



CAPTIVES COURAGEOUS : SOUTH AFRICAN PRISONERS OF WAR WORLD WAR II

Maxwell Leigh
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Captives Courageous; South African prisoners of war in World War II is the ninth work in the South Africans at War series published by Ashanti Press.

Leigh has divided his book into two parts. In the first part, entitled "Into the bag", he details the capture of South Africans in the Western Desert and their rapid transition from efficient fighting men to often sickly and weak prisoners of war (POW). The Western Desert was an unforgiving environment in which to find oneself a prisoner of war. If passing fighters or bombers (of either side) did not "get" you the dysentery invariably did. The heat, lack of water and lack of compassion shown by Axis non-frontline troops towards South African prisoners of war are all documented by Leigh. He also highlights the differences South Africans experienced in the treatment meted out by Italians on the one hand and Germans on the other. Ironically this relationship was to change later in the war, when many South Africans were moved north into Germany after the collapse of Italy in

mid-1943. The conditions in POW camps in Germany were much tougher than those experienced in Italy.

Leigh records the initial experiences of the POW in the desert and their, often hazardous, journey across the Mediterranean to the more permanent camps in Italy. He devotes a chapter to all the elements of life in a POW camp. The theatre, sport, education, religion, newspapers and the dissemination of information, and the black markets are all dealt with. The ingenuity of the POW in creating goods to barter with, is also mentioned.

The second part of the work is entitled "out of the bag" and deals with the escapes, attempted escapes, and releases and the eventual repatriation of the South African prisoners of war. The severe marches westward, away from advancing Russian soldiers, through Germany to which numerous South Africans were subjected in the last months of the war, is also touched upon.

This is a book that should have been written immediately after the war when the memories of the men involved were fresh and large numbers of men could have provided evidence. This would have allowed a balanced picture to be built up. A good example of this type of work is W.W. Mason's work *Prisoners of War* (New Zealand War History Branch, 1954) which lays out the experiences of Kiwi soldiers in an academic manner. Leigh does harness oral history (although no record of interviews is provided) and he relies heavily on the books produced by the Reverend Chutter, S.G. Wolhuter and Douglas Scott. Newman Robinson's account *Missing Believed Prisoner* is also used extensively and since it was published in 1944 immediately after his escape has added value to the researcher.

One cannot, however, escape the fact that this is a work based almost exclusively on secondary sources. Whilst one accepts that prisoners of war do not leave a rich archival heritage and that it is difficult for a South African to undertake research in German and Italian archives, Leigh provides virtually no evidence of ever having consulted local archives. The Adjutant General (POW), Deputy Adjutant General (O) and Chief of the General Staff (War) files held at the Documentation Service, SADF would have been an important starting place in this respect.

Furthermore, it is ironic that Leigh did not consult two works by men who were both captured during the war and who have subsequently

gone on to become leading South African men of letters. Uys Krige's *No Way Out* (Unie-Volkspers, 1946) provides great detail about his internment and subsequent escape through Italy. Sir Laurens van der Post's *The Night of the New Moon* (The Hogarth Press, 1970) is less pertinent in as much as he did not experience POW life like the majority of his countrymen behind the wire but still commands attention.

Leigh's book lacks depth but he has succeeded

in reminding us of the rich history of the POW which has been largely untapped by historians in this country. The POW is normally the forgotten man of a war to whom a slight stigma is attached. Leigh's work shows us how wrong this concept is and what deep reserves of strength both physical and mental had to be called upon by the POW just to survive. Hopefully South African military historians will build upon Leigh's work in years to come.

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