Hammelburg, Germany. C 1943 One of the shows produced with the help of talent found among prisoners of war in Stalag XIIc was ‘The Cabaret’ with a Mexican setting. Costumes were made up from old clothes, blankets etc.
Background

Here are some ideas for students to consider while watching this DVD chapter.

- This film begins with the assertion that Australian servicemen were trained, disciplined, men. Do you think this is accurate? Why or why not?

- As you listen to the accounts in this section, what examples can you find in the DVD that support or challenge this suggestion?

- Discuss why you think keeping prisoners’ spirits high was so important. Keep a list of the techniques that prisoners used to achieve this.

DVD Chapter 3 – Life in the camps

Summary

This chapter proposes that, after capture, in some cases there was friction and resentment towards the officers from the enlisted men. It illustrates that two of the great challenges of camp life were the maintenance of discipline and keeping boredom at bay, and it shows how the prisoners used lessons, debates and sport to keep their minds and bodies as active as they could.

Some of the more remarkable events that took place in the POW camps of the Second World War were the concerts and plays performed by the prisoners. This chapter examines those events in detail, showing students how important to morale and a sense of worth those performances were.

Duration 12 minutes 50 seconds

The script of this chapter can be found in printable text form on the CD-ROM.
Fred Skeels’s story

Why us, and why did we get sent?

- Explain why the soldiers in Able Seaman Fred Skeels’s camp would feel so frustrated. Was anybody to blame for this feeling?

- Script a conversation between two of the soldiers and Fred Skeels in which they explain to Fred their disappointment over being captured when Singapore fell. What steps do you need to take to ensure that your research is historically accurate?

- Script a conversation where three of the officers in the camp discuss what to do about the men’s resentment and their own disappointment concerning the surrender. Again, be aware of historical accuracy.

A column of British and Australian prisoners of war marching through the streets. The column is headed by a member of the Japanese Security Police (the Kempeitai) followed by a Korean guard. The Allied troops had been captured at the fall of Singapore.
Listen to Pilot Officer Geoff Cornish’s story in this DVD chapter and then read the additional material from his Archive interview below.

We had eight in a room and we finished up with eighteen, three-tier bunks in exactly the same space. And the feeling of being hemmed in by people was huge. You wanted to bust a chap’s nose in just because he was there and he was too close to you. As they say, ‘invading your space’ is the term now. You knew it was no good losing your temper or picking a fight or something like that because you had to live with him twenty-four hours a day. Okay, there were some minor scuffles in the first week or so. But people soon learnt to control their temper and to control their attitude and to be more thoughtful of others. In that way it was wonderful discipline, you had to pull together as a unit and you did. – Geoff Cornish

Consider the following reminiscences.

It was treated as an RAF station. There was a Senior British Officer – the most senior ranking, was in charge, from our side of the camp. Although we didn’t have to obey him… we would do what he suggested.

– Geoff Cornish

There probably wasn’t any problem across the board really as far as ranks were concerned except that you treated officers as officers. If it was a squadron leader you were talking to you called him, ‘Sir’, unless he said otherwise, if he turned round and said, ‘Call me Bill’. You called him Bill. – Rex Austin

… they were so filled up with their own importance, as being in charge of all these prisoners, you know, and they never did much, very much, for our prisoners, the officers, they weren’t a very trust – well not trustworthy, shouldn’t say they were distrustful, but you had no faith in them, you know? No respect nor faith, it wasn’t always their fault, because they weren’t allowed to work, the Japs wouldn’t let them work, but the old British officers’ principles are a cane under the arm and swagger sticks and polish your boots and all these sort of things, you know? It was a good thing for discipline, but if you had no boots to polish, and no polish to put on your boots, you couldn’t very well look very presentable, and we never ever looked presentable whilst I was a prisoner. – Fred Skeels

Discussion

- Why do you think these prisoners have different accounts of their officers?
- How do these accounts help you understand the relationship between officers and ordinary servicemen in captivity?
- Why is the chain of command so important in the military? What stresses does imprisonment place on both ends of that chain – the men and the officers?
Activity 2

Classes in camp

Research and discussion

It didn’t matter what you wanted to do, there was somebody in that camp.

– Geoff Cornish

Many former POWs have given the Archive accounts of formal education conducted in camps. Sergeant Keith Hooper was captured on the last day of the Battle of Crete on 31 May 1941 and ended up in a camp at Hohenfels, in Germany. This is what he said in his interview about classes in the camp:

University was set up in conjunction with the London University. London University was the mentor. We’d contacted them and they said yes, if you want to set up some faculties of various things we’ll supply the type of stuff you need to study and the examination papers when it comes around to examinations.

And it worked very well. I’m amazed… at how many courses we had. There were about fifty courses and oh, an incredible number of things, jewellery making, and you can imagine, any courses you get at the university now, we had them.

And they’d set the exam paper and then the exam papers would be sent back to London and they would mark them there, you see. And then eventually in a couple of months time you’d hear how you went. Did I get my degree or did I get a pass or whatever? But to me, the university was the really the outstanding thing of Hohenfels, the most outstanding thing… out of four thousand five hundred and twenty-nine men you’d probably get maybe eight hundred would want to do a university course which made it really worthwhile for the London University. – Keith Hooper

Suggest ways that the prisoners may have created the equipment needed for studying jewellery making or chemistry or music, or any other university course that interested them.

In the civilian camps, children were often incarcerated along with their parents, so schools were begun, using adults that were imprisoned as the teachers. Fifteen-year-old Howard Walker attended such a school in Pu Dong Camp, in China:

We had to study, we were still under extreme difficulties because there was no paper supplied, or pencils or pens, and we had to sort of gather these from everyone who could let us have them. We used to use toilet paper if there was any to spare and jam tin labels from people who got parcels and every bit of paper they could possibly use was given to the school. And the whole thing was taken very seriously and I received a few years of very good schooling there. – Howard Walker

Write a list of things you think would be in a curriculum that you would study if you suddenly found yourself in the same situation as Howard Walker. Interview your teacher and ask them what they think is important. Ask your parents the same question at home.

As a class, combine all your information and design a curriculum you think would be suitable for your own education for a year.

You are trying to study without textbooks or even writing paper and pens, let alone access to a library or the internet. Write an account of how you think the classes would be run. How would you go about studying and doing homework?

Divide the class into two groups. One half represents the adults in the POW camp, the other half the children. You are to have a camp meeting where the adults must convince the children that a camp school is necessary.

Probably Sulmona, Italy. Flight Lieutenant A.H. (Henry) Comber RAAF (an Australian attached to 39 Squadron, R.A.F) at work on his painting ‘Italian Spring’. An artist before the war, he painted this work when a prisoner of war 1942-1945, but had to abandon his bundle of paintings on the roadside during a forced winter march in January 1945 from Stalag Luft III at Sagan, Poland.
Activity 3

Sport in camp

**Analysing the Photographs**

Wherever they were imprisoned, and while they had the physical strength, Australian servicemen found a way to play sport. And it was taken seriously.

They invited me to be goalkeeper and I let too many balls in and they sacked me pretty quick and lively.

– Rex Austin

The following photographs were taken by two Australian POWs held in camps in Europe during the Second World War. What can we learn from these photographs about conditions in those camps? Look at each one and answer the questions, then check the actual captions to the photographs at the end of this worksheet.
Activity 3
Activity 3

Analysing the Photographs

What is happening in the pictures?

1. ............................................................................................................................
   ............................................................................................................................
   ............................................................................................................................

2. ............................................................................................................................
   ............................................................................................................................
   ............................................................................................................................

3. ............................................................................................................................
   ............................................................................................................................
   ............................................................................................................................

4. ............................................................................................................................
   ............................................................................................................................
   ............................................................................................................................

What do you think happened before each photograph was taken?

1. ............................................................................................................................
   ............................................................................................................................
   ............................................................................................................................

2. ............................................................................................................................
   ............................................................................................................................
   ............................................................................................................................

3. ............................................................................................................................
   ............................................................................................................................
   ............................................................................................................................

4. ............................................................................................................................
   ............................................................................................................................
   ............................................................................................................................
Activity 3

What do you think happened after each photograph was taken?

1. [Description]

2. [Description]

3. [Description]

4. [Description]

What might be happening outside each photograph?

1. [Description]

2. [Description]

3. [Description]

4. [Description]

What can you learn by looking at the faces of the prisoners in all the photographs, the condition of their clothing and their surroundings?


Examine each photograph carefully. What small details can you see that were not obvious at first glance?

1. [Description]

2. [Description]

3. [Description]

4. [Description]

If you had to write a caption for each photograph, what would it be?

1. [Caption]

2. [Caption]

3. [Caption]

4. [Caption]

The actual captions provided by the veterans are-

1. Raphael (‘Ray’) Corbett competing in the high jump at E3 Camp Blechhammer, Poland, 1943.


3. Boxing Carnival, Blechhammer, 1944 with invited German guards.

Activity 4

Entertainment in camp

In many camps throughout South East Asia and Europe, the POWs showed remarkable ingenuity and skill, performing everything from Shakespeare to variety concerts.

Improvisation and creativity

Once, the prisoners managed to smuggle a full drum kit into Changi prison, piece by piece under their sarongs. They were amazingly inventive in finding ways to make musical instruments, toys, sports equipment, theatrical sets and so on.

Here are four articles prisoners constructed by improvising with whatever materials they could scrounge from the jail or nearby houses. How would you duplicate their improvisation?

1. Guitar

2. A ventriloquist’s doll

3. A stage set for a play that takes place in an English house

4. Women’s gowns for a play

What have you learnt about conditions in the camps?

Why would music be so important to POWs?

Compile a list of ten songs you would like to have with you if you were ever imprisoned.

Which would be the song that would:
- make you feel happy;
- make you feel safe;
- make you feel strong enough to survive;
- lift your spirits when you were down; and
- help you to inspire others?

I really did my stage debut in that prison camp.

– Maric ‘Eddie’ Gilbert

Interpretation and analysis

Find out the meaning of the words:
- debut
- camaraderie
- banter

Create an advertising banner and flyer for the Australiana show in Changi prison.

For higher grades

Maric Gilbert played the part of ‘Mabel’ in the production Dad and Dave. Research the ‘Dad and Dave’ films and write a brief outline of the main characters (Dad Rudd, Dave, Mother Rudd, Myrtle (Mabel)).

Write the dialogue around the scene of Private Maric Gilbert’s debut as ‘Mabel’. Refer to his story on the DVD.

Fun for any class

List the types of concerts the prisoners managed to organise. Select one of these, and as a class try and replicate it. Prepare things like costumes, props and programs using the materials the prisoners would have had available to them.
Activity 5

Other activities

One activity that helped women prisoners deal with boredom and boost their morale also served another useful purpose.

A Red Cross representative in Changi prison, Mrs Ethel Mulvaney, organised the making of quilts and managed to obtain permission from the Japanese to have the quilts sent to the men in Changi hospital.

Each woman or girl embroidered a square, which would become part of the larger quilt, and was advised to ‘put something of herself’ into the square. These embroideries became coded messages, some more obvious than others, to let the men know that their wives and children were still alive – something they would otherwise have no way of knowing.

Sheila Bruhn was one of those quilters and this is what she said about the experience in her interview.

“We were given an eight inch square, all of us, especially cut out from the sacking that had the rice flour and sugar, so that was unpicked and washed and carefully cut out and given to each of us that were interested in having one. I did a map of Australia with a kangaroo in the centre, an aeroplane at the top and a sailing boat on the bottom to signify that I was going to get to Australia by hook or by crook, somehow or other. But unfortunately I forgot the island of Tasmania which I didn’t know existed, my father never told me anything about Tasmania, he only told me about Australia. So that is something that I still have to apologise for.

…Another one of them was a cheerful Tommy [British] soldier with the thumbs up sign. And another famous one, of course, was three dwarves with two menus saying, ‘There will always be tomorrow.’ Of course some of the more national ones would be, ‘There will always be an England as long as Scotland stands.’ …there was one there with two bunny rabbits, the mother rabbit, and the baby rabbit had a blue ribbon around its neck to indicate that they had a son. There was another with two sheep, and the baby lamb had a pink ribbon around its neck to indicate that they had a baby girl… Freddy Bloom did a clock with wings on it to indicate that she wished time would fly. Elizabeth Ennis did a ship called Homeward Bound with the hope that one day she would be sailing home with her husband. And of course the very famous one I would think, was by Iris Parfitt, our cartoonist, a square of a lonely figure in a cell saying, ‘How long, oh Lord? How long?’

There were other bits and pieces, funny bits. Dr Margaret Smallwood had her cell decorated with underwear and called it ‘the room with a view’. And one who had a humorous one, had a sketch of just a plain brick wall and called ‘Changi Holiday Home’.

Anything that would bring the men perhaps a bit of laughter, or a smile to their faces. To know that in a way, the women are keeping their end up. -Sheila Bruhn

This is a picture of one of the quilts-

If you visit the Australian War Memorial website at www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/quilt/detail_view.asp, you will be able to view specific squares in one of the quilts and learn more about their making.

- Design a brief caption outlining the history of the Australian quilt that is on display in the Australian War Memorial in Canberra.
- As a class, each design and contribute a square to a quilt that would reflect either what you have learnt about the POW experience or the hopes and aspirations of your own group.
- Suggest ways you would encode a personal message to a loved one.
- Students could look at the AIDS Quilt as a current quilt project designed to ease grief and suffering. See www.aidsquilt.org.au.
Interpretation and analysis

Hope was in short supply, boredom plentiful.

It’s very, very monotonous. There’s nothing that really excites you.

– Rex Austin

Discuss whether you think these quotes are an adequate summary of the experience of most POWs whose stories you hear.

In this DVD chapter POWs describe all of the activities that took place in the camps.

Keep a list of the techniques prisoners used to keep their spirits up.

Explain why you think these activities were so important for the survival of prisoners.

What do you think was the most successful technique used to maintain a positive spirit while in captivity? Justify your selection and compare your choice with the rest of the class.

List the ways Australian prisoners improvised to create what they needed from what they had. Select one of these articles and see if you can duplicate their improvisation. What does your experience tell you about conditions in the camps?

Discussion

Here are some statements and questions for a group of two or three students to discuss and write notes on, prior to a whole class discussion. Review the DVD chapter first.

- The POWs were clearly suffering from the hardships of prison life and became frustrated. Talk about a time when you were suffering hardships and your behaviour and mood changed. Perhaps you were badly injured in a sporting activity; maybe your family moved house and you left your friends. Discuss how you managed and overcame these feelings.

- The prisoners had to contemplate what really mattered in their lives as POWs. Have you ever had reason to reflect on important aspects of your life? Perhaps your parents forced you to take a part-time job or stay on at school. Talk about this time in your group. How did it make you feel? Did you get angry with the authority figures in your life? Where could you go for support?

- Was discipline important for the prisoners? Is discipline important in our lives? Why or why not? Do you consider yourself to be a disciplined person? When does your self-discipline suffer most? When you’re under pressure or stress? Would things have been very different if the POWs’ self-discipline waned? What gives us a sense of self-discipline? Discuss these issues within your group.

- Define boredom. When do you get bored? How do you relieve the boredom? Do you think it’s easier to deal with boredom in 2008 than it might have been in, say, 1944? Why?

- You are alone with nothing to do, day after day. List all the things you would like to think about. Invent a ‘mind game’ that you could play simply by thinking. Come up with the rules and how it works and then teach another student your game.

- After the whole class discussion, use any of the ideas above as the basis for an original narrative. Any of the ideas above may be the springboard for your story. It does not have to be set in a POW camp (but it could be).