

Otto Wortmann internment camp papers, 12 August 1914-October 1917
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On 12 August 1914, warships of the Australian Navy appeared at in front of the docks of Herbertshöhe and Rabaul and demanded information about the wireless station; this was refused. At Herbertshöhe [indecipherable] destroyed the telephone installation and issued an ultimatum: either the wireless station was silenced within four hours and the [indecipherable] surrendered, or they would shell Herbertshöhe. It took the Australian seamen just one hour to ransack the Post Office and to steal everything but the kitchen sink, and then, for reasons unknown, the ships hastily disappeared southward without waiting for the ultimatum to lapse.

The German Protectorate expected to be revisited soon by either the Australians or the Japanese, and decided to defend the island Neupommern [New Pomerania], the seat of the Government, against the enemy. The Government was relocated from Rabaul, which like Herbertshöhe was difficult to defend, to Toma, at the foot of the Varzin mountain in the interior of the Gazelle Peninsula. The reservists were re-mustered, the native police force strengthened and drilled, and half were put to the defence of Toma, the other half to the defence of the wireless station at Bitapaka. The wireless station had been cobbled together in tireless labour in the first days of the war, and was able to receive and send messages.

In Australia, meanwhile, they were busy drumming up support [for the war effort], and by promising a day's pay of 5 shilling and other possible sources of income, they attracted enough people to man the first Australian Naval & Expeditionary Force, which set sail in Sydney on 19 August 14.

The Expeditionary Force was commanded by Brigadier [Colonel] William Holmes, commander of the 6th Australian Infantry Brigade, and consisted of six naval reserve companies (485 men), a war-strength infantry battalion (1100 men), two sections of the machine-gun division, a signal contingent, and medics and orderlies, and their order was: "to seize all German wireless stations in the Pacific and to occupy German territory as soon as possible, to hoist the British flag and make suitable arrangements for temporary administration."

The fleet comprised the warships Berriman, Arangi, Yarra, Warrego, Kanowna, Australia, Parramatta, and later the Encounter, plus 5 auxiliary ships. (In typical Australian fashion, the stokers of the "Kanowna" went on strike so that she had to return to Townsville, Queensland, and come back with a new crew.) The French cruiser Montcalm joined the fleet along the way. Only a short time before the Japanese warships – which, seeing their good intentions thwarted, left New Guinea soon after – the Sydney and the Berrima, covered by the destroyers Warrego and Yarra, landed their troops in Kabakaul, the port nearest to Bitapaka, on 11 September 1914, [added in handwriting:] 5am. – Rabaul and Herbertshöhe were taken soon after without resistance. The enemy's landing at Kabakaul was soon reported to Bitapaka, and the German soldiers manned the freshly dug trenches. The advancing enemy encountered strong resistance and was constantly bothered by lateral fire from German raiding troops. Unfortunately, a German division, approaching from Herbertshöhe, had already fallen into enemy hands.

At noon, the advancing Australian forces were fortified and managed to capture the first German trenches, albeit at a loss. The Germans had been surrounded and were forced to surrender to the juggernaut. The black police force continued to fire at the enemy's flanks from the jungle. When one of these black raiding troops emerged from the jungle, our countryman Ritter, who had already been captured, motioned to the men to cease fire. His gesture must have been misunderstood by the watchful Australians, and he was killed by several bullets. He died for his homeland! The enemy, after waiting for further reinforcement, arrived at Bitapaka between 5pm and 6pm. The Germans, in the meantime, had dismantled the wireless station and felled the

towers. The remaining German soldiers and bureaucrats, as well as the natives, were captured and the place was occupied. The Australians themselves report the following casualties from this uneven fight for their own side: killed: 2 officers, including a surgeon, 4 men. Wounded: one officer, three men. The German side: killed: one man. Wounded:

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one man. The casualties among the natives are hard to assess. The numbers of the defence were: 24 Germans, including officers and radio operators, 72 black soldiers, 24 black recruits. After this victory, the Australians set up their garrisons in Rabaul and Herbertshöhe, and henceforth lived in constant fear of German attacks and exhausted themselves in preparing against the German main forces in Toma, where the governor resided. On 14 September, the Encounter opened fire on Toma from Herbertshöhe, but having badly misjudged both direction and distance, did no damage whatsoever. Then a few Australian companies advanced towards Toma with a small ship's cannon but did not make contact with the German troops, who had further retreated into the hinterland. On 15 September, the Governor of K. and his small force surrendered to the enemy, and hostilities were halted. The official capitulation of the colony occurred in Herbertshöhe on 21 September. Parts of Kaiser-Wilhelm's Land were occupied a few days later, but it took until the end of 1914 to capture all German territories. The Japanese, meanwhile, had captured the northern islands of Carolinas and Marianas.

During the handover negotiations, the Governor, Dr Haber, managed to gain very favourable terms for the protectorate. For the duration of the war, the German colony will be regarded as only militarily occupied. Administration and legal practice will continue under German law. But recourses and appeals against verdicts of the district court, which will be handed down by an English judge in the name of the German Emperor, are not admissible. The German language is banned in official statements. For the duration of the occupation, no new tariffs, taxes or property sales are allowed. German commercial enterprises and plantations continue to exist. The officers of the defence force and those soldiers who refused to take an oath of neutrality were dispatched to Australian prisoner-of-war camps, and government officials and physicians were granted safe conduct to Germany. The remaining civilians, after swearing an oath of neutrality and promising to obey wartime orders, and after surrendering all weapons, ammunition, photographic material and petrol, etc, were allowed to stay on in the colony and in their jobs. In return, they were promised protection against potential native rebellion and support in their commercial endeavours.

In mid-October, connection with Australia was finally re-established by steamships of Burns, Philp & Co. The confiscated steamers of Norddeutsche Lloyd, "Meklong" and "Sumatra", and those of the New Guinea Company, "Madang" and "Siar", kept the island-hopping service alive, and because the trading companies and the plantations were allowed to run their motor vehicles, not even the remotest outposts lacked food or other commodities.

To ensure commercial traffic the Australian government leased the piers and docks of Norddeutsche Lloyd in Rabaul, and probably to protect commerce, the former colonial government steamship "Komet" was converted into the Australian gunboat "Una". Although the Australians tried to do their best to keep maritime connections and production in the Protectorate going, they still mostly pursued their own interests and German trade suffered considerably, not least because more and more German traders and plantation owners were sent off to internment camps. Commerce with Germany was completely disrupted, and while the plantations remained more or less self-sufficient, their profitability was badly impaired by the cheap prices of copra, etc in Australia's trading ports, prompting many initially to consider stockpiling all produce. What's more, the Japanese emerged as the fiercest competitors for the German trading companies by flooding the islands they had occupied with cheap Japanese goods and by simply usurping the phosphate deposits in Micronesia that were in private German hands. As already mentioned, and in violation of the handover terms, soon more and more civilians were deported to Australian internment camps, so that

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the German trading houses began to suffer from an acute lack of staff. Guided by the aim of slowly anglicising the German colony and undermining German repute everywhere, [the enemy] tried to provoke the Germans at every turn and with the dirtiest tricks, and when a German, out of frustration or outrage, committed even the slightest breach of order, he was deported to Australia, sometimes instantly, sometimes after various forms of local punishment. Martial law prohibited any correspondence with Europe, and newspapers, even Australian ones, were banned. Although the government seat in Rabaul released daily news telegrams, they talked of nothing but German defeats and losses, day in, day out. Every letter within the island region had to be censored and sent via Australian post. All Germans, and initially also the Chinese and Malay people, had to report daily, and later weekly, to the police station of their district; had to be home by 6pm, with lights out by 10pm; and any breach of these rules was severely punished.

Considering that many a planter had to ride for several hours to get to the nearest police station and that plantation work pretty much stopped while he was gone, such orders are too harsh and largely superfluous, even though they did eventually cut them down to once a month. But what's really superfluous and humiliating is the fact that they let these people wait out in the searing sun, sometimes for hours, and that the enemy officials are impolite and arrogant, and that the behaviour of the Australian soldiers beggars all description; the only time they muster any semblance of manners is when they try to wheedle booze or ethnologica from us.

It would be futile at this point to list and statistically evaluate all the harassments, or the many fines and punishments that have been raining down on the Germans in Rabaul and Herbertshöhe. What's remarkable and interesting is that so many meetings – or let's be more frank, so many extended morning pints – of Rabaul's German population were stopped and the participants punished. These meetings were officially allowed, but almost regularly heavily armed Australians, led by officers, would soon heroically surround the house in question and arrest the attendees. In the subsequent court hearings, the officers, for the most part, would shamelessly testify that they had been sitting below [the windows of] the respective houses for hours and had heard the Germans ridicule England, toast the Kaiser and utter all sorts of things. Therefore, Rabaul's jail, a hut of corrugated iron in the middle of an open field, with temperatures worthy of a baking chamber and full of bugs and rats, was never empty, and the upshot of the story is that the arrests and the court hearings always culminated in a barrage of fines.

As an aside, in those days there was just one Australian officer in Rabaul who understood German. And strangely enough he of all people never took part in these heroic raids, because he was too busy selling all the weapons, ammunition, binoculars, etc that had been confiscated from the Germans back to the owners, or shipping them along with all sorts of other precious goods such as birds of paradise, doves, etc to Australia, filling quite a lot of crates in the process. — Plantation owners and traders in the outposts were compensated for the loss of their beer buddies in Rabaul by frequent visits from the soldiers. The gentleman visitors seldom left home without their guns and used them liberally and carelessly. It's not clear what they were hunting for given the lack of game in New Pomerania, but one of these reckless hunters was spotted [indecipherable] among a herd of [indecipherable]. These visitors often ended up begging for whisky or beer, uttering a flood of vulgarities, and taking along a few "souvenirs". None of these soldiers and officers ever forgot to tell the plantation workers and Kanake about the benefits of joining the Australian regiment, or to encourage them to lodge a complaint with the Australian police about being overworked or underfed. The result: general dissatisfaction among the workers, constant complaints, reticence and rebellion by the Kanake, and eventually

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annulment of the planters' right to discipline their staff, and even punishment of the planters because the poor, downtrodden Kanake were always right. However, if any German ever dared

tell a Kanake that the German governor would one day return, said German would soon find himself, along with one or the other fellow sufferer who maybe no longer could pay his many fines, deported to the much-vaunted Australian prison camps. It is not hard to picture the idyllic circumstances [in New Pomerania] if you add to the afore-mentioned all the other punishments for all sorts of trivialities; the difficulties employers encountered when trying to hire labour; the sometimes downright insolence of the Kanake; the high costs of food; the lack of good medical staff and medicines; health problems arising from prolonged exposure to the tropics; the low prices paid by Australia for our produce and the dizzyingly high freight costs.

But what really tops all these adversities is an incidence that can be called, without exaggeration, the most heinous event of the war. The German freighter "Meklong", in the first days of enemy occupation of the colony, had sought shelter in a bay of Ulu, an island off Neumeklenburg, and the captain thought it necessary, for military reasons, to secure the promise of Cox, an Australian missionary at the nearby Wesleyan Mission, not to disclose the presence of the freighter. Also for military reasons, the captain had confiscated the mission's barge and taken her along to the bay where the "Meklong" was sheltered. Ten days later, British destroyers arrived in the neighbourhood and, with remarkable certainty of direction, spotted and captured the Meklong and the barge. This gave rise to the suspicion that Cox might have given the British authorities the information that led to the capture of the freighter. At the same time apparently, they intercepted a letter to Cox from a British sailor aboard the German schooner "Samoa", which was also hiding in a bay of that island; in that letter the Englishman asked Cox to inform the Australian authorities in Rabaul of the ships' whereabouts. Cox later denied knowing the man or having had any correspondence with him. But the Germans of Neumeklenburg were rightfully angry about Cox's strange behaviour, since they had always treated him with respect. About four weeks after the capture of the freighter, Cox visited Neumeklenburg. He alit at Eratabu on the west coast and travelled inland to the mission Namatanui, where he resided with his missionary colleague. In the afternoon, the official German physician arrived on a medical visit but declined to be introduced to Cox. This resulted in a rather vehement verbal dispute between the physician and Cox. (Cox, who obviously knew the reason for this animosity, later claimed that he sent the physician a letter after his departure in which he assured him that he had never acted against German interests, but the letter never arrived.)

That same evening, at 10 o'clock, 5 Germans and a Belgian showed up at the mission, and one asked Cox to come out for a talk; when Cox refused, they went in to get him and took him to the woods, where he was accused of betrayal and where, no doubt, he got the hiding he deserved. The missionary of Namatanui was not present, did not witness this and his later testimony would have been based solely on what Cox told him, who left that same night for Eratabu, hastily departed Neumeklenburg and the next day filed a report of the events in Rabaul. The authorities immediately dispatched a commando to Neumeklenburg, which managed to capture the wrongdoers and to bring them back to Rabaul. After crying blue murder over the gutless brutality towards a God-fearing, innocent missionary, all in typically British-hypocritical fashion, the local court found no better punishment than having the wrongdoers publicly flogged, a verdict that flies in the face of international established case law. And indeed, even though one of the unfortunate men

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had slit his wrists and another had contracted dysentery, this humiliating punishment was executed in plain view of the Australian garrison and the non-invited but always nosy Kanake. Rabaul's German population had been asked to watch the flogging, but refused to do so, except for three gentlemen who acted as witnesses. The authorities were rather embarrassed that their Belgian ally, despite several hints [indecipherable], insisted on being punished along with the Germans. Afterwards, the poor souls were hastily deported to an Australian internment camp.

We must never ever absolve the Australians of this utterly criminal verdict. From then on, all chance of friendly co-existence and co-operation with the Australians in the colony was lost. And

as for the British missionaries in the German colony, there was plenty of opportunity later on to observe their incendiary and inflammatory influence on Kanake and Australian soldiers. The Australians have thus done little for the good of the colony, although to be fair, they did look well after road construction and maintenance of all public thoroughfares, as well as making sure that hygienic standards were kept up in all settlements and Kanake villages. They issued a number of regulations concerning the upkeep of public squares and gardens, and the Germans, recognising the sensibility of the rules, gladly obeyed them. I would doubt, however, that the Kanake, who were always conscripted to jobs they didn't like, felt any gratitude...

Generally, the Australians considered all Germans in the Protectorate to be rather dangerous, suspecting a German officer in each of them, and they always circulated rumours about German troops attempting to land or Germans massing together in rebellion. It's hard to figure out if such fears were real or feigned, but they certainly provided our enemies with enough welcome justification to periodically intern all Germans, thus crowning their efforts in the colony. Because this [the fears] is what they later, years later, told the Germans was the reason for interning them at the time and later deporting them altogether to the prison camps in Australia. Whatever the reason, it was a fresh, and this time forceful, attempt to anglicise the German territory and bring trade and development under British control.

Within the vast territory of New Guinea, the area most heavily settled by Europeans, mostly Germans, is the coast of New Pomerania, from Cape Stephens to Cape Gazelle (Gazelle Peninsula). Coconut plantations after coconut plantations from cape to cape, up to the hills of the barren mountains in the interior of the island, and only occasionally is the light green of the pretty palm fronds interrupted by the darker green of a eucalyptus cluster or a towering jungle tree. In the shade of the palm trees, like in a giant garden, stand the airy timber villas of the planters and traders, all on high stilts and reasonably protected against the volcanic quakes that are so unexpected in the southern seas, and hidden away are the huts of the labourers and the warehouses. And in all this solitude just two larger settlements, which with their web of streets, police stations, courts and pubs give the colonials the illusion of city pleasures and tribulations. Here, on the flat, open coast, is Herbertshöhe with its 12 or 13 houses, and there, in the quiet Blanche Bay, is Rabaul. Rabaul: the capital city, the seat of power, the pride of the colony, with its jetty, proud buildings, parks and restaurants, and with proper streets flanked on both sides by tall eucalyptus or casuarina trees, all of it surrounded by steep mountains and spent volcanos that are densely overgrown with jungle up to their craters. As each of the clean, white houses is surrounded by a garden, the place is probably best compared to a European residential neighbourhood or villa precinct, and yet there is a constant buzz of activity, of restless German energy, of German stamina.

Rabaul and Herbertshöhe were thus the centres of the entire trade and commerce in the Protectorate. As mentioned before, the Australians, too, had chosen these places as their headquarters, but they degraded both by turning them into prison camps for German internees.

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From Herbertshöhe, on 23 July 1915, they sent out troops to all the plantations of the district, requesting all planters and officials to report to Herbertshöhe. From the police station [in Herbertshöhe] they sent all Germans to a fairly large, one-storey private residence between Herbertshöhe and Ralum, which they had seized without much warning. The few German women were lodged at a nearby home. Once the whole German population of the district was confined to the two houses, they began without further ado to erect barbed-wire fences around them and there, the "prison camp" was born. Life in Herbertshöhe's prison camp, with all the attending misery of captivity in the tropics, was the same as in the larger camp in Rabaul, so it should suffice to describe the conditions of the larger camp in some detail.

In Rabaul, the creation of the prison camp was shrouded in mystery. In the night from the 23rd to the 24th of July, 1915, there was much ghostly activity in the street. Dark figures moved from

house to house, torches briefly shone, sabres rattled, bayonets and guns clinked, and every honest German who, obeying the orders, had gone to bed at ten and turned off the lights, was yanked from his bed at two in the morning and told to assemble at the movie theatre. At this point and to acknowledge its glory, we have to mention that Rabaul possessed a cinema. Not that it showed a lot of films, but the house was wonderfully cool and contained a full-on restaurant so that it was even more, or especially, popular and very well frequented. Nobody would have ever refused to visit this friendly place, but now, in the middle of the night and at the behest of Australians, it was a different story. Despite some desperate questions many did not know why they had to assemble there, others were simply told that their passports needed checking, but the most vociferous of the invaders expounded that it was simply a matter of periodic registration but it was easier to do so at night, when all the Germans would be at home.

There was no point in resisting the orders, nor did any negotiating produce any results, so everybody got dressed as best as they could, had a quick swig from the cognac bottle if the same hadn't already been emptied by the enemy, and trudged up to the new place of registration. The arrivals were cheerfully greeted by two rather tipsy Australian police sergeants and kept waiting on the porch while inside they were frantically removing all alcoholic beverages, which saddened quite a few upright Germans but definitely made everybody suspicious. Soon the ransacked sanctuary was opened to the public and the cheerful police began to jot down the names of those present on long lists, illuminated by the glow of a stable lamp.

This process lasted long enough to ensure that Australian resourcefulness succeeded in rounding up all German residents of Rabaul and environments and escorting them to the cinema. No building, no ship had been left unsearched, and the last man was brought in triumphantly at 7am from a Japanese, well, let's say, teahouse. In the ensuing morning hours, the planters from the north coast and Baining arrived. Now suddenly all doors were being guarded by sentries, and we all became quite worried and began demanding a full explanation. But no information was given. – They referred us to the Australian officers, but none of them was present. Again they checked thoroughly if any of the Germans were still missing, and that was that. Then, at about 8am, a bunch of Chinese carpenters, until yesterday all still in German employment, arrived and began their strange new job. They dug holes, drove stakes into the ground, and connected the stakes very carefully and diligently with barbed wire. By the time the clock struck 11am, our hall, kitchen and outhouse were fenced in by barbed wire and we were sitting in a cage. And this secure place, with its one house, a bit of lawn, much sun, two shabby papaya trees and one kapok bush, its view of a dusty street and six casuarina trees, an ilang-ilang meadow, a mountain ridge, a few roofs and some palm trees; this wired cage which let us sense, hear and, most of all, smell the nearby Chinatown, which had no shade and was pretty much sheltered from any cooling sea breeze,

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was now, and would remain, the prison camp of Rabaul. For I have to destroy right away any illusion that this monstrosity of a camp would ever evolve into something more harmonious. It is and will be futile to break out into protest songs over the internment of civilians, which is doubly cruel when a German gets imprisoned in a beer hall but is denied all alcohol. It is equally futile to cling to the image of a great big plain dotted with tents when hearing the word "camp". Because the Rabaul camp was nothing more than a hall covered in corrugated iron with asbestos walls, extending over an area of, with a tiny kitchen, 3 latrines, one shower head, a washbasin, and a gramophone, and all this opulence surrounded by barbed wire at a distance of 8 metres along the front and the street side, and of 15 metres along the other side and the back. In the course of the first morning of our captivity, the Australian deputy governor, accompanied by a judge and his aides, finally did show up in camp and gave us a "beautiful" speech. He said he was deeply saddened that he had to intern the Germans, but he hoped he could soon let them go free again, he was not at liberty to tell us why all this was happening, circumstances simply dictated it. On his part, he would do whatever he could to keep us happy and make our situation as comfortable as possible. Upon our entreaties, he granted us 5 Kanake to do the lowliest chores, serve the

roughly hundred Europeans, keep the place clean and help out in the kitchen. Our [previous] servants, who were frolicking outside the barbed wire but always near their masters, were to be allowed to fetch us deck chairs, cots, blankets, bed linen, etc from our houses, because the Australian government was not capable of providing its prisoners with beds and blankets. The commander would also let us order food from our Chinese cooks, etc, and our servants would then bring the meals to the fence. He went even further and allowed us to buy two bottles of beer per man per day. But when, after all this magnanimity, the word was finally given to the speaker for the Germans, who right away declared that [Australia] had no right to intern civilians who had even pledged neutrality and referred to the terms of the handover agreement, the governor curtly dismissed him and hastily left the camp.

But soon an Australian officer, apparently inspired by his chief and by plenty of booze, arrived on the scene and declared with considerable noise that he would look after the camp, and, more interesting for us, also said that the whole colony was under rule of war because enemy battleships had been sighted near Rabaul. The noble man was soon busy searching our blankets, linen, etc, that our Kanake had fetched. He attended to the censorship of our books by occasionally tearing out a page and throwing it away. Happily the man also found a few bottles of whisky he could confiscate and then disappeared for the rest of the day.

On the subject of visits and visitors, let's not forget Major Frey, who shortly before 5pm materialised in camp heavily armed. He hastily unfurled a huge document and began to recite: All Germans were required to declare if they were in possession of any arms and ammunition – which originally had been confiscated but later were handed back or sold back to some for hunting or self-defence – of telephones, photographic equipment, sextants, maps, etc. All these things would have to be confiscated and a thorough search of our homes was to be undertaken. Whoever was found with undeclared goods incurred the death penalty, the same for any attempt to flee. In short, whoever did anything other than meekly sit in his cage would find death. "These orders will take effect from 5pm." Mr Major pulled out his watch and lo and behold, it was 5pm. The hundred captives were now given three pencils and a few sheets of paper and everybody hurriedly tried to declare any "forbidden" goods. As for the search, we were right to fear the worst. We don't really know who combed our homes, if privates or officers, but

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we know that everything that we had gone to great pains to hide from the covetous Australians was now in their hands anyway. They scorned nothing and found a use for everything from pieces of jewellery to undergarments. For none of this, nor for the properly confiscated objects, did we ever get a receipt. – The Australians will no doubt claim that the missing things have been taken by our servants or some loitering Kanake, but then the Australians had an obligation to safeguard our possessions during our captivity and keep a watchful eye on potential thieves. Having come to know the Australian soldiers, we can safely credit them with the loss of our jewellery, money, other valuables, passports and IDs, photographs, new clothes and booze; whereas the Kanake would have taken the rest, like old clothes and blankets. It applies here, too: to each his own, and on the dark continent of the south sea, the lion's share still belongs to the white race.

All stations and plantations, including those in the district of Herbertshöhe, were searched with similar abandon. Just consider that the plantations lay idle for weeks during the internment of the Germans, consider too the laziness, nosiness and the long fingers of the plantation workers and Kanake, plus the "collection-mania" of the Australians, and you can easily imagine how these plantations, most of them German model plants, would have deteriorated within a very short time, and how much financial loss resulted for the owners, be they companies or private people, and their employees. In Neumeklenburg, they [the Australians] even went as far as deporting most residents of the main port, Kaewieng, and of the islands Neu-Lauenburg and Neu-Hannover, to Rabaul, where they billeted them in the middle of the night, in pouring rain, in tents pitched on the naked soil of the last remaining space of the prison camp. They were given neither cots, nor blankets, and it was up to the already imprisoned Germans to help their newcomer comrades.

The German women of Herbertshöhe, as already mentioned, were housed in a building near the men's camp. In Rabaul, four fenced-in buildings served as women's camp. The fences were locked and a guard was posted in a tent outside. At least here the women were left in peace and had a bit more room than the men.

In the men's camp, where the Kanake had finally brought the most basic things from the homes to the fence, the men began to settle in. Since it was impossible to fit 120 beds into a room of ... sq m, most made do with a deckchair as their sleeping place. Soon there were rows of chairs, under which one stowed one's few belongings. Those who couldn't find a free spot in the hall had to nest in one of the tents outside, which soon took up the last available space and left no room for moving about in the fresh air. But worst of all, there was no way of putting up mosquito nets, so night after night swarms of mosquitoes buzzed around us with admirable stamina. Night after night the same hopeless fight against the rage of these most beloved tropical beasts. Hygiene and sanitary installations were laughable. Or can you seriously apply these terms to 120 men squeezed together in a tropical climate, to 3 latrines cleaned once a day, one shower and 15 washbasins? There was no drinking water in the camp. Water for washing was carted to the camp once a day, early in the morning, so one wash a day had to suffice. Although an Australian physician had been appointed to supervise the sanitary conditions and check our health, he hardly ever showed up, and then only drunk, and just long enough to smilingly assure us that he would get us medicine, especially quinine, and prescribe sweeping changes. But nothing was ever changed nor provided. Thus, there were frequent bouts of malaria in the camp, and it's only thanks to luck and our overall good health that no really serious illness occurred. Not that it would have bothered any of our enemies if an internee had fallen fatally ill. They went so far in their negligence as to intern a 60-year-old German who had contracted dysentery and come to Rabaul to be hospitalised.

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Given that such an illness is doubly contagious in the tropical air, one had to fear an epidemic. But it took two letters to the deputy governor, in which we strongly protested the brutal treatment of the sick man and the whole camp, before they agreed to hospitalise the patient, but in utter mockery they forced the 60-year-old to make the 1½-hour trip to the hospital alone, on foot.

At least we had proper food, because, as mentioned before, we were allowed to buy meals from the mess or the Chinese restaurant. Although the government was obliged to feed us, it did not provide a chef and the food it did offer was of inferior quality. For a European it is no fun, at least not in the tropical heat, to stand in front of a stove or oven and to bake or boil, and yet quite a few comrades-in-pain had the gumption to transform the frozen mutton, potatoes, onions, tea, dry biscuits or corned beef that were thrown over the barbed wire each morning into a meal and tackle it with their own knives and forks, as the government again did not provide those. But even for this much smaller half of the camp the quantities provided were not enough.

What was to top all these pleasures of camp life, however, was an action that very aptly illustrates the character of the Australians. There is no doubt that the governor had enough white troops at his disposal to keep watch over the camp. But since he chose to have our barbed-wire cage guarded by natives, i.e. the members of the former German police force, tells us that the wanted the Kanake to lose the last of their respect for the Germans. It is a humiliating feeling to sit behind bars and be watched by spitefully smirking negroes. Also, the camp was situated in the middle of Rabaul, and Rabaul and its environs were densely populated. All the resident Kanake, Chinese and Malay would promenade past the camp at least once a day. The crews of the Australian warships and the passengers of any arriving steamship were invariably told of the rare spectacle and never failed to stroll past in great numbers and watch with vivid interest and much commentary the prisoners and their doings. When a house in the tropics is filled with 120 people, it is impossible to keep the doors and windows closed to prevent at least the outside world from peering in. And although the inside of our house was the only shady place, with the tropical sun

beating down on the corrugated iron roof all day long and always some people inside smoking or sweating, it was still preferable to stay outside despite more heat and full-on sun.

Thus camp life meant more or less sitting meekly outside for the better part of the day and be a spectacle for the passers-by. What else could we do? There was no room for sports; going for a walk meant dodging people, table corners, tent poles and untold other hurdles, so a walk was tiresome and very short and only earned you a lot of disgruntled enemies. Each day, upon the first ray of light, the first man in camp woke up and tried to find his way outdoors, but either his climb over 4 or 5 comrades or his frantic attempt to persuade a servant to fetch water would invariably wake up the neighbours, and soon the whole camp was on its feet. At this point, it's still cool and fresh outside, wonderful, let's make a dash for it. And just as once upon a time Homer's heroes fought with much shouting and cajoling, there is now this fight raging over the precious water and the washbasins, and each morning some music lover – well, some would say a torturer of men – turns on the orchestrion, the one and only remaining treasure from the old pub, and there, the strains of the *Hohenfriedberger March* successfully drown out the human racket.

At last, even the most unassuming man has found a way to do his ablutions and soon our Chinese cooks and the servants arrive at the fence with tea, coffee and breakfast. The orchestrion is having its hardest time but does the best it can to “entertain” us. We chat and joke and laugh while it is still reasonably cool.

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But soon the sun rises and one after another takes off in the futile hope of finding a shady spot, and one after another soon lands defeated in his deckchair, smoking, reading or simply ranting, depending on his character more or less loudly. At 9am, the great event of the day: the beer arrives. Two bottles per man. The beer is cold. Hardly anyone can resist the temptation of an early pint, and for a short while camp life becomes quite animated again. We have lunch at noon in more or less dignified fashion and then the worst part of the day comes. The sun is at its highest, its roving hot, not a flicker of a breeze, the air shimmers, no shrub, no blade of grass moves. Man after man half-dead in their deckchairs, no energy, no sense of humour, one can only sweat and sweat and maybe try smoking, even bitching takes up too much energy... At 4.30pm, finally the first timid breeze from the shore comes up, nature and camp arouse: once again music, singing, the German men's choir, *Die Wacht am Rhein*, and as much exercise as possible. We proudly call it sport when, in single file, we hop and climb over tables and chairs. At 6pm already, the night approaches and with it dinner. The next few hours are quite bearable. In the glow of the stable lights we play a lot of cards and finish off the beer. Or like sardines we are lying on our backs, side by side, staring up at the tropical night sky, dreaming, humming, meditating, or politicking, discussing the great big war somewhere out there, and griping about our misfortune...

10pm. The signal for lights out and turning in. Soon a great silence descends, but lo, there's the buzz of the first blood-thirsty mosquito; it will be a great night again...

And so it went day after day. We had never been told if they intended to keep us interned for the rest of the war, or if we would be released again. So we took it as a sign of imminent freedom when after 12 days, upon the return of the original governor from Sydney, the chief executives of the big Rabaul companies were released. But we had assumed wrongly. Captivity went on, and on August 9, an Australian officer appeared in camp and summoned 23 German merchants and planters, asking the one or the other if they had suitcases and European clothing. It wasn't hard to figure out that they were contemplating deportation of the 23 men, an act that sharply contradicted the terms of the handover agreement and all promises by the English.

When the governor visited the camp, we tried to sound him out about this, but he refused any discussion. On August 10 and under close surveillance, each of the 23 men was escorted to his home and was given 10 minutes on average to pack his belongings. The destination was as yet

unknown, only that we would go to a colder climate. On this occasion, most discovered that during the famous, afore-mentioned house searches most of their belongings had vanished, and the rest was scattered all over the place in messy heaps. Under these circumstances, it would have been a worthy task for a brilliant housewife to pack together enough sensible stuff for a lengthy journey in just 10 minutes; none of us 23 bachelors managed to do anything remotely useful. And so it happened that we all departed Rabaul the next day with hardly a warm piece of clothing and would, both on board and later in Australia, be often miserably cold and suffer frequent bouts of fever. The packed suitcases didn't follow us to the camp, where we returned for the night, but went straight to the dock.

In the afternoon of August 11, the 23 victims were summoned again and told to line up outside the camp with their hand luggage. Again they refused to inform us what was to happen. Resistance would have been pointless, so we hastily took leave from our longstanding colleagues and comrades-in-pain, and marched off, heavily guarded but free to sing heartily *Deutschland, Deutschland über alles*,

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towards the port. There, without pomp and circumstance but to the great amusement of the passengers and gawking Kanake, we were escorted onto the ...-tonne Burns Philp steamship "Morinda", which kept traffic between Australia and New Guinea alive. Thus our destination had become clear without explanation.

Despite the deportation of the 23 apparently most dangerous elements, the prison camp of Rabaul lasted another three weeks, but slowly, one by one, the inmates were released, until after three weeks the last of the involuntary guests left the cage, and this aberration of a camp became history. The barbed wire was eventually removed and after a while the friendly hall reopened, this time in its original incarnation of beer hall and movie theatre...

Meanwhile, aboard the "Morinda", the 23 Germans were kept on the afterdeck, neatly separated from the better part of humanity. Night had descended and we were thrown a few tins of corned beef and dry biscuits, the opulent banquet complemented by a very dirty pail full of tea, but at least they left us alone. At midnight, the steamer finally set out to sea and we were shown down a ladder into the empty hold of the ship. Up at the hatch 2 guards took their position, bayonets at the ready, and through the same hatch 2 thin blankets and an even thinner palliasse per man came flying, and so we settled down for the night alongside our luggage, which we rediscovered here. The part of the hold assigned to us lay directly in front of the ship's cold storage rooms and had hitherto served as a resting place for copra and muscles, so that the stale air produced by 23 men was sharpened by the smell of copra and muscles. And every time the cold storage doors were opened, which happened frequently, a chill shot out, and with it the penetrating stink of rotten meat and fish and vegetables. During the nights and in bad weather we were confined to this dungeon, which was always heavily guarded, but in daytime we were allowed on the rear upper deck, where guards blocked the gangways. In the mornings there was a window of 10 minutes during which we were allowed to fetch some water for our ablutions. On these and other private errands we were always closely watched. We were told to clean our living quarters down in the hold every day, and thanks to German diligence, they were soon in better shape than ever before. Such treatment and custody, which would have been appropriate for hardened criminals, was complemented by food that beggars all description. It was dirty water and tea with stale bread. The main meals always consisted of meat, beans and potatoes, but the stuff was in such foul condition that you got nauseous just looking at it or smelling it, and we invariably threw it overboard. In Port Moresby (British Papua) they finally gave in to our insistent requests and let us buy on land to buy some provisions at own cost; it wasn't gourmet, but at least gourmet expensive, and it saved us from starvation.

We were accompanied by about 30 soldiers, two officers, a physician, and the former deputy governor of New Guinea. Of that whole contingent, apart from the sentries, we only ever got to

see the physician, whom we requested when one of our comrades contracted a fever. But despite our entreaties, the patient received no extra attention nor was he moved, they simply gave him a hammock for a few days so that he didn't have to lie on the floor. When the ship left the tropics, colds and fever bouts became more frequent, but the physician was never seen again, and the only relief we got was the chance to buy, for an exorbitant price, a bottle of Kanake rum so that we could concoct a grog for 21 men. The crew and the soldiers always seemed to expect a tip from us, probably for serving us food like dogs and for guarding us so well.

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[Much of this page is indecipherable due to wear and tear and smudges. It seems the men arrived in Sydney on August 24 and were taken to Liverpool. This part of the diary ends here, initialled O.W., date: September/October 1917]

[Transcriber's notes:

Pg 1. Australian Naval & Expeditionary Force = Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force

Pg 1. Berriman = Berrima

Pg 3. Kanake = a derogatory term for the indigenous population

Pg 4. Neumeklenburg = Neu-Mecklenburg

Pg 10. Die Wacht am Rhein = popular patriotic anthem: Watch on the Rhine]

[Translated from German and transcribed by Rosemarie Graffagnini for the State Library of NSW]