

HAY PRISONER OF WAR CAMP

SOME REFLECTIONS

(Contributed by A.J.T.)

The days of the Hay P.W. Camp are numbered, and the old camp is already in the process of demolition. The camp has for so long been an integral part of our lives that its passing leaves a feeling of regret and a void.

Hay's military appearance has now almost disappeared. The numbers of soldiers in the streets, shops and theatre, the incessant hurrying up and down the street of military trucks, ambulance waggons and jeeps; the band and the parades, the glare of the camp lights (visible some nights from a distance of 20 miles). All these things are now past history. Hay has been what was termed a "war lucky" town in securing the internment camp and the munition factory. The camp particularly, has been a great financial asset to Hay and many an organisation shrewdly holding functions on the "pay Thursday" to ensnare the unwary soldier and lighten his pay envelope a little.

Looking back to the days when the camp was in the course of construction we will remember the urgency and hurry that attended it. For the British Empire the year 1940 was grim, with nothing but bad news of defeats and capitulations and Australia's sons were volunteering for overseas service. It was in this atmosphere that the camp grew. At night the railway yards resounded to the clank of shunting trucks and the dull thud of heavy girders being unloaded. A forest of pine posts virtually sprang up overnight to be interlaced with barbed wire. Huts were laid down in dozens, the flooring put in place. The air rang with sound of a hundred hammers and huts soon took shape to fill up miniature streets. Roads were made and water and electric light connected in record time.

Electric light connected in record time. The Commonwealth Bank opened up till late at night for the convenience of hundreds of workmen, and Hay in the midst of a boom period. The camp was open for public inspection on the Sunday before the first occupants, the internees, arrived, and a large crowd took the opportunity of looking over the buildings.

Many people witnessed the arrival of the internees—a bedraggled lot, who had suffered a bad voyage out, losing most of their luggage and belongings. Their treatment was later the subject of an enquiry in England. One pathetic figure looking at the people, asked: "Is this 'home' at last?" He soon found out what a good home the camp was with its splendid quarters, good food, and considerate guards. The internees soon picked up in spirits and condition, and many were to be seen enjoying themselves at the river beaches under the watchful eyes of an armed guard. Among the internees were some very fine singers and many people used to wander out towards the camp at night to listen to their combined singing.

In due course the Italian P's.O.W. replaced the internees and later the Japanese prisoners occupied the camps (Nos. 6, 7, and 8). We had a few "moments" when the Japs were here. Everyone well remembers when there was the threat of a mass escape and many people were ordered from West Hay as a precaution in the event of gunfire. A very strong guard was here while the Japs were in camp, but no serious trouble eventuated. After the Japs left the Italians again returned to occupy Camps 7 and 8. Finally No. 8 camp was the only compound in use until the camp virtually closed on Monday, 28th October, 1946.

There are some features associated with the Hay Camp of which we can well be proud. Mainly under the command of Colonel C. E. Thane, the camp gained the reputation of being one of the finest camps in Australia. Another record is that dur-

tralia. Another record is that during its long career of over six years only one prisoner escaped, and he a confirmed adept at the art of escaping. He scaled the wall at the detention barracks at the old gaol. What is even more praiseworthy is that conditions were such that apparently comparatively few felt the desire to try. It is said that all the various occupants, internees, Italian and Japanese prisoners, spoke their praise of their treatment by the Australian soldiers. Surely in this and in other lands when the full story of the war is written such things as this will make a bright and lasting picture in an evil and terrible war.

In conclusion, it is interesting to recall that the spot where the camp stands has in turn been a cattle camp (in the days when Hay was known as Lang's Crossing). Later it was an aerodrome with a large hangar of the Australian Aerial Service built on it, and lastly, it has been a prisoner of war and internment camp, and so it has in no small measure witnessed the romance of the changing years. What the future holds for it is not known, but it is our earnest hope and prayer that never again will it be a place where men are caged up like wild animals for years on end, but that the "brotherhood of man" will become a reality and wars will no longer deface God's fair world.