

LETTERS IN A SHOE BOX

1940-1945



Naomi Schamroth Rapeport
2017

LETTERS IN A SHOE BOX

1940-1945

Foreword

Julian Meyer was born in Johannesburg on the 18th August 1918. He was schooled at the King Edward VII School for Boys. He went on to study law at the University of the Witwatersrand. He interrupted his studies when he volunteered to join the Union Defence Force (U.D.F.) at the beginning of the Second World War (WWII). He was assigned to the Transvaal Scottish Second Battalion. During the five years of the War he wrote numerous letters to his family in Johannesburg.

These letters were kept by his mother, Fanny Meyer. They were subsequently given to Julian. They were kept in a shoebox in his garage at the family home in Pietersburg. Following Julian's death on the 6th September 1993, the letters were taken for safe keeping by his second son, Ralph. It was Ralph's intention to compile a document of his father's experiences. Unfortunately, this never happened. The letters were subsequently scanned by the family as PDF documents. In 2015 I was given copies of these documents. The letters are beautifully written and give the reader an interesting overview of the experiences of a soldier and prisoner of war (POW).

Naomi Schamroth Rapeport

Daughter of Zelda.

May 2017

Contents

Chapters	Page
1. Introduction	3
2. Training in South Africa	7
3. Voyage to Suez Egypt	16
4. Union Defence Force and the Western Desert	20
5. War Experience in Egypt and the Western Desert	30
6. Italian Prisoner of War number 32383	52
7. Résumé of Italian POW	63
8. German Prisoner of War number 248565	70
9. Résumé of German POW	90
10. Repatriation to England	100
11. Zamzam	108



L/Cpl J Meyer; number 32383

Introduction

Julian Meyer volunteered to serve in the Union Defence Force (U.D.F.) during World War II. He joined the army in 1940, aged 22 years old and spent over 4 years away from home. He wrote numerous letters and postcards to his family which detail his experience in the army. The letters were dated from the 17th December 1940 until the 9th July 1945. Most of the letters were addressed to his mother, Mrs A. L. Meyer, 26 Johnston Street, Berea, Johannesburg and written to: 'Dear Ma, Dad, Leah and Zelda' – the latter being his two sisters.

The correspondence covers the period from his enlistment until his return to South Africa after the War. It includes telegrams and letters that the Meyer family received in Johannesburg from the Department of Defence and the Red Cross. The letters narrate his training in South Africa, voyage to Egypt, and time spent in Egypt and the Western Desert. They continue when he was an Italian Prisoner of War (POW), a German POW and describe his release and repatriation to England. The narration confirms events that occurred during World War II. Due to censorship, he does not give precise details. However, he does allude to important events and happenings.

The postal stamps on the addressed envelopes and postcards give an indication of his movements. They vary from the category of 'On Active Service'; Censored; to stamps from Egypt, Italy, Germany, and England. They confirm his status - Prigionieri di Guerra, Kriegsgefangenenpost, and ex P.W respectively.

They also illustrate the time delay between the writing of his letters and the time that he or the family received the mail. The dates of the letters are given either as a superscript or adjacent to the text.

These letters show the transformation from a young man into a mature adult. They deal with various issues.

1. The need to maintain contact with his family.

This is illustrated by a persistent desire for news of his family. '*I do hope one of you will manage to write soon*' '*I hope to receive a letter very soon now!*' '*I am more than delighted to receive two letters from home.*' '*Wednesday was a bumper Post day.*' '*I have not had a letter from you since I last wrote.*' When he did not hear from the family, he wrote '*I am a little worried in case there should be some reason for your sudden silence.*' Many letters start with a resume of the post that he received. When there was a lack of correspondence from the family, he would admonish individual family members for not writing. His correspondence not only included mail from his direct family members, but also from numerous other relatives - aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends. Following his capture at Tobruk, Libya in June 1942, there was a hiatus in mail. There were long periods when he and his family had no contact and a similar situation occurred in Germany. As a

POW, his correspondence was restricted to a limited amount of letters and cards that he could write per month. During his period as a POW he anguished for news from the family. As time passed, he persistently asked for photographs (snaps) of the family. He felt that they were of far more significance than letters.

2. Information of happenings in South Africa

He wanted to know about both domestic and national news. There was often banter regarding issues at home, news of the extended family and friends. This covered birthdays, births, bar mitzvahs, engagements, weddings, and deaths – the so-called hatch, match, and dispatch events. A huge need was reading material - newspapers, magazines, and books. Information was also gleaned from newspapers sent to him while in Egypt, but also from newspapers published by the Army such as the Springbok. In Egypt, there was a period when he had access to radio broadcasts – predominantly the BBC. He tried to keep up with his law studies and requested a textbook on Mercantile Law. As a POW he lamented the lack of books in the Italian POW camp and at a later stage wrote about the library set up by the Red Cross. A similar situation occurred in Germany.

3. Requirement of basic items.

These ranged from clothing items, toiletries, writing material, and watches. His requirements were detailed in his letters home. He enjoyed the parcels received and documented the items contained in each. Parcels were received from the immediate family, as well as from his extended family - the Blieden and Meyer families. He acknowledged parcels sent from family friends and a girlfriend Lilian Stein. The Old Edwardians - Old Boys Comfort Committee, of the King Edward VII School, where he had previously studied, and the South African Gifts and Comforts Fund Committee also sent him gifts in Egypt.¹ As a POW he expressed huge gratitude to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) for their parcels. He was also indebted to the South African Red Cross who organised parcels via South Africa House, London.

4. Maintenance of Jewish observance

Many letters revolved around the forthcoming Jewish holidays, the manner in which they were celebrated, particularly Pesach, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur. Food parcels received included traditional Jewish delicacies such as teiglach, imberlach and pletzlach. Wherever possible he connected up with the local Jewish communities and was hosted by them for Shabbat. This occurred locally, in Egypt and in England. He described their hospitality. The Egyptian community was Sephardic, and he remarked on the similarities with Ashkenazi traditions. During his time as a POW in Italy he wrote of the manner in which the festivals were celebrated. During his time in Germany he alluded to the High Holidays but did not mention them by name. In his last letters to his family from England, following his release as a POW, he questioned his beliefs.

5. Money

A ‘curse’ was a shortage of money. He did receive a salary from the U.D.F which was sent to his parents. Intermittently he requested money and during his time in North Africa asked for at least £1 to be sent monthly. At times he helped others in need of money. He acknowledged money postal orders and the generosity of relatives who sent money as gifts for Rosh Hashanah. A desire was to go on a trip to Palestine during his leave in Egypt and he started a ‘Palestine Fund’. During his time as a POW he never requested money. His main request was cigarettes which were probably used for trading food and goods. While in Germany he was paid for the work he did. He ensured that money was reimbursed to his parents in South Africa.

Julian wrote about his friends, and in Egypt recorded the war casualties of those that he knew. In particular he often wrote about his friend, Philip Medalie who sustained spinal injuries on active duty. Philip returned to the Union. Many letters from the start of Julian’s enlistment included regards from Philip to the family. After Philip’s return to the Union, he always conveyed regards to Philip. He traced the progress of two school friends who qualified as doctors during this time – Morris and Lippy (Robert Lipschitz became a professor of neurosurgery).

Indirectly Julian covered the progress of other family members who enlisted in the Army – all first cousins:

Jack Baynash (1903-1953) served as a doctor in Kenya, East Africa. During his tenure there, he married Esther Jacobs. This caused a lot of consternation in the family, as Jack had not let his parents know. He subsequently worked at the Heights (Voortrekker Hoogte, Pretoria) during the War.

Bernard Blieden (1913 -1997) enrolled in the Air Force and got his wings. He spent time in Kenya and met up with Jack Baynash. He was promoted to the position of lieutenant.

Julian Blieden (1921- 2013) also enrolled into the Air Force and became an instructor at the Heights.

Woolf Austoker (1920-1971), a fellow soldier and POW, was frequently mentioned. Following the War, he married Julian’s first cousin – Joyce Lewis.

Judell Blieden (1908 – 1992), a first cousin, and his wife, Daphne Blieden (nee Green, 1918 – 1965) were aboard the Egyptian passenger ship Zam Zam en route from New York, USA to Cape Town when they were taken captive by the Germans. The letters followed their reported progress with the release of Daphne to Cairo and correspondence from her upon her return to South Africa. Julian wrote of his reunion with Judell in London at the end of the war.

Events described in the letters track events that took place during the War. His descriptions are more accurate than some events published due to the fact that

majority of his letters were dated. One is able to discern the influence of the propaganda that he was exposed to during his time in the North African desert as well as in Italy. Analysis of his letters many years after World War II give a clearer understanding of events. These letters must be read in context with the hopes and desires of this young man.

References:

1. The South African Gifts and Comforts Fund was a benevolent fund established by Field Marshal Smuts and administered by his wife "Ouma" Smuts and her "Band" of Voluntary Workers in co-operation with the Quartermaster-General. Gifts were sent to servicemen and women during World War II. They were known as "Glory Bags". They contained all sorts of reminders from home including cigarettes. For Christmas, Christmas cake was included in the parcels.

SOUTH AFRICAN
GIFTS AND COMFORTS FUND

WORLD WAR 1939-1945

Letter of Thanks

—to workers from

Mrs. J. C. Smuts
(Ouma)

6th OCTOBER, 1945



6. 10. 45.
DOORNKLOOF,
IRENE,
TRANSVAAL

Dear Friends,

Now that there is peace at last after six years of the most terrible war in all history, I want to send a word of thanks & appreciation to all those women who have worked so hard & done so much to brighten the lives of our brave Boys & Girls on Active Service. Most of us have had husbands or sons or brothers at the front & we have spent many anxious days, knowing them to be surrounded by death & danger on all sides. To some of us our dear ones will never more return, but in the midst of our sorrow we are proud of them & the part they played, & South Africa will never forget her brave Boys & Girls who raised her name so high among the nations of the world.

I want to thank you all, my Girls, whether you joined our work parties or did your bit at home or at street collections or public functions or in other ways. I am very grateful to you all & greatly appreciate all your labour of love & sympathy & self-sacrifice.

God bless you all & give you peace!

Iris K. Smuts (Ouma).

Training in South Africa

L/Cpl J Meyer; number 32383

1940 to 10th June 1941

In 1940 Julian Meyer joined the army. He was 22 years old. He had studied law and was a law articulated clerk. Julian was assigned to the 16th Platoon, Support Company, 2nd Transvaal Scottish, 6th Infantry Brigade. His rank initially was that of a private - Private J Meyer, Number 32383. A few weeks after his enlistment he was promoted to Lance Corporal. He was initially stationed at Kafferskraal, Premier Camp. In later letters he referred to the base as Zonderwater. The postal stamps on the addressed envelopes stated that he was '*On Active Service*'.

One of his early letters was addressed as '*G-d knows where in Africa*'. It detailed an exercise in the veld whereby they were under active service conditions. This meant they had *to live on one bottle of water per day*, despite unbelievable heat: lights are out at 7 p.m. and no smoking or show of lights was permitted until 5 a.m. the following morning. All their positions were in camouflaged trenches. He described himself as *just about covered by odd branches and leaves which hide the weapon pit*. Despite the unpleasantness of the situation '*except for the lack of water, I am enjoying it*'.^{18 Dec 40}

During December he wrote about the rainy weather, watching the engineers build bridges and the forthcoming Christmas leave. This was granted from Saturday 28th December 1940 to Thursday 2nd January 1941 and he stated that the holiday feeling gripped even the army. They did not work for the week of the 23rd December.^{22 Dec 40} He writes '*I deplore the prospect of any physical exertion. I have just heard that we are doing Bayonet Fighting this afternoon. This is the most violent exercise the Army provides. Still I'm sure I shall survive.*'

In January 1941 he was promoted to Lance Corporal and wrote '*I am now quite a gentleman with a stripe up! I eat in a fairly respectable mess, can buy any kind of liquor I might conceivably desire, do far less fatigous duties than previously & am fair game for all senior N.C.Os to give jobs to. I put my stripe up today & all in all am rather bloated with my own importance!*'^{18 Jan 41}

A number of letters were written in pencil describing manoeuvres done away from the Camp. He described a *terribly dusty trip* from Camp to Ermelo where they *camped in the Show Grounds*. The people of Ermelo threw a dance in the Town Hall. He met a fellow law articulated clerk, Bob Greenberg who introduced him to all the worthwhile women and he had a whale of a time. His troubles

started while he *'was guard- corporal...it rained in buckets and he had a whole horde of drunken prisoners & as we were in the veld, the prisoners & the guard were quartered in troop carriers. We had no lights & were thoroughly miserable.'* ^{17 Jan 41}

From Ermelo they went to Barberton. They slept in the veld and were awoken at 1 a.m. as they had a manoeuvre towards the town of Nelspruit. They won the battle hands down. He described the presence of about 15 000 troops there and he had never seen so many lorries in his life. He wrote that they were returning to Barberton and would be in camp there for a month. In a letter with the postal stamp *Barberton Camp 13th January 1941* he wrote that the soldiers received helmets. *Those tammies of ours are no protection against the sun at all, but the helmets are a different proposition.* As the troops were in a malaria area, malaria precautions were undertaken - spraying with citronella oil and quinine tablets were prescribed. ^{11 Jan 41} A letter addressed from Barberton talked of them being housed in bungalows and there being so much space. ^{18 Jan 41} By the 22nd January he had returned to Kafferskraal.

Further letters described route marches and plenty of field exercises with live rounds. The farm Spitzkop was used extensively for field work. He did admit that sometimes the army was *"getting me down"*. *Things are getting steadily worse here & the yoke is certainly chafing.* ^{3 Mar 41}

His platoon was transferred to Pietermaritzburg on the 19th March 1941, prior to their departure for North Africa. A letter dated *Tuesday* written as a serial, detailed their departure from Kafferskraal to Pietermaritzburg. He started to write the letter from his bivouac in the veld, about 19 miles from Standerton, and it was written with the aid of a tiny hurricane lamp. They had departed the previous day and travelled at a speed of 20 miles per hour. Their journey took them via Bronkhorstspuit, Witbank to Middelburg - a total of 64 miles. They slept next to the Middelburg Lake. The next day they travelled 104 miles passing through Bethal to Standerton. His immediate superior left him in charge of the detachment and the truck. The convoy continued through Charleston to Newcastle and they camped off the main road next to the Sundays River, having covered only 105 miles. They were fed sandwiches by women lining their route. He described how the National Roads Board was working on upgrading the roads and felt that *'In a few years' time we will have some extremely fine roads in the country. The road to Durban will be much shorter as all the unnecessary windings & turnings are being eliminated.'* On their arrival in Pietermaritzburg on the Thursday, they were welcomed by the residents as they passed through the town. The camp was 3 miles away from the centre of the town, situated on a hillside overlooking the town. ^{Mar 41} Two things in its favour were: *One the tents don't leak & two it's very near town.* He and others

went to the local shul (synagogue) on the Friday night. *Unfortunately when we got there it was closed. They do not have a 'minyan' on Friday nights. I was rather disappointed but we spotted a Jewish shop & went in. The proprietor told us that formerly there was a committee which arranged a service every week for troops as also entertainments of a Jewish nature. When South African troops left the town the committee lapsed. He is, however going to see about reviving it now that there are again Jewish men stationed in the town.*^{22 Mar 41} The Jewish community subsequently arranged shul services and dances on a Sunday evening.^{28 Mar 41} During his time in Pietermaritzburg, he visited Durban on many weekends, as leave from their new Camp was very liberal. He met up with many family members and friends. These included his first cousin, Elick Beinashowitz and his wife Beattie. Julian stayed with Mrs Ray Berman, a family friend in Durban.

He gave snippets of camp life. On a route march, he stated that he had never sweated so much in his life – *the heat here is just like Durban's species of Turkish- bath.*^{2 Apr 41} He discussed being out on bivouac. General JP de Villiers, ex-chief of Police, GOC 2nd Division inspected the Brigade and they were told that pretty soon they would be off to pastures new.^{16 Apr 41} He enquired whether Ma had received his army pay as he required that the money be wired to him. A friend contracted German measles and the Health authorities fumigated the room.^{2 Apr 41} *'It is only since I have been in the army that I have come to realise just how much such things as Kiddush on Friday Evenings, Seiders & the like have come to mean to me'*^{4 Apr 41} Regarding the forthcoming Pesach, numerous letters covered this topic. He wrote that he was rather depressed about it as there was no chance of him being able to come home. He would either be in Durban or Pietermaritzburg. The local community were arranging Seidorim for those unable to get Durban leave. He wrote that they would all get matzo and kosher food for the whole of Pesach from the army. Special cooks were provided for them.^{7 Apr 41} He complained about a dearth of letters from the family.

He did manage to travel home for a visit on the weekend of the 11th April and had leave due to him from the 10th to 18th May.^{25 Apr 41} A letter of the 1st May, written on the Transvaal Scottish Battalion letterhead, stated they were crating all their equipment, weapons etc. ready for loading on to the ships.^{1 May 41} He did return home as the following letter of 23rd May stated that he had arrived safe & sound, back in Pietermaritzburg. The train trip was very pleasant.^{23 May 41} He mentioned that he was awaiting being promoted to full corporal. The company were given new kits – battle dress.^{18 Apr 41} He had previously requested a hackle which he received in a parcel sent by the family and described it as luxurious. Activities in Pietermaritzburg included participation in the local fete, swimming and boating on the river.^{25 Apr 41} In his letter of the 28th May, Julian stated that Field Marshall Smuts inspected his brigade and informed them that Egypt was

their destination. He stated that *‘it may seem like an extract from a popular novel but my message to you is to “keep smiling.”’* ^{28 May 41} He described a magnificent parade. He requested a snap of the family, which he wanted to have with him. He sent home 15 snaps and detailed the people and events. He also sent various newspaper articles and copies of 2 T.S. – their local magazine. ^{4 Jun 41, 5 Jun 41} He wrote of a change in his platoon number to 15 and that his address in future would be c/o Army Post Office, Durban.

Definitions:

N.C.O. - Non-commissioned officer

Tammies - Tam o' Shanter is a name given to the traditional Scottish bonnet worn by men. The name derives from Tam o' Shanter, the eponymous hero of the 1790 Robert Burns poem. In the First World War, a khaki Balmoral bonnet was introduced for wear in the trenches, by Scottish infantry serving on the Western Front. This was called the 'bonnet, tam o' shanter', and later was abbreviated among military personnel to 'ToS'.

Bivouac - a temporary shelter or camp for sleeping in outside, that is not a tent.

Hackle is a clipped feather plume that is attached to a military headdress. In the British Army and the armies of some Commonwealth countries the hackle is worn by some infantry regiments, especially those designated as fusilier regiments and those with Scottish and Northern Irish origins. The colour of the hackle varies from regiment to regiment. In the South African Army, the Scottish- and Irish-influenced regiments wear the hackle. The colour of the Transvaal Scottish Regiment is red, the Witwatersrand Rifles is black and the South African Irish Regiment is green.

GOC - General Officer Commanding.

2 T.S - 2nd Transvaal Scottish magazine.



August 1940



8th February 1941



7th May 1941

L-R: Julian Meyer, Leslie Ernest Berrington, Robert Blair, Percy Skelton (Buster) Wimble and J.W. (Jimmy) Whelan.



7th May 1941

L-R: J.W.(Jimmy) Whelan, Percy Skelton (Buster) Wimble, Leslie Ernest Berrington, Robert Blair and Julian Meyer

Seven photographs from a file spool that was sent to the Meyer family in Johannesburg. The photographs were taken in May 1941 when Julian Meyer was stationed in Pietermaritzburg.



Photograph (2)

Back row L-R: Mac Donald, Julian Meyer, Allen Barrie
 Middle row: Percy Skelton (Buster) Wimble, Leslie Ernest Berrington
 Front row: J.W. (Jimmy) Whelan, Robert Blair and Swan.



Photograph (8)
 Bunny Austin holding washing
 and Julian Meyer holding a rifle



Photograph (11)
 Julian Meyer outside his tent



Photograph (14)
 Kit Inspection Parade
 Bunny Austin is on the left in front with pipe and Julian Meyer is behind him,
 grimacing in the background



Julian Meyer at the beach in Durban



Photograph (15)
 Gen. Smuts taking salute at a Brigade Parade in his honour



June 1941
 15th Platoon N.C.O.'s.
 Julian Meyer is in the middle row last on the right



Letters written in South Africa



Voyage to Suez Egypt

At Sea: 10th June 1941 to 21st June 1941

On the 8th June 1941, the platoon left Pietermaritzburg for Durban by train and went to the harbour to board the boat. Julian described the boat as the biggest that had ever been in the harbour. The boat was described as a wonderful piece of work, the luxury of some of the staterooms was unbelievable. He was placed on the promenade deck and had a hammock in which to sleep.^{9 Jun 41} He did not mention the name of the boat but stated that his cousin, Lily Nathan would inform the family. The Nathans were on holiday in Durban at the time. He was given shore leave and was able to meet numerous family members. Many family members were in Durban at the time and included his maternal Uncle Max Blieden and his wife Minna, and a maternal aunt, Auntie Helena, mother of Judell Blieden who had been taken prisoner on board the ship –*ZamZam*. Julian's last letter prior to his departure, was written in the Men's Recreation room aboard ship.^{10 Jun 1941} His address was c/o Army Post Office Durban. Letters were "passed by censor".

Tuesday, 10th June 1941¹

CORNWALL left Durban escorting Convoy CM 12 (MAURETANIA, ÎLE DE FRANCE, NIEUW AMSTERDAM) for Suez, 1500GMT, speed 20 knots.

Julian Meyer was either on the *R.M.S Mauretania (II)*, the largest ship built in England up 1938 or the *Nieuw Amsterdam*.^{2,3} The Dutch liner was dubbed the "Ship of peace" as there were no provisions for possible war use incorporated in her design. The *Île de France* had been built in 1926 after World War I.⁴ A day later he wrote to the family, informing them of their departure. '*We were given a wonderful send-off from Durban. The Point was absolutely crammed with people, waving flags & shouting*'. He subsequently alluded to the fact that his ship was part of a convoy to North Africa. In a letter from Egypt he mentioned that he was informed about footage taken by the African Mirror that was reported to having shown him during their departure from South Africa.^{22 Jul 41, 5}

He complained of '*a temporary deterioration in my sense of balance, ... none of the proverbial ill effects of sailing for the first time*'. The weather was lovely, and the ship rode very steadily. '*The facilities on board are excellent*', including the food and the ability to buy smokes at the canteen at very modest prices.^{11 Jun 1941} Further letters stated that he had become a seasoned sailor. They had very little work to do and he had plenty of time to read. '*It's almost like a perfect holiday*'.^{13 Jun 41} The next letter was post stamped Egypt but was written on board ship. He described that the weather was '*becoming progressively hotter ... It's like working on the lowest level of a mine*'. The boys were beginning to tire

of the life on board. He described a phenomenon where ‘*the sea was covered for miles with a film of dust, presumably blown from the desert. It was a most peculiar sight & one which I shall not quickly forget. The effect resulted in beautiful sunsets. When the clouds were in the West the effect of seeing the other ships of the convoy silhouetted against the darkening sky which with the sea assumes, the most wonderful variations of pink and gold, is a sight at once peaceful and inspiring*’.^{17 Jun 41} A request for a writing kit – a leather writing compendium and newfangled pens which one filled with water, was made.

By the 25th June he informed his family that he had arrived at his new home and that the journey was completed without incident. He did not inform his family of any danger. However, reports from others in the same convoy relate that ‘Danger was a constant companion, such as the sight of the bombed “Georgiac”, sinking fast by the stern as the *SS Île De France* arrived with troops at Suez on the 21 July 1941’.⁶

A letter written a year later on the 10th June 1942, marked the anniversary of him sailing from Durban – 10th June 1941.

References:

1. <http://www.naval-history.net/xDKWD-SAt1941SouthAfrica1.htm>
Tuesday, 10th June 1941. ADMIRALTY WAR DIARIES of WORLD WAR 2
SOUTH AFRICA, CAPE TOWN - January to June 1941
LATONA left Durban for Kilindini 0521, speed 22 knots.
BALTAVIA parted company with NEWCASTLE off River Plate and sailed for Cape Town 1900GMT.
CORNWALL left Durban escorting Convoy CM 12 (MAURETANIA, ILE DE FRANCE, NIEUW AMSTERDAM) for Suez, 1500GMT, speed 20 knots.
No air operations entry for 10th June 1941.
2. <http://www.greatships.net/mauretania2.html>;
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RMS_Mauretania_\(1938\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RMS_Mauretania_(1938))
R.M.S Mauretania (II) was the largest ship built in England up to that time and the first ship built for Cunard- White Star Line Trans –Atlantic Line build in England. During the Second World War she travelled 540,000 miles (870,000 km) and carried over 340,000 troops. After the war's end, *Mauretania* made several further voyages for the Government repatriating troops. This mainly took the ship to Canada and Singapore. In addition, she made at least one voyage from New Zealand via Australia and South Africa to Liverpool. Women and children were crammed ten to a cabin in the bunks used by the troops, while the men were in "dormitories" for sixty, sleeping in hammocks.
3. <https://www.ssmaritme.com/nieuwamsterdam>;
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_Nieuw_Amsterdam_\(1937\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_Nieuw_Amsterdam_(1937))
The **Nieuw Amsterdam** was a Dutch ocean liner built in Rotterdam for the Holland America Line. This *Nieuw Amsterdam* is considered by many to have been Holland America's finest ship. She was, at 36,982 tonnes, the largest liner ever constructed in the Netherlands up to

that time. Proudly she was dubbed the Dutch "Ship of peace" since there were no provisions for possible war use incorporated in her design. After only seventeen voyages, *Nieuw Amsterdam* was laid up at Hoboken, New Jersey in 1939 after the German invasion of Poland. She would be idle for only a year, however, and was requisitioned by the British Ministry of Transport after the Netherlands fell to Hitler's armies. She would spend the remainder of the war years as a troop transport, despite the fact she had been constructed without the consideration of ever being used in a military capacity. *Nieuw Amsterdam*, with a nominal troop capacity of 6,800 and speed of over 20 knots, was among the British-controlled "monsters" – high-capacity, high-speed troop ships capable of sailing unescorted due to their speed. During the course of the conflict she transported over 378 631 troops and steamed around 530,452 nautical miles (982,397 km). In July 1941, she was used to transport the Greek Royal Family into Wartime Exile in Durban. After the War she was returned to the Holland America Line in 1946.

4. <http://www.greatships.net/iledefrance.html>;
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_%C3%8Ele_de_France

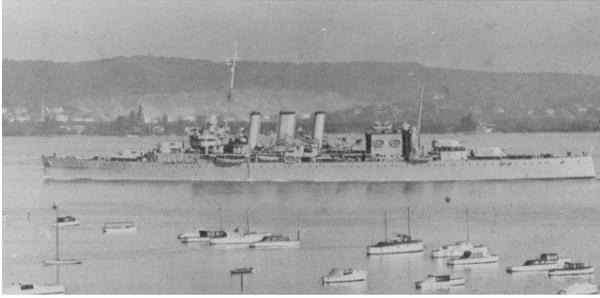
The **SS *Île de France*** was a French ocean liner built in Saint-Nazaire, France for *Compagnie Générale Transatlantique* (CGT) The ship was the first major ocean liner built after the conclusion of World War I, and was the first liner ever to be decorated entirely with designs associated with the Art Deco style. It was considered the most beautifully decorated ship built by CGT (also known as the "French Line"). She was launched in 1926. In March 1940, she was commanded by the British Admiralty, The ship was loaded with 12,000 tons of war materials, submarine oil, tanks, shells, and several uncrated bombers that were stowed on the aft open decks. After the Fall of France it was officially seized by the British. The ship was converted into a troopship in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. She underwent extensive alterations, the largest ever undertaken in the harbour. A small party of workmen fitted the luxury liner out as a floating prisoner of war camp, "with festoons of barbed wire sprouting from her decks and disfiguring her graceful lines" as the ship was prepared for the task of bringing POWs back from north Africa. She reverted to French control in September 1945 and served another year as a troop and repatriation ship before being returned to CGT in February 1946.

5. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Killarney_Film_Studios

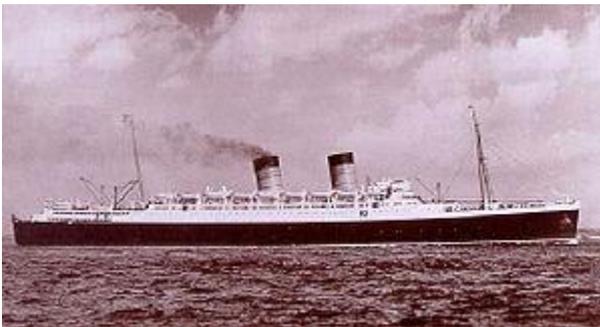
A legendary insurance, real estate and financial tycoon, Isidore William Schlesinger, a US citizen, decided that the new entertainment medium "The Bioscope" had a future in South Africa. The African Theatre's Trust was formed in 1913 in association with a number of leading entrepreneurs of that time. In 1915, it was decided to set up a South African company under the title "African Film Productions" (AFP) and studios were built in Killarney. The Film Studios was "the first motion picture studio in Africa" and screened the first of its weekly newsreels, African Mirror. This film newsreel magazine, the brainchild of Schlesinger, continued week by week, first 'silent' and then with sound, for well over 70 years. It was the longest running weekly newsreel in the world. Killarney cameramen drove "up north" throughout World War II, and their archive material is among the most valuable held in South African Film archives today.

6. <http://peek-01.livejournal.com/11746.html>

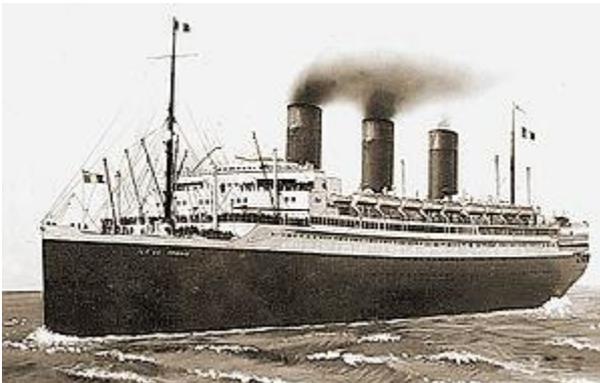
The SS "Ile De France" in Southern African Waters 1940-1945



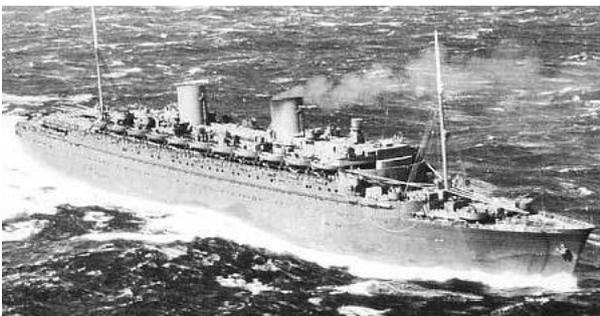
HMS Cornwall was a county-class heavy cruiser built for the Royal Navy in the mid-1920s. This cruiser left Durban escorting Convoy CM 12 (MAURETANIA, ILE DE FRANCE, NIEUW AMSTERDAM)



RMS Mauretania



SS Île de France



Nieuw Amsterdam

Union Defence Force and the Western Desert

The Union of South Africa was established in 31 May 1910, with the unification of four British colonies- Cape Colony, Natal Colony, Transvaal Colony and Orange River Colony. The latter two were previously the Boer (Afrikaner) Republics - South African Republic and Orange Free State, having been annexed in 1902 following the Anglo Boer War by Britain. The Union of South Africa was a dominion of the British Empire, and became sovereign on 11th December 1931. It was governed under a form of constitutional monarchy, with the Crown represented by a Governor-General. The Republic of South Africa was established in 1961.

Prior to World War Two (WW II), the Union of South Africa's Army comprised a small Regular Army known as the South African Permanent Force; a territorial force called the Active Citizen Force and the Defence Rifles Association. The Minister of Defence, Oswald Pirow, was pro-German and had no intention of going to war against Nazi Germany. Before South Africa entered the war, Afrikaner nationalists dreamed of independence from the British Empire. They were inspired to a considerable degree by Nazi ideology and by strong cultural links between many Afrikaners and their German ancestors. However, the South Africa's parliament voted in favour of declaring war on Germany. The Prime Minister J.B. M. Hertzog resigned, and Jan Christian Smuts became the Prime Minister.

In an effort to avoid hostilities from nationalist anti-war groups, such as the Ossewabrandwag, Smuts relied on volunteers and did not impose conscription. Those who volunteered from March 1940 had to take an oath, thereby declaring that they would serve anywhere in Africa. The status of these volunteers was obvious as they had to wear red tabs on their uniforms. Many who had been part of the Union Defence Forces (U.D.F) or of the South African Police (SAP) before March 1940, refused to take the oath and were utilised on the home front. This situation resulted in re-organisation of the armed forces with the establishment of a volunteer basis for service overseas. From 1939 - 1949 the U.D.F Army consisted of 12 Active Citizen Force Infantry Battalions and Brigades. The Mobile Field Force created in 1940 formed 3 Divisions.

- 1st South African Infantry Division
- 2nd South African Infantry Division
- 3rd South African Infantry Division

The 1st and 2nd South African Infantry Divisions subsequently formed part of the British Eighth Army in North Africa.

War in North Africa - Western Desert

On 10th June 1940 Italy declared war on the United Kingdom. The Kingdom of Egypt, a neutral country, was occupied by the British under the terms of the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936, which allowed British military forces to occupy Egypt if the Suez Canal was threatened. Bordering on Egypt was the Italian colony of Libya. A series of cross-border raids and skirmishes began on the Western Frontier between Egypt and Libya. On 13th September 1940, an Italian force advanced across the frontier into Egypt, reaching Sidi Barrani. Their advance was halted until logistical difficulties could be overcome. On 9th December 1940 the British Western Desert Force attacked the Italian position at Sidi Barrani. The position was captured, and 38 000 Italian soldiers were taken Prisoner of Wars (POWs). The remainder of the Italian force was driven back. The Western Desert Force pursued the Italians into Libya.

One of the battles fought was the Battle of Bardia. This fortress town was an important source of water. There was a large pumping station which the Italians had installed to serve the township and Fort Capuzzo. This battle took place in January 1941, as part of Operation Compass. Some 36 000 Italian POWs were taken. The victory at Bardia enabled the Allied forces to continue their advance into Libya and ultimately capture almost all of Cyrenaica, an administrative division of Italian Libya. In 1941 the German Afrika Korps under Rommel arrived in Tripoli, Libya to reinforce the Italians. The Italians and Germans formed the Axis forces. In late March 1941, the Axis forces captured the British front line position at El Aphelia. On 14th April 1941 Rommel's main force reached Sollum, an important port in Egypt, and occupied the Halfaya Pass. There were several allied attempts to recapture the Halfaya Pass and relieve the besieged fortified port of Tobruk, held by the British.

In June 1941, the British Army's Operation Battle-axe was organised to clear eastern Cyrenaica of the Axis Forces and raise the Siege of Tobruk. This operation failed. The British lost over half of their tanks on the first day and only one of three attacks succeeded.

In September 1941, the British Eighth Army was formed from the Western Desert Force under the command of Lieutenant-General Sir Alan Cunningham. At its creation, the Eighth Army comprised two Corps: XXX Corps and XIII Corps

- XXX Corps was made up of 7th British Armored Division, the South African 1st Infantry Division and the 22nd Guards Brigade.
- XIII Corps was composed of the 4th Indian Infantry Division, the 2nd New Zealand Division and the 1st Army Tank Brigade.

The Eighth Army also included the Tobruk garrison - 70th British Infantry Division and the Polish Carpathian Brigade. The 2nd South African Infantry Division was held in reserve.

A third attempt was made to relieve the besieged city of Tobruk, Libya, and capture eastern Cyrenaica. Operation Crusader commenced on the 17th November and ran until 30th December. Before dawn on the 18th November, they launched a surprise attack, advancing west from their base at Mersa Matruh. They crossed the Libyan border near Fort Maddalena, and then pushed to the north-west. They were repulsed several times, culminating in the defeat of the 7th Armored Division by the Afrika Korps at Sidi Rezegh. The 1st South African Infantry Division paid a high price at the battle at Sidi Rezegh. The entire 5th South African Infantry Brigade was lost with 224 killed, 379 wounded and 3 000 captured.

Rommel ordered the panzer divisions to relieve the Axis positions on the Egyptian border. He achieved several tactical successes, which led the Commander-in-Chief Middle East Command, General Sir Claude Auchinleck, to replace Cunningham with Lieutenant-General Neil Ritchie. Despite achieving a number of tactical successes, Rommel was forced to concede Tobruk and retired west of Tobruk to the Gazala Line and then back to El Agheila by the end of 1941.

Following Operation Crusader, the Eighth Army's advance of 800 kilometres over-stretched its means of supply. In January 1942, the British reduced the front line garrison to work on lines of communication and supply dumps, in preparation of another westwards advance against Tripolitania. Ritchie created a system of defensive boxes along a line that ran from Gazala, a coastal town situated on the coast 48 kilometres west of Tobruk, to an old Ottoman fortress, Bir Hakeem. This defence line stretched across a distance of 80 kilometres and became known as the Gazala line. It was a series of immobile defensive boxes accommodating a brigade each, laid out across the desert behind minefields and wire, watched by regular patrols between the boxes. Those boxes nearest the Axis forces were held by infantry, while those further back served as reserve static positions and as bases from which the armour could operate. The line was not evenly manned, with a greater number of troops covering the coast road. The defence box known as "Commonwealth Keep" or Hill 209 was at Ras El Madaur; on Tobruk's main defensive line, about 14.5 km west-south-west of the port; The chief 'box', known as Knightsbridge, was around a junction of tracks about 20 kilometres west of Tobruk and 16 kilometres south of Acroma, commanding all the tracks by which supplies came up to the front. The Eighth Army's advanced fuelling stations and airfields were at Acroma, El Adem, El Duda, Sidi Rezegh and Gambut. Gazala had an

aerodrome, which was taken from the Italians early in the campaign and housed two Commonwealth squadrons.

It is reported that the British General Head Quarters (GHQ) in Cairo underestimated the Axis fighting strength, having greatly exaggerated the casualties inflicted on the Axis during Operation Crusader. In an appreciation made in January 1942, the Commander-in-Chief Middle East Command, General Sir Claude Auchinleck, alluded to an Axis fighting strength of 35,000 men, when the true figure was about 80,000 (50,000 German and 30,000 Italian troops). The Eighth Army expected to be ready by February 1942 and GHQ Cairo believed that the Axis would be too weak and disorganized to mount a counter-offensive. On 21st January, Rommel sent out three strong armored columns to make a tactical reconnaissance. Finding only the thinnest of screens, Rommel changed his reconnaissance into an offensive, and recaptured the towns of Benghazi on 28th January and Timimi on 3rd February. By 6th February, the British had fallen back to the Gazala Line. The Axis advance was halted, and the front line was stabilized.

Both sides commenced a period of building their strength to launch new offensives, but it was Rommel who took the initiative first, forcing the Eighth Army from the Gazala position. The Eighth Army commander, Ritchie proved unable to halt Rommel. Auchinleck then took direct command of the army. The Battle of Benghazi in January 1942 became known among troops as the Benghazi Handicap and that at Gazala as the Gazala Gallop. These phrases described the to-and-fro nature of the North African battles.

The Panzer Army Afrika were eventually stopped by Auchinleck at the First Battle of El Alamein (1st – 27th July 1942). At the beginning of November 1942 the Eighth Army defeated Rommel in the decisive Second Battle of El Alamein (23rd October–11th November 1942), pursuing the defeated Axis army across Libya. They reached the Mareth defensive line on the Tunisian border in February 1943. The Axis forces in North Africa surrendered in May 1943.

It is against this background of events, that one can understand and piece together the events that were described in the letters written from the Western Desert, North Africa by Julian Meyer.

Julian Meyer, a 22-year-old university law student/articled clerk, volunteered to join the UDF in 1940. It is unknown whether it was peer pressure that played a role in his decision to volunteer or whether he was influenced during his school days at King Edward VII School in Johannesburg. In WWII over 2000 Old Edwardians and masters on the staff volunteered for the fighting forces. The Roll

of Honour of King Edward VII School for the WWII had the highest number of volunteers in the British Commonwealth for a school.

The Second World War had started the previous year. He was a private in the 2nd Transvaal Scottish and was assigned to the 6th South African Infantry Brigade. This Brigade was composed of the 1st South African Police of Pretoria, 2nd South African Police of Pretoria and the 2nd Transvaal Scottish of Johannesburg. He was initially stationed at Premier Camp. This was originally the Premier Diamond Mine (now known as Cullinan Mine) in the village of Cullinan, near Pretoria. Following the closure of the Diamond mine in 1932, the village became a virtual ghost town. In 1939, the U.D.F selected the village and the surrounding area as the site for the construction of a massive camp - Premier Camp. The abundance of open veld was suitable for practising military manoeuvres and the village was connected by the railway network. Julian's address was c/o Kafferskraal, a farm in the area.

The 6th South African Infantry Brigade was to form part of the 2nd South African Infantry Division and their theatres of operation were as follows:

South Africa: 23rd October 1940 to 20th April 1941

At Sea: 20th April 1941 to 6th June 1941

Egypt: 6th June 1941 to 22nd March 1942

Libya: 22nd March 1942 to 21st June 1942

The dates that Julian Meyer documented were slightly different as his battalion was at sea from the 10th June 1941 to 21st June 1941 and arrived in Egypt on the 21st June 1941.

In Egypt, the 2nd South African Infantry Division fell under GHQ command and was responsible for protecting the railway and water supply lines between Alexandria and Mersa Matruh. The Division was transferred to British Troops Egypt on the 7th September 1941 and the Eighth Army command on the 5th October 1941. The Division suffered a lack of transport and was held in reserve. They spent time digging defenses around the El Alamein area and helped construct the famous Alamein Box. They did not experience any battles initially. Their task of digging in the 30-mile bottleneck between the Mediterranean Sea and the Qattara Depression was met by some with disappointment and frustration because they wanted to become involved in active warfare.

The division took over responsibility for the Frontier area on 2nd December 1941 as part of the British Eighth Army under the command of XIII Corps. They were transferred to the XXX Corps on the 10th December 1941. Their duties acquired a more prominent role as Tobruk became the responsibility of

the 2nd South African Infantry Division under Major General H.B. Klopper's command when Rommel withdrew in December 1941

In the area was the Halfaya Pass, colloquially known as Hellfire Pass. It is a 180 metre high escarpment extending south eastwards from the Egyptian-Libyan border at the coast at Sollum, with the escarpment slope facing into Egypt. It is about 3.2 km inland from the Mediterranean and provides a natural route through. It had great strategic importance during WWII. During the War, the engineered route up the escarpment was destroyed. The only ways westwards into Libya were to assault the pass or to out-flank it to the south. The Axis forces had previously forced the British forces out of Libya, leaving a besieged garrison at Tobruk. They occupied Sollum and the Halfaya Pass. In November 1941, following the Allies' third attempt to recapture the Halfaya Pass and relieve Tobruk, Rommel was forced to withdraw to El Agheila. However Axis garrisons were left behind at Sollum, Bardia and the Halfaya Pass.

The 2nd South African Infantry Division partook in the following battles, actions, and engagements in the Western Desert:

Bardia: 31st December 1941 to 2nd January 1942.

This Italian fortress town in Libya had previously been taken by the Allies in January 1941. The Axis forces reoccupied the town three months later, in April 1941. Further fighting occurred from 31st December 1941 – 2nd January 1942, before Bardia was re-taken by the 2nd South African Division. Bardia changed hands again in June 1942, being occupied by Axis forces for a third time and was re-taken for the last time in November 1942 unopposed, following the Allied victory at the Second Battle of El Alamein. During the engagement at the end of December 1941 to 2nd January 1942, some 8,000 Allied POWs were freed, and some 6,000 Axis POWs were taken.

Clayden's Trench (Sollum): 11th January 1942 to 12th January 1942.

The 2nd South African Division entered the battle at Sollum with the XXX Corps. They attacked this fortified town on the Egyptian border in a bitterly fought battle. The Axis troops were forced to surrender. This battle has since forth been commemorated by the 2nd Transvaal Scottish.

Halfaya Pass: The Axis garrisons left at Halfaya Pass were isolated after the fall of Bardia on 2nd January 1942. They were cut off from supplies, and following bombarded from the air and the sea, they surrendered on 17th January 1942.

During the months preceding the fall of Tobruk, the men in the 2nd South African Infantry Division gained limited battle experience in the Benghazi Handicap - the retreat of Allied Forces from Benghazi ahead of German forces. The 2nd South African Infantry Division was transferred to XIII Corps on the

27th March 1942 and they partook in the Gazala Gallop - the headlong retreat of the British Eighth Army during the six weeks following the 26th May 1942 from the Gazala line in Cyrenaica, Libya to the Alamein line, 113 km west of Alexandria, Egypt.

Gazala: 26th May 1942 to 21st June 1942.

The 2nd South African Infantry Division fought at Gazala, the coastal town situated 48 km west of Tobruk. One company of the battalion put up a memorable stand at Knightsbridge (Acroma Keep) which was a defensive box on the Gazala Line. It was situated at a junction of tracks commanding all the tracks by which supplies came up to the front.

The task of the 2nd South African Infantry Division became increasingly difficult on 14th June 1942 when the Commander of the Eighth Army, Lieutenant General N.M. Ritchie, ordered the withdrawal of the 1st South African Infantry Division and the British 50th Division to allow the Eighth Army to rally its strength. The 2nd South African Infantry Division experienced heavy fighting in the week before the fall of Tobruk at Point 209, also known as Commonwealth Keep, the defence box at Ras El Madaur on Tobruk's main defensive line, about 14.5 km west-south-west of the port; They was cut off on the 18th June 1942 and retreated into the Tobruk Fortress.

Tobruk: 20th June 1942 to 21st June 1942.

At the battle of Tobruk, Rommel's attack bypassed the Gazala line. The South Africans were at a disadvantage because they had their backs towards the Afrika Korps. Rommel's Stuka dive bombers, Mark III and IV tanks, and the use of superior German anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns, placed the Germans in a position to defeat the Allied forces in Tobruk. The 2nd South African Infantry Division under Major General H.B. Klopper's command was left to defend the harbour with "insufficient anti-aircraft and anti-tank guns".

For most in the 2nd Division, the battle at Tobruk was a chaotic experience characterised by conflicting orders. Many POWs described the battle as frenzied and confused, mostly due to the fact that many of them were unaware of the full extent of events in the battlefield because it was spread out over such a wide area. The majority of the battalion, along with the entire South African 2nd Division, was captured when the "fortress" of Tobruk fell at the end of the Battle of Gazala. Of the 33 000 Allied soldiers captured on 21st June 1942, 10 722 were South Africans who were all part of the 2nd South African Infantry Division under command of Major General H.B. Klopper. Rommel considered the fall of Tobruk on the 21st June 1941 the high point of the war in North Africa and as a reward he was promoted to Field Marshal. Churchill called the loss 'one of the heaviest blows I can recall during the war'. The British did not

stop retreating until they reached a position covering the 30 miles of desert between the impassable Qattara Depression and the coast, where the road and railway run through the little village of el-Alamein.

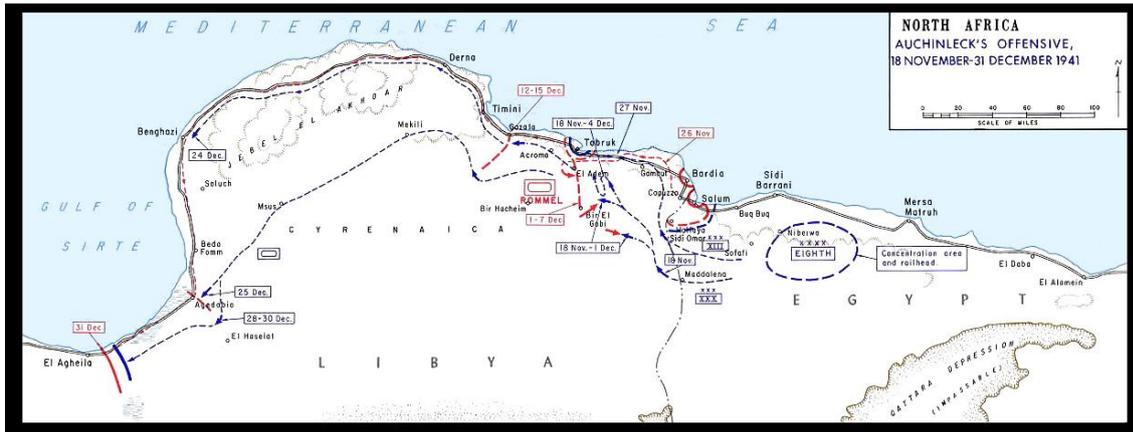
References:

1. <http://za.geoview.info/kafferskraal,993194>
2. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2nd_Infantry_Division_\(South_Africa\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2nd_Infantry_Division_(South_Africa))
3. <http://www.jocks.co.za/history.htm>
4. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transvaal_Scottish_Regiment
5. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halfaya_Pass
6. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Bardia
7. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Gazala
8. <http://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/alameinbattle.htm>
9. <http://samilitaryhistory.org/vol145ds.html> Military History Journal Vol 14 No 5 June 2009 Long Journey to Anzio. A Springbok Escapee Story.
10. <http://samilitaryhistory.org/vol014pd.html> Military History Journal Vol 1 No 4 June 1969. From Playing Field to Parade Ground. The Record of King Edward VII School, Johannesburg
11. <http://www.army.mil.za/aboutus/history.htm>
12. <http://www.britishmilitaryhistory.co.uk/documents>
13. <http://www.southafricawargraves>. The South Africa War Graves Project
14. Horn K. South African Prisoner-of-War Experience during and after World War II: 1939 –c.1950. Stellenbosch University 2012

Information gleaned from various websites helped to confirm the activities of the 2nd South African Infantry Division. Sources included British Military History Archives, South African Army Department of Defence History and the 2nd Transvaal Scottish Archives.



Western Desert Campaign

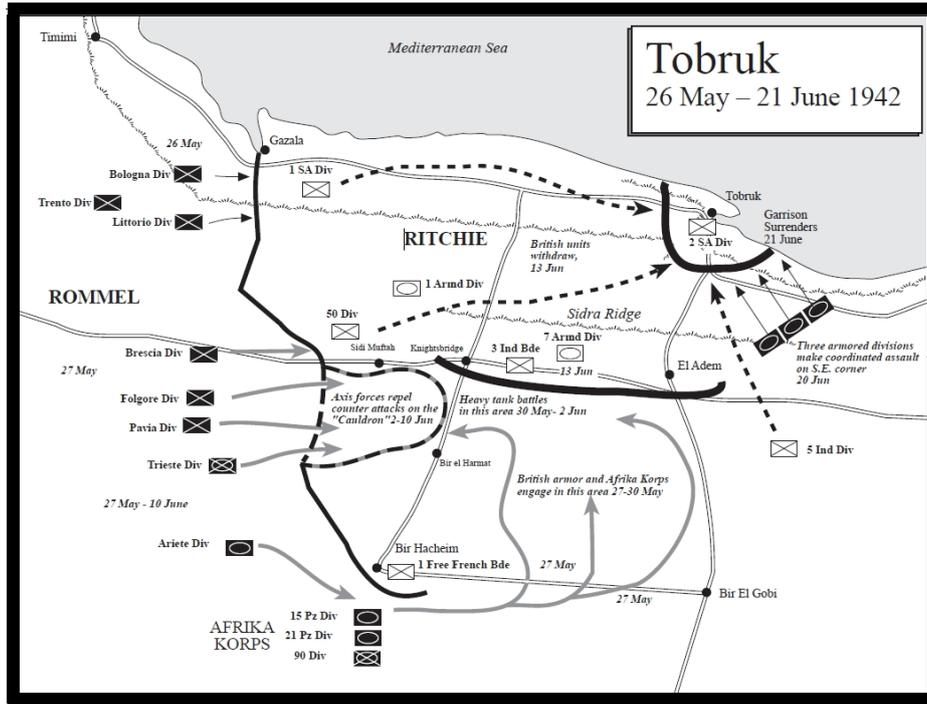


**Map of the Western Desert Campaign and Operation Battle Area
Egypt & Cyrenaica, Libya 1941**



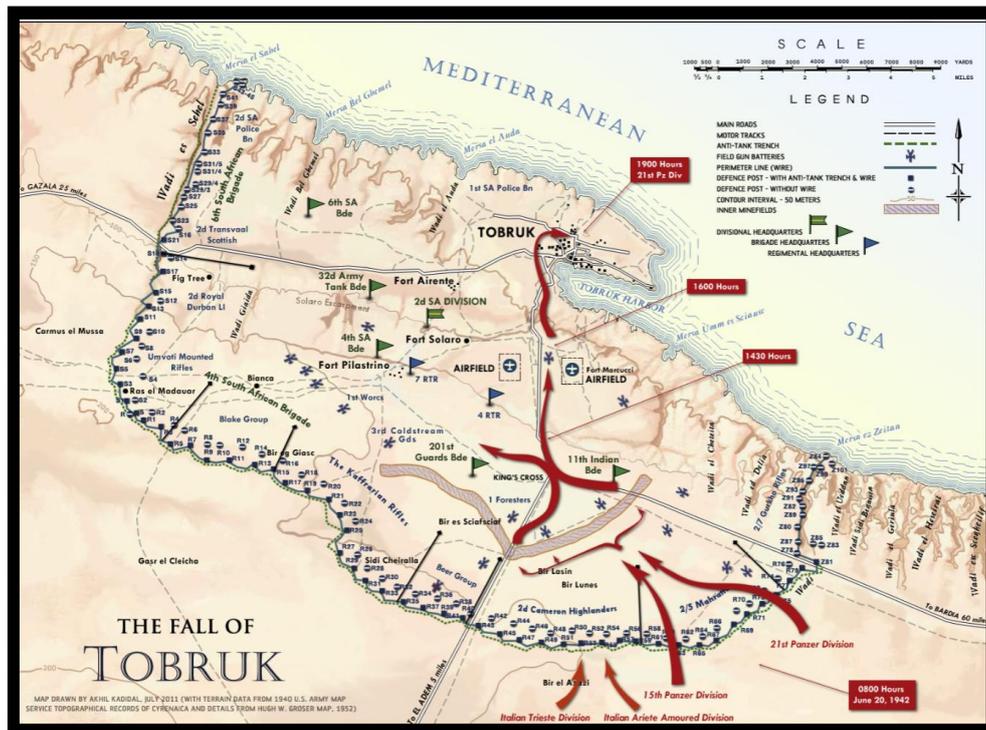
Map of the contested area of Operation Battle-axe - June 1941

Operation Battle-axe failed. In early 1942 the 2nd South African Infantry Division fought in this area and retook Bardia, Sollum and the Halfaya Pass. Many soldiers were killed and were buried at the Halfaya Sollum Military Cemetery. The majority of graves are South African War Dead – 368 of a total of 382 graves.



Maps of Tobruk 26th May to 21st June 1942.

The 2nd South African Infantry Division had retreated from the Gazala line to Tobruk. At the time of the fall of Tobruk they had their backs to the attacking German Afrika Korps.



War Experience in Egypt and the Western Desert

L/Cpl J Meyer; number 32383

21st July 1941- 20th June 1942

1941

The letter of 25th June 1941 informed Julian's family of his arrival at his new home - a base camp in the Egyptian Desert.^{25 Jun 41} They were back to tents and the dust made things rather unpleasant. He described Egypt as a county of contrasts - an impressive city (Cairo) and a bleak and desolate desert with mention of camels grazing in the desert. He had a fleeting view of Cairo at night. The modern part was beautifully laid out and the pyramids were as they appear in films and postcards.

His address changed to the 2nd SA Division, U.D.F. He requested a pad of airmail writing paper and envelopes as an airmail service was available even though it was fairly expensive.^{25 Jun 41}

Further letters described adaption to the desert condition and washing himself by means of a sponge and water in a paraffin tin. One night he witnessed an air raid on an objective about 10 miles away. He described it rather like a fireworks display. He acquired a primus stove and at night they made hot drinks. There was a request for coffee, cocoa, and Ovaltine. A question to his family was what they thought of the news of the Russian intervention in the war. He thought that Russia's intervention would change the whole course of the war and would hasten its conclusion considerably.^{26 Jun 41, 30 Jun 41.}

An air mail letter card described a visit to Alexandria and the Jewish club. They entered the city through slums, where centuries of filth and poverty had left an indelible mark. He compared this to South Africa and noted the contrast with that of the middle-class area where buildings were built in continental style. The shops tastefully displayed their goods, which were imported from all parts of the globe. He mentioned that the greater portions of commerce were in the hand of the Frenchmen or Greeks. The Upper-Class Egyptians were almost European in appearance. The shopping area was huge and some of the suburbs were really beautiful with delightful gardens. He described meeting a few Polish soldiers. One could speak English fairly well and he asked him in Yiddish whether he was a Jew. He confirmed that he was Jewish, and they had a very interesting discussion. He had served in the Polish Army and was taken prisoner

when Poland was invaded. He managed to escape to France where he joined a Polish unit. He was evacuated at Dunkirk and after a short while in Scotland was sent to Egypt. He knew nothing of the fate of his parents. He was the only Jew in his unit and held the rank of Corporal.^{7 Jul 41}

Julian met the Jewish chaplain and mentioned in a subsequent letter that he was Rov Yesorski, who had studied at Jews College London and had arrived in South Africa recently.^{17 Aug 41} A request was to be sent a copy of the Singer's Daily Prayer Book, as often comrades wished to say Kaddish. A few of them made enquiries of a trip to Palestine, if they could get leave. Requests were made for reading matter – particularly short stories and a mouth organ.^{22 Jul 41} He did receive the Sunday Times, Zionist Record and Jewish Times as arranged by his cousin, Annie Zulman.

In a later letter addressed to his father he stated that they had moved to a new camp right on the seashore and went bathing every day. There was very little dust or flies. The work was similar to what they did in the Union, the pick and shovel being their usual weapons.^{28 Jul 41}

The 2nd South African Infantry Division fell under General Head Quarters command and was responsible for protecting the railway and water supply lines between Alexandria and Mersa Matruh.¹

He stated that the war news was pretty heartening and that the Russians would prove more than a match for the Germans. He felt that even if the Russians halted the enemy, it would be some time before the war came to an end.^{28 Jul 41} A visit by Smuts to Egypt was mentioned, but not to his platoon.^{18 Aug 41}

Further letters in Egypt related to letters and parcels received; birthday wishes and a request for the Adler Machor for Rosh Hashanah and Davidson's Hebrew Grammar book to smarten up his musty Hebrew, especially as there was a chance to visit Palestine.^{25 Aug 41} He noted that the effects of war were finally catching up in the Union with an increase in prices and shortages of various commodities (Sunday Times newspaper). He continually mentioned that he was keeping wonderfully well. The Battalion was entertained by a famous Scottish regiment and they had a wonderful concert. They also played sport including soccer.^{8 Sept 41}

In September 1941 the battalion spent a few days in the desert doing manoeuvres. The break from routine was welcome and he enjoyed the scheme to the full. Each section did its own cooking which he felt was much like being out camping. He

stated that the landscape was interesting. Most of Egypt was flat with endless plains broken by great depressions which dropped to below sea-level. The largest was known as the Great Depression. *“One travels along and suddenly comes to the steep edges of these depressions which at night one can easily walk over the edge”*. On one night they camped about 30 yards from the edge of a depression, and in the morning the sudden drop was revealed.^{13 Sept 41}

The 2nd South African Infantry Division was transferred to British Troops Egypt on the 7th September. They were under the command of Major-General I. P. de Villiers. To the dismay of many in his command, they were ordered to dig defences around the El Alamein area. They helped construct the famous Alamein Box. They did not experience any battles initially. Their task of digging in the 30 mile bottleneck between the Mediterranean Sea and the Qattara Depression was met by some with disappointment and frustration because they wanted to become involved in active warfare.² The Qattara Depression is a depression in the north west of Egypt and is part of the Western Desert. It lies below sea level, the second lowest point in Africa at 133 metres below sea level. It is covered with salt pans, sand dunes and salt marshes. During WW II the depression's presence shaped the 1st and 2nd Battles of El Alamein. It was considered impassable by tanks and most other military vehicles because of the features of salt lakes, high cliffs and/or escarpments, and fech fech (very fine powdered sand). The cliffs in particular acted as an edge of the El Alamein battlefield, which meant the British position could not be outflanked. Both Axis and Allied forces built their defences in a line from the Mediterranean Sea to the Qattara Depression. These defences became known as the Devil's gardens and are for the most part still there, especially the extensive minefields.³

During the month of September, Rosh Hashanah took place (22nd - 23rd September 1941). He did receive the Singer's Daily Prayer book and the Rov gave each of them a special pocket edition of Hertz's Book of Jewish Thoughts and a well-produced Soldiers' Prayer Book, which was prepared under the Dr Hertz's auspices. He described that they would not be granted any days off for Rosh Hashanah but would be excused from all duties on Yom Kippur.^{15 Sept 41} Prior to Rosh Hashanah, they did their first route march to get into practice. A letter of the 21st September described that he just returned from evening services and was writing in the spirit of Rosh Hashanah. The Rov excelled himself, blew the shofar and sang a few of the familiar nigens. The site of the services was on the slope of a hill overlooking the sea and the atmosphere was one of peace and quiet - the desert stretching away to the white of the beach and the blue of the Mediterranean. He subsequently mentioned that Yom Tov passed very well and although they had to work, he was able to keep the spirit of the festival. He did not smoke for

the two days – that was the way he could observe the sanctity of the occasion. Between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, they were away from Camp for 5 days doing guard duty. They were next to an Arab Village which was a collection of tumbledown shacks having all sorts of traders and tradesman. The village catered for thousands of Bedouins who lived in their tents contrived of all sorts of odd pieces of fabric. *One sees the heads of camels and a number of beautiful Arabian horses. The poverty of the people is unbelievable.* They were able to buy eggs and vegetables to supplement their rations. The experience was like camping and he enjoyed it. ^{29 Sept 41} He returned to camp on Yom Kippur morning, having missed the Kol Nidres service. However, they got a minyan together and said the evening prayers with the assistance of his Singer's. The services on Yom Kippur morning and afternoon were impressive and he derived a good deal of satisfaction from them. He broke his fast on tins of grapefruit and pineapple juice. Yom Kippur was on the night of the 30th September and the day of 1st October.

The 2nd South African Infantry Division was transferred to the Eighth Army command on the 5th October 1941. The Division suffered a lack of transport and was held in reserve.¹

At the beginning of October 1941, he spent time in Cairo.^{12 Oct 41} Very detailed letters were written of his visit. They left the camp at dawn, passing through Alexandria where the desert ended. They passed through the city and *came upon cultivated fields which stretched as far as the eye can see.* This contrast was pleasing after months of *glaring sand, unrelieved and painful. The Nile breaks up at Cairo and its waters flow into the myriad of canals which spread fanwise to the sea. These canals bring water to a large tract of land, every inch of which is cultivated and bears its share of colossal crop which the Delta produces... The vegetation is so dense and the soil so rich, water so plentiful that I was depressed by a feeling of unwholesomeness. So much in so small a space borders on decay. This scene was much the same all the way to Cairo.* Modernities were cotton ginning factory and a power plant next to the mud huts of the fellahs, *ancient water wheels propelled by blindfolded bullocks and donkey drawn wooden ploughs...* The people seemed very poor despite their industry and their physical standard was low. He was very impressed by the bridges which carried the road over various canals and the two main streams of the Nile. They were marvels of engineering. A mingle of modern and primitive. The scene of a dhow passing through the locks of such a bridge symbolised one of the important aspects of Egypt. In Cairo, he describes the bedlam of the traffic. He expressed that living in respectable and decent surroundings, eating perfectly prepared food, and sleeping between clean sheets, did one the world of good. He indulged in something that he had dreamt for months - of a hot bath! And described the feeling of a million dollars and with clean hair. While strolling through Cairo, he

noticed an imposing building with a huge tapestry drooped over the entrance. It was a Sephardic shul and he attended their Shabbat and Succoth services. The community was large with many brown skinned befezzed individuals. The service was exactly the same as ours but the nigen quite unfamiliar. The rituals were different including covering the face with one's palm when saying the Shema and kissing the palm. A custom was giving money to the beggars on exiting the shul after Shabbat. (Succoth was the 6th -12th October, Shabbat 11th October 1941) His stay in Cairo included visits to the Bazaar where children under the age of 7 years did filigree work in a silversmith shop. He dispatched a parcel of gifts he bought - a pair of slippers typically Egyptian for Dad, a snap album as a birthday present for Leah and a Kiddush Becher and tray in silver which he though would last and be ideal. He stated that there were so many lovely things to be seen that he could spend weeks in the Bazaars and if money grew on trees, spend it like water. ^{7 Oct 41} There were visits to night clubs with cabarets and dance bands, all of a high standard of accomplishment and rhythm. The entrance fee to the club was inexpensive but the cost of drinks was very high due to the gigolos and ladies. By 12 p.m. all was closed on Order of the Military Governor of Cairo.

He visited mosques and was impressed with the Mohammed Ali Mosque. One thing that struck him was the hold which religion played in the lives of the Egyptians. It was an integral part of their lives and the mosque was the kernel of all community life. Ramadan was in progress and none were not observing to the letter the injunction of their creed. He stated that part of the explanation of the apathy shown by the average Egyptians to a European, unless his interest was gained, was explained by the fact that "*we are unbelievers*". Whether religion should play so great a part in the life of man was arguable. He covered the subject that the impression the Egyptians made, was that of carrion - preying on the tourists, and in the time of war on the troops. He stated that this was a mistake '*as no one who has not our intimate knowledge of the way of life of the average man in the street is equipped to make an assessment of a nation as a whole*'. He visited the sphinx and the pyramids. A visit into the inside of the largest pyramid was noteworthy due to a horrible musty smell of the interior and the hopelessness of trying to get a good idea of the place with the aid of a candle and magnesium wire doled out by an all but illiterate guide. A photo of himself in front of the pyramids was sent home. ^{20 Oct 41}

Much to his disappointment, his planned trip to Palestine transformed itself into a trip to a base camp just outside Cairo. He did a course away from his battalion. He enjoyed the course, wrote the exam, and was confident that he attained distinction. The course was considered to be a wonderful holiday from the boredom and inactivity which prevailed at Camp. This camp was well appointed

with bungalows and showers. He spent a number of Shabbat evenings with local Jewish families who were most hospitable. One was with Mr Harry Nachum, who lived in the suburb Maadi. They were a frum Sephardic family from Tripoli Libya. He was an Italian subject and spoke 7 languages. They had a stationary business. His wife was in the USA. Harry and his mother hosted 10 people to a sumptuous meal followed by benching. *'Jews are all the same, no matter where you meet them'*.^{20 Nov 41} He acknowledged a parcel of taiglach, pletzlach, imberlach and all sort of confectionaries from Mom. These were obviously sent for Rosh Hashanah.^{17 Nov 41}

During October there was a change in the weather with shorter days - dawn to dusk 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. They were issued with more blankets and he needed to buy a sleeping bag in Cairo. With winter approaching they were issued with a winter kit. They received the British Battle Order – winter dress – thick flannel longs and jacket which troops in Europe wore, not like the dress that the Imperials wore at home.^{9 Oct 41}

On return to his battalion he was happier being with chaps who had been his constant companions for so long. In December, the mood changed. They were continually on the move, but so far had struck no trouble. He stated that the family could not expect more than a brief note now and again. It was freezing cold. Time was spent in the desert with no ability to wash as water was initially scare. They had bad weather with dust storms and needed to move camp – packing up and digging in. They subsequently moved to a new site where he slept in a bed and he was able to write at a table – *'Living like a lord'*.^{18 Dec 41} He received lots of parcels but did not receive much outside news. He commented that the *'Japs like the Italians will prove a flash in the pan. Russians doing wonderfully well.'*^{22 Dec 41} His parents were due to celebrate their Silver wedding anniversary and he sent his wishes and gratitude. As always, he stated that he was fit as ever - fit was a fiddle and revelling in it.

The 2nd South African Infantry Division took over responsibility for the Frontier area on 2nd December 1941 as part of the British Eighth Army. Their duties acquired a more prominent role as Tobruk became the responsibility of the Division under Major General H. B. Klopper's command when Rommel withdrew in December 1941.^{1,2}

The Eighth Army conducted Operation Crusader (18th November – 31st December), to relieve Tobruk and capture eastern Cyrenaica. They launched a surprise attack, advancing west from its base at Mersa Matruh and crossed the Libyan border. They were repulsed several times, culminating in the defeat of the 7th Armoured Division by the Afrika Korps at Sidi Rezegh. Rommel ordered the panzer divisions to relieve the Axis positions on the Egyptian border. He failed to find the main body of the Allied infantry, which had bypassed the fortresses and headed for Tobruk. Rommel withdrew his armour from the frontier towards Tobruk and achieved several tactical successes. The Axis forces then retired west of Tobruk to the Gazala Line and then back to El Agheila.¹



July 1941

Photograph of Julian Meyer taken in the gardens off Mohamed Ali Square, Alexandria, Egypt.



September 1941

Photograph of Omaied Station (El-'Imayid / [El-Omaied) which is situated 15 miles east of El Alamein on the railway line to Alexandria, Egypt.

Photographs taken during the visit to Cairo – October 1941



4th October 1941

On the way to Cairo, early morning



4th October 1941
Bridge over Nile at Tanta



4th October 1941
On the way to Cairo



5th October 1941

L-R: Dragoman (interpreter, translator, and official guide), Percy Skelton (Buster) Wimble (1910-1942), Robert (Bob) Blair and Julian Meyer, at the Ibn Tukum Mosque Cairo.



October 1941

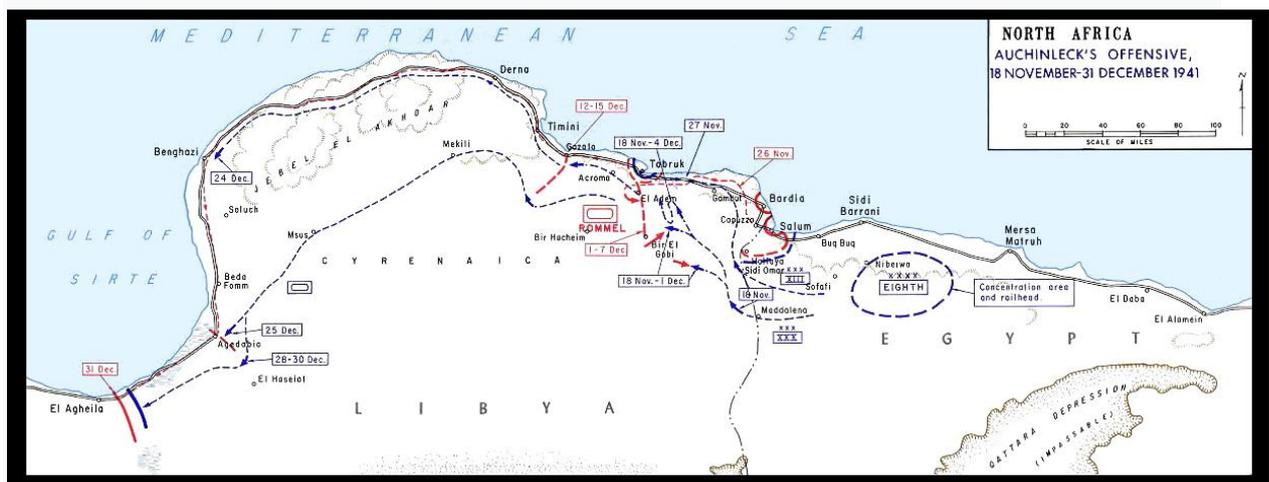
Visit to the Pyramids

L-R: Julian Meyer, Percy Skelton (Buster) Wimble (1910-1942) and Robert (Bob) Blair



Mortar Course S.A. Base - October November 1941

L-R: Strydom, Bennett, Faurin, Sgt. Fleming (Instructor), Julian Meyer, Puth, and Pettitt.



Operation Crusader 18th November – 31st December 1941

1942

When Julian's platoon returned to Battalion HQ, the unit that replaced them was that of his friend Philip Medalie, of whom he was able to catch a glimpse. The weather was harsh - rained cats and dogs and very cold. New Year's Eve was spent in a shelter hearing the bursting of shells in the vicinity. At about 3 a.m. someone remembered that it was 1942.^{4 Jan 42} In early January 1942 there was little time to write as they were very busy. *Not to worry if don't hear from me for a week or two. We have so much to do that it may be impossible for me to find time to write regularly.*^{13 Jan 42} It was the first time that he mentioned casualties. He noted that Astor Levy was killed in action – Sunday Times.^{4 Jan 42} *'You must remember him – he lived down the road'*. Astor Levy was 21 years old. He served

in the regiment South African Reserve Mechanical Transport, Unit 110 Reserve Motor Transport. He died on 16th November 1941 and is buried in the Addis Ababa War Cemetery, Ethiopia.⁴

Battles that the 2nd South African Division were involved in:

Bardia: 31st December 1941 to 2nd January 1942. This town was re-taken by the 2nd South African Division. Some 8 000 Allied POWs were freed, and some 6 000 Axis POWs were taken.^{5,6} *“The Regiment then proceeded into the desert, where it was engaged in two actions, at Fort Capuzzo (Bardia) and Sollum.”*⁶

Clayden's Trench (Sollum): 11th to 12th January 1942. They attacked the fortified town of Sollum, on the Egyptian border, on 11th January 1942 in a bitterly fought battle. This battle has ever since been commemorated by the 2nd Transvaal Scottish.^{5,6} *‘The attack on Sollum, a small coastal village in Egypt close to the Libyan border, took place in January 1942. It was part of a broader strategy of denying the Axis forces access to the sea and it was here that the Transvaal Scottish battalion went into serious battle for the first time. At 06.40, under cover of an artillery barrage, the Scottish platoons moved down the wadis onto the narrow plain. Close to the enemy positions, they launched a full-frontal regimental bayonet run for forty yards to overrun the forward lines. Smollan was injured when a bullet scythed across his cheek, ear and neck. Dazed and bleeding, but fortunately not seriously hurt, he was removed to hospital. He was one of over a hundred Transvaal Scottish casualties incurred during the successful operation. A close friend, John Mendelsohn, was killed in action while another, Phillip Medalie, was seriously wounded and would spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair’*⁷ A year later, a letter of Julian noted *We had a memorial service on the 11th for those of our chaps who fell at Sollum.* ^{15 Jan 43}

Julian’s letter of 21st January 1942 stated that his good friend Phillip was wounded in action by shrapnel and had been evacuated to hospital. Julian was in a different sector of the field of action, as their respective sections were attached to different companies.

Halfaya Pass: The Axis garrisons left at Halfaya Pass were isolated after the fall of Bardia on the 2nd January 1942. They were cut off from supplies and following bombardment from the air and the sea, the Axis garrisons surrendered on 17th January 1942.¹

Julian stated that the capitulation of Halfaya Pass had put a completely new complexion on the situation, and he believed that there would be very little fighting before the whole campaign was brought to a successful end.^{21 Jan 42}

In his next letter of the 26th January 1942 he stated that they have moved right back, miles from the scene of their recent activities – for a rest, right by the sea. The dust was a problem, but his tent was dug in. The site had been a scene of fighting at the beginning of the push. Before they left their last situation, they were taken on a sightseeing trip to Bardia which was captured by the Second division. It was very interesting as the harbour was most amazing, consisting of a channel running inland from the sea for about a mile. The land on the coast and on the sides of this channel are about two hundred feet above sea level and drop sheer down into the water. The Italians had made a road up this almost vertical face, leading from the water up to the village which is perched on top of the escarpment. He had seen a number of examples of Italian road making recently. He noted that the Italians made poor soldiers but wonderful road engineers. He hoped that the Union was making good use of the POWs, now in the country, for improving South African road.

During their period in contact with the enemy they saw vast quantities of German and Italian material. The Germans had a number of useful gadgets but almost without exception, their equipment was superior in quality and durability. The Italians' rifle was the most laughable weapon he had seen.^{26 Jan 42}

He commented on the home news of the O.B. (Ossewa Brandwag) having become most active again and the internment of so many policemen as certainly not a good sign. He also noted petrol rationing in the Union. He mentioned that he would be getting leave in the near future and needed money. There also was a shortage of stamps and letter cards.^{28 Jan 42} He noted that some chaps had received gramophone records with messages from home. He requested that each family member make a record and send them up to him.

The letter of the 3rd February 1942 described a service held by Chaplain Yesorki, the Jewish Chaplain. This was their first service since the push began and took the form of a memorial service for the Fallen. Four Jewish members of the Transvaal Scottish Regiment Unit 2nd Battalion were killed on active service. They were Privates Jacks, Golombick and Nidzon, and Corporal Mendelsohn. He stated that they could not be buried according to Jewish rites and the Church of England Padre did what he could for them. There were a number of Jewish fellows among the wounded. He had news that his friend Philip was severely hurt, and the doctors had every hope of being able to patch him up successfully. He

hoped that his friend would come through without being maimed for the rest of his days. Albert Jacks died on 11th January 1942; Israel Golombick aged 31 years, died on 12th December 1941; Leslie Nidzon aged 22 years, died on 11th January 1942. They were all buried in the Halfaya Sollum War Cemetery; John Moss Mendelsohn aged 24 years, died on 21st January 1942, and was buried in the Alexandria Hadra War Memorial Cemetery. The Halfaya Sollum War Cemetery contains the graves of 368 South African War Dead out of a total of 382 graves.⁴

Julian was disquieted by the news from the Union – a complacent attitude adopted by the majority towards the War and the War Effort with subversive activities of a small minority. *‘Surely they have learned by the experience of others and do not need a disaster such as Dunkirk or Pearl Harbour to awaken them as did Britain and America’*.^{3 Feb 42}

He connected with the Woolf Austoker, future husband of his cousin Joyce Lewis, who had been given a job to do in a back area and only re-joined the battalion after their period in the line. Julian described the only souvenir he cared to keep. It was a little booklet published in Magdeburg Germany in 1941. To put it crudely, the book tells its enlightened Nazi readers how to say “Kiss my backside” in no less than forty-five languages. The book was to his mind a fair reflection of the mentality of the modern German.^{4 & 9 Feb 42}

In the middle of February 1942, he described the situation as quiet – back to the pick and shovel. He received gifts of books, magazines and thrillers from his family and Sun Life, the Assurance Company where his father worked.^{13 Feb 42}

He heard from the family that *‘Leonard Silberman was missing. He is in for a miserable time in Italy but as long as he was safe I suppose it is all that really matters. He will not lack company anyway!’*^{17 Feb 42} He mentioned a friend having seen Philip Medalie in hospital in Cairo and stated that Philip left Cairo on 22nd February 1942 for the Union. The news of his injury was a severed spinal cord.

The weather started to improve, and Julian was able to wear shorts. There was mention of a cinema show, which was held in a large cave near them. The cave was probably used by the enemy as an ammunition store and made a wonderful auditorium. They were shown the African Mirror, a few musical shorts and a film called “The Housemaster”. It succeeded in taking them out of themselves for once in a while and they all felt better for it. He hoped to be going to Cairo for Pesach.
^{17 Feb 42}

He discussed at length an issue with a girlfriend, Lilian, who *'is quite a problem... I have repeatedly told her in so many words not to get too serious about me. I should hate her to suffer any injury on my account but she certainly will if she persists. Things are quite complex enough without the addition of emotional entanglements and I don't know quite what to do about it all.'*^{17 Feb 42}

He stated that *'The news is not calculated to cheer one up, but although the loss of Singapore is certainly serious.... Once America can fully mobilise her industry as well as her manpower it will only be a matter of a very short time before the Axis will be forced to its knees.'*^{17 Feb 42} The month of February continued with work using a pick and shovel – busy digging. The weather was changeable with days of dust and wind and he got accustomed to the weather. During this time, he gained about 10 to 15 pounds *of unnecessary weight.*^{26 Feb 42} In reply to a request from the family to let them know of his recent experiences he stated *'We in mortars did not come into very close contact with the enemy – our job was to harass them from afar & of course they did their best to repay the compliment. Anyway when I'm in the mood & have time I'll do my best to inform you of the Battalion's activities'*. He stated that he would appreciate a rare letter from his father although he knew that he sends the money. Regarding news of South Africa, he informed the family that the U.D.F newspaper, the Springbok was published weekly in Cairo, and gave them all the South African news. *'Do you see it in the Union?'* There was also a request for a cheap pocket watch and Springbok plain cigarettes, even though he smoked all the brands, as he preferred them. In response to his sister Leah's concern following Dr Freed's lecture on the diseases which are *'the rewards of sin'*, he replied that he could safely look after himself. *'The diseases are infectious but not contagious'*. He commented on the report of casualties which appeared in the Zionist Record. Harry Lurie's name was given, and he stated the he had received a small cut, so technically was a casualty. Lt Selikman was not at all seriously wounded and should recover.

Limited battle experience was gained by some soldiers during the Battle of Benghazi in January 1942, or in what became known among troops as the Benghazi Handicap and the Gazala Gallop, apt phrases for describing the to-and-fro nature of the North African battles.²

In March Julian stated that from his reading of the news and from information gathered here and there, he thought that the Middle East may soon be in the news again. He stated that an offensive before the summer begun would just about settle Rommel for good and all.^{7 Mar 42} During a thunderstorm one night, they made their way to the trenches when they realised that it was not bombs and felt a bit shamefaced.^{9 Mar 42} During that month they were on the move again and he

complained of miserable trips in lorries. He mentioned their unit's first casualty – Hyatt who sustained an eye injury but was pleased to know that he has recovered. They settled in at camp and he was comfortable as the ground was soft and he was able to dig his tent in and make everything generally shipshape.^{18 Mar 42} *'All is quiet and it does not feel like war. It is hard to believe that there is a war on at all. Now and again we are reminded by the presence of hostile aircraft. They do not take a great deal of interest in our particular existence.'*^{27 & 28 Mar 42} He mentioned BBC broadcasts, having the opportunity of listening to the news from a set that another soldier had a few hundred yards from them. It was wonderfully refreshing to listen again to music and song. He was heartened by the news and was convinced that the Allies were preparing to strike, and they would see the Axis crumble beneath the huge masses of war material which had been set aside for the task. He felt that very soon, within six months *'America will be hitting back at Japan. The Pendulum has reached its zenith and is now beginning to swim back.'*^{17 Apr 42}

His letter of the 3rd April 1942 described a Pesach service held by Reverend Captain Weinstein for his battalion. They each received a little matzah, a drink of wine and some raisins and nuts. He was awaiting the parcel with all the Pesach goodies and supposed it would arrive for Rosh Hashanah. (Pesach was the 2nd – 9th April 1942). A note was received by the family from the Rev. Capt. S Weinstein, dated 6th June 1942, stating that he had *'seen your beloved son, Julian and I am happy to inform you that he is cheerful and enjoying the best of health.'* Julian wanted snaps as he felt that they conveyed more than words. *"We are not permitted to carry cameras in the field"* but would do his best to let the family have snaps whenever possible. The soldiers evolved a method to make cookies using Eno's Fruit Salts and for obvious reasons could not eat too much.^{3 Apr 42} They made a chocolate cake without eggs, butter, or fresh milk. They used an oven built into the side of a trench. The fire was inside and once the ground had been heated up, the fire was raked out, the dish inserted, and the entrance closed with a piece of tin. A number of cottage pies were cooked in the oven. Once again, they were still digging, and it was still quiet.^{14 Apr 42} He requested his mercantile law books be sent to him. There were not enough law students and he hoped to work out a scheme with a few of the accountants who were interested in quite a few branches of law. If he succeeded, he would have solved a dual problem: killing boredom and keeping in touch with things.^{5 Apr 42} A problem was the presence of thousands of mosquitoes. The soldiers received a change of uniform to the summer issue, having worn the winter issue for 6 months. The new issue was all brand new and the same as the bush kit they used in the Union. He got perfect fits in everything and felt that he was looking very smart indeed in the midst of the desert.^{10 Apr 42}

During the month of May he described deserts storms and had requested goggles from the family. However, the goggles were no match for the onslaught of Libyan dust storms. He stated that the Ities (Italians) most obligingly left all their equipment behind them. The upper portion of the face piece of their respirators (gas masks) made excellent dust goggles with very little adaptation.^{8 May 42} The continuous dust got on one's nerves and generally made things pretty miserable. He experienced the Khamsian winds blowing with an overcast sky and the hot wind was like being in a furnace, with a heat wave of over 100 degrees. A can of beer in his tent was hot to touch although it has not been exposed to the sun. They had a visit to a beach and a swim of 20 minutes was a wonderful sensation, worth the 15-mile trip. In the parcels he received, he enjoyed the cans of fruit juice sent and did not want Nescafe but more fruit juice as they were really delicious. He hoped for leave and stated that he would hate to slip up again. He was thinking of writing to both Rommel and Auchinleck to delay any pushes they may have in mind until he had had his leave.^{1 May 42} He still had not heard about Cairo leave in his next letter. He hoped thought that, if they got enough time he intended to go to Palestine.^{8 May 42}

In May General Smuts paid them a visit and *brought "Ouma" to see the Waafs* (Women's Auxiliary Air Force) & *W Assies* (Women's Auxiliary Army Service). Julian was most fortunate in being one of the parties of 15 from his battalion, who had the honour of going to see Smuts They had to travel 60 miles by truck and left on a Wednesday afternoon returning the following day. He felt that Smuts had little to tell them but was pleased to hear that the government was taking a serious view of the dangers facing South Africa.^{15 May 42} This visit by Smuts was recorded on film.⁸ It included various shots of Smuts during his morale boosting trip to South African and Allied troops in desert. He was seen talking to nurses, addressing troops, inspecting the troops, inspecting camps, as well as him filming his own record of the bombed towns. These were Bardia and Sollum.

During May, Julian described guarding a well on the main road and described it as *'the most pleasant task that we have yet had. The wells are apparently fed by an underground stream & there are quite a number in this area. Do not infer from the existence of the wells that this is an oasis. The desert here is as bleak & as barren as anywhere else. However, we are in a wadi protected from the wind & have occupied some very comfortable bivouacs kindly prepared for us by the Italians. Since we have been here I have been able to wash all my clothes & would you believe it, bath every day! ... The only drawback is that every variety of insect, rodent & reptile shares the wadi with us, apparently attracted by the water.'* He wrote about the parcels he received and tried to impress on the family that he felt that the parcels were not worth the expense the family paid. The money they

would save by sending him fewer parcels could be put to far better use...*Too much fresh air, food and sleep and too little manual labour!*^{25 May 42}

Gazala: 26th May 1942 to 21st June 1942. The 2nd South African Infantry Division went on to fight in the battles of Gazala. The Gazala Line was a stretch of 80 kilometres extending for Gazala, situated on the coast 48 km west of Tobruk to an old Ottoman fortress at Bir Hakeim, 80 km to the south. Behind the Gazala Line were defensive boxes known as "Commonwealth Keep" or Hill 209 (at Ras El Madaur; on Tobruk's main defensive line, about 14.5 km west-south-west of the port), Acroma, "Knightsbridge" (19 km south of Acroma) and El Adem, sited to block tracks and junctions.⁹

By June, Julian had no opportunity of dropping the family a few lines 'as we have been pretty busy, firstly moving about from one place to another & latterly preparing positions. We have seen quite a bit of activity all about us but so far there has been little of immediate concern to us....This show won't last very long - Germany's little game in the desert is nearing its end, as in Europe too...as soon as I have a little time to spare & conditions are conducive to writing I'll certainly reply to letters. He commented on reports of snow in Johannesburg and it reminded him that it was very nearly a year since he had left the country. 'I pray that it may not be long before the war will be won & I will see you all again well & happy. Do not I implore you worry about me. Have faith that I shall be safe. All my love Julian.'^{4 Jun 42}

His last letter of the 10th June 1942 stated 'Though we have been sitting on the edge of the battlefield for a week, still we have not been obliged to participate in the conflict in any active capacity. I feel that within the next few days the struggle in this area will have been decided and the scene of activities will then move very quickly towards Benghazi. We have definitely won the first round and it will not be long before we are able to administer the K.O. (knock out)' This letter was written on the anniversary of them sailing from Durban – 10th June 1941. He stated that *The year that has passed has been a full one, fraught with a lot of experiences both harsh & pleasant. ...The lessons I have learned during this time been invaluable & the benefits I have derived therefrom far outweigh the desolation of spirit & anguish of body I have suffered. God willing I shall emerge a fuller and better man for my years away from those closest to me; with a deeper and more sincere appreciation of the true values of life....Believe me I am well & as confident for the future as ever. Be of good cheer & courage & all shall be well. All my love, Julian.*^{10 Jun 42}

There was no further communication following this letter.

On the 30th June 1942, a telegram was sent to Mrs F Meyer:

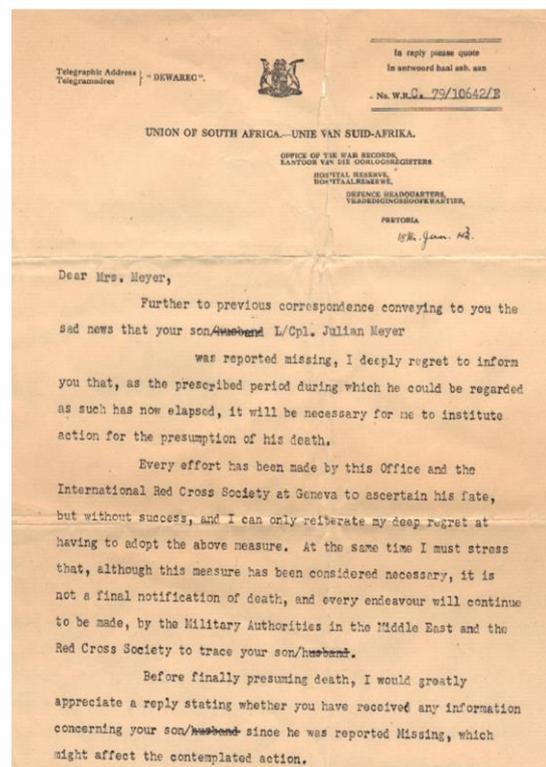
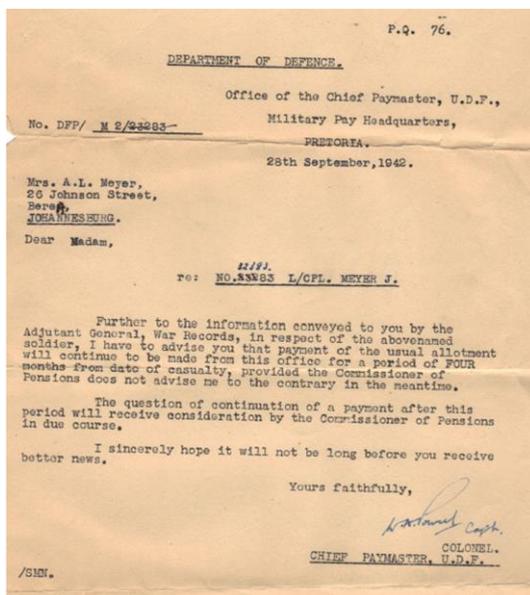
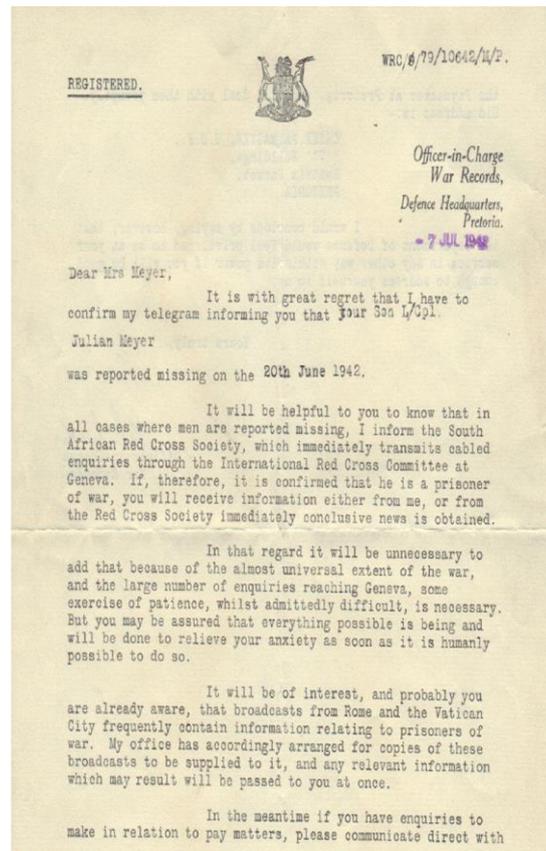
Department of Defence regrets to inform you that your son 32383 Lance Corporal Julian Meyer reported missing 20 June. Addressed Mrs F Meyer, repeated Red Cross Johannesburg. On the same day the South African Red Cross Society sent Mrs Meyer a letter informing her that they had instituted cabled enquiries re the welfare of L/Cpl Meyer. They stated that they had to receive 'communication by the capturing power from the scene of operations to the Official Prisoner-of-War Bureau. From there it is cabled to the International Red Cross in Geneva and from Geneva to us.'

The Officer in Charge War Records, Defence Force Pretoria sent a registered letter to Mrs Meyer on the 7th July. *It is with great regret I have to confirm my telegram informing you that your son...was reported missing. It will be helpful to you to know that in all cases where men were reported missing, I inform the South African Red Cross Society, which immediately transmits cabled enquiries through the International Red Cross Committee Geneva. If, therefore, it is confirmed that he is a prisoner of war, you will receive information from me, or from the Red Cross Society immediately conclusive news is obtained.*

Further correspondence from the Department of Defence, Office of the Chief Paymaster, U.D.F to Mrs Meyer of the 28th September 1942 stated: *in respect of the abovenamed soldier, I have to advise you that payment of the usual allotment will continue to be made from this office for a period of FOUR months from date of casualty. ..., after this period will receive consideration by the Commissioner of Pensions in due course. I sincerely hope it will not be long before you receive better news.* In the New Year of 1943, the Office of War Records sent a letter on the 18th January 1943 which stated that they *regret to inform you that, as the prescribed period during which he could be regarded as such has now elapsed it will be necessary for us to institute action for the presumption of his death.... Before finally presuming death, I would greatly appreciate a reply stating whether you have received any information concerning your son since he was reported Missing....* The final letter from the Office of War Records on the 8th May 1943 read: *I am in receipt of one kit bag from the Authorities in the North, belonging to your son L/Cpl Julian Meyer. This is now being forwarded to you, as received, by passenger train and I trust it will reach you safely.*



Telegrams and Letters
re L/Cpl J Meyer
Department of Defence



Résumé of Egypt

Life appeared quite mundane and boring initially during Julian's time in the Western Desert. He wrote about the weather; parcels received and always listed the gifts. He described the improvisation of meals and baking of chocolate cake and biscuits. As the war effort intensified, he gave snippets of incidences. He did define the work he did in the army as that of *We in mortars...* Due to censorship he did not detail events, and neither could he take photographs as a camera was not permitted.

In a later letter written as a POW on the 18th December 1942 he stated *Just a year ago I saw my first action in the desert....* He alluded to battles in the Western Desert, and interaction with the Axis Forces – the Italians (Ities) and the German Afrika Korps. 'He detailed the names of fellow soldiers killed in action. When he stated that he did not have time to write, the reasons related to activity on the battle front. He wrote about Leonard Silberman who his family had informed him had been taken as a POW by the Italians.¹⁰ Julian had no idea that he would suffer a similar fate a few weeks later.

References:

1. SA Army. Dept of Defence. History of the Second World War
<http://www.army.mil.za/aboutus/history.htm>;
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2nd_Infantry_Division_;
<http://www.britishmilitaryhistory.co.uk/documents>.
2. Horn K. South African Prisoner-of -War Experience during and after World War II: 1939 – c.1950. Stellenbosch University 2012
3. Quattara Depression. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qattara_Depression
4. The South Africa War Graves Project. <http://www.southafricawar Graves.org>
5. Transvaal Scottish Regiment.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transvaal_Scottish_Regiment
6. Bardia and the Western Desert. <http://www.jocks.co.za/history.htm>
7. Military History Journal Vol 14 No 5 - June 2009. Long journey to Anzio. A Springbok escapee story. <http://samilitaryhistory.org/vol145ds.html>
8. Field Marshall Smuts visit to the troops in the desert.
<http://www.britishpathe.com/video/field-marshal-smuts-visits-troops-1942>
 The video included various shots of Field Marshal Smuts, Prime Minister of South Africa, during his morale boosting trip to South African and Allied troops in the desert. He is seen talking to nurses, addressing troops, inspecting the troops, inspecting camps, talking to officers etc. While on tour, he films on small cine camera his own record of the bombed towns. Various shots, air to air, of the Hudson carrying Field Marshal Smuts. Good shots of the accompanying Hurricanes. Various shots of Field Marshal Smuts watching troops assembling wagons and native men unloading ammunition

from boats near seaport. On review of this film it shows images of Bardia and Sollum, including a memorial to the deceased at Sollum.

9. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Gazala

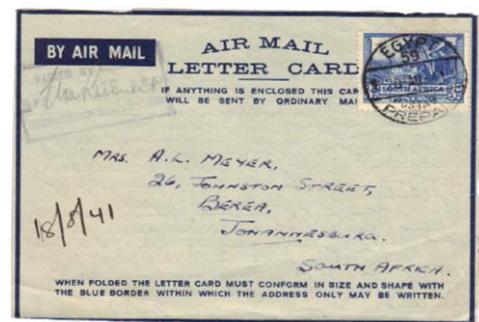
10. Forces War Records. www.forces-war-records.co.uk.

Imperial Prisoners of War held in Italy 1943: LJ Silberman, number 78884, private

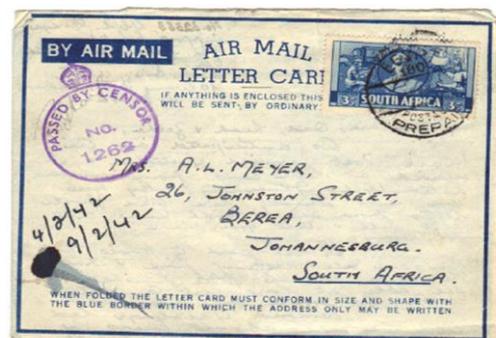
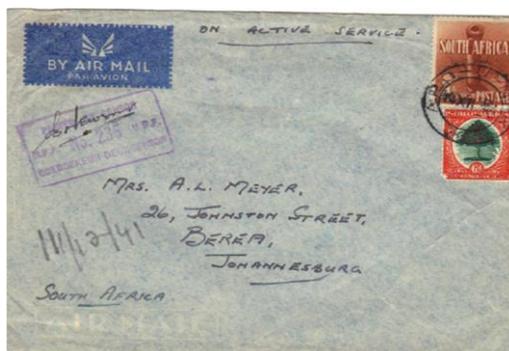
Definitions:

Waafs - Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) were the female auxiliary of the Royal Air Force.

W Assies – the Women's Auxiliary Army Service.



Letters from Egypt



Italian Prisoner of War

L/Cpl J Meyer; POW number 32383

20th June 1942 – 11th September 1943

Italy officially entered the war on the side of Germany on the 10th June 1940. Mussolini believed that Italy could gain territorial concessions from France, following the fall of France and the French armistice with Germany. He concentrated his forces on a major offensive in North Africa, where British and Commonwealth forces were outnumbered by Italian forces. With the fall of Tobruk to the Axis forces on 21st June 1942, 10 722 of the 33 000 Allied soldiers captured were South African.

The shock of becoming a prisoner was followed by days of mental and physical hardship under Italian captors. Although the Germans captured the men, they immediately handed over their prisoners to the Italian forces who were responsible for the confinement of POWs, mostly in camps in Tobruk, Gazala, Tarhunah, Derna, Benghazi and Mersa Matruh. These were all transit camps. Most POWs ended up in Benghazi before being transported to Italy. Most camps were simple wire enclosures with Italian and Senussi guards posted on the perimeter. At this early stage of captivity, no Red Cross delegates inspected any of the camps, and the conditions in the North African camps were so bad that POWs were mainly concerned with basic survival needs. Many South Africans were reduced to begging for water and food during the first few days in transit camps. Faced with an unexpected high number of POWs and inadequate temporary camps, the Italians did not regard the Geneva Convention as a priority at this time. The Italian troops were reported to be in a poor state, especially with regard to their equipment, transport, rations.¹

Before the events at Tobruk, some South Africans came across German and Italian (Ities) POWs. They formed initial impressions of their adversaries - The 'Ities' were looked on as inferior to the Germans. Opinions about Italians were also formed when South Africans raided abandoned dug outs at Mersa Matruh, Sidi Barrani, Sollum, Halfaya Pass and Bardia.¹

Many POWs considered their experiences in North African as dehumanising, referring to the camps as "cages". Maintaining a sense of dignity became a daily struggle, because living conditions worsened, and most POWs lost on average between 20 and 30 kilograms in weight as a result of food shortages. Because there were so many prisoners, the distribution of food was a long process and after standing in line for hours, the POWs were always disappointed when they received their rations. In most transit camps POWs were accommodated in tents, but in Benghazi some of the camps used converted barracks which were

equipped with electricity. Hygiene, however, was a problem in all camps and POWs quickly became infested with lice and infected with dysentery. The toilet facilities were hopelessly inadequate and at some camps POWs were not allowed to go to the toilets at night. The Benghazi camp had only one toilet which was supposed to serve 400 men. There were about 4000 POWs in the camp and in an attempt to solve the problem, a trench of about four meters was dug and a box with holes was placed over the trench. Toilet paper was simply non-existent, and any paper found was reserved for those suffering from dysentery.¹

Most POW's coped with the deplorable conditions in the camps in a similar manner, realising that friendship and trust was the determining factor. It was during this time that prisoners established their POW identities, either as team players or as loners because the sharing of food became a necessary part of life.¹

On average, the Tobruk POWs spent five months in the North African camps. When the Italians started to move the Tobruk POWs to Italy, many were still suffering from dysentery and virtually all had lice. The majority of POWs were transported across the Mediterranean by boat. They were forced to endure utterly miserable conditions. The journey took between five and ten days. Cargo spaces were packed to capacity with men, and movement was severely limited. At night, hatches over the holds were closed. The lack of toilet facilities below deck was a severe problem. The Italians provided buckets, but they were inadequate, and men found themselves lying or sitting in bodily waste.¹

The majority of South Africans arrived at Brindisi and were sent to Camp 85 in Tukuran or Camp 75 near Bari. They were deloused, had their hair shaved, received additional clothing and had their first hot showers in months before arrangements were made to transport them to permanent camps.¹ The Axis POW camps in Italy had the initials "P.G." denoting *Prigione di Guerra* (Prison of War). This was often interchanged with the title *Campo* (field or military camp).

1942

Poste Italiane Cartoline Postale per Prigionieri di Guerra. Meyer Julian Lance- Corporal Campo P.G. 75 P.M. 3450 Italia.

P.G. 75 was a Transit Camp near Bari, a port city on the Adriatic Sea, and the capital of southern Italy's Puglia region.

7th August 1942. *My dearest Ma, Dad, Leah &Zelda,*

At last I can let you know what you have been so anxious to know- am well & as happy as can be under the circumstances. Hope soon to be in permanent camp. Write as often as you can. Fondest love Julian Meyer

Poste Italiane Cartoline Postale per Prigionieri di Guerra. Meyer Julian Lance- Corporal Campo P.G. 54 P.M. 3300 Italia.

. P.G. 54 was situated at Passo Corese, Fara Sabina It was 35 km north east of Rome. Work on Camp PG 54 started during July 1942. The first group of nearly 3,000 men arrived during the second half of August 1942, followed by another 1,000 men who arrived on the 27th and 28th September from transit Camp PG 66 at Capua. Initially the camp was comprised of two compounds 150 m by 150 m, each containing 2,000 men. Each compound contained four rows of tents accommodating 68 men in each. The camp housed lower-ranked British, South African and Ghurkha prisoners, mostly from the surrender of Tobruk. They were held in the two compounds in very poor conditions and they suffered food shortages.

18th September 1942. *Dearest Ma & Dad, This camp is a new one in lovely surroundings. We are being reasonably treated and I am keeping very well. Think of you always & pray you are all well & not worrying about me. Wish you all Happy New Year; next one will see me home, Julian.*

On the same day a second letter was written to *Ma & Dad. Settled, fit & happy in permanent Camp. Can now receive letters & parcels. Have been issued British Winter Kit, brand new & complete & as I saved most of own kit need no clothing beyond Polo Sweater, gloves & Tam o' Shatner. Send maximum parcels possible of food. Believe parcels sent from Egypt & England reach here sooner - please investigate possibilities of additional parcels from these services. In food parcels suggest following: 'Klim' Milk, Syrup, Sugar, Peanut Butter, Compressed Oats, Oat Biscuits, Cocoa, Bovril, Bully Beef, Etc.as basic content; & Tinned Butter, Saccharin, Jam, Pancake Powder, Biltong, Bantam Coffee, Honey, Sugar, Sweets at your discretion. Make weight in all parcels with all tobacco & chocolate possible. ... avoid toilet requisites as we receive some through Red Cross. ... Wish you Happy New Year during which I feel sure all will finally come right.*

2nd November 1942. This letter documented Julian's POW number 32383. It was the same number assigned to him by the U.D.F. It was obvious that he had not had any correspondence from the family, despite having sent them letters. *Letters from South Africa are arriving in increasing numbers and any day now, I confidently expect to have one from you, reassuring me that all is well with you...As I think I told you previously, I've decided to cultivate a beard until my term as a POW terminates. ... What a pity I can't send you a snap! Incidentally if you can do so, please send some photos of yourselves. Am keeping fit & cheerful & am not allowing things to get me down.* He enquired about his friend Philip. He described the weather and that they were experiencing a good deal of rain.

10th November 1942. This letter notes that he was aware *that my name had not yet come through from the Vatican. That you should have been subjected to so long a period of uncertainty and strain on my account, is as far as I am concerned, the most unpleasant aspect of the whole of this business. However I know that information must have reached you shortly after Dawson's letter, my name having been handed in for broadcast at the same time as his; & I expect to hear from you in the very near future.* He states that he is together with a friend Teddy Dawson and Woolf Austoker and that they were now receiving a Red Cross parcel each per week regularly.

18th November 1942. ... *owing to that wonderful organisation the Red Cross, conditions here are constantly improving.* He asks the family to ascertain about 6 men as to where they are listed as POWs. (L/Cpl. Robert Blair, Ptas. Buster Wimble, J.W. Whelan, L.E. Berrington, H Kirkby, Sgt. FW Walker).

25th November 1942. He described life as a POW. He described the beds as wooden double decker bunks with *mattresses, sheets & blankets... am better off ...than I was in the Army.* He detailed the meals as *we receive bread & cheese for breakfast. The drinks were supplemented from Red Cross Parcels. They had a hot meal at midday & another in the late afternoon.* Between meals he was either at a lecture or brewing tea. In the evenings they *play cards, have a sing song or, if we are lucky enough to come by a book, read... The mountains which we see from our camp now have a blanket of snow...*

21st November 1942. Christmas Greetings, written on the letter head – Secretariat of State to His Holiness - Seasonal greetings: *Well and Happy God bless you all Julian.* This note had the postal stamp dated 29th March 1943 Bloemfontein. It was sent via the Catholic Missionary Station, Bloemfontein.

4th December 1942. He still had not heard from his family. *After so many months without any word of you, my imagination is occasionally inclined to conjure up all manner of disquieting possibilities.*

11th December 1942. He still *has not received letters*, through a letter written to Woolf Austoker, from his future wife Joyce Lewis mentioned that the family were all *fine but that at the time of writing – the end of August – I was still reported missing.* He stated that a few days prior he sent a telegram through the *courtesy of the Vatican.*

18th December 1942. *Just a year ago I saw my first action in the desert... Though there have been times when I have felt that all is futile & that life has no point or focus, I know full well that I shall emerge better able to direct my future along the correct channels, in the light of the lessons which are being impressed upon my mind. The sufferings of loved ones, whom one leaves behind, are always more acute & intense than are one's own.*

25th December 1942. Christmas day and the Red Cross *provided each of us with a wonderful Christmas parcel. ... I cannot stress too often that you send me as many snaps as you possibly can. Words can never convey the information which a photograph so effectively contains.* His POW companion Teddy Dawson had received a letter in which it stated *that I was still missing on the 19th September.*

1943

1st January 1943. *Today holds for me a dual significance. Not only does it mark the birth of a new year... it records also the admiration of a week which will ever live in my memory. I find myself unable to describe adequately the spirit of festivity & good cheer pervading the Camp.... The Christmas fare provided by the Red Cross and the ingenuity of the men have converted this place from a Prison Camp to a Banqueting Hall.*

8th January 1943. A post card to *My Dear Ma & Dad, Overjoyed to receive first two letters from Ma & Leah a few days ago.*

15th January 1943. This letter details the dates of letters that he had just received from the family. They were written 5.10.42 & 27.10.1942. *You can well imagine how relieved I was to know definitely that you are all well & that your worries on my account are at an end. It was so good to see again the familiar handwriting conveying all those little pieces of personal information which I have missed for so long. Somehow it puts new spirit into one when one realises that home is still the same as ever.* He sends his love to Philip. *We had a memorial service on the 11th for those of our chaps who fell at Sollum.* A separate card to Dad that day states that *he was been fortunate enough to obtain clerical employment in camp & so am keeping mentally as well as physically fit.*

22nd January 1943. His letter acknowledged further receipt of letters from his mother of 12.10.42 and Zelda 15.10.42. He was doing *clerical work in connection with Camp administration.* In his postcard sent to Ma and Dad he stated that *... The majority of chaps have been moved to another camp so feel a bit strange at the moment, but will soon make new friends!*

5th February 1943. He prefaced his letter with the mail received – Ma, 28.09.42. Although the majority of chaps were transferred to another camp, he stated that *my close friends are still here & so I do not miss the others much...* He was still awaiting parcels that the family had mentioned had been sent. *Incidentally, I have removed my beard ...*

12th February 1943. *The Red Cross parcels are providing us with parcels unflinching,*

24th February 1943. *... my primary object is to get letters to you (the family).* He was unable to write to others. *The Red Cross parcels which we receive*

weekly give a picnic atmosphere to the Camp. You cannot conceive just how much these parcels mean to us.

3rd March 1943. *It refers to a letter from you Ma, of 4th December (1942). It is most distressing to learn that you have had no further letters from me; but as you say it's the first that really counts.*

17th March 1943 he acknowledged parcels received and *I cannot tell you just how much all the lovely things I have received mean to me.* He suggested that they limited future parcels to *socks, summer underwear, light shirts and shorts. A pair of shoes, a kit bag, a raincoat & a tam 'o shanter could also be useful.... I was overjoyed to see my old pipe again.* A second letter of that day described his joy of receiving a personal parcel sent from home! A second *parcel through London!* In the letter he listed all the contents. *As you will realize I have everything I need and more! And that' still not all.... your first cable to me....*

24th March 1943. *We receive weekly Red Cross food parcels and 50 cigs and occasionally tobacco. But additional smokes can be sent addressed personally from England. The same applies to books. We get a fair supply from Geneva which go into the Camp library.* He changed his script from cursive to print.

31st March 1943. *Received a consignment of oddments from the SA Red Cross. Apparently foodstuffs in personal parcels destined for us in Egypt, which arrived after we had been taken prisoner have been sent to Italy by the authorities... He was most pleased to get a few S. African cigarettes, after all this time – somehow we still prefer them to English brands. ... biscuits, sweets, canned fruit and the like, all of which were most welcome* He mentions new arrivals to camp –Lionel Cooper and Maurice Friedland.

14th April 1943. He stated *A few medicals have been repatriated, so you will soon have first –hand news of me. Contact Serg Brown who will tell you just how well I am.*

21st April 1943. He again sent regards to Philip, and also regards from Jacko and Pat Robertson. *We hear the nightingale each night. One joy I might never have had, had I never come to Italy.*

28th April 1943. *The conditions in camp are becoming better & better as time passes. Our buildings are almost completed ... The Red Cross is unfailing in its care for our welfare & we are well supplied with food-parcels, cigarettes & clothing... My work keeps me pleasantly occupied & ensures for me supplementary rations & various considerations, all of which make life not as unpleasant as you might imagine.... At this festive season my thoughts are with you as yours are with me. We have not forgotten and at least in spirit maintain the significance of Passover. (Pesach 20th – 27th April 1943)*

30th April 1943. *All I need now is a kit bag to keep all my stuff in!*

5th May 1943. *The Easter season has come and gone. As I mentioned in my last letter, we did our best to observe the spirit of the Festival of Passover. ... The weather is beautiful & the countryside looks wonderful.*

12th May 1943. *He was somewhat disappointed not to receive any snaps. However I do not doubt that some will arrive soon. He noted that Philip is destined to spend the rest of his days in a wheel chair. That he still smiles & is determined to carry on his career speaks volumes for his fortitude.*

19th May 1943. *He responded to his mother's query whether the book on mercantile law that had previously been sent in 1942 was received. It reached me a few days before my capture, but unfortunately I was unable to carry it with me & so I'm afraid it remained in the Desert.*

26th May 1943. *Any letter from you brings me joy. Letters which tell me that you have heard from me, bring me, if that were possible, even greater delight. Ma's letter of 30 March acknowledged his letter of 1st January and Xmas Greeting.*

2nd June 1943. *I open each of your letters hoping to find a snap enclosed; but up to now without success*

9th June 1943. *Tomorrow is the second anniversary of our embarkment to the Middle East. June has indeed been an eventful month for me since the beginning of this War. (His experiences) have entailed periods of physical discomfort, even hardships: & spells of mental depression & stress: taken as a whole I have gained from them far more than I have lost.*

21st June 1943. *We have all for which we could wish; plenty of books & amusements; & food has definitely ceased to be a problem.*

23rd June 1943. *He received his second clothing parcel from the Union. I could not have wished for more useful articles.*

7th July 1943. *I have not received any mail for a few weeks ...In each letter from you I look in vain for snaps. Please do make an effort to let me have some.*

14th July 1943. *He requested book parcels be sent through London, and the same applied to cigarettes. He referred to playing in the camp hand-ball league*

28th July 1943. *There still was no mail from the Union for over a month, He stated that his hand ball team, in which he played full back, won the knockout competition. He found a few law books in Camp and was doing what he could with their assistance. We hold services regularly, many of which I conduct.*

4th August 1943. He had not received mail, *but for reasons which you will understand I am not at all perturbed.... I am as well as ever & have never felt more confident as to the future ...God bless you - it can't be long now. Julian.*

11th August 1943. He acknowledged receiving post after a silence of over 7 weeks. He referred to a letter from his father and replied to him: *To meet one's fate with a smile & to preserve one's faith under stress of misfortune are no more than negative virtues. He who has the courage to go out to meet his destiny & take a hand in the shaping of his end, is deserving of the highest praise.* He was happy that the family have received a photograph of him.

18th August 1943. This was Julian's birthday. *In normal circumstances it is difficult enough to express adequately one's emotions on an occasion such as this. Under present circumstances it is practically impossible. My chief desires are to make it clear to you that I am not deserving of pity, ... I know and am reconciled to the fact that we as individuals are but inconsiderable non entities, when one realizes the mental anguish & physical torture to which so many are now subjected. It behoves us now not to bemoan our misfortunes, but rather to count our blessing which are manifest and many. ... My friends have helped to make today most pleasant. Though a fence encompasses me, my spirit is free and with you.*

Political events in Italy 1943 – downfall of Mussolini and Armistice

On 24th July 1943, soon after the start of the Allied invasion of Sicily, Italy the Grand Council of Fascism voted against Mussolini. King Victor Emmanuel III had him arrested the following day. In the meantime, units of the 44th Infantry Division and the 36th Mountain Brigade of the Wehrmacht broke through the Brenner, Reschen and Toblach passes, occupying South Tyrol. At the same time, other German units penetrated Italy from the north crossing the Julian and Piedmontese borders. Trains transporting the German troops were gilded with writings praising Mussolini and pictures of the fallen dictator. From the 26th July until the 8th August eight Wehrmacht divisions and one brigade were moved into northern and central Italy, without Italian consent. On the 12th September 1943, Mussolini was rescued from prison in the Gran Sasso raid by German Special Forces.

POWs mostly heard of Mussolini's fall from guards, but prior to this they relied on rumours, pamphlets, and hidden radios for news of Allied landings in Italy. Many camps were also near cities and intensifying Royal Air Force activity and anti-aircraft fire enabled some fairly accurate assumptions to be made. A pamphlet drop informed POWs of Allied victories in North Africa. Shortly after a bombing raid on Rome in July 1943, Allied aircraft dropped more pamphlets into camps which guards scrambled to collect and to sell for soap and cigarettes.

This exchange illustrated the state of shortages in Italy by that stage. Propaganda pamphlets also stressed the deterioration of the relationship between Italy and Germany since the overthrow of Mussolini. A pamphlet told the Italians that Rome was going to be bombed by daylight so that the Ities could see that the Allies were not ‘bombing their valuable antiques – a thing Germany would do at night and blame it on us (the Allies)’.

Rumours abounded in the pre-armistice period, with it even being predicted in Camp 54 that Berlin itself would fall within weeks. The phase between Mussolini’s toppling and the Armistice was one of widening optimism for POWs, with conversation centred increasingly on Allied victories.

The Allied invasion of mainland Italy took place on 3 September 1943. It followed the successful invasion of Sicily. The main invasion force landed around Salerno on 9th September on the western coast in Operation Avalanche, while two supporting operations took place in Calabria (Operation Baytown) and Taranto (Operation Slapstick).

The Italian Armistice was announced in the afternoon of the 8th September 1943 by Allied Radio. The majority of the Italian Army was not informed, and no orders were issued about the line of conduct to be taken in the face of the German armed forces. In Camp 54, on the 11th September, the guards threw away their rifles and left POWs to their own devices. Many ignored instructions from senior NCOs that all POWs remain in the camp. ‘. we woke up two mornings later (Italian Armistice) to find no guards in sight and the prison gates wide open.’ About 2 000 prisoners took advantage of their abandonment to break out, but only a handful managed to evade recapture. Many prisoners escaped into the Apennine Mountains. Most were recaptured by the Germans and taken back to Camp 54.



Julian Meyer - 24th January 1943
Campo Concentramento P.G. 54, P.M. 3300, Italia



POW Letters from Italy

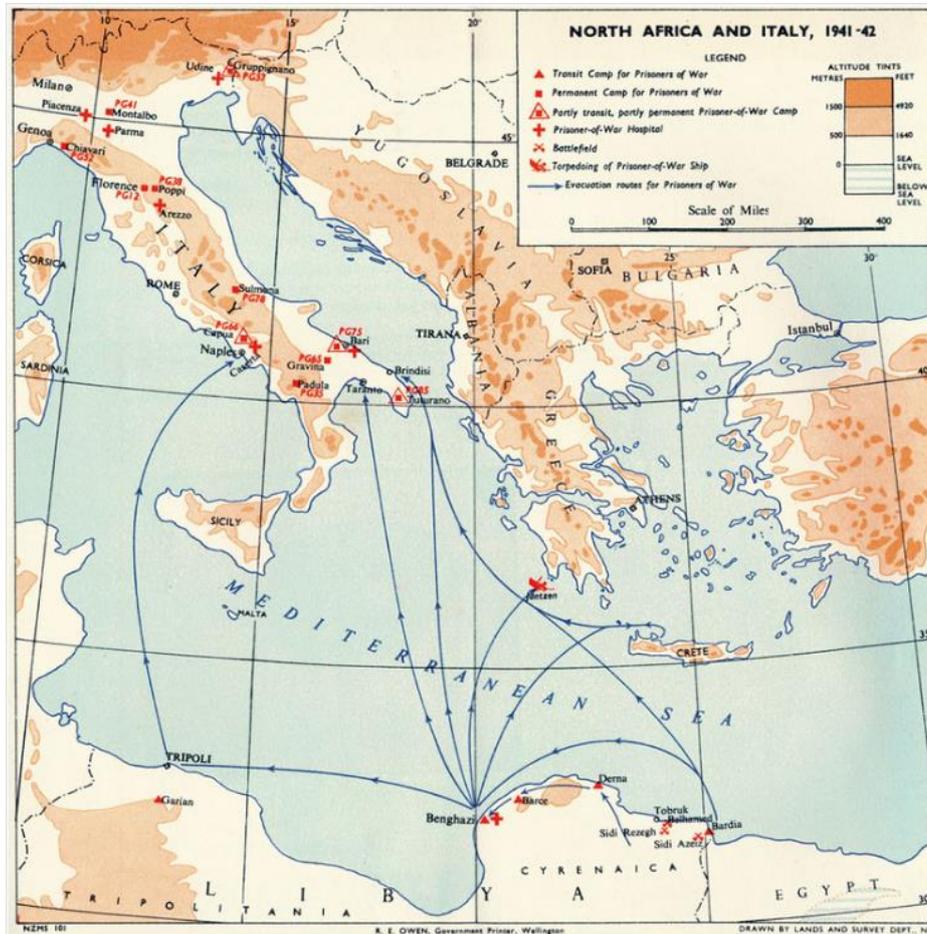


References:

1. Horn K. South African Prisoner-of -War Experience during and after World War II: 1939 –c.1950. Stellenbosch University 2012.
2. <http://www.pg54.org.uk/history> Camp PG 54 at Fara Sabina.
3. <http://powsitaly.weebly.com>

Definitions:

Senussi are a Muslim political-religious Sufi order and tribe in Libya and the Sudan region.
Tam o' Shanter - a khaki Balmoral bonnet, also known as a 'ToS'.



Lists of Camps in Italy

Campo P.G.75 P.M. 3450 Italia at Bari was the Transit Camp from where Julian Meyer first wrote to his family. Campo P.G. 54 was north of Rome and is not marked on this map.³

Résumé of Italian POW 32383

20th June 1942 – 11th September 1943

POWs were aware that letters to their families were strictly controlled to prevent enemy countries obtaining information.

Six weeks after Julian was taken POW at Tobruk in 1942, a postcard of the 7th August confirmed that he had arrived in Italy. He was sent to Camp 75, a transit camp near Bari on the Adriatic Coast and seven weeks later wrote that he was at P.G. 54, a permanent camp.¹ This camp was located 35 kilometres from Rome. Most of the POWs were from Tobruk. He described the camp as a new one in lovely surroundings. He did not state that the prisoners were held in two compounds and were housed in tents. Each compound housed four rows of tents accommodating 68 men in each. They were housed in very poor conditions and there were food shortages.²

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) were inundated with queries about the Missing. In South Africa, families turned to the service provided by the Vatican radio. The Catholic channel was the main source of news regarding Italian-held POWs.³ The Meyer family approached the Catholic Archbishop of Bloemfontein for assistance in obtaining information regarding Julian. On 22nd September 1942 the Meyer family received a telegram from the Catholic Missionary Station in Bloemfontein ‘CONFIRM L/CPL MEYER 32383 CYRENAICA. A cousin, Elick Beinashowitz also made enquiries at the Catholic Missionary Station in Bloemfontein. In a letter of the 1st October 1942 sent to the family, he informed them that the Station *‘pick up all messages from the Vatican and I enclose herewith their reply’ ‘...Julian has been reported Prisoner of War in Cyrenaica and hope that very soon further good news will follow.’*

The Meyer family were unaware that Julian was by now in Italy. In December Julian noted that he was aware that his name had not yet come through from the Vatican informing his family that he was in Italy. He received his first post from the family in January 1943, six months after his capture. These letters were written to him in the previous October of 1942 and probably were redirected from North Africa. The Meyer family only received their first post from Julian on the 22nd January 1943. It was his letter of 18th September 1942 which stated that he was in a permanent camp in Italy. Fanny Meyer must have immediately notified the Office of War Records as there was an acknowledgement of a letter from her dated 27th January 1943 regarding news of her son. It appears that the family still did not know exactly where he was imprisoned as this letter stated that the Office of War Records would forward her information onto the Red

Cross to assist in locating her son in Italy. Six months after his arrival in Italy, on the 9th February 1943, the South African Red Cross Society informed the family that a cable from the International Committee confirmed that 32383 L/Cpl J Meyer was in Camp 54 PM 3300 Italy and they advised that they were to address all future letters parcel to Camp 54. This information was also confirmed by the Department of Defence a few days later in a telegram ^{15 Feb 43}

Regarding camp life, Julian stated that they had wooden double decker bunks with mattresses, sheets & blankets. He never stated that they were living in tents. During the month of November, they experienced a good deal of rain and in December it snowed. It was only at the end of April 1943 that he wrote that the condition of the camp was improving. *'Our buildings are almost completed'* implied that he had spent autumn, winter, and spring living in a tent.

Regarding food shortages, the POWs received Red Cross parcels, and only later did he state that they received them regularly. The meals were documented as bread and cheese for breakfast. Drinks were supplemented from the Red Cross Parcels. They had a hot meal at midday and another in the late afternoon.

Between meals he was either at a lecture or brewing tea. In the evenings they played cards and had a sing song. He stated that *'if we are lucky enough to come by a book, read....'* confirming a shortage of books. Later he mentioned that there were plenty of books and amusements. Food shortages also ceased to be a problem. He partook in the camp hand-ball league. In terms of his correspondence it appears that each week he was allowed to write a one-page letter and a postcard. The postcard area allocated for writing was half the card.

In January 1943 he was employed - clerical employment in connection with Camp administration. His work enabled him to obtain supplementary rations.

In March 1943 he received his first parcel from the family. Regarding cigarettes, a commodity for trading, he acknowledged that the weekly Red Cross food parcels contained 50 cigarettes and occasionally tobacco. He advised that smokes could be sent addressed personally from England. The same applied to books. Regarding his law studies, the book of mercantile law that he had previously requested in 1942 had reached him prior to his capture but remained in the Desert.

In April 1943 Julian stated that a few medicals had been repatriated - Serg Brown was one of them. Repatriation was a very difficult process and POWs were only repatriated based on health issues.³

Regarding Jewish life, he acknowledged the Jewish festival of Pesach *'We have not forgotten and at least in spirit maintain the significance of Passover.'*

(Pesach 20th – 27th April 1943). In the Camp he stated that they held services regularly, many of which he conducted.

Following the fall of Mussolini in July 1943, a letter of August *stated 'that for reasons which you will understand I am not at all perturbed.... I am as well as ever & have never felt more confident as to the future'*. This sentiment related to the optimism of the POWs to the news of Mussolini's downfall and the Allied invasion. Camp 54 was near Rome and intensifying Royal Air Force activity and anti-aircraft fire enabled some fairly accurate assumptions to be made.

Julian requested photographs of the family. He probably did not have any on him following his capture in the Western Desert. By May 1943 he still had not received any snaps. In a letter of August, he mentioned that he was happy that the family had received a photograph of him. It is possible that family photographs sent to him were removed as part of censorship and curtailment of benefits to the POWs. As a POW in Germany he subsequently wrote that he did eventually receive photographs of his family. *The last letters I had from you were mid-July & I can't tell you how pleased I was with the snaps*. These letters were received at the time of the downfall of Mussolini and probably related to more lenient censorship by the Italian authorities.

In his letter of 18th November 1942, he asked the family to ascertain about 6 men as to where they are listed as POWs - L/Cpl Robert Blair, Ptas. Buster Wimble, J.W. Whelan, L.E. Berrington, H Kirkby, Sgt. FW Walker. It is unknown whether he did ever find out of the whereabouts of these men. Forces War Records list 4 of the 6 men being held as Imperial POWs in Italy in 1943 - Blair ⁴, Kirkby ⁴, Whelan ^{4,5} and Wimble ⁴. Berrington ⁴ was listed as a British POW in Italy and Germany. Percy Skelton (Buster) Wimble died on the 14th November 1942. He was lost at sea on the S.S. Scillin, an Italian troopship transporting POWs, which was torpedoed. He was 32 years old.

No entry for Sgt. F.W. Walker was found. Other POWs mentioned in Julian's letters from Campo P.G.54 included Teddy Dawson, Woolf Austoker ⁴, Simon Jackson (Jacko) ⁴, Lionel Cooper who arrived on the 24th March 1943 together with Maurice Friedland. ⁴ Serg Brown had medical repatriation on the 14th April 1943 and Pat Robertson arrived on the 24th April 1943. ⁴

The same facts and sentiments of Camp life described by Julian were expressed in interviews and diaries of other POWs of Camp 54: the brothers, David and Paul Brokensha, Fred Geldenhuis, Jack Mortlock, E.B. (Dicky) Dickinson and Clive Luyt. ³

Julian arrived at Camp 54 between late August and early September 1942. When the POW, Jack Mortlock arrived in August 1942, he stated that he and others had to drag in their own sleeping bunks from a nearby camp, sleep in tents and were issued with a blanket. They received rations insufficient for basic nutrition. Four months later, in December 1942, when the Brokensha brothers arrived at Camp 54, they were impressed by the, '*well-organised camp, with beds, blankets, new uniforms, showers, reasonable food and our first mail, as well as our first Red Cross parcels.*'

As POWs received more Red Cross parcels, they became expert at dividing the food between them and at pacing themselves in consumption of the contents. The food contents in these packs were calculated on a nutritional value formula for one person. The parcels often had to be shared between a number of men, thereby diluting their nutritional value. The parcels included cigarettes. By January 1943, the British Red Cross was able to supply fifty cigarettes per week to each prisoner. It tried to supply familiar brands to each nationality. The South Africa Red Cross was asked to supply Springbok cigarettes for camps containing South Africa POWs. Julian was most pleased to get *a few S. African cigarettes, after all this time – somehow we still prefer them to English brands.* Cigarettes were popular among the Italians and accusations of theft were made by POWs as cigarettes were missing from their parcels. The Italians claimed ignorance that guards had pilfered the entire supply. POWs used this commodity as a trading currency to trade in all kinds of goods with their Italian captors. Tea was also used as a trading currency in Camp 54, but only after it had been brewed, dried in the sun, and repacked. It was claimed that the guards never realised that they were trading bread for tea that had been used two or three times. POWs mostly relied on friends and on trade between themselves and guards to gather sufficient food and other necessities. Those who stole for sustenance were a small minority.³

Hygiene was a matter of obsessive pride for South African POWs. In Camp 54, cricket and soccer were the games of choice. Five short games of cricket were played almost daily. Long hours of boredom led some to re-evaluate their place in life, and to consider philosophical aspects that previously they may have dismissed as insignificant. For many prisoners, boredom itself became an enemy and often led to periods of severe depression. The lack of books added to frustration.³

Men of Confidence, or camp leaders, were elected by POWs to act as representatives with whom Red Cross inspectors could discuss camp conditions and POW grievances. Camp leaders were also responsible for communicating with camp commanders regarding living conditions and other related matters

that arose periodically. The election of camp leaders put in place a system which helped to establish order and a united front against captors. Leaders were elected based on their popularity, leadership qualities and linguistic ability, as being able to communicate with camp commanders in their own language often determined the outcome of negotiations. While most POWs seemed to respect military rules, it was not always the same with camp rules. The camp leader of Compound Number Two in Camp 54 was Sergeant-Major Snyman. It was stated that when Snyman wanted to discuss a matter with the camp commander, he would simply walk out of the camp to the office, causing the guards to run after him as they were not allowed to let a POW out without an escort. He also had a physical advantage as he was very tall. Snyman often exploited his height to upstage his enemy, standing very close to the commander to force him to look up to his captive.³

POWs who managed to escape following the Italian Armistice included Stanley Smollan and Clive Luyt. Smollan's escape and his arrival with three companions at the Anzio beachhead, where the Allies were engaged in a battle against the Germans, made headlines in the Rand Daily Mail newspaper in February 1944. Like many other escapees, he had depended on the charity and goodwill of Italian peasants while on the run. The son of one of those families, Tammaso de Lellis, was a POW in South Africa.³ Luyt, another escapee from Camp 54, managed to stay on the run, and after living in caves and hiding out with Italian families, found himself on the Allied side of the fighting in the town of Campitello di Fassa or Campobello di Licata.³

Meyer Family correspondence

22nd September 1942; Telegram Willows Bloemfontein CONFIRM L/CPL MEYER 32383 CYRENAICA

1st October 1942; Elick Beinashowitz's letter made enquiries at the Catholic Missionary Station in Bloemfontein. '*..Julian has been reported Prisoner of War in Cyrenaica and hope that very soon further good news will follow.*'

22nd January 1943; letter of Mrs F Meyer that she had received a letter from her son dated 18 Sept 42. Permanent camp 54.

27th January 1943; Office of War Records acknowledgement of a letter from Mrs Meyer re news of her son.

9th February 1943; The South African Red Cross Society informed the family that a cable from the International Committee confirmed that 32383 L/Cpl J Meyer in Camp 54 PM 3300 Italy address all future letters parcel to camp 54.

15th February 1943; Telegram from the Department of Defence that the International Red Cross Society of Geneva confirm that your son no 32383 is a POW in Italian hands Camp Address 54 3300 Italy.

T.S. POST OFFICE TELEGRAPHS.—POSKANTOORTELEGRAAFDIENS.

1943 2 FEBRUARY 15

Address: BJA445 VILLOVS BLOEMFONTEIN II 3-15PM

TO: MEYER DE JOHANNESBURG BEREJA JHNSBURG

CONFIRM L/OPL MEYER 32383 CYRINIACA • DEL. DATE 4

BLOEMFONTEIN SOUTH AFRICA

PAID

Mrs. A.L. Meyer,
26 Johnson Street,
Berea.
JOHANNESBURG.

27.11.42

Private Mail

Postage Service

Telegrams and Letters re POW number 32383

Telegraphic & Cable Add. "SUTINGS" Telephone 20043.

A. L. BEINASHOWITZ & SONS (PTY.) LTD.
WHOLESALE WOOLLEN MERCHANTS

333 PINE STREET, DURBAN.

1st October, 1942

Mrs A.L. Meyer
26 Johnson St
Berea
JOHANNESBURG

Dear Auntie Fanny,

As recently wired you, we are very happy to see that Julian has been reported Prisoner of War in Cyrenia and hope that very soon further good news will follow.

If you will remember I wrote to you on the 22nd ult stating that I was asking enquiries from the Missionary Station in Bloemfontein who pick up all messages from the Veld and I enclose herewith their reply. You will see therefore that Julian is quite well. I understand that if you write to these people they will be able to tell you whether you can send cables or wireless messages.

I am pleased to tell you that I have already moved into my new house but we are not living there as we are doing a few alterations, and in the meantime are staying at the Pavilion Hotel.

Trusting Uncle Leopold and the girls are well.

With kind regards and love from us all.

Ala

THE SOUTH AFRICAN RED CROSS SOCIETY

GENERAL SECRETARY

OFFICE: HIS MAJESTY'S BUILDING, 5 LOFF STREET, JOHANNESBURG, TRANSVAAL.

9th February, 1943.

Mrs. F. Meyer,
26 Johnson Street,
BEREA, JHS.

Dear Mrs. Meyer,

We have pleasure in advising that we have now received a cable from our International Committee reading as follows :-

"32383 I/OPL J. MEYER IN CAMP 54, P.N. 3300, ITALY."

Would you please accordingly address all future letters, parcels, etc., to Camp 54?

MAY we say how glad we are to receive confirmation that your son is a prisoner-of-war, please rest assured that any additional information concerning I/Opl Meyer will be passed on without delay.

Yours sincerely,
Helena Meyer

For: GENERAL SECRETARY.

DS.

PH/125.

T.S. POST OFFICE TELEGRAPHS.—POSKANTOORTELEGRAAFDIENS.

1943 2 FEBRUARY 15

Address: BJA445 VILLOVS BLOEMFONTEIN II 3-15PM

TO: MEYER DE JOHANNESBURG BEREJA JHNSBURG

CONFIRM L/OPL MEYER 32383 CYRINIACA • DEL. DATE 4

References:

1. <http://powsitaly.weebly.com/> List of Camps in Italy.
2. <http://www.pg54.org.uk/history> Camp PG 54 at Fara Sabina.
3. Horn K. South African Prisoner-of –War Experience during and after World War II: 1939 –c.1950. Stellenbosch University 2012.
4. www.forces-war-records.co.uk Forces War Records
Julian Meyer is listed in the Forces War Records. Details of 5 of the 6 men he enquired about following his capture are listed.

Imperial Prisoners of War held in Italy 1943:

Blair Robert: service number 32308, Lance Corporal

Kirkby H: service number 221603, Private

Whelan J.W: service number 32474, Private

Wimble Percy Skelton. (Buster) (1910-1942): service number 32450, Private Transvaal

Scottish. He died on the 14th November 1942. He was on the S.S. Scillin, an Italian troopship transporting POWs which was torpedoed. He was the son of Percy Skelton and Wilhelmina Elizabeth Wimble of Johannesburg. His name is inscribed in the Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

British POW in Germany & Italy:

Berrington LE (Leslie Ernest): service number 32482 Private Transvaal
Scottish Regiment

There was no entry for Sgt. FW Walker.

Fellow POWs mentioned in Julian's letter are listed as

Imperial Prisoners of War held in Italy 1943:

Austoker W M: service number 221480, Private Transvaal Scottish

Friedland Maurice: service number 32568, Corporal

Jackson Simon Joseph: service number 32359 Corporal

Katz H: service number 32367, Private

Meyer J: service number 32383, Lance Corporal

Robertson PC: service number 32672 Private

5. <http://www.wartimememories.co.uk/allied/southafricanarmy/transvaascottish>.
The wartime memories of Jimmy Whelan were posted on the internet by his son Kevin.

German Prisoner of War

L/Cpl J Meyer; POW number 248565

21st September 1943 – 9th May 1945

Shortly after the Italian Armistice, German troops arrived to take control of the Camp 54 and immediately set about trying to recapture the POWs who had fled from the camp. As the POWs were rounded up, they were brought back to the camp to await transportation to Germany. The Germans reorganised the camp as a transit camp for the recaptured POWs. Escapees' clothes were marked with yellow paint and the letters KGF, which stood for Kriegsgefangenen (prisoner-of-war). These initials were turned into a joke, in that it stood for 'Kouldn't Get Frough' to the Allied lines. Camp 54 was completely evacuated in January 1944 ahead of the Allied advance.

The POWs' journey to Germany started with them being marched from the camp, to Fara Sabina railway station at Passo Corese where they were loaded onto trains, often 40 or more men to an enclosed cattle truck. They were then transported north to Germany, via the Brenner Pass, to German POW camps.¹ The journeys were repeatedly interrupted. The railroad tracks were damaged from Allied air raids and when the raids occurred, trains stopped for guards to take shelter in nearby fields, leaving POWs in their enclosed cattle trucks exposed to the danger of bombing. With the Allies targeting transport infrastructure, the bombing of POW trains was always a feared possibility.¹ The train trips to Germany were frequently delayed, and as a result sanitary conditions on board deteriorated alarmingly. At intervals, the train would stop, and all the prisoners would be expected to get out of the train to either relieve themselves or empty their bowels by the side of the track. The length of the journey depended on the distance needed to travel as well as the number of times the train would be shunted into a siding to make way for a passing troop train.² A POW at Camp 54 wrote that on the 25th September 1943 they were put into crowded cattle trucks to be sent to Germany. At Bolzano, a siren sounded an air raid warning. The guards locked them in the trucks and went off to the air raid shelters. He described it as a frightening experience. They travelled to Innsbruck where it was snowing. They were let out into the snow to relieve themselves. They continued to Munich where a German Women's unit – the Grauen Mäuse gave them food. The next stop was Mulhberg an der Elbe. In the early hours of the morning of the 30th September, they were kept waiting at the side of the train until they were marched to the camp.³

The German Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW) was responsible for the system of prison camps. In Germany, all POWs were first sent to large transit camps, also known as Durchgangslager or Dulag. These camps served as a collection point prior to reassignment. Details of the prisoners were processed. Under the terms of the Geneva Convention prisoners only had to give details of their name, rank, and serial number. These camps served as intelligence collection centres and interrogating officers often tried to trick captured servicemen to give away more information. POWs were then sent to smaller work camps, known as Arbeitskommandos. The work camps consisted of fewer than 100 prisoners, depending on the specific work they were sent to do.

Stammlagers, also known as Stalags, were permanent camps used to house non-commissioned officers and privates. There were around 1 000 POW camps in Germany during World War II. ⁴

Germany was a signatory at the Third Geneva Convention, which established the provisions relative to the treatment of POWs.²

- Article 10 required that POWs should be lodged in adequately heated and lighted buildings where conditions were the same as German troops.
- Articles 27-32 detailed the conditions of labour. Enlisted ranks were required to perform whatever labour they were asked and able to do, so long as it was not dangerous and did not support the German war effort. Senior Non-commissioned officers (sergeants and above) were required to work only in a supervisory role. Commissioned officers were not required to work, although they could volunteer. The work performed was largely agricultural or industrial. It ranged from coal or potash mining, stone quarrying, work in sawmills, breweries, factories, railroad yards, and forests. POWs hired out to military and civilian contractors were supposed to receive pay. The workers were also supposed to get at least one day a week of rest.
- Article 76 ensured that POWs who died in captivity were honourably buried in marked graves.

The layout of individual camps varied from camp to camp. All were enclosed with barbed wire and contained guard towers which were manned by armed German soldiers ready to shoot anyone trying to escape. Prisoners were usually housed in one-storey wooden barracks which contained bunk beds (two or three high) and a charcoal burning stove in the middle of the room.

Prisoners were generally given two meals a day – thin soup and black bread. Hunger was a feature of most prisoners' lives. All prisoners looked forward to deliveries of Red Cross food parcels which contained 'luxury' items such as butter, biscuits, chocolate, condensed milk, dried fruits, and vegetables. Prisoners often improvised their own brick stoves and cooked their food in empty milk tins.

Daily routine varied from camp to camp. All prisoners were expected to parade at least once daily for a rollcall. Men would be put to work either around the camp or in the locality. A range of sports were played when the weather was fine and sometimes in the evenings there were concerts. For most POWs, the overriding features of life in camp were boredom, hunger, and dreams of a better life once the war was over.

POWs were allowed to send two letters and four postcards each month. There were no restrictions on the number of letters a POW could receive. All incoming and outgoing mail was censored.

1943

Kriegsgefangenenpost.

POW number 248565 Stalag IV-B

9th October 1943. *There is no need for me to recapitulate to you events in Italy of the past month. Suffice to say that I was at liberty for a period of ten days in our effort to join our troops. Unfortunately the German forces, by dint of prompt action, ensured that my designs were to come to naught & accordingly I was taken prisoner for the second time. The last few weeks will have been extremely trying for you. Be assured that I have undergone no hardships whatever & have been exceptionally well treated up to now. I am quite reconciled to the position & face the future confidently.... The last letters I had from you were mid-July & I can't tell you how pleased I was with the snaps. Have seen Louis Mendelow, Monty Saharin & Woolf Austoker here and Simon Jackson is with me.*

Stalag IV-B Mulhberg an der Elbe was one of the largest prisoner-of-war camps in Germany. It was located 8 km north-east of the town of Mühlberg in the Prussian Province of Saxony, just east of the Elbe river and about 48 km north of Dresden. The camp covered about 30 hectares and was opened in September 1939. It could accommodate as many as 7000 prisoners at one time. In September 1943, British, Australian, New Zealand and South African soldiers, previously captive in Italy, arrived.⁵ They were transferred to stalags across Saxony, including Stalag IVA and its *Arbeitskommandos*. A report by the ICRC in November 1943 described Stalag IV-B as a 'poor camp'. Its hygiene arrangements were described as 'satisfactory', and the medical attention to POWs was deemed 'no longer adequate.'³

POW 248565 Stalag IV-A Arb.Kdo (*Arbeitskommando*) 1169.

19th November 1943. This letter was written in pencil. *My first letter, which I trust you have received was written from a transit camp. I am now in a working camp, all junior ranks being obliged to work. This is a brand new camp & to be truthful I am far better housed here than I have been anywhere, since leaving home. The barracks are beautifully clean; we have a well-appointed Mess Hall, hot & cold showers... The work is not unpleasant being light, clean & indoors. As ever I am keeping wonderfully fit & as I am well clothed, face the winter with confidence.... The Red Cross is looking after us marvellously.*

Kommando number 1169 was located in the suburb of Gorbitz, Dresden. The POWs worked for the Reichpost. The camp was manned by South Africans.²

25th November 1943. *My card last week, I wrote to S. African House London asking them to cable you my address & also to arrange to send one cigarettes monthly & to look to you to reimburse them. Two days after my birthday, I received 500 cigarettes from them & did they form a welcome present! The very day I left the Italian Camp I received a parcel of books. Luckily I was able to carry them with me & they tided me over nicely.*

It was reported that in work camp 1169 beneficial trade took place between POWs, guards, and German civilians. Cigarettes were an important commodity.⁴

20th December 1943. *The countryside presents a pleasant white face for review from the window before which I sit & write. ...The Christmas season is upon us...The Red Cross, as ever, is unfailing in its care of us We expect complete new battle dress, boots, underwear etc.*

27th December 1943. *And so another Christmas has passed Here in camp we were able to have a thoroughly good time - plenty of good food, beer and music. Yes we were allowed to buy beer in this country! ...Some weeks ago I filled in a form authorising the Paymaster to pay you £100 from my credits & to increase my allotment to one-third of my new rate of pay. ... I wrote S. Africa House to cable you.*

1944

A Swiss report of January 1944 stated that the British POW population across the whole of the Stalag IVA increased to 3500. 2300 had been transferred from Italy the previous year. A further report in May 1944 put the British contingent at 4000, held in 54 kommandos. The breakdown of British POWs was: 3356 British (i.e. from the United Kingdom), 328 South Africans, 60 Irish, 68 New Zealanders, 47 Australians, 47 Indians, 43 Cypriots, 15 Canadians, 1 Egyptian, 1 West African and 2 Palestinians.²

17th January 1944... *We have been most fortunate this winter. People tell us that it is the mildest in years... In the last few days we have each received new boots, trousers, socks & underwear from the good old Red Cross.*

26th January 1944 (post stamped 5.2.44 and 13.2 44) *The last few days have brought the first South African letters to this Camp & I feel confident that within the next month I shall have heard from you... every picture tells a story far more eloquently than any words – I expect numerous ones of yourselves... My German is improving by leaps and bounds, despite the paucity of suitable grammar books.*

2nd February 1944. *This week I have written my card to Philip Medalie. Not having had any news for so long, one's imagination is inclined to run away with one.... Need I mention that my impatience increases with each day that does not bring a letter from you.*

9th February 1944. *Snow has fallen ... The countryside & the town are a beautiful sight in the reflected sunlight. Praying for news of you.*

23rd February 1944. *Once again I write in the hope that you are all well & that before I write again I shall have had some mail from you. ...the clouds broke this morning & the snow covered city nestling below us has an air of serenity. ...Winter's grip has broken. The radio is pouring forth music.... ... the sunlight has awoken all the latent nostalgia in my breast & my heart aches to be with you. Still I know that the day of reunion will not be long now and the realization bears me up.... A few days ago I weighed myself & was not surprised to find that I am the heaviest I have ever been – no less than 171 lbs!*

1st March 1944. *Perhaps it was because I wished so hard for news of you while I was writing to you on the 23rd, ultimo, that the next morning brought me a letter from Zelda, dated 25th December. To be in touch with you again has renewed my spirit.... Simon Jackson, who has not yet had mail, was overjoyed to know that his mother had heard from him.*

7th March 1944. *I hope to be able to send you some snaps very soon now & trust you are doing likewise. They bring a more reassuring message than letters ever can.*

22nd March 1944. *On the 19th March 14 letters readdressed from Italy reached me My deepest sympathy goes to Aunt Sarah. Though not a surprise the news was still a shock. (His uncle Abram had died) Had a reply from SA House, who will be sending my cigarettes.*

The size of this letter and subsequent letters was decreased to a postcard size.

5th April 1944. *Have received Ma's letters of 12th & 18th August ... Thanks very much Ma for the birthday wishes. With luck they may yet be fulfilled.*

12th April 1944. *On the 7th April I had a bumper mail...The following day, 8th April, brought me your first parcel. It was in perfect condition.... I do not believe that your last parcel to Italy will show up.... With this letter is a snap of myself in the snow.*

19th April 1944. *Am revelling in the spring weather and have taken up gardening. (Pesach was the 8th – 15th April 1944. He did not refer to this festival, as he had previously done in North Africa and Italy)*

26th April 1944. *Am fit & still gaining weight (now 172 lbs!) Please see if you can send me some study books.*

3rd May 1944. *The blossoms on the trees down the road are so innocent in their beauty they bring a lump to the throat, & awaken dreams of summer evenings at home. The next blossoms I see will be from my bedroom window of the apricot tree in the yard.*

10th May 1944. *A fortnight ago one of my friends received "Mercantile Law of S.A." from home & I am doing some fairly intensive revision of the subject. I have applied to Y.M.C.A. for further books ... occupied, what with outdoor games, P.T. & ping pong.*

17th May 1944. *Sorry to hear you're still not heard from me & do hope you are not worrying.*

31st May 1944. *This has been an eventful & cheering week. On the 20th. I received a parcel of 500 cigarettes from S.A. House, which had been redirected from Geneva. ... Yesterday ...I received the clothing parcel sent on 10th August 1943 in perfect condition. The kit- bag is just what I need.*

7th June 1944. *I had a windfall of letters... One of Leah's letters contained the snap of my two charming sisters on holiday. Anxious days lie ahead. I have complete confidence in the outcome.*

14th June 1944. *In these anxious days it is heartening to know that you are all keeping well... I am sending you a photo taken last month in front of our hut one morning. You will probably recognise me second from the left with Jacko on my right. Hymie is smoking nonchalantly, third from the right.*

21st June 1944. *Today is an unpleasant anniversary but it's the last!*

28th June 1944. *Am feeling fit & as each day passes grow more confident.... Keep well & don't worry. God bless you*

5th July 1944. *Attached is a snap of Hymie Katz & myself taken recently... We find time to play games & in addition I'm keeping up a certain amount of studying*

26th July 1944. *This week has brought me no mail.... The weather is still holding & I am as brown as a berry... I have spent a good deal of time at the dentist lately & have had my teeth put in proper shape.*

2nd August 1944. *The letters received were all April & early May mail. Please write Air mail ...it makes a difference of at least a month.*

9th August 1944. *It's disheartening to hear that Philip is still in the same state. Jacko & the lads are always asking after him & send their best wishes.*

17th August 1944. *In two days' time I'll be twenty -six – I can't believe it myself as I feel no older.*

30th August 1944. *It's a pity you have not yet heard that I've had mail & parcels from you. ... The nervous tension of the present time is trying & one has ups & downs despite the underlying unassailable confidence in the outcome. I hope and pray your optimism is fully justified so that I may return to you before it's too late.*

Living conditions in urban areas and in POW camps worsened during the second half of 1944 as the Allied bombing campaign focused on Germany's transport infrastructure. Thus, it was able only to transport half of the goods needed on the battle front and in cities. Shortages were especially felt in camps, where rations were reduced, and some Red Cross supplies disrupted. Work camp 1169 received only half of its supply from September.²

13th September 1944. *I'm hoping that by winter I'll be in more comfortable surroundings. My mind is more than ever occupied with the future but it's very difficult to foresee and plan much now.*

20th September 1944. *As always at this season my thought were with you. This year will be one of the most critical for the whole of mankind & its events will decree the future of the modern world. (Rosh Hashanah was the 18th -19th September and Yom Kippur 27th September 1944)*

27th September 1944. *I'm glad my authority to pay over £50 to you came through...*

4th October 1944. *As you know we are on half a parcel a week temporarily.... The R.C. will soon have things running normally again.*

11th October 1944. *It was one of my most fortunate periods so far as mail is concerned, since being a prisoner. Yesterday I received no less than three smokes parcels... from S.A. Red Cross London.*

18th October 1944. *Three days ago was the first anniversary of the arrival of myself and my companions in this camp. In retrospect it has been a better year than one anticipated.... For so much I am duly thankful.*

When the ICRC visited Stalag IVA in October 1944, the number of POWs had increased further. There were just over 25000 POWs, of whom 3837 were British.²

1st November 1944. *Hymie & Jacko are keeping well. Please thank Mrs. Katz for her consideration in phoning you.*

8th November 1944. *After all these weeks without mail it is somewhat difficult to find something to say. Here everything is very much the same though the strain of event is having its effects. This does not apply so much to us as to our hosts. My confident is unbounded & I do hope you are not worrying*

29th November 1944. *Today we had our first fall of snow.... My wardrobe is more than adequate & working & living conditions are reasonable. As I sit here, helplessly watching from afar, the gigantic conflict, all my hopes & prayers are that the future may bring a better & a fuller life for all & not the exhausted chaos I fear.*

20th December 1944. *The mail received covered the period from late July to 25th October.... Thank you all for your birthday wishes. Let's hope they will be fulfilled... Have conveyed your regards to Jacko & Hymie, who are both fine.*

27th December 1944. *Upon reflection I can honestly say it has been the best (Christmas) since I left the shores of the Union. You cannot conceive the good cheer which prevailed & the extent of our celebrations, coming to a climax last night with a concert at a nearby lager. (Stammlager - a permanent camps used to house non-commissioned officers and privates) The weather is very cold but I am fit & well.*

1945

Across the Reich conditions for POWs were worsening. The winter was particularly severe, even by central European standards. The Germans were being pushed back in Italy, Western Europe and in the east. They were also assailed almost without resistance from the sky. The hardships of POWs were reflected in the situation of the civilian population. There were severe reduction in supplies of coal, motor fuel, food, and clothing. For POWs, the impact of the war on transport links meant that Red Cross and personal parcels were even more difficult to get hold of. New prisoners kept arriving. Kommandos in Dresden received an influx of new POWs with the arrival of those captured during the failed German offensive in the Ardennes, a region in southeast Belgium that extends into Luxembourg, Germany, and France.⁴

3rd January 1945. *It would not be honest were I to deny that I had hoped that I would never be obliged to date a letter from Germany in the year 1945. But we*

must meet events as they occur & never lose faith in the fundamental goodness of life & mankind.

17th January 1945. *We are passing through a thin period as far as mail & parcels are concerned, but there is every hope that it will not be of long duration. You will know as much as, if not more than I do of the reasons for this state of affairs, so that there is no need for me to enlarge upon them.*

31st January 1945. *I am keeping fine, though it has been very cold the last few days... These are exciting days but I still feel it will be many months yet.*

Between the 13th to the 15th February 1945 the city of Dresden was firebombed.⁶ American POWs were moved to Camp 1169. 'This camp was located part way up a long hill with open fields around it. From there we could see the smoke plainly coming from where Dresden had been.' They encountered the South African POWs.⁷

22nd February 1945. *During the last few weeks the war has come a great deal closer to us. Naturally nervous tension has increased correspondingly & one is beset with doubts & fears. At times such as the present I find my thoughts persistently turning homeward & the longing for liberty & freedom of action grows more intense. ... There must come a time when hopes materialize.*

25th February 1945. *My dear Zelda Today is the fourth of your birthdays for which I've been absent. ... Fate has decreed otherwise & I must content myself with wishing you a full & happy future, in a world of peace & goodwill.*

28th February 1945. *Tension is at its highest & naturally I am unable to say just those things which would interest you most. ... I can definitely say it cannot be much longer now, before a decision is reached.*

The destruction of Dresden in mid-February further degraded transport links and some POWs were killed in the bombing. POWs in Dresden, as well as those in Kommandos from nearby Stalags, were drafted in, or even volunteered, to help clear the damage. They were used to help excavate dead bodies trapped under rubble, which were then destroyed by SS extermination experts. Deaths increased because air raid sirens were affected, due to disruption of electric mains. Sirens short circuited and blew the "all clear". People were caught out in the open when the bombs arrived.⁴

8th March 1945. *At this end we are managing as well as circumstances allow. The weather is very changeable. I am very well indeed and you have nothing to worry about.*

There was no further mail from Germany after the 8th March 1945.



“The Breadwagon Bogged” - Arb. Kdo. 1169 January 1944



“Bread’s In!” Arb. Kdo. 1169 January 1944



“The Caps”. Arb. Kdo. 1169 20th February 1944



“C” Hut Arb. Kdo. 1169 20th February 1944’
Julian Meyer is second from the left in the back row.



Men from “C” Hut holding icicles



POWs from “D” Hut February 1944



“F” Hut. Arb. Kdo. 1169 February 1944



“Morning after the night Before” Self, “Jacko” & Klot’. Arb. Kdo. 1169
February 1944

(Klot was a cook and served in the South African Police)



“Morning after the night Before”



‘Unter. offis Snowman Feb 1944. Arb. Kdo. 1169’



‘With this letter is a snap of myself in the snow – soon I’ll send you one showing me sunbathing!’ This photograph was sent with the letter dated the 12th April 1944



‘Dresden February 1944’. Julian Meyer is standing in the middle. Note the railway truck in the background.



‘Dresden February 1944’.
Note the railway trucks in the background



‘May 1944 Dresden’

‘I am sending you a photo taken last month in front of our hut one morning. You will probably recognise me second from the left with Jacko on my right, Hymie is smoking nonchalantly.’. This photograph was sent with the letter dated the 14th June 1944

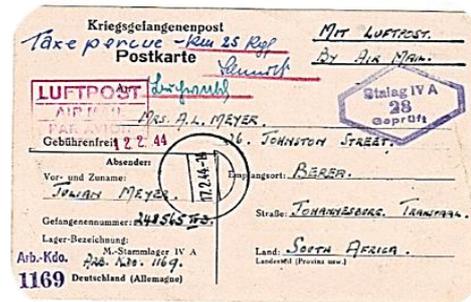
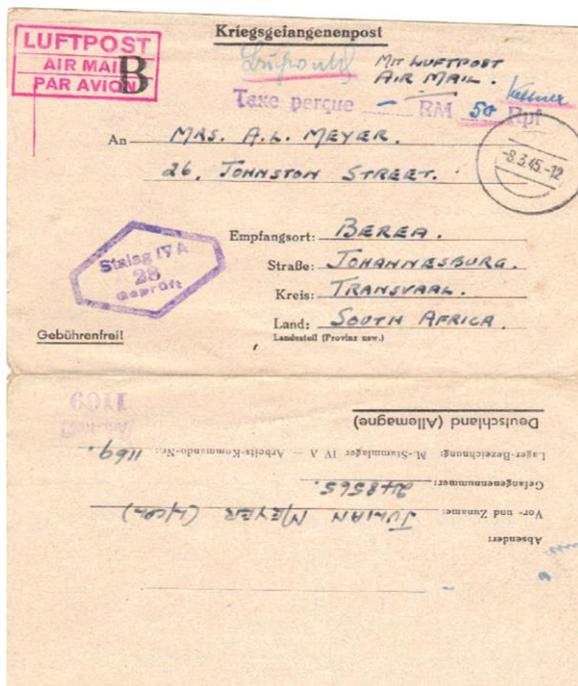


‘Attached is a snap of Hymie and myself taken recently’. These two photographs were dated May 1944 and were stapled to the letter sent to the Meyer family of the 5th July 1944.



“C” Barrack May 1944 Dresden

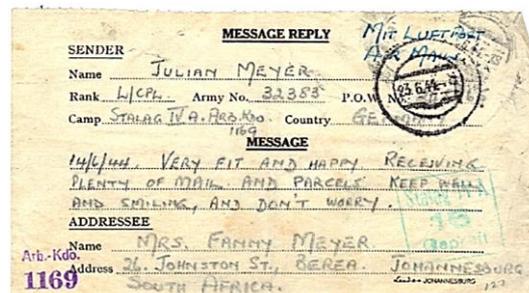




Postcards and letters from Germany

The South African Red Cross has pleasure in forwarding to you the reply to the twenty-word message despatched through them.

FW/155.



By April 1945, the Allies had dropped a total of 1.18 million tons of bombs on Germany. It was a bombing campaign that significantly damaged German morale. By mid-April, the German military authorities decided to evacuate POW camps along the Elbe. The POWs were forced to leave, under guard, for the Sudetenland. Those from Camp 1169 joined the thousands of mobile evacuees on the 14th April. Their march experiences were harrowing as they marched towards Czechoslovakia.⁴

Julian wrote that he was released on the 9th May 1945 by the Russians *at a little place called Peterswald on the Sudetenland border on the main road to Prag*. He ceased to be a prisoner at 9.30 am on 9th May 1945. Four days later, on the 15th he *crossed into the American lines at Siegmars-Schonau near Chemnitz, Saxony*. *By that evening I was at Gera. The following midday at Erfurt. On 17th we boarded an American plane and landed in Brussels.*

References

1. <http://www.pg54.org.uk/history>
Camp PG 54 at Fara Sabina
2. <http://www.historyonthenet.com/world-war-two-german-prisoner-of-war-camps>. History on the Net. World War Two German Prisoner of War Camps
3. Brokensha David: Love and Work in Three Continents.
<http://www.brokiesway.co.za/army.htm>
4. Horn K. South African Prisoner-of -War Experience during and after World War II: 1939 –c.1950. Stellenbosch University 2012
5. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stalag_IV-B
6. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bombing_of_Dresden
This was a British/American aerial bombing attack on the city of Dresden, the capital of the German state of Saxony. In four raids between 13 and 15 February 1945, 722 heavy bombers of the British Royal Air Force (RAF) and 527 of the United States Army Air Forces (USAAF) dropped more than 3,900 tons of high-explosive bombs and incendiary devices on the city. The bombing and the resulting firestorm destroyed over 1,600 acres (6.5 km²) of the city centre. An estimated 22,700 to 25,000 people were killed, although inflated casualty figures have been promulgated over the years by authors such as David Irving. Three more USAAF air raids followed, two occurring on 2 March aimed at the city's railroad marshalling yard and one small raid on 17 April aimed at industrial areas. A 1953 United States Air Force report defended the operation as the justified bombing of a strategic target, which they claimed was a major rail transport and communication centre, housing 110 factories and 50,000 workers in support of the German war effort. Critics of the bombing argue that Dresden was a cultural landmark of little or no strategic significance, and that the attacks were indiscriminate area bombing. There have been large variations in the claimed death toll. In March 1945, the German government ordered its press to publish a falsified casualty figure of 200,000 for the Dresden raids, and death toll estimates as high as 500,000 have been given. The city authorities at the time estimated no more than 25,000 victims, a figure that subsequent investigations supported.
7. Szpek Jr E.E., Idzikowski FJ, Szpek HM; Shadows of Slaughterhouse Five: Recollections and Reflections of the Ex-POWs of Schlachthof Fünf, Dresden, Germany. Chapter 10 –The Firebombing of Dresden confirmed the dire situation in Dresden. ‘On the 15th February our guards moved us out to a camp on the road toward Chemnitz from Gorbitz, a suburb of Dresden. English and South African POWs were kept here to work in Dresden. They were crowded together to make one building available for us. This building had double-deck boxes with thin straw mattresses. Two men were assigned to a box, others laid on the floor anywhere there was an open space. This camp was located part way up a long hill with open fields around it. From there we could see the smoke plainly coming from where Dresden had been. Some authors writing about Dresden say the fire was eleven square miles and burned for several days.’ World War II as remembered by George Bloomingburg; Unpublished Memoir 1994 (page 242)
‘The Americans ... were marched to the outskirts of the city to Gorlitz, a

suburb which was on a rise. From there they could look down on Dresden, now a city of fire. In Gorbitz was another POW compound housing English and South Africans. At daylight the Americans were marched into this compound.' H. Lew Wallace & William R. Burns, "From the 'Bulge' to Dresden" 1986 (page 243)

8. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/puschel-buttons>. Puschel Buttons – Made in Sudetenland. Peterswald was isolated in the forests of Sudetenland/Bohemia. In its heyday it had a population of 1,200 people, mostly all Sudeten Germans, with almost no Czech residents. The Czechs were government workers who ran the bureaucracy (i.e., postal workers, police, customs/immigration). It now is called Petrovice, and has a population of 220 people; all Czech. Petrovice was formerly known by the German name Peterswald. It is a village and municipality in Ústí nad Labem District in the Ústí nad Labem Region of the Czech Republic.

List of POWs mentioned in Julian Meyer's letters:

Austoker Woolf Magnus: service number 221480, Private Transvaal Scottish ^{1,2}

Jackson Simon Joseph: service number 32359 Corporal ¹

Katz H: service number 32367, Private ¹

Mendelow L: service number 125309 Sergeant¹

Saharin M: service number 125547 Corporal¹

The above men were listed in the Forces War Records www.forces-war-records.co.uk

1. Imperial Prisoners of War held in Italy 1943

2. British POW in Germany & Italy

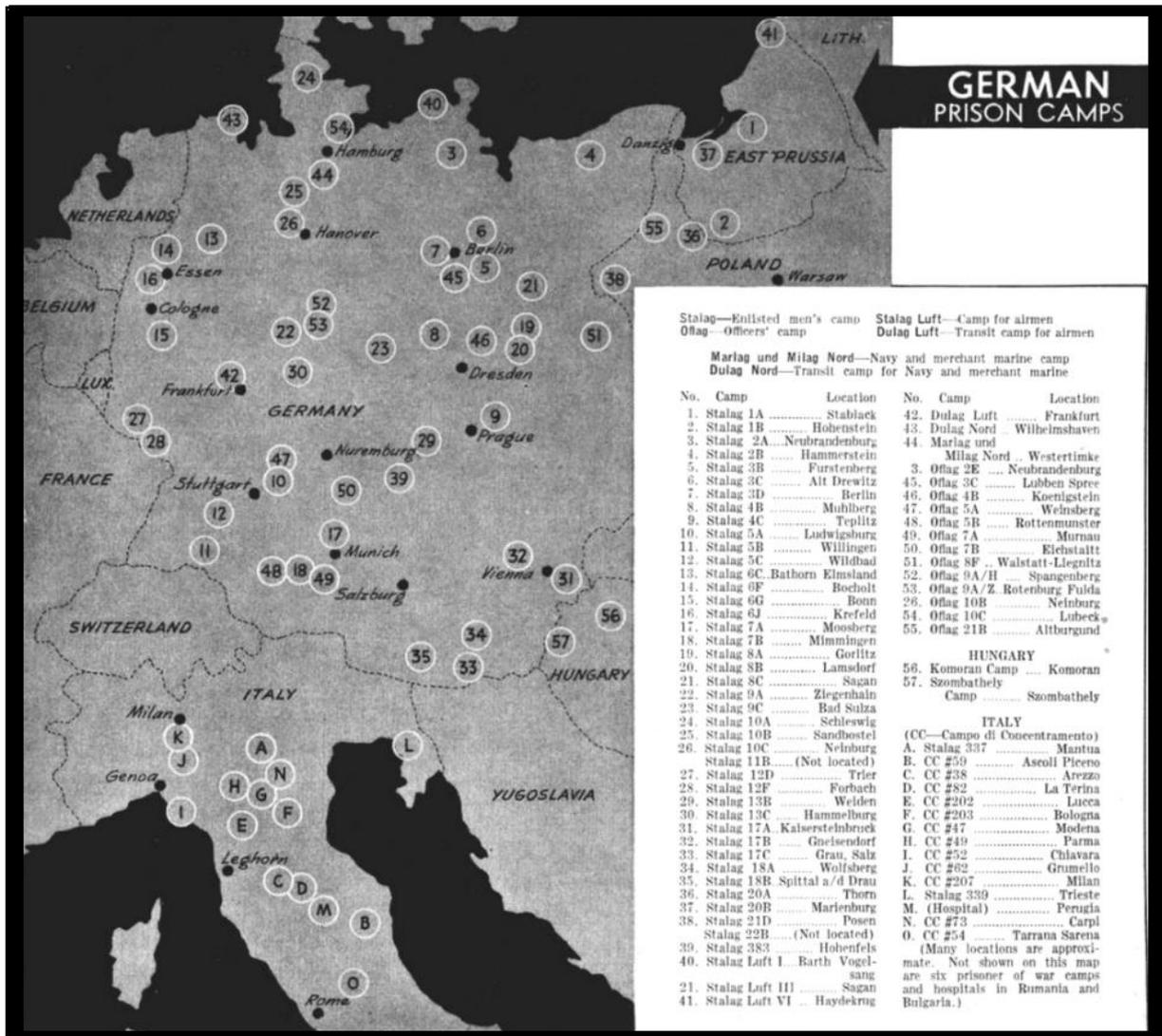
Abbreviations:

ICRC - International Committee of the Red Cross

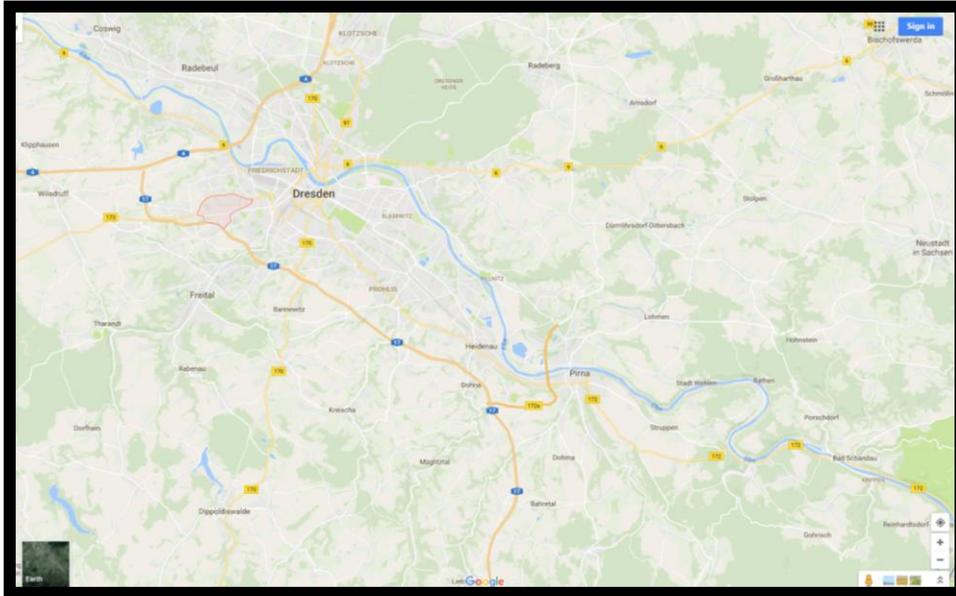
P.T - physical training

R.C. - Red Cross

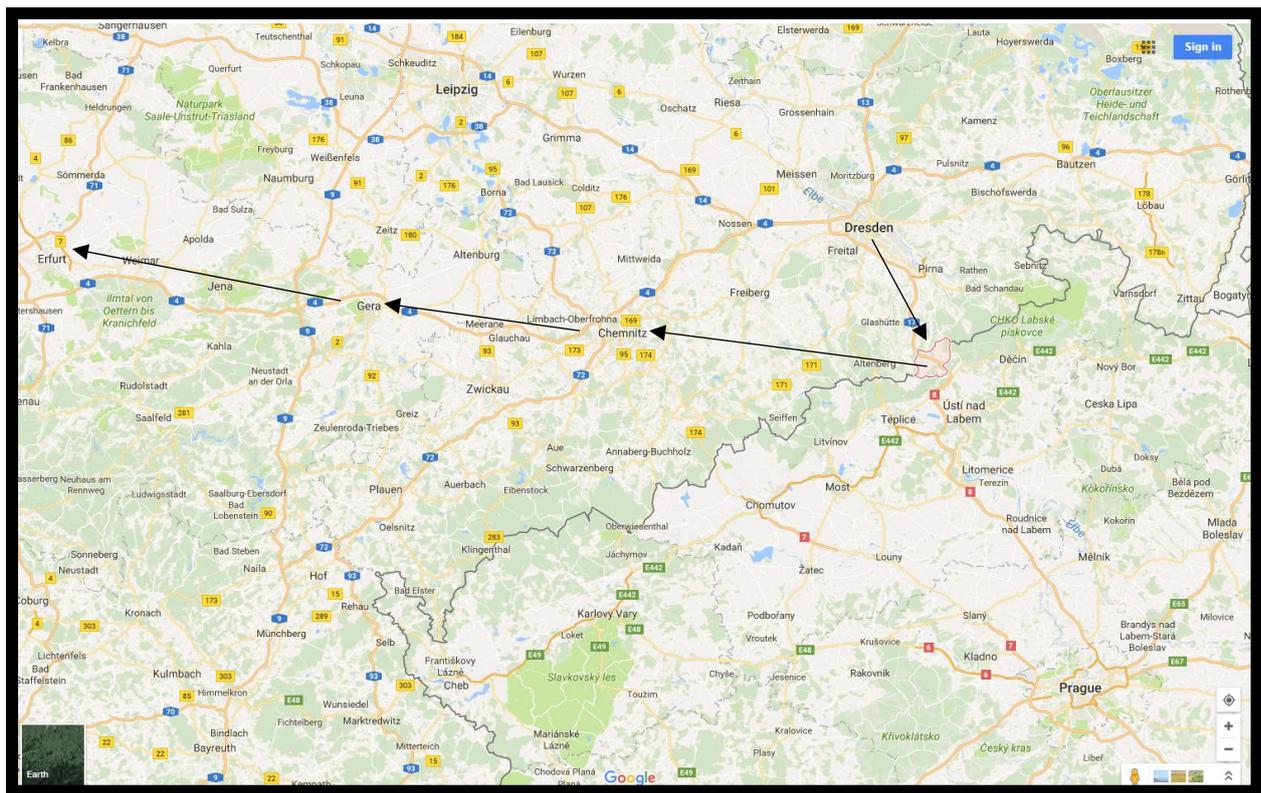
Y.M.C.A. - Young Men's' Christian Association



1944 map of POW camps that were located in Germany and German occupied countries. The camp in Italy was near Rome. The German transit camp is number 8 and Arbeitskommando camp 1169 was in Dresden.



Google map depicting the region around Dresden: Gorbitz is the red area to the left of the city where Arbeitskommando camp 1169 was located.



The POWs were marched from Dresden to Hellendorf in mid-April 1945. On the 9th May Julian stated that he was released by the Russians at Peterswald and arrived at Erfurt on the 16th May 1945. The American lines were at Siegmarschonau near Chemnitz. Peterswald is shown as the red area. It is isolated in the forests of Sudetenland/Bohemia.⁸

Résumé of German POW 248565

21st September 1943 – May 1945

Julian's first letter home, dated early October, was written from Stalag IV-B Mulhberg an der Elbe, one of the largest prisoner-of-war camps in Germany. He arrived there accompanied by other POWs from Italy. They probably arrived in September 1943. They were at Stalag IV-B for about ten days and were segregated from the main camp in a small compound of their own.¹

A letter written a year later confirmed that he had arrived at the work camp Stalag IV-A Arb.Kdo (Arbeitskommando) 1169 on the 15th October 1943. He never divulged the location of the work camp. It was situated in a suburb of Dresden. In letters of February 1944 he alluded to city of Dresden - *Snow has fallen ...The countryside & the town are a beautiful sight in the reflected sunlight; snow covered city nestling below us has an air of serenity.* The camp was located part way up a long hill with open fields around it.

Camp 1169 was manned by South Africans.^{2,3} It was a brand-new camp and he stated that he was better housed there than he had been anywhere, since leaving home. *The barracks are beautifully clean; we have a well-appointed Mess Hall, hot & cold showers.* This camp consisted of two dormitory barracks, a central dining room, kitchen, a block of showers and toilets, the administrative block and guards' quarters.¹ The camp area was less than two acres and strongly fenced. The huts were generally adequately heated, but in the winter of 1944/45 there was a shortage of coal for the stoves and thick icicles hung from the eaves of the bungalows. Inside the dormitories, bunk beds were arranged in fours, two up and two down. The POWs slept in double-deck bunks on thin straw mattresses.¹ All junior ranks were obliged to work, and Julian *found the work not unpleasant being light, clean & indoors.* He was *well clothed, and the Red Cross was looking after them.* He did not state what the type of work he was doing.

By December 1943 his family had not heard of his whereabouts. His father, an insurance agent working for Sun Life of Canada, sent a telegram to the English branch of the insurance company, to ask them to help locate Julian. The telegram was *'My son L/corporal Julian Meyer 32383 is prisoner. Last address P.G. 54 P.M. 3300 Ital. Can you trace present address? A.L. Meyer agent Johannesburg.'* This telegram was not sent. The family were notified on the 14th December 1943 – *'Postmaster telegram from Rissik Street Jhb to Sun Life Bromley Kent England'* was not sent in accordance with instruction from the Military Censorship authorities as enquiries of this nature contained therein may be made through the South African Red Cross Society only. It was ascertained that by the end of December 1943, the Meyer family were aware of Julian's

imprisonment in Germany. On the 30th December, the South African Red Cross Society thanked Mrs Meyer for advising them that she had received a new direct that Julian had been transferred from Italy to Stalag IVB Germany and his POW number given was 248565. *‘For your information, the Germans are known to be meticulous in their observance of the terms of the International Convention governing the treatment of Prisoners of War.’*

The first mail Julian received from his family was on the 24th February 1944. It was a letter written the previous December by his sister, Zelda. This was the first correspondence since his previous mail received in Italy in August 1943. Mail was redirected from Italy to Germany over the course of the year. He was allowed to send a letter twice a month and a postcard each week. The space allocated to write on for a letter was one sheet of paper. By the 17th May 1944, he noted in his letter to the family that he was *Sorry to hear you’re still not heard from me & do hope you are not worrying.* On the 23rd June, the South African Red Cross forwarded his mother a reply to the 24-word message despatched through them of the 14th June 1944. In a letter of November 1944, he stated that *the authorities allow communication between the closest relatives only* which prevented him writing to his extended family and friends. As conditions in Dresden deteriorated, mail dwindled and by January 1945 Julian stated that they were passing through a thin period as far as mail and parcels were concerned. His last letter home was dated the 8th March 1945.

The POWs worked for the Reichpost. It appears that their work differed. Some worked at the Dresden Post office, a huge building built of wood on an open platform.¹ *.. they were marched down to the Post Office to work, and then marched back to eat, wash, cook and sleep... (those who) worked in the Dresden Post Office – worked all night and slept during the day or visa versa, depending on the shift we were on... we did not even know ALL the men in our own Unit because we were constantly working or sleeping. ..* Others worked at the Hauptbahnhof, the main railway station.³ They worked in three gangs, the first shift from 7 a.m. to 1.p.m., the second 1p.m. to 7 p.m. and a nightshift from 7 p.m. to 7a.m.³ Their work entailed *sorting parcels and loading these into railway trucks for the German Postal Services at one of the Dresden railways siding.. placing the sacks and parcels on a moving belt between the platform and wagon. A major pastime was .. ‘mousing’ (from the German mauseri, pilfering)*¹ Julian described his work as *not unpleasant being light, clean & indoors.* This suggests that he worked in the Dresden Post Office.

Julian learnt to speak German but stated that there was a paucity of suitable grammar books. 'Julien Meyer, 2nd Transvaal Scottish, a law student and the cleverest man in camp, a brilliant scholar who learned to speak German fluently in record time. He was a great asset to us in that he was able to pick up news

outside and translate it into English for us. He wrote a daily bulletin of news for our benefit'.¹ Germany was a signatory at the Third Geneva Convention. POWs hired out to military and civilian contractors were paid. He was paid for his work and authorised the Paymaster to pay his parents £100 from his credits. In 1944 he acknowledged that £50 was received by his parents and in February 1945 his parents received £ 3 - a special allotment from him from German Marks accumulated by him, received in payment of work performed.

Cigarettes were an important commodity for trading. It was reported that trade took place between POWs, guards, and German civilians. Julian wrote directly to South African House London, asking them to arrange to send to him cigarettes monthly and to get his parents to reimburse them. In May 1944 he received a parcel of 500 cigarettes from S.A. House.

The only two people mentioned frequently in Julian's letter were Hymie Katz and 'Jacko' Jackson. He referred to them frequently in that they sent regards and they were present in a photograph taken at the camp. Julian never mentioned the names of any other POWs in his letters written from Camp 1169. David Brokensha, a POW in Camp 1169 stated that there were several Jewish South Africans at Camp 1169.³ Hymie Katz once persuaded their guard to make a detour in Dresden so that he could walk across a park clearly marked 'Juden und Hunden verboten'.³ Simon (Jacko) Jackson was described as a tall dreamy South African who was most entertaining when not daydreaming.¹ He was part of the Brokensha group of six men who encountered a Russian officer on their escape to the American lines at the end of the War. He helped ease the situation when he met a Jewish Russian major with whom he conversed in Yiddish.³ Julian never wrote about the Jewish holidays or Shabbat. Pesach occurred during the 8th – 15th April 1944. In previous years he had always mentioned Pesach. In September 1944 he intimated about Rosh Hashanah. *As always at this season my thought were with you.* Rosh Hashanah occurred on the 18th -19th September and Yom Kippur, 27th September 1944.

Initially the prisoners were well fed, and Julian stated that he gained weight - *no less than 171 lbs!*' In the second half of 1944 their rations were reduced; they received only half of the Red Cross supply from September 1944 onwards. This situation was confirmed in his letter of 4th October. In the letter a month later, he stated that the strain of events was having its effects, not only on the POWs but also on their hosts. He hoped that the Red Cross *will soon have things running normally again.*

Activities in camp that Julian participated in, included gardening and outdoor games; P.T. & ping pong. He was able to study and acknowledged being able to

do revision on the subject Mercantile Law of South Africa. He had previously asked for photographs and received some with his last mail received in Italy in July 1943. In Germany, in June 1944 he acknowledged receipt of photos of his sisters. *One of Leah's letters contained the snap of my two charming sisters on holiday.*

Julian mentioned seeing a dentist in July 1944. This was confirmed by other POWs. A German woman dentist came to the camp to examine the POWs teeth.³ She was not only young, attractive, and conversable, but also efficient. She did an excellent job.³

The POWs were evacuated from Camp 1169 in mid-April 1945. They were marched towards the Czech border. Following their release by the Germans, they were left to fend for themselves. They followed different escape routes to cross into the Allied-American lines. Julian was accompanied by Hymie Katz.

19th May 1945. Following his release as a POW and repatriation to England he wrote. *Strange but true, I like the Germans & they liked me, with the exception of the politically tainted element with whom I clashed bitterly but harmlessly. I'll have plenty to tell you – enough for a lifetime.*

Excerpts of other South African POWs experiences in Germany^{1,2}

Stalag IVB (Muhlberg)

Dick Dickinson, David Brokensha and Jack Mortlock were sent to Stalag IV-B. As each new group of POWs, also known as a *purge*, arrived, they found themselves increasingly disadvantaged in camp communities as newcomers had to be accommodated in already crowded barracks. Some had to sleep on the floor as no beds were available. The new arrivals from Italy were 'processed in a brutally efficient manner.' Given meticulous German record-keeping, all POWs were brusquely registered. Giving their names, rank, army, and POW number, they were then sent to barbers who sheared their heads with sheep clippers. Next, naked men were sent into shower rooms to be deloused 'by a Russian prisoner [who] sat in front of a bucket smelling of creosote [and who] applied the mixture with a mop on our armpits and on the groin area.' At no point were POWs informed of what was to happen to them, being simply herded along from one thing to the next. The most terrifying part of the process came with the rough inoculation at the end; in Brokensha's example, this happened at three in the morning and he fainted twice while queuing. He fainted a third time as a doctor struggled to inject him with a blunt needle, leaving him with a life-long fear of injections.²

Arbeitskommando 1169

Kommando number 1169 was located in Gorbitz, Dresden and the POWs worked for the Reichpost. The Brokensha brothers, Dick Dickinson and Jack Mortlock were sent to this work camp where they worked for the post office.² The camp commander was Horst Mainz. He had been wounded on the Russian front, as had many of the camp guards.¹ He had a POW son in the United States and he apparently wanted to ensure that men in his camp would be treated as decently as his son was being treated in America.² On arrival at work camp 1169, the POWs viewed its commandant, Horst Mainz, positively, describing him as ‘fair minded [and] even as early as October 1943, when we arrived at this camp, Horst was convinced that Germany would lose the war and he was concerned ... that we were treated as well as possible.’ Mainz and his sentries were described as a ‘decent lot.’ The camp was clean. The camp leader was Paul Brokensha. Some regarded him as a racketeer and felt that he was unfit as ‘the WO who would be in charge of the postal staff. Others were more forgiving, regarding Brokensha as ‘rather young and inexperienced for this unenviable task (of camp leader). He was the only one who held the rank of sergeant, and on the whole, he did not do too badly.’ He had a close working relationship with the commandant and they both seemed to have agreed on a number of matters. POWs were advised against escape, not only because they were very likely to be recaptured, but also because any escapes would have meant punitive repercussions for both prisoners and for the commandant. By co-operating, the group managed to improve their own living conditions and enjoyed access to a commandant who was amenable to many reasonable requests, secure in the knowledge that he could rely on his prisoners not to attempt to escape. To ease pressure as the official capacity of the camp was 100 POWs, Mainz asked Paul Brokensha confidentially to see to the composition of the group ‘so that all of us have as good a war as possible in the circumstances.’ Although Brokensha duly selected mostly South Africans, they excluded some U.D.F servicemen for being ‘troublemakers, given to quarrelling, or those whose morale was low.’ Some British POWs also made it onto their list, but they were highly selective, as Brokensha remained convinced that ‘British POWs still harboured resentment against us as South Africans, whom they blamed for the fall of Tobruk.’ This selection appeared to have been done in complete secrecy, as camp transfers occurred without reasons being provided. It was assumed that the Germans were responsible for moving all British soldiers and left only South Africans at 1169. Other South Africans were brought in to take their places.

Their guards were from soldiers wounded on the Russian front, *our first guard for our work gang we called “Nelson” as he had lost an eye in Crimea... the commandants were also young men. As the war progressed they were*

substituted by older men, majority being WW1 Vintage and who did not really have their hearts in the war.¹

POWs received Red Cross food parcels as well as extra food provided by an employer. *German rations were a slight improvement on the Italian; however we seemed to be loading and unloading German food parcel in the main for the Russian front... quite a few parcels did not reach their destination and we were benefitting accordingly. At the station where we worked we were divided into gangs of four supervised by an elderly German 'gaffer' for the loading and offloading of parcels. These old gaffers would ask us to 'keep cave' while they went into the truck to gorge themselves. We did have periodical visits from German postal inspectors. ... Once regular Red Cross parcels commenced to arrive the urge to look for food dwindled... At one time Red Cross parcels were not coming through regularly (it was impossible to survive solely on the German rations) and we had no alternative to supplement it with the contents of parcels, People who have never been really hungry would not understand this.¹*

In work camp 1169, beneficial trade also took place between POWs, guards, and German civilians. Regarding the guard "One Eye" (Nelson) *apparently you could give him money and he would buy you stuff you wanted.... The South Africans dropped packages where they worked and then got things out of the packages. They told us that. If you found any potatoes or anything, they'd trade you for cigarettes.¹* Paul Brokensha arranged a birthday feast for his brother David's 21st birthday; Breakfast: porridge, followed by fried sardines in tomato sauce with marmalade and white bread; Lunch: a meat roll in batter; Afternoon tea: two real cakes, baked in the neighbouring bakery, made from: 2 heaped Klim tins of flour; ½ cocoa tin of sugar; ½ tin Klim; 1 packet of prunes, 1 packet of raisins; 1 tin egg powder; yeast; baking powder; the kernels of the prune pits; – plus extra ingredients for the icing. The Brokenshas realised that many of the parcels contained food and a fellow POW, Mugglestone, admitted that they supplemented their food by pilfering from parcels. If caught, the consequences of theft from post office parcels were severe and sweeping: One of the English fellows was caught pinching biscuits... The culprit was taken away and our camp commandant, a *Feldwebel* (sergeant), took it out on the rest of us.²

The Dresden bombing took place on Tuesday 13th February 1945... *the sentries came banging at the door of the barracks ordering me (Jack Mortlock) to get the men into the 'air-raid sheler'. This was merely a trench about 5'6" deep, the floor constantly covered in water a few inches deep. The men were reluctant to leave their warm bunks ... warned them that flares were falling... heard the incendaires falling with a few high explosives as well. In no time the*

city south of us was alight, paper and ash began falling around us ..The closest bombs fell down the road at the tram terminus but not in our camp... The Post Office was utterly destroyed. Following the bombing we too were detailed to shovel human parts into the inferno after the raids.

In the beginning of April 1945, the Camp 1169 group, were still on postal work. They joined the thousands of mobile evacuees later. *On the 14th April 1945 we were told that we were to be moved to a 'place of safety'. The Russians were rapidly advancing from the east and the Americans and British from the west.. the end of the first day's march (25 miles) found us at Liebstadt south of Dresden. Next day we were marched another 10 miles to Hellendorf close to the Czech border and billeted in a wooden barn full of hay, here we remained until the morning of the 8th May (VE Day) when we were told by the Feldwebel in charge that we were to be taken to the advancing Americans and exchanged 'head for head'¹. A more detailed account of the events of the 8th May 1945 were narrated in a letter by Paul Brokensha.³ They left Hellendorf at 7 a.m. in a column of about 700 POWs. At 9 a.m. they were attacked, bombed and machine gunned by Russian dive-bombers and fighters. The first attack resulted in bombs dropped 50 to 100 yards from them. The countryside was studded with woods and when they reappeared from the woods in which they were hiding, a second wave of bombing occurred. During this attack, Paul's brother, David Brokensha, was wounded. David Brokensha wrote *I had heard Winston Churchill on a radio, announcing the end of the war. When I was hit and I put my hand to my head, it was covered with blood, as scalp wounds bleed a lot. My first reaction was anger, not fear, here was I going to die at the hands of our Russian allies and the war was over. As soon as I was hit, Julian Meyer (a lawyer, and later Mayor of Rustenburg in the Transvaal), who had been sheltering behind a small tree, near my tree – I don't know why we chose these trees, they offered no protection, really – immediately jumped up and ran to me, despite the bullets and bombs which continued to rain down very close to us. I was deeply touched by Julian risking his life to look after me.*³*

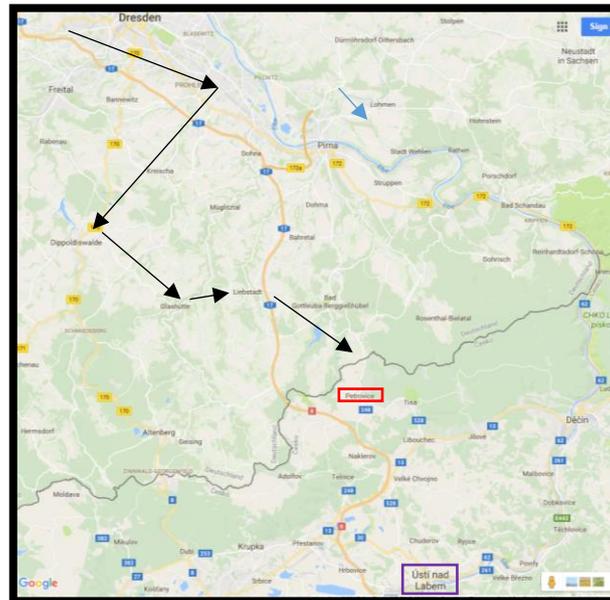
The Brokensha brothers, Jake Jacobsen, 'Jacko' Jackson and 2 other POWs teamed up together and made their way through the woods to Lauenstein (Geising). They came across heavily inebriated Russian soldiers who were firing into the air.³ Although they appeared friendly, dressing Brokensha's wound, the POW group felt safer moving on without Russian company. After securing transport in the form of a fire engine from a small town, the Brokensha band once again ran into the Russians who demanded their truck. It was at this stage that 'Jacko' Jackson helped ease the situation. He met a Jewish Russian major with whom he conversed in Yiddish.³ At this stage of their uncertain and hazardous journey, they felt far from being liberated and continued hoping to meet up with British or American forces. When they eventually encountered the

Americans, they were met unexpectedly with suspicion. David Brokensha was stopped and told ‘*Hey, you can’t come through there, you’re a Kraut.*’ The guard called to his sergeant ‘*there is a guy here (who) says he’s a South African, whose side is he on?*’ The sergeant’s response to the soldier was “*Why, you dummy, haven’t you heard of Jan Christian Smuts? Sure he’s on our side; let them through*’. These were the most welcome words they heard in three years.^{2,3} From the American lines, they were driven by truck to Erfurt, from where they were flown to Brussels.³

Jack Mortlock’s experience was boarding a train.. *we left Aussig on the 12th May 1945, arriving at Karlsbad on the 18th May; it was a hair raising trip as we eventually drove the engine ourselves, only knowing that we had to go west ...There were some 2000 in the 50 trucks, Frenchman, Cypriots, English, S.Africans and some ex concentration camp skeletons. Our route was as follows Aussig, Tplitz, Dux, Brux, Komotan, Karlsbad where we met up with the Americans. From there the Americans transported us to Eger, then to Pilsen, flying us to Brussels in Dakotas,..RAF flew us in Lancasters to England; the crew incidentally were all Polish.*¹

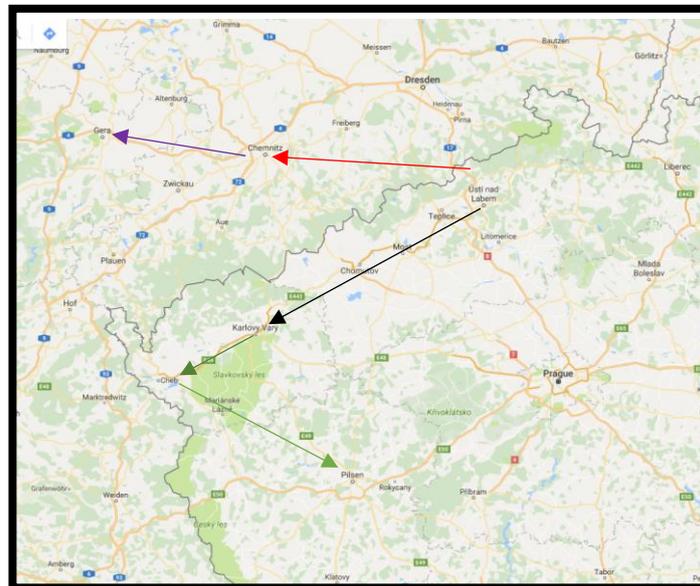
POWs at Arbeitskommando 1169

Julian Meyer³; Hymie Katz³; Simon Jackson known as ‘Jacko’ Jackson^{1,3}; Paul Brokensha camp leader^{1,2,3}; David Brokensha^{1,2,3}; Jack Mortlock a bungalow commander^{1,2,3}; Harry Mortlock^{1,3}; E.B (Dicky) Dickinson^{1,2}; Jake (Ernest) Jacobsen -SA Corps of Signals¹; Mervyn Whittle- Elliot platoon¹; Lionel Swingburn - Elliot platoon¹; Brian Marillier - Elliot platoon¹; Felix Bean - 2nd Transvaal Scottish¹; Duggie Bean, a first class bugler¹; Steve de Beer¹; Harold Oftebro - 4th Armoured Cars¹; Van Heerden –SA Police¹; Dusty King, a regular soldier in the British army – bungalow commander¹; Taffy Williams an Irishman known as a pickpocket¹; Johnnic Marrs an Englishman¹; Tim Featherstone - Dordrecht platoon who had the job as a bungalow orderly because of his poor health^{1,3}; Ferreira and Kloot – the cooks, both were SA Police¹; Jock – a Scotsman who was the barber¹; Tosher Tushaw, a Cockney from London¹; Jake Broderick and Rubelli - Royal Durban Light Infantry (R.D.L.I)¹; Jim Mason from the Hebrides¹; Finlay – he left the camp and went to work on some brickfields¹; Taffy Davis and Gray from England¹; Ivan Rogers - Elliot platoon¹; Jim Moon from Cape Town¹; Frank Twinch¹; Alex Michau and Hector Sands both from the Natal Mounted Rifles (N.M.R)¹; Gallagher – an Australian and Red Cross orderly who died of tuberculosis just before the end of the War.¹ They were generally speaking a very good crowd¹



March from Camp 1169 to the Czech border.

Route followed by all the POWs. First day's march Gorbitz, Dresden to Liebstadt – 25 miles. *'We left the camp .. and passed Nieder Sedlitz, Dippoldiswalde and Glashutte, finally sleeping in a farm house outside Liebstadt.'* The next day they *continued through Gotleuba .. to our destination, a barn in the village of Hellendorf, close to the Czech border -10 miles.*³ Julian Meyer described being released at Peterswald (Petrovice) by the Russians (red rectangle). Mortlock got onto a train at Aussig (Ústí nad Labem) (purple rectangle).



Route to Allied Lines

Julian Meyer's route was to Siegmars-Schonau near Chemnitz, Saxony where he crossed into the American lines (red arrow). From there he travelled to Gera onward to Erfurt (purple arrow). From there he was flown to Brussels.

Jack Mortlock's route: Train - Aussig (Ústí nad Labem), Tplitz (Teplice), Dux (Duchov) Brüx (Most), Komotan (Chomutov)–Karlsbad (Karlovy Vary) (black arrow) They met up

with the Americans who transported them to Eger (Cheb) and then to Pilsen (green arrow). From there they flew to Brussels.

References:

1. Szpek Jr E.E., Idzikowski FJ, Szpek HM; Shadows of Slaughterhouse Five: Recollections and Reflections of the Ex-POWs of Schlachthof Fünf, Dresden, Germany. In the aftermath of the bombing. Excursus VI. Letters from the South African POW camp at Gorbitz.
2. Horn K. South African Prisoner-of -War Experience during and after World War II: 1939 –c.1950. Stellenbosch University 2012
3. Brokensha David: Love and Work in Three Continents.
<http://www.brokiesway.co.za/army.htm>.
4. <http://www.historyonthenet.com/world-war-two-german-prisoner-of-war-camps>

Fleeing Hellendorf for "Home"



South African POWs at Gorbitz, Germany, required to pose and smile for a guard, who then made them buy a copy of the photograph. The bungalow was adjacent David Brokensha's. Back row (l. to r.) 6th Paul Brokensha (deceased) 9th Jake Jacobsen (lives in Zimbabwe) 11th Dave Brokensha (lives in England), standing in front of Dave is Mervyn Whittle (living in Cape Town). Sitting (l. to r.) 7th Lionel Swingburn (lives in Gonubie) next to him (also in white) Brian Marillier, whereabouts (Courtesy Norwood Frye)

Shadows of Slaughterhouse Five: Recollections and Reflections of the Ex-POWs of Schlachthof Fünf, Dresden, Germany

Repatriation to England

32383 L/Cpl Meyer J

No 4 Rest Camp U.D.F Repatriation Unit, Brighton

Telegram to Mrs F Meyer: DEPARTMENT OF DEFENCE TELEGRAM WISHES TO INFORM YOU THAT YOUR SON 32383 L/CPL JULIAN MEYER HAS BEEN RELEASED AND ARRIVED UNITED KINGDOM 19 MAY. Stamped Johannesburg 22 May 1945

Telegram to Mrs AL Meyer: ARRIVED ENGLAND YESTERDAY FIT HAPPY RECEIVED MAIL PARCEL LOVE JULIAN MEYER. Stamped Johannesburg 25 May 1945

Letters

32383 L/Cpl Meyer J. No 4 Rest Camp U.D.F Repatriation Unit, Brighton England. ex P.W postage free.

May 19th 1945

It is beyond me to write you a coherent letter now. My mind and feelings are in such turmoil that it would be foolish even to attempt to give you a full account of the last few weeks in this letter. ... To begin at the end of the journey: Yesterday afternoon I landed in a Lancaster Bomber at an airfield near here & was immediately driven here by trunk. Since then everything has been a whirl How overjoyed I am to know you are all fine is beyond expression. It hurts me when I realise what fears & anxiety you have suffered all these years on my account.

From the date of my release by the Russians at a little place called Peterswald on the Sudetenland border on the main road to Prag, life has been full & fast. I ceased to be a prisoner at 9.30 am on 9th May. On the 15th I crossed into the American lines at Siegmars-Schonau near Chemnitz, Saxony. By that evening I was at Gera. The following midday brought me to Erfurt. At noon the next day (17/5/45) we boarded an American plane & landed in Brussels at 2.p.m. Yesterday we took off from Brussels at 2.30p.m & landed in England at 4 pm.... Ever since we passed into American lines we have been treated like conquering heroes... We have been showered with luxuries & flowers at every turn... Hymie Katz & I have stuck together...I've met scores of old friendsStrange but true, I like the Germans & they liked me, with the exception of the politically tainted element with whom I clashed bitterly but harmlessly. I'll have plenty to tell you – enough for a lifetime.... As I sit here writing, clothed in new kit... looking out over the sea, with Hymie still by my side after all these years, my thoughts are

diverse... The other world of uncertainty & danger has disappeared in a flash & peace & serenity seem to overflow. ...We cannot expect to leave for home for at least two months. Try to be patient as I must be.

In the next letter he wrote *Each time I go out of the house, I meet old friends I have not seen for 4 years, some since school days... Tomorrow – Empire Day. I am going with a party of some two hundred of us to a Garden Party at Buckingham Palace where we will be presented to the King. Next week I shall probably go on leave. We are entitled to 30 days while we are here.... my appetite knows no bounds. Though the unfortunate population has to go without a number of things, we are being fed like prize bulls. I've drunk more milk in the last 5 days than I've done in ten years.* His next letter mentions a telegram from his family. *How delighted I am to know at last that your anxiety on my account is ended.* He described the Garden Party at Buckingham Palace at which some 3000 ex POWs were presented to the King and Queen. He described his visit in London, overnighing at the YMCA, a visit to SA House and Sun Life. Regarding London, he stated that *by the standards of bombing that we saw so much of in Germany, London has not suffered unduly. The cleaning up has been done so efficiently that very little damage is apparent & life is very nearly normal.... I've been passed by the doctors as A1.*^{23 May 45}

29th May 1945 The South African Red Cross Society sent a letter extending their sincere good wishes on this happy occasion. They suggested that letters and cables be sent as follows: REGIMENTAL NUMBER, RANK, NAME, and SAREPAT BRIGHTON.

Julian stayed at Smuts House, a club for their benefit in London.^{3 Jun 45} *I'm afraid if I go on sightseeing & play going at my present rate I shall get an acute dose of mental indigestion....I would certainly have preferred to come here after first having been home, More & more since the novelty of being free again has begun to wear off am I becoming home sick. I want to see you all again so much it hurts... How many times have we all wondered whether it would ever be possible again?*^{6 Jun 45}

A letter of the 20th June is very soul searching. *I do not know how I can ever justify the love you have always had for me. I feel almost guilty when I realise how preoccupied I have often been with myself even to the exclusion of thoughts of you & home.....Perhaps I had better say a few things now lest you are shocked when I return. Outwardly you will find me little changed. But inwardly many changes have been wrought. I have to find again faith - faith in myself & faith in humanity. Just now I'm inclined to believe that all is futile & that nothing natters very much. I may hurt you in many ways. Please try despite the*

difficulties I may make to make my struggle easier. Try not to tell me what I should or should not do. For my part I'll try to respect the laws of reason & the dictates of common sense.

I must at all costs avoid hurting you more than you have already been hurt on my account. But at the same time, I must find my way through life according to my own conscience. Readjustment will come gradually & eventually I hope we shall be able to see eye to eye with one another. ^{20 Jun 45}

He spent a Friday evening with Philip Dombey's sister. Philip was married to Julian's first cousin, Julia who lived in Cape Town, South Africa and *after all these years I once more heard "Kiddush" & sat down to a typical Friday evening meal. ...Though it has been so very long since I last went to "Shul" I immediately felt at home & was a little surprised to find that I have forgotten nothing.* ^{12 Jun 45}

A letter written to his father stated *When I return home please make allowances for the changes in me. In many respects you will find my attitude different from yours but I do not see that we should not be able to agree with one another. I am not certain what I want to do & must have a little while to make up my mind.* ^{25 Jun 45}

On the same day he wrote to all the family. I have had an interesting time in London & I think that I can say that I've successfully adapted myself to city life. Though I find that it does not the same appeal for me that it did. I wish you could have been here in my stead. I'm sure you could have derived more real enjoyment from the concerts, ballets & plays I've seen & heard, than I could. ^{25 Jun 45}

Hymie Katz and Julian travelled together and visited the English Midlands and Scotland. While visiting in Warwick, they went to Stratford-on-Avon where they saw the Shakespearian play, *Much ado about Nothing*. *After London I find the country refreshing. It will be very difficult for me to adapt myself to city life again I am afraid. I have come to prefer the simpler & more direct life of the country man.* ^{29 Jun 45} On his return to Brighton Julian wrote *Fortunately I was able to put my name down for the next boat... We expected to leave this week but a hitch has occurred & it looks as though we will have to wait until the middle of next week... Here I am having a very quiet time. We had three glorious days of sunshine.* Again he writes *At first the novelty of being free kept me interested. Now all I want is to get back, & make a start at finding my way in life.* He also wrote *It was very kind of Kloot to write to you. He & I were in the same camp & were very good pals... I've seen a lot of Alan Barrie lately. He is fine and asks to be remembered to you all. It's marvellous how little any of us have changed in the last few years. Hymie is very well & thanks you for your regards which he reciprocates.* ^{9 Jul 45}

Kloot shared the same hut as Julian Meyer in Arbeitskommando 1169

Dresden where Kloot served as a cook. Alan Barrie was with Julian throughout his training in South Africa. Hymie Katz was with Julian Meyer throughout the war, having been a fellow POW in both Italy and Germany. The two escaped to American Lines and following their repatriation to England remained together until their return to South Africa.

17th July 45 Telegram from 32383 L/CPL JULIAN MEYER SAREPAT
BRIGHTON STOPPED WRITING EXPECTED EARLIER HOMECOMING
ALL WELL LOVE MEYER 32383

Two days later on 19th July 45 the Meyer family were sent a telegram:
LEAVING ENGLAND BE HOME THREE WEEKS LOVE JULIAN MEYER

The last telegram sent was on 6th August 1945 from Cape Town. FIT AND
WELL ARRIVE HOME SUNDAY 0937. TERRIBLY EXCITED LOVE
JULIAN.

Letters sent to the Meyer family following Julian's repatriation.

25th May 1945 South African Board of Jewish Education. *It is with a sense of genuine pleasure that my Executive has learned that your son has eventually been liberated from German captivity and reached London safely.*

5th July 1945 Principal Jewish Chaplain Voortrekkerhoogte. *It is with great pleasure that the Jewish Chaplaincy learns of the release of your son.... S Weinstein.* The Rev. Capt. S Weinstein had previously seen Julian three years prior in Egypt. He sent the family a note of this encounter on the 6th April 1942.

The letters following Julian Meyer's release are very soul searching. They deal with his emotional turmoil having lived a life of imprisonment to sudden freedom. He stated that he would have preferred to have gone home immediately, rather than to spend weeks in England awaiting a boat back to South Africa. One sentiment that he expressed was a desire to live a simpler and more direct life of the country man. He did undertake this decision and following his marriage moved from Johannesburg to Pietersburg. He never married Lilian Stein, the woman who corresponded with him during the years that he was away. He married Bessie Borman, from Grahamstown, Cape Colony. They had four children who were born and schooled in Pietersburg. Julian finished his law articles and was a partner in a law firm in Pietersburg. Although he was passed medically as A1 by the army doctors upon his arrival in England, he suffered from rheumatic heart disease and in later years required heart valve surgery. The one memento that he kept was the name tag of the

British Red Cross & Order of St John. Kriegsgefangener L/CPL J. MEYER
 P.O.W. 248565 STALAG IVA GERMANY

T. 57. POST OFFICE TELEGRAPHS.—POSKANTOOR-TELEGRAAFDIENS.

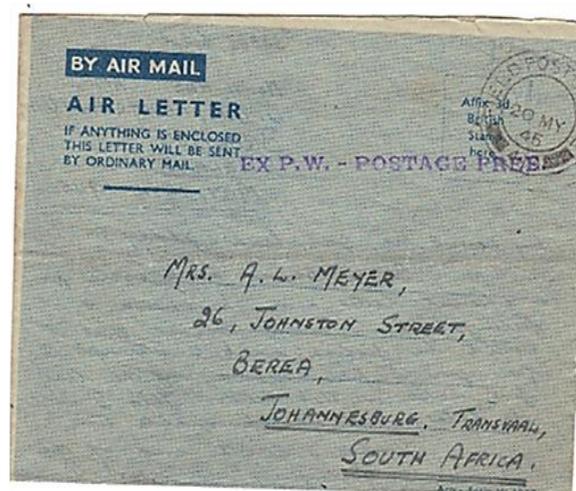
Transmitting No.	Class	Time	Priority	Work	Date	Time of Sending	Office Stamp
PJAS 13	QVT	PRETORIA	3/5/33	4/15PM			
415 20 GNT HRS F MEYER 26 JOHANNESSTREET BEREA JOHANNESBURG							

UN729/10542/H/P DEPARTMENT OF DEFENCE WISHES TO INFORM YOU THAT YOUR SON
 32303 L/CPL JULIAN MEYER HAS BEEN RELEASED AND ARRIVED UNITED KINGDOM 19
 MAY 22 DEWARED +

32303 19 +
 UN729/10542/H/P 32303 19 +

SHARP PAT. B. 10/10/44

Telegram, name tag of released POW 248565 letter home from ex P.W.





Photograph of Julian Meyer taken in Trafalgar Square London.
He is standing on the right with a pipe in his hand.



Photograph taken by Central Press Photos 119 Fleet Street. Julian Meyer is sitting at the table on the far left and is seated in the middle of the table.



Photograph taken by Central Press Photos 119 Fleet Street. Julian Meyer is sitting at the table at the back against the short concrete wall and is seated forth from the left at the table.



Photograph taken by E. Hereward Phillips 10 Bedford St., W.C.2. Julian Meyer is sitting at the table in the foreground and is smoking a cigarette.



Photograph taken by E. Hereward Phillips 10 Bedford St., W.C.2. Julian Meyer is sitting on the left and is looking at record covers.

ZAMZAM

Judell and Daphne Blieden

Julian's first cousin and his wife, Judell and Daphne Blieden (nee Green) were aboard the Egyptian passenger ship Zamzam en route from New York, USA to Cape Town when they were taken captive by the Germans in 1941. His letters followed their reported progress with the release of Daphne via Cairo to South Africa and Julian's reunion with Judell in London at the end of the war in 1945.

The Zamzam was an Egyptian passenger ship.¹ It had departed New York en route to Egypt via South Africa. The Zamzam carried primarily civilian passengers. Of the 201 passengers 142 were Americans, most of whom were missionaries en route to Africa.² In the South Atlantic, on the voyage from Recife, Brazil to Cape Town, the passenger ship was mistaken for a British Q-ship or troop transport.³ The German raider, Atlantis fired shells at her in the early morning of April 17th 1941. When the Zamzam surrendered, the Germans rescued the passengers and scuttled the ship with explosives. The passengers were transferred to the Atlantis' supply ship, the Dresden the following day. The passengers were landed at St. Jean-de-Luz, France on May 20th 1941, five weeks later. The dramatic sinking and miraculous rescue made headline news in 1941. Apparently initial radio broadcasts and newspaper headlines announced that the Zamzam was lost, presumed to be sunk, with very little hope of any survivors.^{1, 2}

Following the passengers' disembarked in Bordeaux, France, they were taken to internment camps in Germany. Many of the women and children were part of prisoner exchange programs. A family, Levitt, were involved in a Red Cross exchange with German Templers in Palestine. From Palestine this family travelled to Cairo and then flew on a Sunderland Flying Boat via Khartoum, Lake Victoria, and Beira (Mozambique) to Durban.

Men prisoners were less fortunate. They spent the duration of the War in camps in Germany.

The letters from Julian collaborate the events of the Blieden family following their captivity. Both were taken as POW. Judell spent the rest of the war in Germany. He was sent to Stalag XB, Germany.^{4,5} He was released at the end of the War and sent to Britain. His wife was released and returned to South Africa via Cairo in 1943. Julian met up with Judell in London after the war in 1945.

28th April 1941 Julian enquired whether his cousin Judell Blieden and spouse had returned to South Africa. They were en route from New York to Cape Town.

28th May 1941 he stated that he had also heard the news about the Zam Zam and as far as he could make out Judell and Daphne must be safe. *Where they are is not the best place they could be in, but we must be thankful that they did not suffer a worse fate.*

2nd June 1941 He went to see Auntie Helena, (Judell's mother) in Durban. *They (his parents) are naturally very worried. Apparently they know nothing further & the position is as obscure as ever.*

9th June 1941 he stated that he was told by Auntie Minna that *Judell & Daphne are definitely safe and are at Bordeaux. Naturally they will be prisoners for the duration of the War.*

14th August 1941 he made mention that he had heard that Judell was a prisoner of war and asked of the where about of his wife Daphne.

22nd August 1941 He wrote that *Aunt Helena sent Judell's address but as the writing is a bit indistinct you had better verify it. ... Blieden Judell N 98588, Stalag XB Germany.*

13th February 1942 he stated that he was *sorry to hear that news from Daphne was scarce & only hoped that she will be able to endure the hardships to which she is no doubt subjected. Are her people still trying to safeguard their assets in America or have they returned home?*

14th April 1942 he stated *The news that Daphne & Judell have at long last been allowed to see one another is extremely pleasing. They have suffered a far worse fate than they deserved... Are they obliged to work?*

4th March 1943 *you have no idea how glad I am to know that Daphne is returning home. The poor girl has had a very rough time...*

19th May 1943 he heard that Judell *is keeping well & that Daphne is in Cairo.*

19th April 1944 he received a letter from Judell and in May Judell had included him in a radio message which he sent home.

19th July 1944 *Am hoping to hear that Judell has left for home.*

29th November 1944 he wrote that he had a letter from Daphne Blieden of 18/8/44. *I have written to Daphne personally. I have not been able to continue my correspondence with Judell as the authorities allow communication between the closest relatives only.*

19th May 1945 upon his arrival in England he wrote *Within the next day or two I hope to be able to find about Judell & will write immediately.*

23rd May 1945 *While I am in London I'll go to SA House, London & see what I can find out about Judell.*

27th May 1945 *Went to SA House to enquire about Judell. Unfortunately the Red Cross could not give me any information.*

3rd June 1945. *I was delighted to learn from Jacob's cable that Judell is safe*

20th June 1945 *Judell is here & I've met him. He is the same as ever. Physically he has come to no harm, but unfortunately I cannot get on with him. To my mind he requires pathological treatment. The world owes Judell a lot in his own estimation and I cannot abide those who are overcome with self-righteousness and self-pity.*

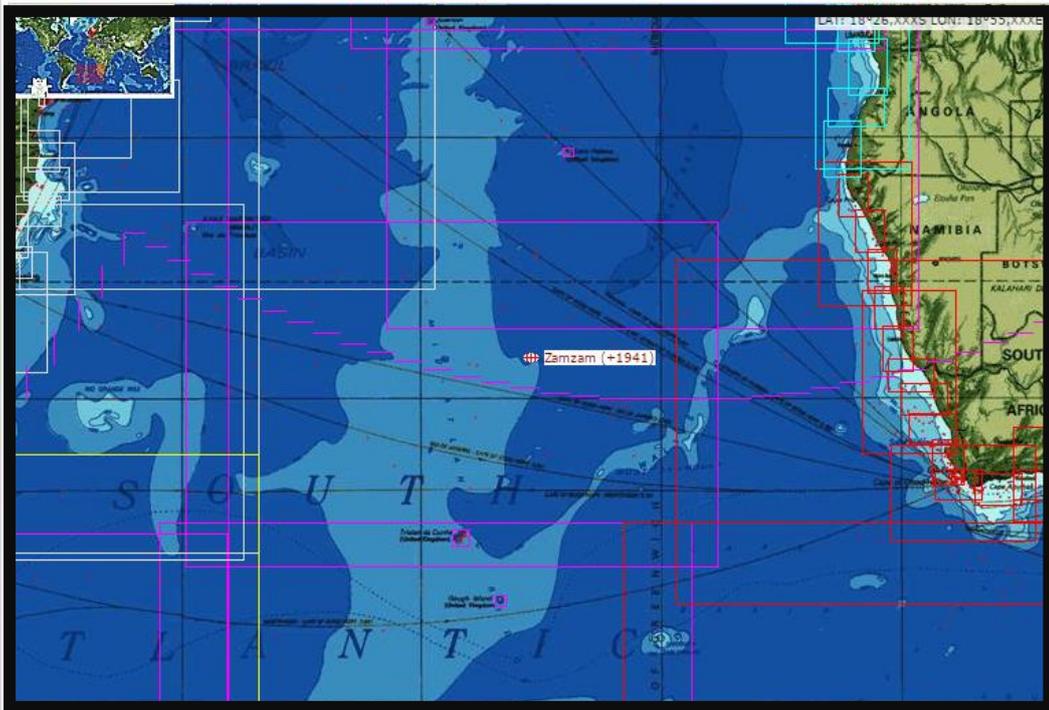
References:

1. <http://zamzamship.net>
<http://www.wrecksite.eu/wreck.aspx?156714>
2. <https://hirschland.com/2012/03/28/the-sinking-of-the-zamzam>
The Levitt Family Story. Peter Levitt
3. Q-ships, also known as Q-boats, decoy vessels, special service ships, or mystery ships, were heavily armed merchant ships with concealed weaponry, designed to lure submarines into making surface attacks.
4. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stalag_X-B
Stalag X-B was a World War II German Prisoner-of-war camp located near Sandbostel in Lower Saxony in north-western Germany. Between 1939 and 1945 several hundred thousand POWs of 55 nations passed through the camp. The camp was divided into several sub-camps which included an Internierungslager (Ilag), or internment camp for civilian citizens of

enemy nations, including members of the British merchant marine. This section was moved in 1941 to Westertimke. At the instigation of the U.S. and Swiss governments, the International Committee of the Red Cross put pressure on the German government not to keep civilian non-combatants in a POW camp.

5. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marlag_und_Milag_Nord

Marlag und Milag Nord Germans complied with the ICRC and selected what was originally a small Luftwaffe training camp consisting of six barracks and a small airfield at Westertimke. In July 1941 the prisoners of Ilag X-B were set to work dismantling their barrack huts at Sandbostel, then rebuilding them at Westertimke, finally completing the Milag camp in February 1942. Marlag camp was not completed until July 1942.



Position of the Zamzam wreck in the South Atlantic Ocean

<http://www.wrecksite.eu/wreck.aspx?156714>

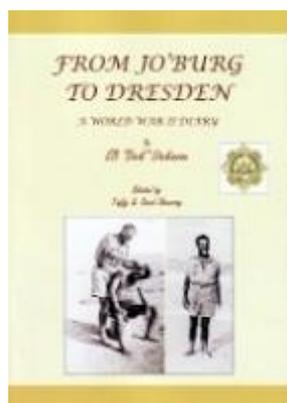
MEYER, Julian. Attorney. Born Johannesburg, 18th August, 1918, son of Abraham Leopold and Fanny Meyer. Educated King Edward VII School, Johannesburg. Past President, Hon. Life Vice President & Presently Vice-President of Pietersburg Hebrew Congregation. Member of Council Law Society of The Transvaal 1975-1976. Chairman Pietersburg Attorneys Association. Past Chairman



1973-75 Capricorn High School Governing Body. Member and Past President Pietersburg Rotary Club. Served in World War II 1940-1945, Transvaal Scottish Second Battalion, North Africa, P.O.W. Italy and Germany 1942-1945. Married Bessie Borman, 3rd August, 1947. Three sons, one daughter. Member Pietersburg Golf Club and Pietersburg Club. Member of Pietersburg Town Council 1957-62. Deputy Mayor of Pietersburg 1960-1962. Add: 32 Plein Street, Pietersburg. P.O. Box 152, Pietersburg.

South African Jewry 1976 -77

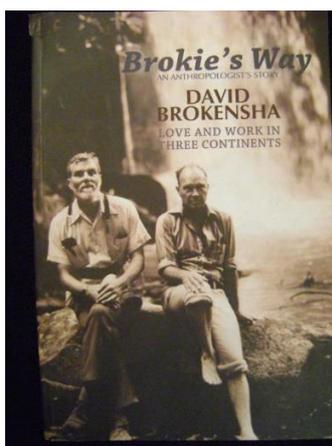
Books written by Camp 1169 POWs



From Jo'Burg to Dresden - A World War II Diary

Private EB Dick Dickinson's diary captures the drama of joining the 2nd Transvaal Scottish in 1940 and going up north. After a year's campaigning in North Africa he was taken prisoner at Tobruk along with thousands of other South African and British troops.

Held as a POW at PG 54 Fara Sabina in Italy, he walked out into the mountains when Italy surrendered and was recaptured by the Germans. Then for eighteen months he worked in a post office in Dresden before the war ended. Travelling to work daily from the Stalag, it gradually dawned on him that thousands of German civilians were taking shelter in Dresden because they believed they would never be bombed. He was sure it was a tragic myth.



Brokie's Way An Anthropologist's story.

David Brokensha: Love and Work in Three Continents.

Part 1b Army & POW details his experiences in the army and as a POW in Italy and Germany. <http://www.brokiesway.co.za/army.htm>.