

PREFACE

During World War 2 one in two hundred of New Zealand's population (about 8000 servicemen) suffered loss of liberty and deprivations through being held in captivity as prisoners of war (PoW's). About 500 of these were airmen.

The Geneva Convention required that PoW's assessed by a mixed medical commission as seriously ill or wounded should be repatriated back to their own country, invariably via a neutral country. Each commission consisted of three medical officers, two from a neutral country (one of whom presided) and one from the detaining power. Decisions were by a majority. The Convention also stipulated that repatriated personnel were not to be subsequently employed in any combatant role.

Overall, about 11,000 New Zealanders served as aircrew in Britain's Royal Air Force in its various theatres of operation, and more than one in three were killed. Around 6000 of these flew with Bomber Command, and 1850 died.

*Many other aircrew were injured or became PoW's. Two Hawkes Bay aircrew that suffered both these fates were Warrant Officers **David Allen** and **Hugh English**. They were injured when shot down on separate Bomber Command operations over enemy territory and ended up as "Kreigies" (the name Allied prisoners used to describe themselves, and derived from Kriegsgefangene, the German term for PoW's).*

Later in the war David and Hugh were assessed under the Geneva Convention as qualifying for repatriation on medical grounds. After release from captivity they eventually embarked on the Hospital Ship MV Oranje, arriving in Wellington on 14 December 1943. The next day David Allen, Hugh English and Ian Walker of Auckland (who had all been promoted to the rank of Warrant Officer while in captivity) were welcomed back by the Chief of Air Staff for the RNZAF, Air Vice-Marshal LM Isitt. They were the first three New Zealand overseas air personnel to be repatriated back to New Zealand from German hands.

DAVID ALLEN

After schooling at Napier Boys High School David worked in Napier for a bus company (HB Motor Co) and then a local garage (Anderson and Hansen). At the outbreak of World War 2 he was employed as a car salesman. 7 weeks later he applied for enlistment in the RNZAF. About a month after this he re-applied, this time for aircrew - listing 'pilot' his first preference, and 'air gunner' as his second. He required the written consent of his widowed mother, being under 21 years of age at the time. Character references were supplied by his employer and by the Mayor of Napier, Mr TW Hercock.

David joined the RNZAF on 9 April 1940 (Service No. NZ40910). His training thereafter is best described as a series of “pressure cooker” courses compared to that which applied later in the war. After 3 1/2 weeks at the Ground Training School near Levin he was posted to the Air Gunner’s and Air Observer’s School at RNZAF Ohakea as an LAC Air Gunner Under Training.

Over the next 3 weeks his training included seven hours air-to-air firing from the open rear cockpit of large single-engined Vickers Vincent biplanes. His first three flights were in Vincent NZ 311. By a strange coincidence this aircraft survives today and is part way through a full restoration North of Auckland.

At the end of May 1940 he was awarded his Air Gunners brevet, promoted to Sergeant and posted to the RAF. On 1 June he sailed off to England, arriving at the Aircrew Reception Centre at RAF Uxbridge on 21 July 1940 during the dark days of the Battle of Britain.

A week later he was posted to No 15 Operational Training Unit at RAF Harwell in Oxfordshire. During August he flew about 30 hours learning to become a rear gunner on Vickers Wellington night bombers – the type he was soon to fly in on operations.

On 6 September he was posted to 149 Squadron at RAF Mildenhall in Suffolk. Sergeant Allen’s first operation against the enemy was on 18 Sep 1940 to Flushing in Holland. Further operations on Wellingtons to targets in Germany and France, including 8 hour sorties to Berlin and back, continued until June 1941.

In July 1941 he transferred to No 7 Squadron at RAF Oakington in Cambridgeshire and converted onto the Short Stirling, the RAF’s first four-engined bomber.

His first (and last) operation in a Stirling (N6035) was to Berlin on 27 July 1941. The aircraft was hit by enemy fire and ended up limping over Holland at 800 ft with two motors crippled and all gun turrets out of action. David parachuted from the aircraft but after landing the Germans smartly gathered up the crew and took them into captivity.

David was subsequently admitted to the “Caterpillar Club” – an organisation with exclusive membership for aircrew who have parachuted from disabled aircraft. The badge symbolises a silkworm whose threads created the silk from which parachutes were made (until substituted with nylon late in the war).

Shortly after his capture the Germans telegraphed advice of David's prisoner of war (PoW) status to the Red Cross in Geneva. It is likely the Red Cross then informed the British authorities, and ultimately notice was given to his mother in Napier as next of kin. Later she received notice from the RAF's Central Depository that they now held her son's personal effects in safe custody.

After his eventual return to New Zealand David noted that the newly captured airman-prisoner was could get a wrong first impression of his hosts. At the Dulag-Luft, or airmen's passing through camp at Frankfurt-on-Main, an institution under Reichmarshall Goering's patronage, the prisoners were given a brandy issue, and the generous Goering presented a radio set.

However, well-schooled in England about the likely artifices of the enemy, the airmen suspected that the German hospitality was largely designed to loosen tongues and discretion. "Whether, as we suspected, there were concealed microphones in our rooms or not, I do not know but, if there were our audience must have been disappointed, for our conversations were mainly about aircraft that flew backwards, sideways, and at 700 miles an hour."

During his time in Germany David was transferred to several camps, including Stalags IIIE, IIID, VIIB, and Stalag Luft 3.

The Geneva Convention allowed for "other ranks" PoW's to be utilised as workmen on non-war type work; and also allowed for the supervision of such work by PoW's who were non commissioned officers. However the German system for the incarceration of airmen-PoW's meant that they were not allowed the worker's liberty given Army personnel. Their captors said this was because of the airmen's knowledge of navigation and wireless, and a belief that after having been on many operations they had a useful knowledge of the country's topography and communication system.

PoW's looked forward to letters from home and occasionally were able to send brief (and censored) replies. The Germans even produced photograph postcards for Kreigies to send home. On the back of the postcard taken at Stalag III E (dated Dec 1941 and addressed to his Aunt in Kensington, London) David wrote:

Dear Aunt. I hope you receive this OK. It is a Christmas present from the Commandant. Will you please send it home by airmail for me being the only one I have & and I want to make sure it reaches the folks at home. It is a photo of all the Australian & NZ boys on this Camp. The residence in the background is the Germans not ours – I suppose you can recognise "Yours Truly". Thanks & love David

He also spent time during 1942 in a Military hospital in Berlin (Reserve-Lazarett 128, Berlin – Biesdorf) having his wounds tended and being medically assessed. While there was sketched by an artist.

Being in Berlin he experienced at close hand the heavy pasting that the shattered city received from bombing. He observed that his experience of the raids lived up to all he subsequently read of them. Despite German endeavours to keep news from the prisoners he observed, “the Reich was being considerably rocked by the RAF.”

Speaking later of camp life David said that it was made tolerable only through the good offices of the Red Cross organisation, whose parcels were a veritable God-send. The photo shows his plywood meal tag for issue of the meagre camp rations.

Apart from the food parcels, one of the brightest spots in camp life was news. David observed that Camp news was of two varieties, a “doctored-up” camp broadcast in English of what was alleged to be happening in the war and the world, and the mouth to mouth and camp to camp underground “grapevine” news system.

He thought it remarkable how news travelled among prisoners in Germany. PoW’s were able to tell their guards of the fall of Stalingrad and the Dieppe raid before the Germans themselves knew of those events. David even knew of his repatriation long before it came off. In the first instance he heard he was to be released through Ankara in Turkey. Although he was actually repatriated through Marseilles and Barcelona, he subsequently learned that the arrangements were originally for repatriation through Turkey.

PoW’s participated in a range of activities to pass their dreary days. Sports like athletics and soccer were organised on a proper basis as the photos show.

Another activity was the production and putting on of various forms of entertainment, despite the limitations of equipment and facilities. The photo shows some of the props that were made. Note the Raffle Drum, and beside it the life-size “Betty Grable” – type cutout.

It is likely that a mixed-member Medical Commission assessed David while he was in the military hospital in Berlin. On 9 November 1942 the German authorities at the hospital issued a certificate under Article 70 of the Geneva Convention affirming his right to repatriation.

In April 1943 he was transferred to a hospital attached to Stalag VIII B where PoW's awaiting repatriation were assembled.

Eventually, in late 1943, David and a group of other sick and wounded PoW's travelled south by train to Marseilles in German occupied France. From there they went by sea to a most hospitable reception at Barcelona in neutral Spain. A freighter then took them across the Mediterranean to Alexandria in Egypt where they boarded the *Oranje* on 24 Nov 1943 for the long journey back to New Zealand.

After discharge from the RNZAF in 1945 David was active on the Committee of the Napier Ex-PoW Association. Looking after the welfare of members was an important function of the Association.

David died in 1969.