

Aaron Pegram. *Surviving the Great War: Australian Prisoners of War on the Western Front, 1916-18*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Pp. 284.

“A soldier sometimes thinks of being killed or wounded, but never of being captured,” recounted an injured Australian artilleryman who was taken prisoner by the Germans. In his mind, becoming a prisoner was “looked upon as being worse than death” (p. 32). Australia, like Canada, used the Great War as a nation-building event. While Canadians have often framed the unifying effects of the four divisions attacking in unison at Vimy in April 1917 as a constructed legend that signified a country coming together to do something difficult, the Australians had the Gallipoli campaign as their trial by fire battle with similar messages underpinning the story. But the Australian soldier—the Digger—also has a strong place in the country’s mythology, part of the Anzac legend that encompasses mateship, solidarity and a gritty struggle against long odds. With the importance placed on the Australian soldier, both those that lived to return home and those that died overseas, there was little space in the country’s mythology for the 4,044 Australians captured and made prisoners of war.

Australian War Memorial historian Aaron Pegram offers a fine study of the multiple histories of Australian prisoners on the Western Front with a deep exploration into the archival records, including some 2,500 postwar interviews with returned veterans. *Surviving the Great War* presents the prisoner experience, especially the hardship in some of the camps, but Pegram also notes that the eight per cent mortality rate was much lower than those who fought through the many battles of the Western Front.

Pegram never loses sight of the individuals in this fine academic work that reads exceptionally well. Each man had his own capture story. Most often soldiers were “bagged” when they were engaged in combat and their unit was pushed out of a trench or forced to pull back in the face of a counterattack. In the chaos of fighting, small groups of soldiers or individuals were left exposed, overwhelmed and wounded. Pegram argues that surrender was rarely linked to morale and the same can be found in the three Canadian battles where the most prisoners were captured: at the April 1915 Battle of Second Ypres, in the June 1916 Battle of Mount Sorrel and in the later 1916 engagements on the Somme. All were battles where

the Canadians were pushed back in sustained fighting or engaged in see-saw combat. It was usually enemy action that led to capture and Pegram also explores the German success in raiding Australian trenches and snatching sentries. The experience of being captured is also presented, with evidence of some Australians who were murdered in the fraught area between the act of surrender and the act of accepting the surrender.

Most Australians survived the ordeal and were led from the front, receiving care when required and sometimes interrogated. There were enough stories of cruel German guards beating prisoners to show it was not an anomaly, but it was also a period of despair over capture during the long voyage to the prison camps. Within the camps, the loss of freedom and shortage of food were part of the prisoners' ongoing struggle. And still the Australians mobilised to play sports, publish camp papers and put on theatre shows. Depression nonetheless plagued many men and often manual labour outside of the barbed wire on German farms was an escape from the monotony. "Prisoners had to find ways to overcome the secret battle of emotional survival," writes Pegram (p. 150).

The prisoners were not passive victims, but not many were engaged in escape plans, as is often romanticised in popular culture. For those who could get outside the barbed wire, it was difficult to travel across Germany to find safety in neutral Switzerland or Holland. The punishment for being caught was harsh and some of the 327 Australians who died in captivity came at the hands of Germans who hunted them down. More often, however, the prisoners died from wounds sustained when they were captured or during work accidents. "It is a life of torture and hell," wrote one Australian, who pleaded for food and help, and there would have been more deaths without the Australian Red Cross Society. Two aid organisations run by Australian women were especially important in supplying food and care packages to the prisoners who sometimes ate better than the Germans suffering through the naval blockade that curtailed supplies from 1916 to the end of the war. These societies also assisted the desperate families of soldiers who prayed that their loved ones who were listed as missing were in fact prisoners. Pegram notes that fewer than ten per cent of the time the man was found to be alive (p. 92).

One of the most impressive chapters explores the postwar lives of prisoners and their return home. Some were broken in health, having been forced to work in mines, while most did not know how to talk

to loved ones. They had fought a separate battle for survival and now they struggled in a new battle to make meaning of their personal war history. But not all were shamed. Many veterans were proud of their service, having volunteered, fought and survived harrowing events. There was no single narrative (p. 169).

Pegram's excellent study notes how the prisoner experience was "neither brutal nor benign" and that there were many circumstances that determined the privation faced by the thousands of Australians in captivity (pp. 12, 174). This is a model history that should be read by all scholars and students of the Great War and it will provide new ways to understand the 3,842 captured Canadians during the war.

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