George Bell, prisoner of war

Bell served in the 16th Battalion in France and was wounded in his back and knee when he was captured by German troops during the battle of Bullecourt in April 1917. He spent months in a prison hospital in German occupied Valenciennes in France and then moved to Stettin, a prisoner of war camp in Germany. Despite all his sufferings, George managed one act of defiance. He kept a series of diary notes whilst a prisoner, hiding the papers in a tube of toothpaste. After the War, he typed up a more detailed account of his time as a POW.

During the First World War around 4,082 Australians were taken as prisoners of War. They were captured by the Ottoman Turks in the Middle East and by the Germans in Europe. At Bullecourt, the largest number of Australians were taken prisoner (1,170). This included George Bell.

George’s fellow prisoners included Australian, British and Russian men. It was a grim existence and there were high death rates. Wounds became infected due to unsanitary conditions. Food was scarce and of poor quality. They were made to eat unspeakable meats: dog and horse. Their guards and the medical orderlies were often violent. Wounds were not dressed regularly and due to a lack of linen bandages, patients’ wounds were dressed with paper bandages.

Food given to prisoners

George was constantly starving. He described the food distributed to prisoners during a day;

“The ordinary diet is as follows: Breakfast 7-30, coffee. 9.30 six ounces of black bread. noon (dinner) bowl of "saur kraut" or swedes in hot water. 3 p.m. cup of coffee; tea 6 p.m. Bowl of hot water and two table spoonfuls of barley. The barley water, in color is uncommonly like dish-water, and smells odiously. The dinner soups, probably have a little dog or horse flesh mixed with them, possibly to give it a greasy appearance, incidentally it improves the taste. One seldom receives any of the meat.”

Once George was in Germany, Red Cross food packages began to arrive. George was over-joyed;

“My first packet from England arrived on the 30th. inst. I already feel years younger, and quite able to bear any future trials. The parcels contained a varied assortment of food stuffs. For instance, canned meat, jam, dripping, tea, sugar, milk, oxo and several additional articles. The number despatched from England; are three food parcels fortnightly and one clothing half yearly. Bread is forwarded from Berne under the auspices of the R.C.S. Regrettably, many parcels go astray in transit, probably Huns steal them. Despite this misfortune, however, when one commences a regular receipt of parcels they suffice to stave off hunger.”

French women

While at the prison hospital at Valenciennes, George reported that the French civilians around the prison camp would offer food to the prisoners when they could. When George had to go to the prison hospital for treatment;

“a girl rushed across the street from a doorway; flung her arms about my neck and placed several biscuits and a packet of cigarettes under the blanket covering me, and then kissed me, deliberately. I cannot explain the joyous feeling and desire to express my gratitude; the girl quickly ran off without waiting for thanks.”

The bravery and determination of French women to try and help Allied prisoners was extraordinary. It was one of
their ways to protest German occupation of their land. George wrote;

“Many French women have been shot, and not infrequently, are they whipped and clubbed, for attempting to assist the English "slaves". We owe much to the self-sacrifice and assistance of these noble women. Not one man would survive the Reprisal treatment, without the assistance given by the French women.”

About this item: Item 01: George W. D. Bell diary and notes, 14 April 1917 - 8 May 1918

FL289134 [1]

George W. D. Bell diary and notes, Pg 2 14 April 1917 - 8 May 1918
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FL289145 [6]

George W. D. Bell diary and notes, Pg 4 14 April 1917 - 8 May 1918
George W. D Bell
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Mail

Once in Germany at the Stettin camp, prisoners were allowed to write letters. George reports;

“Prisoners here are permitted to write one short letter and two field cards fortnightly. Special cards were issued, to forward to the Red Cross Society; parcels containing food and clothing will be received in return, but the mail service is very irregular. Consequently a reply will take 2 ½ months, possibly longer.”

Elise Edmonds, Senior Curator, Research & Discovery

Collections:

Bell papers, 14 April 1917-14 May 1918, by George William David Bell [24]

Item 01: George W. D. Bell diary and notes, 14 April 1917 - 8 May 1918 [2]

Item 02: George W. D. Bell war narrative, 14 April 1917-14 May 1918 [25]