Humour & mateship

‘Every one of us had someone to care for us’
– Ian Wall

Jack Chalker
Two working men, Konyu River Camp
Burma Thailand Railway: Konyu 1942
Pen and black ink, brush and wash on paper
13.9 x 8.1 cm
Australian War Memorial (ART91811)
Focus questions

- Why was humour important for POWs?
- Think about what you find funny. Team up with a partner and compare what makes you laugh. List instances of humour that you share.
- As you watch the DVD, compare the list of what you and your partner find funny with what the POWs found funny. Can you explain the similarities and differences?

Mateship

Coming home gave POWs mixed feelings, because it meant separation from each other. Families and friends found it difficult to understand the POWs’ experiences in the camps and many former POWs felt lost and lonely without their mates.

In human nature you saw the very best and you saw the very worst of the behaviour of men. I’m thankful to say the fellows who surrounded me, my mates; they stood tall amongst the tallest, good men.

Focus questions

Explore how the environment and conditions of a POW camp affected prisoners’ concepts of mateship.

Do you think the experience of being a prisoner under such great duress always creates ‘good mates’?

How is mateship in these circumstances different from the relationships that people in less extreme situations experience?

DVD Chapter 5 – Humour & mateship

Summary

This chapter explores two of the critical survival strategies employed by the POWs – humour and mateship. It examines the different kinds of humour utilised by them - from intellectual games to practical jokes and making the best out of a very bad situation. The POWs’ dependence on each other is looked at in detail and the complexities of mateship are illustrated by touching stories from the veterans. The chapter also examines the other side of mateship, when the circumstances of prison camps caused men to place self interest ahead of their friends.

Duration 13 minutes 29 seconds

The script of this chapter can be found in printable text form on the CD-ROM.
Take up the stories
Stories 1 & 2

Malcolm Keshan's story

Any POW who didn’t have a mate had nothing.

In POW camps, the biggest dangers to morale were often boredom and despair. Many prisoners invented their own unique ways of coping with the isolation and the numbing repetition of each day. Sergeant Malcolm Keshan was imprisoned in Stalag 383, in Hohenfels, Germany:

In 383 you were looking for something to do all the time. Something to occupy you. You had to be occupied. I used to play every sort of sport…

Malcolm Keshan talks about two of his fellow prisoners. One used to walk around reciting Shakespeare. Sadly he ‘went nutty’ in the end. The other used to ‘fish’ in the murky fire pool with a stick and a piece of cotton.

Interview

- Develop your own interviews with:
  - the bloke who used to walk around camp reciting Shakespeare; and
  - McGinty, the man who went fishing.

- Write six questions to ask each of these prisoners.

- Write out the transcript, using your knowledge of the POW experience to create their answers.

Design

It is 1944 and you are an Australian prisoner of war in Stalag 383 in Germany. You have been appointed by the Senior British Officer to create a poster that is designed to encourage the men to keep a positive attitude by helping each other. Use the information in this chapter of the DVD to help you to design the poster. You must include specific advice and suggestions.

Charles Yacopetti's story

In camps, laughter was seized upon eagerly, whenever and wherever it could be found. Best of all, from the prisoners’ point of view anyway, was to be able to laugh at their captors. In Korea, the Communists gave Charlie Yacopetti and his mates a decent laugh and a momentary respite from prison life.

So I requested a meeting with the camp commandant and I pointed out there were lice in the camp and this could get quite serious and I would like some assistance in the way of whatever medication they had, to treat the lice. Anyway, he said he would give it his greatest consideration.

The following day I was summoned, on my crutches again, up to the commandant’s office where a staff member, one of his staff, someone in the office, met me and told me, I think it was one of the interpreters, told me that he'd given it his serious consideration and he agreed, ‘We should not have lice in the camp.’ And therefore I was to put a sign outside of each hut: ‘Out of Bounds to Lice.’- Charles Yacopetti

Design

Design two ‘Out of Bounds to Lice’ posters for the camp, which include 5 rules for keeping lice out of the huts. One should be designed by the POWs, and the other by their Chinese captors. Examine Charles Yacopetti’s story again to determine the differences in their point of view. Who will take the poster seriously and who will use it as an opportunity for humour?
Take up the stories
Story 3

Frank Roy’s story
They reckon it was the only thing that kept him alive.

We had a fellow in our truck, on the cattle truck, name of Dick Beale. Now Dicky Beale, his parents used to own a piano place in Bourke Street in Melbourne, Beale Pianos, and Dick had lived pretty comfortably all his young life. He was a thin, weedy, little bloke but he, as I said, lived very comfortably. And he was lying in this truck, this carriage, and he’s moaning and groaning and he said, ‘Oh God, if I don’t get something to eat I’ll think I’ll die!’ Anyway, there was a big raw-boned Western Australian bloke down the other end of the carriage and he jumped up and he said, ‘You little bugger, you die, I’ll eat you!’ And he waved this knife under his Dick’s nose and they reckon it was the only thing that kept him alive. Every time he got a hunger pain he used to look at this engineer bloke.

- What is it about the story of a prisoner threatening to eat Dick Beale that makes Frank Roy laugh?
- What do you think was the real motive of the big Western Australian bloke?
- Do you think the fear of being eaten really kept Dick Beale alive? If so, why?
Corporal Athol 'Tom' Pledger relates the story about a fellow prisoner on Ambon who obtained two pork chops and was attacked severely by bull ants as he smuggled them back to camp in his clothing.

- Locate Ambon on the map at www.awm.gov.au/stolenyears/ww2/japan/index.asp. What does its location tell you about the climate there?
- Why is this important for you to know the context of Tom Pledger’s story?
- This is what the Australian War Memorial website says about the Ambon POW camp:

  *Unknown to the Allies, prisoners were held at isolated camps on Ambon, in Indonesia, and Hainan, an island off the south coast of China. Just over a thousand Australians, members of Gull Force, had been forced to surrender on Ambon in February 1942. By war’s end more than two-thirds of them were dead. At first, conditions were reasonable; later, treatment in Tantui camp (on Ambon) deteriorated. Starvation and brutality prevailed. Some prisoners died in Allied raids on a Japanese bomb dump located next to the camp and others in medical ‘experiments’. A survivor described their hopelessness toward the end: ‘The men knew they were dying’.*

Does Tom Pledger’s interview support this view?

Find evidence in the ‘chop story’ that verifies the suggestion that prisoners on Ambon were starved.
Take up the stories
Story 5

Ian Wall’s story

Any POW who didn’t have a mate had nothing.

Sergeant Ian Wall worked as a prisoner on the Thai–Burma Railway. Over two thousand Australians died on the railway, often called the ‘Railway of Death’.

Below are two photographs from the Thai-Burma Railway.

What do the photographs suggest about the challenges of climate and conditions that would have been presented to the POWs who were forced to build the railway? How important would taking care of each other have been for the men?

Write a diary entry for a POW travelling on the train in the first photograph.

Describe the actions taking place in the second photograph.

The curved trestle bridge approximately 154 kilometres north of Nong Pladuk. This bridge, approximately one kilometre south of Hintok Station, was one of six trestle bridges between Konyu (Hellfire Pass) 152 kilometres north of Nong Pladuk, and Hintok 155 kilometres north of Nong Pladuk.
Take up the stories
Stories 6, 7 & 8

Maric 'Eddie'
Gilbert and
Ian Wall

Mateship
is a special
circumstance.

Listen to the way these men
express their idea of mateship.

It was so important to me... that
moral support. – Eddie Gilbert

You lived for one another. – Ian Wall

- Compare the experiences of these two POWs.
- What do they have in common?

Sheila Bruhn's
story

Having somebody you
can always depend on,
no matter what sort of
person you are, they still
accept you – it does mean
a lot in life. To be able to rely on somebody
like that, particularly when it is a matter of life and death.
And you know that it didn’t matter what you did, you
have got somebody there who will help you and try and
understand. - Sheila Bruhn

Discussion

Remember that Sheila Bruhn was a young girl when
she was imprisoned in Changi. Think about her
recollections and discuss the following questions.

- Explain how her experience of being a prisoner of
war was similar to that experienced by males.
- How did it differ?
- Explain what Sheila means when she says, ‘Having
somebody you can always depend on, no matter what
sort of person you are, they still accept you – it does
mean a lot in life.’

Walter Hick’s story

I reproached him, but
without any bitterness.

It is important to record that not all Australians
met the challenge of sticking with their mates.
Private Walter Hicks, also imprisoned on Ambon,
describes the continual theft of food from his
garden and the pumpkin he was able to grow.

- What does Walter Hicks say isn’t mateship?
  Do you think it is reasonable given the
  circumstances the men found themselves in?

- Design a cage that could protect Walter’s
  pumpkin. Remember you can only work with
  things that would have been easily available to
  him.

- Walter Hicks felt that he couldn’t blame his
  friend who stole his pumpkin because he was
dying. Create a diary entry for Walter where he
  writes what he thinks about the situation and
  whether or not he still regards the man as a
  mate.

- Debate the proposition that ‘mateship means
  understanding that mates might let you down’.

- Debate the proposition that in the POW camps,
  mateship = survival.
The Claw

Arthur Leggett was working as a slave labourer in a coalmine in Poland when a simple joke by an Australian POW resulted in a hilarious moment for the entire camp.

There was one fellow who brought up a kilo of sugar into the camp, smuggled it into the camp. You did that by simply having it in your dixie and when they give you a body search, you held your arms out. They never thought to look in the dixie. And he puts a note on this, ‘One spoonful per cup, or else you will become a victim of The Claw.’ And he drew a horrible bloody claw.

Well, then, someone else wrote a note to his mate, ‘Don’t do this, or that, or you become a victim of The Claw’. Well, it got down underground and on one of the cement walls one of the blokes with his lamp wrote, ‘Twenty wagons per man today or you will become a victim of The Claw’.

Well, the Poles got onto this, ‘There is a secret society springing up amongst the prisoners. Oh, it’s terrible!’ reported it to the Germans. And we were all lined up on our day off, and in came a German colonel with an interpreter, and he made a brilliant speech, ‘We’re all soldiers. We mustn’t lose our sense of pride in what we are doing… And we’ve found out there is a secret society sprung up amongst you. Now step forward all those who are victims of The Claw.’

We had been locked up for four years, and the whole parade dissolves in laughter, and he could never work out what the joke was. – Arthur Leggett

How does Arthur Leggett’s story of ‘The Claw’ help you to understand what it was like to be a POW under the Germans?

Why did the Australians find the German concern so funny? Can it be argued that guards and prisoners see humour differently?

Draw a picture of what you think ‘The Claw’ would look like.
You are a long-term POW in a German camp. Design a sign to be placed in the POW barracks that instructs newly arrived captives on life in the camp. State the skills they require to survive, and the do's and don'ts of daily life.

Explain the role humour played in helping these soldiers survive their experience as POWs.

Discuss the idea that 'mateship' was crucial in this environment.

Discuss the suggestion that mateship can survive everything but the theft of food.

Read the following anecdote:

… You’ve got no idea what a letter meant. Just to make the contact. It was really, really something. You used to get real uptight if you didn’t get a letter. The letters came around and there’s another funny incident.

Each block had a postman. That’s how big the blocks were. They used to come round and just read out the names and dish out the letters. This day, the post came round and he went into a hut, he read out the names, and he read out the name ‘Bluey Einshaw.’ There was an Englishman in the hut, he called him over. He says, ‘Do you think you’d mind reading this letter out to him? He’s not very well educated and he can’t read. He’d really appreciate it if someone read it for him.’ ‘Yeah, sure. No trouble. I’ll read it.’ So he gives him the letter. Out he goes.

The Englishman opens up the letter and he starts reading it. His wife’s left him, his girlfriend’s pregnant and he’s reading all this out. He said, ‘I can’t go any further!’ Everyone burst out laughing. It was a letter that had been written out especially for him to read. That’s the sort of jokes they used to play on each other.

- Malcolm Kershaw

Explain why letters were so important to POWs.

Discuss as a group the idea that prisoner of war camps are where you can best see the ‘typical Aussie’.

What does this anecdote tell us about the idea of a unique Australian sense of humour?

You are at a school camp. Write a letter home to your parents that starts out convincingly about your activities and gradually becomes more and more outrageous. Remember that by the end of the letter, you want the joke to be discovered.
I’m thankful to say the fellows who surrounded me, my mates; they stood tall amongst the tallest, good men – Lloyd Moule

- What evidence does this chapter present that mateship was the most important factor in surviving as a POW?

- We are used to regarding mateship as a positive quality, and most of the stories here speak of providing great support under intense pressure. Where are there examples of mateship meaning tolerating behaviour you don’t like in other people?

- Create two lists on the aspects of mateship amongst POWs; one positive list and one negative list. Find examples from the stories here to place under each column. Which one is the largest?

- Try to explain why, in a prisoner of war camp, playing practical jokes on one another or laughing at the agony of another prisoner is considered appropriate and even healthy.

Osaka, Japan, 1945. These prisoners of war who had been released from Kyusai on the southern island of Japan hitch hiked 200 miles to reach the occupational troops. They are having their first ride in a motor car for three years.