THE QUARRY

Emma Dorreen

Our Anzac Special

My grandfather was irresistible to children. For me – eldest grandchild – there was always a secret treat, lavish toy or £5 note. He was the master of the corny joke. He was naughty and you could join him in cahoots against other adults. Once, he rolled up his sleeve – to shock us – and showed us numbers, etched in rough digits on the inside of his arm; 28481/13. He had been a prisoner of war in Germany.

I knew little about my grandfather's war except that it had been a long one. He shipped out to North Africa in 1941, missing the birth of my father. He disappeared for a time in 1942, listed as a battle casualty. But he turned up alive, enduring the rest of the war in POW camps. It was August 1945 before he was repatriated to New Zealand and introduced to his son. I have always wanted to fill in that gap, to find out what he did, what his life was like then.

This seems the right moment for me to investigate his war. I have the unsettling feeling, just recently, of moving up a generation. Even after all this time, certain things are still too raw for my parents; doing my grandfather's story justice is my responsibility. It's up to me.

I am fortunate to have access to a cache of family documents. There are letters, newspaper clippings, intriguing photographs. There is also a diary; 'A Wartime Log for British Prisoners'. A small, linen-covered book, the pages filled during my grandfather's long incarceration in Germany. It begins in his distinctive voice:

This book belongs to: *J M Dorreen and don't bloody pinch it!*

Then, on page 9:

Anzac Special (long drink)
1 tot gin
2 tbspns Fr Ver
2 tbspns It Ver
Dash Cherry Brandy
Dash Angostura Bitters
Orange Bitters
Grenadine
Soda
1 dessertspn Icing Sugar
Crushed Ice

Why does my grandfather's war diary begin with a cocktail recipe? The ANZAC Special is followed by recipes for Bavarian Cup, Barbados Swizzle, Queen's Park Hotel Super Cocktail, Mint Julep. There are recipes for Grilled Steak Stuffed with Oysters; Bahama fish Chowder; angels on horseback. It goes on. Jugged hare. Beef stroganoff. Zabaglione.

Were Allied prisoners recipe swapping? Was it code? Was he half-starved, fantasising of gourmet pleasures? Names and addresses appear between pages of notes on the science of petroleum geology. A diary of events of the War begins on 10 September, 1944, squeezed in almost by-the-by.

It all makes sense to me. James – Jimmy – loved to live well. He mixed a good Piña Colada. He loved a joke, practical or otherwise. He was ambitious, curious. He

did become a petroleum geologist, of considerable note, and wealthy. But that was much later.

I should start at the beginning, with the photograph of my grandparents on their wedding day. If I'm certain of anything, it's that my grandmother would have loved a big wedding with a full cathedral gown to lord it over her single friends. But not in wartime. James Moore Dorreen and Ruth Mildred Sinclair were married on 9 November 1939. Ruth is lovely in a knee-length chiffon dress and jaunty straw hat. They had four months living as husband and wife before a month of officer training for Jimmy, and embarkation as a 25-year-old Second Lieutenant with the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force.

Jimmy's military portrait shows him young, attractive, eyes ready for fun. He was far more interested in the world around him, than his 'job', which he found a disappointment. A letter, dated 17 May, 1941, sketches his life in Egypt, where 'somehow' he would take every opportunity to abscond. 'Next to you,' he writes to Ruth, 'I want a geologist's hammer and the open field and a sticky problem in the age and structure of some tertiary beds.' He gets one of his wishes, exploring Fayoum, famous for its nummalite fossils:

Somehow we found ourselves up in those cliffs, and in the stone, but easily extractable were the most gigantic forams [marine fossils]… We were accompanied by a tiny wog of about 11 who kept chattering like a monkey and was everywhere – above us, below us and on both sides of us. I know just enough Arabic now to carry on a crude conversation and when I explained exactly what I wanted he was a great help. At the conclusion I said "*Anna mamsoon lak* (I am very much obliged to you). *Tafadell sigara*

(I leave take a cigarette). *Ma el salama* (good bye)". He soon was happily puffing a cigarette and we went away, I with many blessings from Allah.

Light-hearted, crafted to entertain Ruth, nevertheless the letter was written in an agony of expectation, awaiting news of the birth of his first child and accompanied with a great sense of ennui, of wasting his time and talents in tedious occupation. I don't know what his 'job' was at this time, though the NZ Engineers – the 'sappers' – undertook many projects; constructing bridges and airfields, the railway from Mersa Matruh to Tobruk, as well as 'exploits with mines and bulldozers'.

His son, my father, was eventually born on 20 May, and Jimmy had news 22 days later by telegram. No leave, alas.

JIMMY'S RIDGE

The war was about to become more dramatic. In 1942, Rommel was moving across North Africa, overrunning Tobruk and in June he was on his way to reaching the Alamein Line – last hurdle before Cairo. New Zealand troops were mobilised and ordered to capture Ruweisat Ridge, an unpromising piece of stony desert slightly elevated above the rest of it.

Promoted by now to Lieutenant, Jimmy was part of 6 Field Company, and the sappers were busy taking up and laying minefields, as the ground operations moved to new positions. Jimmy was in the thick of it. Major H.M. Reid, in his memoir of 1944, called 25 June, a 'long and disastrous' day. The sappers were working by themselves in the dark, laying mines right by the enemy – the stress of which told on some of the men, with the result that a couple of the trucks were blown up with their own mines. Then, a major incident:

Sixth Field Company was making ready to leave when a truck loaded with 350 mines blew up. Two sappers on the truck were killed instantly and six others wounded, including Lieutenant Wheeler who was over 100 yards away. While waiting for the ambulances it was found that there was still a gap on the Indian sector as they had run out of mines. The upshot was that Lieutenants Dorreen and Chapman and a party of sappers had to stay and finish the job.

There he is, laying mines through the night. His nerves must have been on edge, with the enemy so close and your own truck having blown up with two of your men. That was life as a sapper in North Africa in 1942.

The wounding of Lt Wheeler meant Reid was now Jimmy's immediate CO. He recorded the events of 14 July, as 1,500 New Zealand infantry closed on Ruweisat Ridge. Jimmy's company was in two trucks loaded with mines. They had a 'very nasty time', under enemy fire in the dark. Once at the ridge, their vehicles had to be abandoned as there was no navigable gap in the barbed wire. Exposed, but on their objective, the enemy was nevertheless 'more a nuisance than a menace' as they waited for the British support tanks to appear just after daylight. Unfortunately, they

never arrived. Instead, the 8th Panzer Regiment launched a counter attack and Reid decided to 'retire due east':

'We thought we had covered all our area, but a little later I noticed *Lieutenant J.M. Dorreen was missing*.'

His own men escaped, but he did not. Had Jimmy taken himself off for a good look around? Was he helping retrieve some wounded men? Looking for the tanks that were never coming?

The New Zealanders suffered heavy casualties. Over 1,800 men were captured and Jimmy was listed as 'Missing, Presumed POW'. Imagine receiving that cable. Ruth always insisted that she never believed Jimmy had been killed, though she had to wait for two whole months to receive confirmation of his capture. Those weeks must have been long, anxious and lonely. This was the start of the real waiting game.

IN THE BAG

Most men – and that certainly included Jimmy – did not want to be captured (go 'in the bag'). Most of them hadn't considered this turn of events and were dumbstruck. I have the recollections of another Kiwi officer, Lt Bruce Robertson, who records feelings of shock and dismay:

With swimming heads and numbed senses we sat upon the edges of holes, dropped our weapons and lit a much-needed cigarette. …It was a miracle that there were 600-odd of us left to stand up and walk slowly towards the future, and what it held in store for us.

Robertson's memoir details a forced march, without food or water, men despondent. Then a disorganised, jarring, health-sapping journey across a week of desert to Benghazi. Prisoners slept in their clothes on the cold ground. Sores festered. Security was lax, as the weakened prisoners were no match for the hundreds of miles of desert between them and Allied lines.

Then the transit camps were brutalising; overcrowded, unsanitary, they were little more than holding pens. Reaching Campo PG47 in Modena, Northern Italy, must have seemed a deliverance of sorts, with hot food, sanitation, medical care.

There would have been little of use to occupy these men, though, and life must have seemed impotent. But then came this:

8 September 1943, BBC

Italy has signed an unconditional armistice with the Allies, General Dwight D Eisenhower has announced.

Ruth thought she'd spend Christmas with Jimmy. It was not to be. There were more than 70,000 Commonwealth POWs in Italy, ordered to stay put and await liberation. Most did, though some ignored orders and took their chances with their new liberty. But the Germans got to the camps before the Allies. About 3,200 New Zealand prisoners were taken in the camps and transported to Germany, including Jimmy. His letter of 20 October recalls the armistice:

There was terrific excitement in Italy and we saw ourselves free men again. During our 'free' period there was great indecision in knowing what to do and then this [recapture] came as the crowning blow.

He returns often to the subject: 'You know the cruelest thing about the Italian show was the realisation that after so long in the bag the majority of us had lost the power of being able to make up our own minds. We had half an hour in which to do so and all we did was to stand 'round and argue like a woman's afternoon tea party.' He calls his recapture 'the biggest disappointment of my life', and 'a failure for which I shall never forgive myself. Yet at the time a thousand other officers and I thought we were doing the right thing in staying. In fact some who went were declared deserters.'

There would still be another two years to wait.

WEINSBERG OFLAG 5A

I have 27 letters from Germany, written on aerogrammes stamped with Hitler's proud portrait, kept safely by my grandmother through many moves to many countries. At first, I felt intrusive, reading her private letters. Then I realised, they would have been censored, and then probably passed from hand to hand, for a thorough examination by all the family.

The letters have their limitations. Some took so long to reach their destination and receive a reply that over eight months had passed. The content had to satisfy the censors, and had to maintain a fragile optimism for my grandmother. We don't hear what living conditions were like 'in the bag' or anything about the progress of war. There was the censor, and Ruth's sensibilities to think about.

For Jimmy, the main themes are his love for Ruth, longing for home, fervent plans for their future – and an overwhelming sense of frustration, at a young and ambitious life put on hold. Thinking on it, another reason his diary may have been so loaded with 'trivia', is that it must have seemed unthinkable that he'd have time to fill it. So as time ground on, the pages became more crowded, space at a premium.

Then, as the 'local' war began to heat up, Jimmy began his cramped diarisation, detailing bombing raids, the destruction of the nearby town of Heilbronn and the mobilisation of the prisoners. The contrast between the diary entries and censored letters is revealing.

Diary: Sunday 10 Sept 1944

Flights of 20-30 planes were moving across to the East looking like shinning bubbles. By 11:15 between 300-400 planes had passed about 5 miles north of camp… Following flight released bombs just off NW corner of camp. Saw and heard them coming. About 1,000 or 2,000 feet above ground all bombs burst with noise and red flash scattering incendiaries. Intensive bombing of Rhine area, and in as far as Stuttgart – Munich started on 8 Sept. Since then average two raids a day.

Wed 27 September

Previous night (Tuesday 26) alarms and excursions all night – four warnings blew. Tonight at 10:20pm lights suddenly flickered and a few seconds later came a loud crash which broke windows.

Sat 30 September

Heilbronn Harry heard overhead at 9:30pm. All our perimeter lights on. Suddenly guards outside started to yell and then came whistle of bomb and loud crash about two miles away.

Bombings are routine, some even strike the camp, and he notes 52 raids for the first half of October. There are no bombs in his letters:

Letter, 28.09.44

There is only one thing in the world I want darling and that is to be with you again. However I'm too realistic to believe we can live on love, so I am planning quite a bit about my job.

Letter, 7.10.44

Do you realise it's just over five years since we met and almost five since we got married? Let's hope the sixth year brings a bit of peace and normality into the world… You say you have an old age complex – you needn't have, dear, because I now have old age without the complex. [Ruth would have been about to turn 30 and must have been grumbling about it.]

The prisoners had good information about the war, via the BBC on a hidden radio, and now they could see and hear it too. Able-bodied camp guards began to disappear to the battlefront, to be replaced by 'old men, cripples and youths'. Then, on December 4, 1944, the nearby town of Heilbronn was destroyed. Jimmy's diary brings the scene to life:

The whole countryside was like day, the heavens were a mass of smoke puffs, flares and parachutes. Scattered bombs started whistling down and bursting with ear-splitting crumps. Gradually the noise increased in volume until there was a continuous roar of planes overhead, whistling of bombs and reverberation of crashes, all in a brilliantly-lit scene. Overhead, low down, could be seen the great black shapes of the wheeling planes as they banked around to ride in on their target – huge predacious birds of death. Sound waves chased and collided across the sky.

Heilbronn was decimated by the intensity of the fire and 7,000 civilians perished there.

Time grinds on; 'Christmas looms up – about my hundredth in the bag if I recollect properly.' Then New Year 1945; 'This passing of time appalls me. I have seen so many New Years in the bag that I begin to wonder if they'll ever cease and enter normally once more… One thing this bag life has taught me is to appreciate simple things and regard as important only major issues.' Bombings continue: windows 'shook like pond ripples'; 'shrapnel was found in camp'; 'noise of strafing, light ack ack and bombs all mixed up.'

By February 1945, the Allies were crossing the Rhine and Dresden was about to be incinerated. Jimmy had been promoted to Captain and would have had an important role in camp leadership, though this is not mentioned in letters or diary. Wednesday, 14 February, was warm and sunny, with 'some strafing in afternoon'. This is his last letter to Ruth.

It does seem out of character that an independent thinker like Jimmy would be a passive prisoner for three years. In fact, he did make several escape attempts. After all, it was expected of the officers – and what else was there to do to pass the time? I know for certain that he escaped in Italy; my grandmother recalled meeting, quite by chance, some lovely Italian people who had sheltered him. Germany was a very difficult country to successfully make a 'home run' in – the countryside was heavily policed and the locals unsympathetic – and punishments could be harsh. Bruce Robertson makes note, on 31 October 1944, of a bungalow commander going to 'civil gaol' for three months 'for damage done to his bungalow roof by the storage of soil from a tunnel.' This was not Jimmy, though perhaps he was involved. I would like to think so.

MOVING OUT

Towards the end of the war, chaos began to overtake German organisation, as the Allies crossed the Rhine. In Weinsberg, the prison guards were now all members of the Volkssturm (the German national militia), and the prisoners were to be moved by rail – much to their dismay; railway lines and trains were prime bombing targets. From 23 March 1945, several diary entries record the effects of bombing on the nearby rail yard, despite which, and after several false starts, they do all move out on 31 March, in a train of '60 cattle trucks marked with British flags and POW signs'.

They made steady progress, crossing the Danube. They passed through Munich and witnessed extensive damage and destruction. They arrived at their destination on 3 April: Moosburg. The largest POW camp in Germany, it held by this time at least 80,000 prisoners. Conditions were squalid, crowded. Edgy. Jimmy and the 1,200 Weinsburg POWs were accommodated in four bungalows in 'cramped space and appalling conditions'. Specifically, this meant 300 men per water tap,

human waste everywhere, prisoners sleeping on bungalow floors, with a blanket if they had one. Dysentery was a major problem.

Then, finally, on Tuesday 24 April came great excitement: 'BBC news flash announces agreement between Britain, USA, Russia and Reich that PsOW will remain in their present camps until overrun.' Moosburg was liberated on Sunday, 29 April. Jimmy records hearing gunfire, sees wounded men in camp, a Spitfire doing a roll right overhead:

At 12:00 hours an American tank and some jeeps came into the camp which was surrendered by the Goons at 12:04…Greatest thrill of war when up on rooftops at 13:30 saw Stars and Stripes being hoisted over Moosburg. Soon flags of all nationalities were flying over the camp.

The tone is jubilant, though muted. Perhaps it was hard to really believe it. And it was cold, still cramped and squalid, still dangerous and, of course, Jimmy couldn't leave straight away. He's 'thoroughly browned off'. He wants out. By 7 May, he was moving, though spent the day at Landshut aerodrome watching planes taking off without him. On VE Day, 8 May, after witnessing a loaded Dakota crash into five other planes on the runway, he finally left Germany for Reims.

May 10, 1945, is his last diary entry. Up at 4am after three hours sleep, he catches a Lancaster to Britain and makes this auspicious entry: 'landed at Aylesbury at 12:05. Went straight to Aylesbury Hospital with diarrhea.'

The wait was over. Almost.

My grandfather's service record notes that on his return home, he weighed 9st 9lbs and had somehow lost two inches off his six feet in height. Camp conditions, particularly in Moosburg, must have taken a toll, especially considering this weigh-in was three months after liberation.

But he received a 'One' rating from the Medical Board, which notes no psychiatric 'disability'. I cannot say why Jimmy adjusted relatively well, while others did not, though he always seems to have had a great enthusiasm for life and its possibilities. Perhaps this helped. In fact, war may have sharpened his determination to make the most of things.

An important discovery for me was the record of Jimmy's journey home. He wasted no time getting organised. From his first letter from Weinsberg, years earlier, he outlined his plans for independent travel home via the US. He managed to swing it – stopping by the US office of the NZ Petroleum Company to secure a job, traversing the continent and arriving home on 11 August 1945, well in advance of the rest of the bunch. Ruth and Jimmy were reunited, and my father met his father. The trio began to adjust to life as a family.

Jimmy had planned it all, done his own thing, restarted his career, wasted no time. He'd learned a lesson in Italy. The army was left in knots over who was to pay for his train fare, and what category of leave he'd taken while in America. In September 1945, just weeks after arriving home, the small family left for Peru, Jimmy to prospect for oil with his geologist's hammer, the beginning of an expatriate life that took them all over the world. No time to waste.

Medals for Captain James Moore Dorreen:
1939-45 Star
The Africa Star
The War Medal 1939-45
The NZ Service Medal

SOURCES

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PHOTOGRAPHS AND LETTER

James and Ruth on their wedding day, 9 November 1939. Ruth's parents are in the background.

Jimmy is second camel on the left. Caption reads: ‘All familiar faces including the jocular old gentleman beside me – I had just cracked a joke about his seat on a camel.’

Hitler mail. Ruth's first letter from Germany, dated 20 October 1943, but not received until 24 February 1944.

No caption, but the photograph was taken in Kent, meaning this must be Jimmy after liberation, and after hospital treatment in Aylesbury. He has three pips on his epaulettes; now it's Captain James Moore Dorreen.