

My Father was a War Hero

It has taken a lifetime for me to appreciate that my father was a war hero.

The penny finally dropped when I peeled the back off a framed pencil sketch of Pvt Matthew Poland which was signed by the acclaimed wartime artist Austen Deans (OBE).

In the reverse side I discovered a letter addressed to his aunt Margaret and written in August 1941 from Piraeus in Greece, in which the 23 year old described how he was 'alive and quite well' after being captured three months earlier in Crete.

'The Germans whom we have come in contact with so far have treated us fairly well and are a contradiction of what we formerly believed when I was taken prisoner with the 21st Battalion Doctor, having volunteered to stay and look after the prisoners who were wounded' he wrote.

The doctor was Capt. Owen Hetherington, who was in charge of a front-line Regimental Aid Post with 70 wounded troops - including some Germans - who had camped under a fig tree following the first large-scale airborne assault in history.

Many of the thousands of German paratroopers who descended on Crete were killed before they landed, but the allied forces were eventually forced to retreat and evacuate after some heroic and ferocious hand-to-hand fighting involving the 28th Māori Battalion.

Among the wounded left in my father's care was Austen Deans, who was with the 20th Battalion in the role of assistant war artist when he was badly wounded after inadvertently setting off a land mine. 'I am writing on the back of this portrait which I hope you will keep as a souvenir' he told his aunt. 'Besides it is a pretty fair likeness and it shows anyway that I am not very worried'.

In the first letter to his girlfriend, later to become my mother, he wrote of his experience among around three thousand others at the Kokkinia POW Hospital in Piraeus – some of whom he described as 'absolute wrecks who looked as if they never had a hope'.

But he was also looking on the bright side. 'We have a canteen here and also get a few bottles of beer per week, how do you like that in a prisoner of war hospital'.

Three months later there was a somewhat different tone after being transported 2,000 kilometres north in a cattle truck to face his first bitterly cold winter at Stalag 344 at Lamsdorf in Poland which housed up to 15,000 POWs who were allowed to shower every ten days in 'bathrooms' that took up to 800 men at a time.

Suffering from pleurisy, he wrote "I am beginning to get hard and bitter here and I wish to God that this war would finish and that I could get home again."

Two and a half years later in 1944, he wrote that he had begun to realise all that he had missed. 'I was 21 when I left home, next birthday will be my 26th. The best years, or what should have been the best years, absolutely wasted.'

It would be another year before the war would finally end, and the Certificate of Discharge from the Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force officially recorded his total service as 6 years and 146 days.

My father returned to his former life as a locomotive fireman for the New Zealand Railways and finally married his sweetheart. There were some happy days to follow, but he was understandably troubled by his wartime experience.

I recall him singing Silent Night in German, and the words ‘Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht’ still ring in my ears. But I also recall him speaking angrily about being paid three shillings a day to kill Germans.

I was 14 years old when I last saw my father in 1968, slumped in the back of a taxi in the darkness of a May evening after he had suffered a fatal heart attack after clocking on for work.

His sudden death at the age of 50 came as a shock, and to this day I regret not having the opportunity to ask him about the failed campaigns in Greece and Crete and the horrible scenes that he must have witnessed from the field hospital overlooking Crete’s Maleme Airport.

Sadly, I will never know how he felt about staying behind to nurse the wounded and throwing himself at the mercy of a vengeful German military. But what I do know is that he was a hero.

ENDS

Sources/References

In addition to my father’s military records and POW letters, I have referenced material from the following sources;

‘Crete – Death From the Skies’, David Filer. Chapter 11, p 153

‘21 Battalion’ – J.F. Cody. Chapter 4, p. 93

[Austen Deans - Wikipedia](#)

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[CHAPTER 4 — Battle for Crete | NZETC \(victoria.ac.nz\)](#)

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[II: Kokkinia Prisoner-of-War Hospital | NZETC \(victoria.ac.nz\)](#)

[I: Conditions at Stalag VIIIB, Lamsdorf | NZETC \(victoria.ac.nz\)](#)

[Stalag VIII-B - Wikipedia](#)