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Cage in the Bush

No 16 POW CAMP MARRINUP

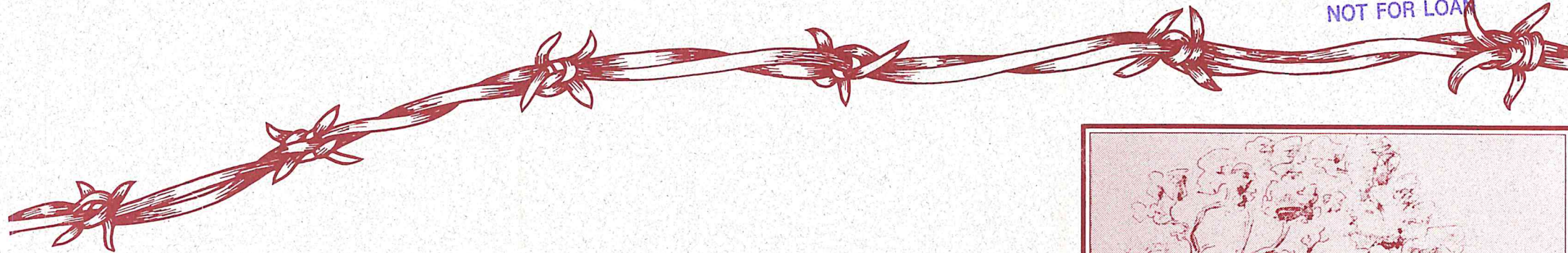
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- BE CAREFUL walk softly; this is a fragile historic site. Please keep off foundations.
- BE CLEAN please take your litter with you.
- BE COOL don't light fires except in fireplaces provided.
- BE WISE leave this natural environment as you find it for all to enjoy. Please don't pick wildflowers.

Please care for this unique and fragile site of important WA history. If you know anything about the Marrinup POW camp we would like to hear from you, especially if you know of some relevant photographs.

Please contact the Information Officer, Northern Forest Region on (09) 390 5977, or the Dwellingup District Officer on (09) 538 1001.



A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

- Angus and Robertson, for permission to reprint the photograph *Stalag Australia!*
- Australian Archives, Victoria, for information from Australian Army documents.
- Barbara Winter, *Stalag Australia!* Photograph.
- Paul Whillier, "Marrinup": four articles in the *Mandurah Telegraph* (21 June 1989, 28 June 1989, 5 July 1989, 12 July 1989).
- Rosemary Johnston, "Marrinup POW Camp". Unpublished thesis, Battye Library. Perth.
- Wayne Schmidt and Murray Love, whose personal interest has made the memory of this historic site come alive.

F U R T H E R I N F O R M A T I O N

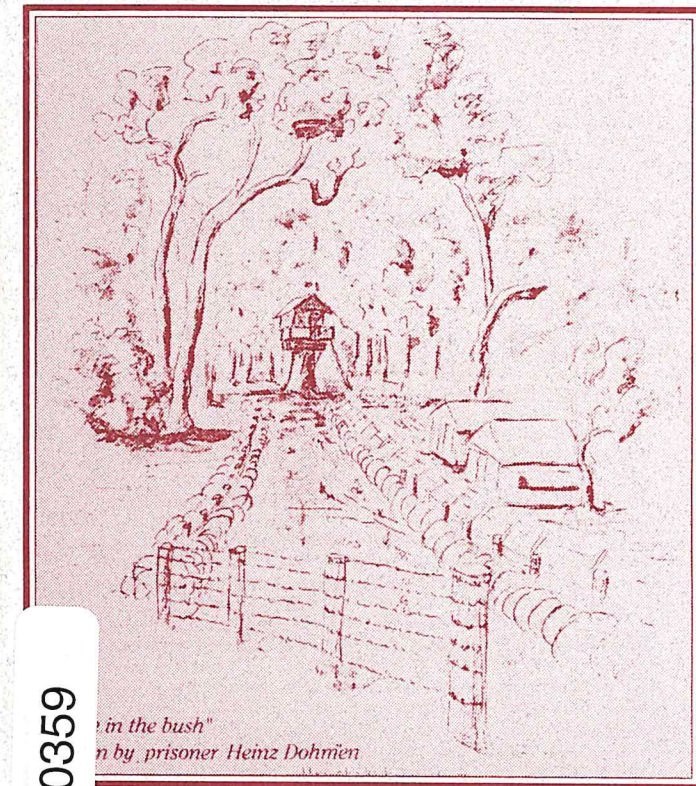
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"Cage in the bush"
 drawn by prisoner Heinz Dohmien

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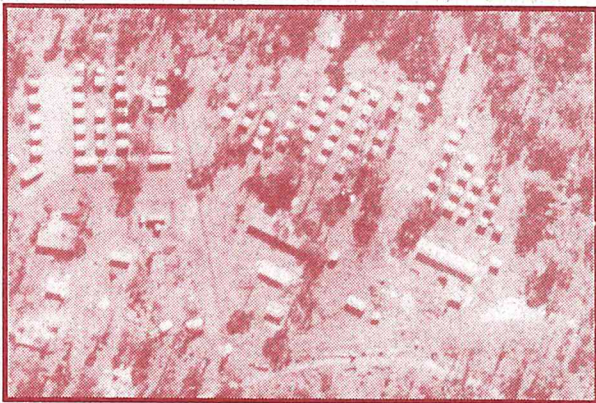
DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION AND LAND MANAGEMENT
 SOUTH-WEST DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY



MARRINUP POW CAMP

When Australians went to war in 1939, a labour shortage resulted that, by 1942, had reached crisis point. Britain also had a problem. Success in the war had meant that 250 000 prisoners needed to be secured. Therefore, an agreement was reached and Prisoners of War (POWs) were shipped from Libya and India to assist the Australian workforce, particularly in rural areas.

A network of camps and control centres was built across Australia by the Army and the POWs themselves.



Aerial photograph of Marrinup.

THE CAMP

One POW camp and 30 control centres were located in WA. The one POW Camp, Number 16 Prisoner of War Compound and Garrison, was built at Marrinup, 83 km south of Perth, to provide farm labour and cut firewood for the State capital. It was approximately 16 ha in size and some of the building foundations can still be seen (see plan 1).

The Camp took its first prisoners in August 1943 and released its last in April 1946. It was built to accommodate 1 200 men, including Army personnel, and thousands of prisoners passed through its gates. Most were Italian and German, who were put into separate compounds in accordance with the Geneva Convention.

The camp was basically a transit stop for workers on the way to farms or rural control centres. Prisoners stayed for long periods only for medical or disciplinary reasons.

The compounds were surrounded by a high barbed wire fence with triple concertina wire strategically placed outside. High-powered floodlights encircled the area and six watch towers were built, one at each corner.

Within the compound, things were not as harsh. Huts had a wooden bed, a mattress, blankets and a locker for each POW. Most of the buildings were constructed of material scrounged from disbanded internee camps and Army depots. Buildings included POW sleeping huts (six men to each), hospitals, latrines, hot and cold showers, wash houses, messroom, administrative office, a “drying room” for wet winter clothes and an education hut.

Gardening was a favourite occupation, and a fine example of their skills and initiative is a fish pond and garden beds built in the shape of the playing card suits. These can still be seen adjacent to the powerhouse foundations.

THE MEN

The Geneva Convention governed treatment of the prisoners and was closely followed to avoid reprisals against Australian POWs overseas.

Because of the lack of work supervisors, extensive screening of prisoners occurred before they reached Marrinup. No escapees, “super-nazis”, “super-patriots”, troublemakers or medically unfit were accepted at the camp.

Most of the Italians were chosen for their rural working background and less troublesome nature, while some Germans were taken because of their skills as woodcutters. Their average age was 30.

On arrival each POW was issued a secondhand Army uniform that had been dyed maroon, and was allowed to wear his insignia of rank.

Conditions were comfortable but monotonous and the work was hard. There was little foreign literature; a booklet was issued explaining the meaning and pronunciation of English words. Delays in mail were up



A parade of POWs at Marrinup camp.

to two years, and there was nothing to remind the men of home. With little to read, being able to talk only to other prisoners, and surrounded by an unfamiliar landscape, life was very isolated and lonely.

THE WORK

Camp life followed a strict routine with the day beginning at 6 am, work finishing at 3 pm and lights out at 10 pm. Italian prisoners were sent via control centres to farms from Geraldton to Albany, where life was strenuous but less authoritarian. For the most part they were willing workers. Unless discipline was required or they were unwilling to work, accommodation was supplied at the farm.

The German woodcutters worked in the forest and supplied Perth with 2 500 tonnes of firewood every week - enough to fill the whole of Hay Street Mall knee deep in wood! This fuelled Perth's power generators, water pumping stations and industry. Marrinup provided half of Perth's annual need of firewood.

Prisoners were expected to work eight hours a day whether inside or outside the camp.

Imagine how harsh the heat and our very different forest must have seemed to these men.

Those who remained within the camp were rostered for general cleaning or for various jobs in the bootmaker, tailor or carpentry shops which utilized their skills.

Prisoners were paid about one shilling and threepence a day for their work, but in tokens and not in currency, to inhibit any thoughts of escape. The tokens were used to buy chocolate, cigarettes, and other items from a mobile army canteen that visited the centres regularly.

Complaints? There were a few...

"I am Camp Leader at No 16 PW Camp Marrinup.

"In regard to PW Hostel Jarrahdale, I consider it a very good camp and I was there when it was opened. The kitchen and Mess is very good also there is a good Recreation Hall. The meals are quite good and apart from the hard nature of the work, working conditions are quite good.

"The cutting area is a long way from the Camp and PW have to walk out in the morning and walk back at night, some manage to ride on the Ration truck when it returns from the area.

"Numerous complaints regarding treatment have been received by me from PW from time to time. Prisoners are frequently abused with bad language at parades and at other times also.

"I am well aware that some of the PW at the Hostel are not good workers but in any case blows and kicks should not be given. I have seen most of the PW who are returned from Jarrahdale and they mostly complain of harsh discipline. Some are sent to work on the roads and it appears that whatever they try to do is belittled and found fault with by the Officer. I have not heard any complaints in regards to the PW's Forestry Supervisors and most of the PW speak well of them."

And: *"On 2 September 1945 I injured my right hand with a piece of tin and it was very swollen and I had to get two stitches in the wound. After two days they put me on duty for three days picking up papers in the camp. After this I was put on duty (I think it was 7 September 1945) carrying water to wash down the Mess floor. I did not carry the water because my hand was too sore. Nothing was said to me about this, but I was put on picking up papers again.*

"On 10 September 1945 I was again told to pick up papers in the camp and after dinner I was told to carry some wood and while I was working my bootlaces kept coming undone and I sat down several times to tie my bootlaces and it took me a good time as I could only use one hand.

"The lieutenant came up to me and said I was not working and called me a "bloody bastard" and after that I said I would not work any more as I had a sore hand and was unable to work.

"They then put me in the guard house."

What the Guards Thought

"This PW is a good worker and has given every satisfaction. Has a bright disposition and his facial expressions combined with an impediment in his speech have earned for him the name of the "Clown". Has expressed a desire to return to Australia. Intelligent type and handy with tools."

16/4/46 "This PW has proved himself an excellent worker, helped with putting complete crop in and harvesting same. Is still inclined to temperamental outbursts if not given his own way in handling certain jobs. This takes the form of throwing himself prone on his back and screaming at top note."

But typically....

"It is hard to imagine this neat, courteous little man as being a former enemy."

"[He] found his Utopia... and swung into the work with ease, enjoyed the life and wept when he had to leave."

In their free time the prisoners painted, sketched, carved wood and crafted wooden items. Education was also available and subjects such as Mathematics, Spanish, English, Italian, Biology, Physics and Accountancy were taught.

On Sundays, prisoners were allowed out of the camp on parole walks, and football matches and other sporting activities were arranged for them. Locals and Army personnel took part in these. Many a foul resulted when occasional matches were organised between the Germans and the Italians.

T H E E N D

With the end of the war came the need to return the POWs to their country of origin. However, particularly in the last few months before repatriation in 1946, a number indicated their wish to stay in Australia and not return to war-devastated Europe. Their employers supported them. Policy dictated, however, that they must return before they could apply to immigrate by sponsorship.

Thirty men escaped and remained in WA after the final shipload of POWs left Fremantle in December 1946. The Marrinup camp's last POWs left in April 1946. In four months all the buildings had been auctioned off or absorbed back into Army depots.

All that remains of the camp are some of the building foundations and the gardens. If you look closely you will also be able to distinguish trees that were used to mount tower boxes and some ruts in the ground that were along fencelines.

