gaol, contained plenty of fish and the swimming was good. Altogether, the setting was serene and beautiful — rural New South Wales at its best. Along each side of the river for two miles the prisoners erected huts of bush timber and, according to Lieutenant Samuels, they used these as rest houses. He wrote: 'Almost all day they are to be found there chatting and reading.'

He added that some of the huts had stoves with chimneys made from jam tins. The prisoners could
please themselves whether they went back to camp for lunch or stayed at home and cooked a meal there.

The river provided a great deal of sporting activity and some of the huts had their own private jetties. There was boating (the boats were beautifully made from tree trunks), swimming and fishing. There was even a gondola complete with canopy. Sometimes, to vary the activities, the prisoners hired vehicles for day trips in true tourist style.

There was no shortage of night entertainment back at the camp, either. Apart from the usual study courses such as navigation, wireless and languages, there were stage shows with elaborate settings and costumes made by the prisoners.

Parcels arrived from Germany and large sums of money poured in from Germany via banks through Switzerland and London (one sea captain alone was drawing £300 a month from his shipping company). Many of the internees had opened Commonwealth Bank savings accounts which they drew on when they visited Berrima township’s general store.

The canteen at Berrima prison was operated by a German committee and the profits were used to buy special items such as band instruments. Christmas and New Year were great festive occasions with open air concerts until past midnight.

There were some memorable carnivals on the Wingecarribee. One of them, on 25 January, 1918, was a preliminary celebration for the birthday of Kaiser Wilhelm II.

Lieutenant Samuels wrote: 'The guards understood and allowed it as long as there were no German patriotic displays or emblems. A very extensive programme started at 8.30am and went until 7.30pm (an extra hour)'.

Sports included tug-o-war, tennis and German ball games (faustball and schlagball); there was a parade of decorated boats with some of the men dressed as ladies (even to the wearing of wigs and female underwear). The whole show was open to the general public and a large crowd of visitors attended. There was diving and swimming, and afternoon tea was served with music provided by a German band.

Lieutenant Samuels wrote: 'Keen fraternisation of some of the girls was noted.'
There is no mention of any celebration on 26 January (Australia Day); however, on the 28th (the Kaiser’s actual birthday) a grand carnival took place at the camp. The tennis court was gaily decorated with flags for a tennis tournament, first prize being a solid silver cigar case. At night there was a concert and permission was given for it to continue until 11pm. Lieutenant Samuels observed that 'almost every prisoner wore in his buttonhole the blue cornflower, the German national flower'. There were live ducks, pigs, vegetables, cigars and sausages as prizes.

Lieutenant Samuels' description of life in Australian concentration camps during World War I concludes with two observations:

Firstly, a German internee wrote home: 'This is a most beautiful place, lovely scenery, and I have made many friends here so we will be happy. We spend most of our day swimming in the river.'

Secondly, Lieutenant Samuels' own summation: 'I feel confident that it is an “immemorable” credit to our race to know we are so instilled with human feelings and kindness...'

**Trial Bay**

The Trial Bay detention camp was set up in a former gaol situated near the breakwater at the entrance to the MacLeay River. It housed more than 500 men — German tea planters from Ceylon, rubber planters, ships' officers and military officers.

Lieutenant Samuels obviously was impressed (and possibly a little envious) of the facilities for these prisoners. He wrote:

'They had the finest tennis courts I have ever seen. There was one cafe inside and one outside the gaol. The one inside was in a huge hall which at night resembled a beer garden. There were concerts twice a week and the prisoners sat in groups at tables smoking and playing cards and drinking the closest they are allowed to beer — two per cent (alcohol).

'There are about 40 in the orchestra and they play selections at regular intervals, and the scene in

At Berrima there were fresh eggs aplenty, and chicken dinners as well

_— AWM H17.344_

**this place is one to remember.**

Lieutenant Samuels was also ecstatic about the prisoners' open air activities. He stated: 'There are many sporting activities — surfing, fishing, boating, and all have permission to use the beach. There is hockey on the beach. Generally the place presents a concentration camp that, undoubtedly, must be one of the most comfortable in the world.'

The internees organised courses in languages, wireless and aspects of merchant shipping. There was an extensive canteen, supervised by the guards and internees, where 'almost any clothing and food can be bought'.

Lieutenant Samuels recorded that roll call was at 6.30pm 'and no internee is allowed outside the gaol after this hour'. He concluded his description of Trial Bay camp rather gloomily. He wrote: 'It is a most monotonous life for the guards; they have to make their own amusements as leave to Sydney is not frequent.'
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