

Italian POWs

in North-West Tasmania
1943–1946



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During World War II, Australia agreed to accept Italian prisoners of war at British expense. In 1943, a recommendation was made to the War Cabinet to adopt a scheme for the employment of Italian prisoners of war on farms without guards. It was argued that their labour should be available to their captors under conditions prescribed by the 1929 Prisoner of War Convention – ‘the Geneva Convention’. Nearly 18,500 Italian POWs were confined in Australia from 1941 until 1947, when the last group was repatriated.

The main POW camp in Tasmania was at Brighton and it was from this staging camp that the prisoners were distributed to local Control Centres, each having a complement of seven. These centres were to supply prisoners with what they needed, maintain supervision, deal with employers’ complaints and liaise with the police if a POW absconded. As many as 200 Italians were to be placed with private employers on farms within a radius of 40 kilometres from each centre. Tasmania’s quota, increasing to 950 in May 1944, was distributed among six centres: Latrobe, Redpa, Devonport, Burnie, Launceston and Brighton.

The Department of Manpower required that rural employers’ contribution to the scheme be set at one pound per week per prisoner of war, plus keep. The hours of work would be the same

as those standard in the industry. Prisoners were permitted to write two letters (with a maximum of 24 lines) and two postcards a week (with a maximum of 10 lines). In addition, short monthly messages were allowed to be sent to their families through the apostolic delegate in Australia.

The rate of pay for Italian prisoners of war was the same throughout the empire: 7½d [pence] a day for unskilled workers and 15d a day for skilled workers. Work on private farms was paid as skilled work. Italian prisoners of war also received, under a reciprocal arrangement with Italy, a fixed allowance of two shillings and sixpence and a free issue of 36 cigarettes or 35 grams of tobacco a week. Employers were told that the Italians must be well fed, but not necessarily on Australian Army rations. They needed very little meat, it was said, but preferred spaghetti, macaroni, soups etc.

The Department of the Army gave the following advice to prospective host farmers:

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.

He cannot be driven but he can be led.

Mentality is childlike; it is possible to gain his confidence by fairness and firmness.

Great care must be exercised from a disciplinary point of view for he can become sly and objectionable if badly handled.

On Sundays, the prisoners were to be permitted to go freely one mile [1.6 kilometres] from the property to which they had been allocated between the hours of 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. provided they wore their magenta POW clothing. They were not allowed to go into any village or town, or enter shops or houses other than the residence of the farmer employing them. Employers were also sternly warned that ‘POWs must not fraternise with members of the public, particularly women’.

ABOVE
Italian POWs
disembark in
Sydney
Courtesy of
IAN McFARLANE



In cases of poor work or unsatisfactory conduct the prisoner was reported to the prisoner-of-war control officer. Regular visits to the farm by the local PWC officer were undertaken to maintain POWs' discipline, to resolve disputes between them and their employers and to check that employers were meeting their obligations.

The picture that these official records present is of life probably only marginally better than that experienced in internment camps – although it would have been better than the drudgery and monotony of camp life. Official records do reveal their isolation from other Italians, other than the one or two who might also be working on the same allocated farm. And they did have the opportunity of meeting fellow prisoners at mass on Sundays. There was a very real danger of exploitation by unsympathetic farmers, who, after all, were very much part of a society at war.

A very different picture emerges when some of the data collected from the people actually involved is examined.

Alfred Jones owned a mixed farm at Henrietta, and had two POWs assigned to his property: Petro Sigolini and Cesario Securo. An interview with one of Alfred's sons, Lance, revealed some key elements of POW life that were confirmed by many other accounts.



'They used to do quite a bit of cooking and sometimes helped Mum out – they shared their meals with us in the house. Mum tried to cook dishes they liked, ordering pasta from Burnie, but some of the ingredients were unobtainable. The Italians used to laugh at the quality of our food compared to what they were used to – they thought that our olive oil was rubbish, for example.

'Our blokes used to grow their own tobacco and make their own wine – they were very industrious and would have a go at anything. Cesario was what we used to call a horse pug – he was very handy with horses.'

There was an almost complete disregard of government stipulations regarding restrictions on prisoner movements off the property and association with other POWs.

TOP
The Jones family, with Cesario Securo, left, and Petro Sigolini, at Henrietta

ABOVE
Cesario Securo with horses
PHOTOS: LANCE JONES





‘They used to visit other Italians on other farms. Some of them were within a mile of our farm and they used to meet regularly. Pasquale Sacco was an Italian whose parents lived in America. He was holidaying in Italy when the war broke out and he was conscripted. He could speak seven languages. He was with the Hays family within half a mile of us. I used to look forward to his visits. Those Italians with the Wrothwell family had their own house and that was a weekend gathering site for the local Italians.

‘I remember dressing them in my civvies to go to dances. We treated them as best we could and there were other prisoners who went to dances as well. At Christmas time the Italians gathered at Wrothwells and put on a feast for the local farmers. They were three months preparing a seven-course meal for us all and making their own wine. You wouldn’t believe the talent in cooking among the Italian prisoners; we used to enjoy going to these gatherings!’

Another revelation was the close and often enduring bonds that developed during wartime.

‘Our POWs used to write to us after they went back – their English wasn’t that good but we got by as we learnt a little bit of Italian from them.

‘I remember my father giving them some money when they left to hide ... so the authorities wouldn’t find it – I would imagine many farmers would have done the same as they were good, genuine jokers – there is no doubt about it.’

Gerardo Mongiello and Antonio Divietro were assigned to the farm of Vincent Henry



ABOVE
Italian POWs at
Camp Loveday, SA
AWM No. 1230601

LEFT
Doll’s basket and
silver ring both
made by Gerardo
Mongiello for Faye
Pease

PHOTOS: IAN McFARLANE

OPPOSITE
Gerardo
Mongiello,
foreground, with
his unit in North
Africa, December
1939

Courtesy of FAYE PEASE

Pease at Romaine: a mixed farm with dairying and potato growing. In general the Italians were great favourites with the farm children. Gerardo is warmly remembered by Vincent’s daughter, Faye, who has kept photos, letters and two items Gerardo made for her: a silver ring made from a two shilling piece and a doll’s basket woven from cigarette papers. Gerardo and Antonio were eventually repatriated from a camp in South Australia. During the long months of waiting for a ship to take them home, they wrote a number of appreciative letters of thanks to Vincent and his family.



ABOVE
Donato Verelli with
young Bill Tanner
on his knee

ABOVE RIGHT
Group of Italian
POWs gathered
on Lillico Straight
NW Tasmania.
Donato Verelli is
second from left.

Photos courtesy of
BILL TANNER



Donato Verelli worked for Cyril Tanner of Seafield at Lillico, a mixed farm with sheep, dairying, potato growing and honey production. On Saturday afternoons he would walk on his own to Devonport to a hotel that was owned by people of Italian origin. And, if any evidence were needed of the disregard for official regulations, there is a photo of POWs socialising together, provided by Cyril's grandson, Bill. Donato occupied a bedroom in the family home and ate with the family. Each family was issued with an *Italian-English Phrase Book for Italian Prisoners of War Engaged in Rural Employment* as well as a Catholic missal. Donato's wife, Rosetta, wrote to Mrs Tanner during the war:

My Dearest Lady,
Maybe this present letter will come to you as a surprise. I'm the wife of the prisoner Donato Verelli. With your kindness you have taken him into your respective home and given him the best care possible and made his life more pleasant to him in this critical time that he is going through, away from his dear one that loves him so much ...

Rosetta Verelli

Strong links were forged between the Tanner family and Donato that continued after the war.

Donato's own appreciation of his treatment is best expressed in a note he left behind in his bedroom on his departure.

25 March 1946

I donate for you this book for you to remember an Italian Prisoner of War. Being 27 months with you to work – the last day I wish to leave a little note in Italian language. I write these few words with affection and all my heart towards you and all family. In a few hours I will be gone and I am going back to embrace my dear wife after 7 years. I have nothing else to tell you. I give you my strong regards. I salute you.

The Tanner family continued to look after Rosetta and Donato in the immediate post-war period by sending clothes and provisions that were much needed in war-devastated Italy.

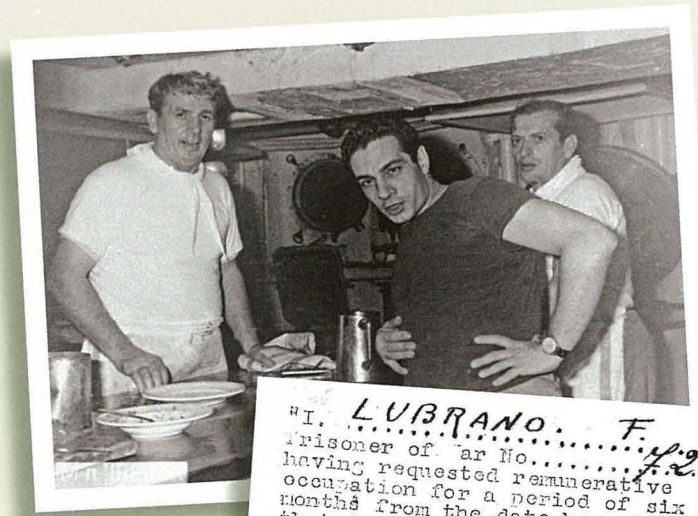
June Morris's memories of Carlo Fuccaci, a prisoner who was assigned to the farm of her father, Charles Tyler, near Sheffield, are consistent with other accounts. Like many POWs, Carlo developed a close relationship with his host family, and although occupying a separate workers cottage, he ate his meals with the family and accompanied them to mass each Sunday. He is also fondly remembered by the Tyler children. Carlo used some of his meagre allowance to buy jubes, Iced Vo-Vo biscuits and chocolate for them from the military canteen that called every three weeks with mail and supplies. (These were items generally unobtainable at the time due to rationing.) Carlo also received (free) English tuition from Fay Capell, a local teacher. In 2001, June, accompanied by her daughter, visited Carlo

and his family in Italy, a journey that prompted a return visit to Tasmania by Carlo's daughter, husband and grandson.

Francesco Lubrano was employed as a cook on the Italian passenger liner *Romolo* and was captured after his ship was scuttled. Although a civilian, Francesco was treated as a POW – one of the first to arrive in Australia. He was assigned to the mixed farm of Wilfred James Stuart at North Motton. He is affectionately remembered by Wilfred's daughter, Valerie, who recalls how good he was with children and how she regularly accompanied him to church in Ulverstone. She also remembers his accomplished cooking; he introduced the family to pasta and the 'best-cooked rabbit' she can remember. Francesco was repatriated in 1946. Valerie journeyed to Italy to see him in 2005. Although she found he had died, Francesco's family was well acquainted with his wartime experiences and looked after Valerie as one of their own during her stay.

It is clear that personal accounts present a very different and more intimate story of the Italian POWs on Australian farms than that suggested by official records.

Perhaps surprisingly, the last Italian POWs to be repatriated did not leave Australia until January 1947. The official reason for this delay was the lack of shipping available at the cessation of hostilities. This seems to be a response that masks some inconvenient facts. The outbreak of war with Italy took place on 10 June 1940 and



"I, LUBRANO, F. Prisoner of War No. 4206, having requested remunerative occupation for a period of six months from the date hereof, agree that during such period I will perform such work as may be required of me. I further voluntarily agree to be bound by the disciplinary provisions and rates of working pay applicable to a private soldier prisoner of war in respect of any period during which such work is required of me."

ceased on 3 September 1943. Thus there is a three-year period in which we held POWs from a country with which we were no longer at war. In fact, the first POWs arrived in Tasmania *after* the war with Italy had ceased.

What became evident from these anecdotes was the display of great generosity of spirit and humanity in rural wartime Tasmania. I have the distinct feeling that the Italians brought a hint of European culture – even sophistication – to what were then insular communities on the edge of empire. ☒

TOP
Francesco Lubrano, left, working as a cook on the *Romolo*

Courtesy of VALERIE MURPHETT

ABOVE
Francesco Lubrano's work agreement

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