
The Greatest Officer or the Greatest Liar Unhung?

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Abstract: This article examines the record of captivity left by Private Alex Drummond, an Australian prisoner of war (POW) held in Japanese hands during the Second World War. Captain Reg Newton was Drummond's senior Australian officer in Pudu Prison from February to October 1942. Some veterans considered Newton one of the best-performing Australian POW leaders of the Pacific War. However, Drummond disagreed and referred to him as "Nazi Ned", as a dictator and as "the greatest liar unhung". Drummond's record constitutes a valuable primary source because he kept a diary for the whole of his incarceration; he wrote a postwar manuscript based on that diary and gave a recorded interview in 1982. Moreover, his original diary can be compared with a faithful typescript made of it. Drummond's material spans three text types allowing comparisons of what he thought fit to tell at what time in each form. Despite his hostility to Newton, Drummond's perspective is important because he was willing to write and say what others would not. As such, Drummond provides insights into the daily reality of wartime incarceration—a reality often obscured by veterans' reticence, respect for authority and the tendency to observe myth-making conventions applying to Australia's chapter of the Pacific POW experience. Drummond's willingness to contest prevailing orthodoxies presented the challenge of reconciling his perspective with more positive – and more mainstream – recollections, particularly in relation to Reg Newton.

Keywords: Private Alex Drummond, Captain Reg Newton, Pacific Prisoners of War, Australian Prisoners of War, Pudu Prison (Kuala Lumpur, Malaya), Burma-Thailand Railway, Memoirs vs Diaries, 2/19th Battalion AIF, 2/29th Battalion AIF, 8th Division

Introduction

The wartime record of Captain Reg Newton of the largely Riverina-recruited 2/19th Battalion is the focus of my doctoral dissertation which argues that he was one of, if not the, best-performed, Australian Pacific prisoner of war (POW) leader(s) in the Second World War; particularly if performance is measured by the number of men under his command who survived in the three main phases of his captivity: at Kuala Lumpur's Pudu Prison, on the Burma-Thailand railway, and at a coal mine in Japan.¹ One of Newton's most loyal supporters, who was with him in all of those places described him as "the greatest officer ever to pull boots on", and another said he "was perhaps the bravest Officer I knew".² However, Private Alex Drummond of the Victorian 2/29th Battalion—whose legacy consists of a one-and-a-quarter-million-word diary written in captivity, an unpublished manuscript and a 1982 interview recorded for radio—had a different view. He referred to Newton as "Nazi Ned", as a dictator and as "the greatest liar unhung".³ As Drummond saw it, "we didn't get on very well together in Pudu Jail"; that ill-feeling erupted in a fiery orderly room clash between the two on 15 May 1942.⁴ While Newton never referred to that clash in the public record, there seems little doubt it was important to Drummond and may have been a factor ossifying his already-existing hostility to Newton. There is evidence suggesting Drummond was not the only person to find his Pudu commander irascible; Newton had court-martial proceedings issued against him on two occasions and described himself as "the Blunt, Black Bastard" of his battalion.⁵ Here then was a paradox in search of a solution. On the one hand, Drummond's material offered invaluable eye-witness commentary and, on the other, he was highly critical of an individual whose reputation—at least in the early stages of my work—I felt I had a stake in defending. As this article will show, Drummond did later recant somewhat on his original, entirely negative view of Newton.

¹ R.W. Newton, ed., *The Grim Glory of the 2/19th Battalion* (Sydney: 2/19 Battalion A.I.F. Association, 2006), 13, 21; Gilbert Mant, *Grim Glory* (Sydney: Currawong Publishing, 1942), 15.

² See the recollections of Ptes Charles Edwards and Allan Brideoake at John Larkin, "Frank Larkin, POW," n.d., accessed 12 May 2019, <http://pow.larkin.net.au/2012/02/15/story-of-2-pows/>; Bruce Brideoake, *Closer Than Brothers: Allan Brideoake's Story*, (NSW: Upper Hunter, 2014), 31.

³ Alexander Hatton Drummond, Papers, 1941-2001 [manuscript] Alexander Hatton Drummond 1911-1983, n.d., MS 13716, State Library of Victoria, 49, 52, 70, 77-79, 88, 96, 114, 124, 131, 163, 165, 201, 238.

⁴ Tim Bowden, Australian War Memorial (hereafter AWM) S02962, Alexander Hatton Drummond as a private 2/29th Australian Infantry Battalion and a prisoner of the Japanese, 1941-1945, interview by Tim Bowden, 1982, Part Two, 56:51; Drummond, Papers, 78-79.

⁵ National Archives Australia (hereafter NAA), ID 4341879, Newton, Reginald William James (Service Record, 1936-1994); Newton, *Grim Glory*, 532-534; R.W. Newton, "Reply to Jack Crockett's Letter to the Editor," *The Nineteenth* 5, no. 4 (1964): 13.



Figure 1. Aerial view of Pudu Prison, Kuala Lumpur (Joseph Gan, Wikipedia).

French philosopher Maurice Halbwachs observed that history “obeys a didactic need for schematization”.⁶ When describing autobiographical memory, US academic Robyn Fivush saw it as “a process by which we construct social worlds”.⁷ Meaning, the recording and telling of social as much as personal history fills a human need to find order from chaos. This article, by tracking the unravelling of a tangle of sources and opinions, seeks to describe a similar quest for resolution, one which the comments of these writers suggest is a strong imperative motivating many of those engaged in historical research—a drive which is, perhaps, fundamental to the discipline. It is hoped these ideas resonate with others working with primary sources and seeking to grapple with similarly complex human dynamics and conflicts among the generally well-intentioned individuals involved. As researchers, we read so much of our sources’ opinions and hear their voices so distinctly, we could perhaps be forgiven for feeling we know them. However, the perennial question remains, would those same feelings have been reflected if we had met them in person? Would our reactions be different if they were not made second-hand since, at this remove, we are condemned to formulate opinions vicariously?

Alternatively, Drummond’s negativity may be symptomatic of a witness too close to events. It is possible his personal animus to Newton obscured his vision of the whole and with it the good his Pudu commander achieved. Since, in Newton’s case, there is evidence he was a divisive and abrasive character, the circumstances under which Drummond and Newton met most likely

⁶ Maurice Halbwachs, “The Collective Memory,” in *Theories of Memory: A Reader*, ed. Michael Rossington and Anne Whitehead (Crawley: University of Western Australia Press, 2007), 141.

⁷ Robyn Fivush, “Autobiographical Memory,” in *Research Methods for Memory Studies*, ed. Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 1.

affected the former's opinion of the latter. Yet Newton's and Drummond's representations of events at Pudu were so different that the research-challenge presented was reconciling what appeared to be polar opposites. These questions took time to process but, over the space of more than three years, I have come to see Drummond's diary as exceedingly valuable, at least partly because of its atypicality which incorporates its unadulterated form and confronting honesty. The corpus of Drummond's material highlights the differences between diaries, memoirs and official histories; it also contrasts with more recent myth-making about Australia's chapter of the Pacific POW experience—myth-making reflected by euphemisms about “sacrifice, courage and mateship” employed by four Australian Prime Ministers in speeches on the subject.⁸

Memory Studies and their Relevance to Newton's Record

Before proceeding to examination of the details of Drummond's and Newton's personality clash in Pudu Prison, it is appropriate to contextualise this discussion within the scholarly literature. Memory studies have focused on how we recollect the past, on defining the relationship between memory and identity and on the role played by story-telling and -construction in sharing our memories. In the context of the Pacific POW experience, myth-making, forgetting and evaluation of the reliability of recounts are particularly relevant.

Memory—or what US historian Jay Winter preferred to call “remembrance” in a post-war context—is at the core of my research into Reg Newton's wartime record.⁹ Since so much source material was based on personal recollection, it is pertinent to note the advice of legal scholar, H.C. Nicholas, who wrote that, when assessing the credibility of witnesses, “there are

⁸ Those words were used by Australian Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese, when speaking of the POW experience in Ballarat, Victoria, in February 2024. They echoed words used in Thailand by two previous Prime Ministers, Paul Keating in 1994 and John Howard in 1998. Harold Holt made similar comments in 1965. See Joan Beaumont, “Officers and men: Rank and survival on the Thai-Burma railway,” in *Beyond Surrender: Australian Prisoners of War in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Joan Beaumont, Lachlan Grant, and Aaron Pagram (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2015), 178; Lachlan Grant, “Monument and Ceremony: The Australian Ex-Prisoners of War Memorial and the Anzac legend,” in *Forgotten Captives in Japanese-Occupied Asia*, ed. Karl Hack and Kevin Blackburn (London: Routledge, 2008), 43–44; Anthony Albanese, “Speech at 20th Anniversary Australian Prisoners of War Memorial, 11 February 2024,” Office of the Prime Minister of Australia, 2024, accessed 15 December 2024, <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/20th-anniversary-australia-prisoners-war-memorial>; Hank Nelson, “Beyond Slogans: Assessing the experiences and the history of the Australian prisoners of war of the Japanese,” in *Forgotten Captives in Japanese-Occupied Asia*, ed. Karl Hack and Kevin Blackburn (London: Routledge, 2008), 32.

⁹ Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 3.

no formulas, no rules of thumb.... The evaluation is simply a subjective judgment”.¹⁰ He added that even relatively reliable witnesses cannot be relied on all the time. Another legal scholar, Sir Richard Eggleston, observed:

honest witnesses, that is to say, witnesses who would not be prepared to lie to gain a personal advantage, will nevertheless lie to protect their good name or the good name of their friends and relations if the questions asked do not seem to them to have any bearing on the case.¹¹

In support of that view, biographer of the virtuous St Augustine, James O'Donnell—whom he argued was not entirely honest in his famous *Confessions*—made the point that, in personal recounts, “no one ever comes entirely clean”.¹²

Significantly, Newcastle University academic Anne Whitehead has advised that recognising the role played by forgetting is as important to an understanding of memory, particularly collective memory, as is appreciation of the process of remembrance.¹³ Whitehead's comment applies to POW memory in which massaging the message to protect reputations and avoid public criticism of both superiors and mates was clearly evident;¹⁴ former POWs' loyalty to their group remained well-preserved and -observed even decades after the war.¹⁵ Respect and loyalty were the foremost of numerous considerations and restraints on their public utterances. Therefore, researchers *must* subject sources to critical scrutiny. In Newton's and Drummond's

¹⁰ H.C. Nicholas, “Credibility of Witnesses,” *South African Law Journal* 101, no. 1 (1985): 32, https://heinonline.org/hol-cgi-bin/get_pdf.cgi?handle=hein.journals/soaf102§ion=12&casa_token=Kqboxnz-EvAAAAAA:G1wBobRRfGyIRcZ4zw6j83oc7CzjjGAK3p43UQL5CBM_FXMGTx9WQrTAZUvCH5pas8tzu_c90ZA.

¹¹ Quoted in Nicholas, “Credibility,” 34.

¹² Quoted in Barbara Caine, “Biography and History,” ed. Donald MacRaild, *Theory and History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 76.

¹³ Anne Whitehead, *Memory* (London: Routledge, 2009), 13–14, 124, 147–149.

¹⁴ Yiannis Gabriel, “Narratives, Stories and Texts,” in *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Discourse*, ed. D. Grant et al. (London: Sage Publications, 2004), 66–67; Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering, “Painful Pasts,” in *Research Methods for Memory Studies*, ed. Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 152–153; Alistair Thomson and Robert Perks, “Oral History,” in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Paul Atkinson et al. (Sage Publications, 2019), 15; Michael Roper, “Re-remembering the Soldier Hero: the Psychic and Social Construction of Memory in Personal Narratives of the Great War,” *History workshop* 50, no. 1 (2000): 97, 100, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/2000.50.181>; Joan Beaumont, “Rank, Privilege and Prisoners of War,” *War & Society* 1, no. 1 (1983): 74, <https://doi.org/10.1179/106980483790303126>.

¹⁵ As an example, compare John Wyett's personal views on Lt-Gen. H. Gordon Bennett with his testimony about him at the 1945 Ligertwood Royal Commission into Gordon Bennett's conduct in John Wyett, *Staff Wallah At the fall of Singapore* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1996), 204, 211. See also discussion on this point in Chris Murphy, “Uren View vs Kappe Reality,” *ERAS* 26, no. 1 (2025): 50–54, https://www.monash.edu/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/4128390/Chris-Murphy-Uren-View-vs-Kappe-Reality.pdf.

accounts, allowance should be made for the strong personalities involved and the almost irresistible attraction for individuals contributing to the written record to engage in self-justification or what Freud referred to as the “censor” innate in each of us.¹⁶

Diaries versus Memories

The Foreword to the first-published Australian Pacific POW memoir contains this observation from Commodore J.A. ‘John’ Collins, RAN:

This is not a grim tale of atrocities in concentration camps but a cheerful story of how spirit and determination made the best of things. One can read between the lines, however, and see that the authors have spared the reader’s feelings by excluding much that might have been written.¹⁷

In offering this advice, Commodore Collins foreshadowed a trend evident in memoirs published as many as sixty years later: that memoirs are carefully considered, crafted and selective retellings whereas diaries, in their raw state, tend more to be warts-and-all accounts. While numerous Pacific POWs kept and were able to preserve diaries during their captivity, the majority of those that went to print were edited and polished before publication.¹⁸ Commenting on the 1980 release of his diary, Stan Arneil described the original as being “written by a boy” and noted the recommendation of an eminent reviewer that “some of the continuous references” to everyday issues be deleted.¹⁹ Although Arneil’s diaries are reported to been published in close to their original form, his comments show the difference in

¹⁶ Dattner and Dahl point to attribution theory as a means of explaining the human drive to project self-serving versions of events. See Ben Dattner and Darren Dahl, *The Blame Game: How the Hidden Rules of Credit and Blame Determine Our Success or Failure* (New York: Free Press, 2011), 32. See also Alice M. Hoffman, “Reliability and validity in oral history,” *Today’s Speech* 22, (1974): 27, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/01463377409369125>; Peter Burke, “History as Social Memory,” in *Memory: History, Culture and the Mind*, ed. Thomas Butler (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 109.

¹⁷ A. Bancroft and R.G. Roberts, *The Mikado’s Guests: A Story of Japanese Captivity* (Perth: Patersons Printing Press Ltd, 1945), 5.

¹⁸ Examples include Rohan D. Rivett, *Behind Bamboo: Hell on the Burma railway* (Camberwell: Penguin Books, 2005); John Nevell, *Diary*, n.d. AWM PR00257; Chaim Nussbaum, *Chaplain on the River Kwai* (New York: Shapolsky Publishers, 1988); Stan Arneil, *One Man’s War* (South Melbourne: Sun Books, 1980); Roy Mills, *Doctor’s Diary and memoirs: Pond’s Party, F Force, Thai-Burma Railway* (New Lambton: Self-published, 1994); Edward E. Dunlop, *The War Diaries of Weary Dunlop* (Melbourne: Nelson Publishers, 1986); Walter Irvine Summons, *Twice Their Prisoner* (Melbourne: Geoffrey Cumberlege, OUP, 1946); Albert Moreton, *Surviving the War: the secret diaries of an English POW along the Thailand-Burma Railway, 1942-1945* (Tokushima: Education Publishing Center, 2010); Fred Lasslett, *War Diaries* (Melbourne: Brolga Publishing, 2012); Robert Hardie, *The Burma-Siam Railway: The secret diary of Dr Robert Hardie 1942-45* (London: Imperial War Museum, 1983); Douglas McLaggan, *The Will to Survive: A private’s view as a POW* (Kenthurst: Kangaroo Press, 1995). Roy Mills’ comments on the editing process are particularly interesting. See Mills, *Diary*, 20, 54, 56.

¹⁹ Arneil, *War*, 3–4.

perspective time can bring. In the Postscript to his *War Diaries*, ‘Weary’ Dunlop commented that he “decided not to re-write the diaries, although it was a great temptation to improve the writing”.²⁰ Despite that stipulation, he had two secretaries and a professional editor working with him on that project—a situation suggesting at least some revision was involved.²¹ In a 1970s footnote to his diaries, Dr Robert Hardie felt the need to explain that “one was inclined, under the conditions that prevailed, to put the worst construction on anything”.²² One published POW diary highlighting the unvarnished nature of original diary entries is that of Indian Army Warrant Officer Albert Moreton.²³ Publication of Moreton’s diary was undertaken in 2010 by his grandson who referred to the revisions Albert made to the originals in 1977 and occasionally inserted into the text comments Albert made at that time.²⁴ What he did not show were his grandfather’s elisions. Evidence like this suggests one derives a different perspective on the captivity experience when reading diaries available in close to their original form as compared to polished personal memoirs written with the perspective afforded by the passage of years. As diaries show, stressed individuals were not quite so noble, and life under such testing conditions was not quite so harmonious as most memoirists suggest. This is a valuable lesson and Drummond’s diary is a key source providing specific evidence of the extent of that divide.

Confinement as a POW by any nation was such a trying experience that in 1918 Swiss physician, Adolf Vischer, described “barbed-wire disease” as consisting of irritability, suspicion, trouble with concentration and memory, restlessness and depression.²⁵ The diaries of Pacific POWs reflect Vischer’s diagnosis and a striking example is the previously-cited Moreton’s recurring complaints about his fellow POWs. Moreton’s ill-temper was particularly evident in the section covering the period between the Japanese surrender and his return to Britain—a time one may have expected to be framed by feelings of gratitude and relief. Instead, Moreton criticised medical personnel, the army, the East, people around him and his short cigarette ration. He alternated between discussing his haemorrhoids, his enemas, his bowel movements and describing people he encountered, in entry after entry, as lacking refinement, inefficient, unethical, shallow, ungracious, ignorant, messy, deceitful, selfish, greedy, queer,

²⁰ Dunlop, *Diaries*, 382.

²¹ Melbourne University Publishing (hereafter MUP), “Sue Ebury,” n.d., accessed 19 September 2024, <https://www.mup.com.au/authors/sue-ebury>; Sue Ebury, *Weary: The Life of Sir Edward Dunlop*. (Ringwood: Viking, 1994), 628–629.

²² Hardie, *Diary*, 32.

²³ Moreton’s formal rank was Sub-Conductor which was equivalent to WO2.

²⁴ Moreton, *Surviving*, xxxviii, 159.

²⁵ Christina Twomey, *The Battle Within: POWs in Postwar Australia* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2018), 32.

swine, empty-headed, lazy and “detestable scum”; he complained about “red tape and bull”, the wastage and lack of variety of food; he criticised Lady Mountbatten—the heroine of numerous other POW liberation stories—was unimpressed by the first film he saw and described new music he heard as “boogy woogy rot”.²⁶ Moreton’s diary provides stark testimony of the effects of “barbed wire disease” but Drummond’s diary, recording his carping criticisms of officers, his suspicion of all authority and his consistent belligerence, also highlights the unflattering effects of captivity unfiltered by later refinements and excisions. As such, they support Vischer’s theory as well as comments made in 1942 in the diaries of two British officers noting that captivity had “done queer things to a lot of people” and “turned hitherto decent officers ... into selfish, mean and unscrupulous beings”.²⁷ The postwar narrative of harmony, goodwill and unfailing mateship among POWs, seen in popular films and referred to by the four Australian Prime Ministers cited earlier, is not supported by an examination of day-by-day diaries, especially those kept by enlisted men such as Drummond.

Drummond’s Background

Like many members of the 8th Division, Alexander Hatton ‘Alex’ or ‘Chick’ Drummond was a family man. When he enlisted on 2 June 1941 he was 29 years old and had two children at home in the Melbourne suburb of Glen Iris: a five-year-old daughter and a one-year-old son.²⁸ Drummond’s service record does not indicate that he was subject to any disciplinary charges prior to captivity yet he exhibited a distinct resistance to authority.²⁹ A possible explanation for Drummond’s lack of respect for military rank could be his enlistment date which came a full year after that of Newton and the great bulk of 8th Division recruits—in other words, at the

²⁶ The instances of griping are taken from Moreton, *Surviving*, 200–232. For examples of positive references to the camp visits made by Lady Mountbatten see Thomas H. Fagan, *World War Two Diary of Thomas H. Fagan 105 General Transport Company POW 1942-1945* (Albury: Albury and District Historical Society Papers No 31, 2018), <https://victoriancollections.net.au/media/collectors/53feae1c2162f1087018acb7/items/5c03651e21ea6712f4ca4d5c/item-media/5c03655721ea6712f4ca860b/original.pdf>, 58; Henk Hovinga, *The Sumatra Railroad: Final Destination Pakan Baroe 1943-1945* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2010), 292–294; James Bradley, *Towards the Setting Sun: An Escape from the Thai-Burma Railway, 1943* (Wellington, NSW: J.M.L. Fuller, 1984), 131; James Boyle, *Railroad to Burma* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1990), 186.

²⁷ The officers were Capt. Ronald Moore Horner and Maj. Desmond Mayler Shean. They are quoted in R.P.W. Havers, *Reassessing the Japanese Prisoner of War Experience: The Changi POW Camp, Singapore, 1942-5* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 42.

²⁸ Department of Veterans’ Affairs (hereafter DVA), “Roll of Honour,” accessed 10 January 2020, <https://www.awm.gov.au/advanced-search/people>; Drummond, Papers, frontispiece; NAA, Series B883, Control symbol, VX52775, Service Record of Drummond Alexander Hatton, c.1945, 2, 6, 8–9.

²⁹ NAA, Drummond Service Record.



Figure 2. Private Alex Drummond's paybook identity photograph (NAA, Drummond Service Record, 3.)

time of his capture, he had been less acculturated than most of his peers into the military mindset.³⁰ Moreover, the disastrous Malayan campaign probably shook Drummond's faith—such as it was—in his political and military masters as it did for many soldiers involved in it.³¹ He was captured on 28 January 1942 after retreating into the jungle and swamp beside the Muar-Yong Peng road in the wake of the Battle of Muar, and from there he was sent to Pudu Prison where he first met Newton.³² Prior to his military service, Drummond had worked as an “assistant publisher” at the then left-leaning—and not yet sensationalist tabloid it became—*Truth* newspaper in Melbourne.³³ In his time at Pudu, Drummond published a news sheet called ‘The Red Flag’ and, in a theatrical hypothetical, cast himself as the “leader of the Communist

³⁰ Gilbert Mant, *You'll Be Sorry* (Sydney: Frank Johnson, 1944), 34; Newton, *Grim Glory*, 2; Lionel Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1957), 14, 28–29.

³¹ For examples see A.J. Sweeting, “Part III: Prisoners of the Japanese,” in *The Japanese Thrust*, ed. Lionel Wigmore (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1957), 511–515; Dunlop, *Diaries*, 109; Gilbert Mant, *Massacre at Parit Sulong* (Kenthurst: Kangaroo Press, 1995), 78–82; John Coast, *Railroad of Death* (London: The Commodore Press, 1946), 13, 53–54; Lt-Col. Peter Winstanley, “Interview of Pte Charles Edwards,” 2007, accessed 23 July 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kwylytcseswI&t=22s>, Part Four, 5:00; Arthur Titherington, *Kinkaseki: One Day at a Time* (Weltevredenpark: Covos Day Books, 2000), 48–51; Sally Moore McQuaid, *Singapore Diary: The Hidden Journal of Captain R.M. Horner* (Gloucestershire: Spellmount, 2006), 25.

³² Drummond, *Papers*, introduction, 15.

³³ Drummond, *Papers*, unnumbered page of introduction by Josie Williams nee Drummond; Bowden, Drummond Interview, Part Three, 5:30. For comments on the *Truth*'s inter-war political affiliation, see Peter Quinlivan, *Forgotten Valour* (Sydney: New Holland, 2006), 120.

party”.³⁴ His diary and his unpublished manuscript do not clearly show he was a communist but he certainly appeared to have communist sympathies. A reason for his reluctance to identify himself as communist may have been the opprobrium attached to that label in Australia at that time. At war’s end, Drummond was a leading figure in establishing the short-lived 8th Division Old Comrades’ Association whose first foundational rule was that no officer could be admitted. The organisation survived only three years and one of its early meetings at Mornington, Victoria, broke up in violence when Drummond was accused from the floor of being a communist.³⁵ Drummond wrote of himself that, in the 1950s, he was a member of a “well-known subversive organisation”.³⁶ But, whatever his formal affiliations, he displayed an acute sensitivity to injustice and, in 1982 said, “I have always tried to help the needy, not the greedy”.³⁷



Figure 3. Private Alex Drummond (right) with two unnamed mates, presumably from the 2/29th Battalion (Drummond Papers, loose photograph).

My attraction to Drummond’s diary originally centred on the promise it held of providing an accurate timeline of events inside Pudu Prison, particularly in respect to an escape attempt on

³⁴ Drummond, Papers, 146, 148.

³⁵ Bowden, Drummond Interview, Part Three, 8:00.

³⁶ Alexander Hatton Drummond, *The Naked Truth*, n.d., AWM MSS1530, p. 2 of letter to Mr G.H. Jones of *The Sun* newspaper, Melbourne.

³⁷ Bowden, Drummond Interview, Part Two, 59:30.

the night of 13/14 August 1942.³⁸ Examination of that section of his diary showed that Drummond was sick at the time and so deputised a mate to make entries for two crucial weeks.³⁹ Triangulation and cross-referencing Drummond's diary with other accounts of that escape show at least some entries were written later.⁴⁰ It seems then that what appeared to be an entirely contemporaneous account of captivity did not meet that criterion in all respects. However, Drummond's is the only Pacific POW diary I have encountered which has entries for every day of his 1,277 days in captivity.

During their incarceration, many POWs kept diaries but it was a risky undertaking, not only for the diarist but for his fellow prisoners, and any person mentioned in the diary should it be found. At Pudu, POWs knew the risks involved with even minor breaches of their captors' regulations and Drummond himself was beaten on 13 May 1942 for attempting to smuggle socks into the prison upon his return from a work party.⁴¹ The contents of Drummond's diary leave little doubt it fell into the high-risk category; much of its commentary would have been of great interest to his captors and incriminating for his comrades. For instance, he gave details of the experiences of two fellow Pudu inmates, Lieutenant Ben Hackney and Private Reg Wharton, both of whom survived the massacre of about 140 wounded Indian and Australian soldiers at Parit Sulong on the night of 21/22 January 1942.⁴² Hackney and others were convinced that, if their captors had known they were the last surviving witnesses of those events, their lives would have been forfeit.⁴³ That is but one example of similar details suggestive of reckless imprudence and even arrogance on Drummond's part. Later, in Thailand, he was "thoroughly scared" when a *kempeitai* (military police for the Imperial Japanese army) search came close to uncovering the bulky diary and there is evidence POW officers looked on his diary with disfavour. Although Drummond was convinced, that was because he was so

³⁸ The eight escaped for times which ranged from a few hours to a few days but all were recaptured and subsequently executed. See Newton, *Grim Glory*, 400-402.

³⁹ The mate was Gnr Reg Dudley, 2/15th Fld Reg. See Drummond, *Papers*, 162; Drummond, *Truth*, 118.

⁴⁰ See Russell Braddon, *The Naked Island* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1953), 152-154; Kenneth Harrison, *The Brave Japanese* (Sydney: Rigby Ltd, 1966), <http://guyharrison.squarespace.com/bravejapanese>, 98-102; Newton, *Grim Glory*, 397, 400-402, 405; R.J.P. Garden, *Survival in Malaya: January to October 1942* (New Zealand: Self-published, 1992), 85-87, 90-99, 102-103, 107, 117; Charles Edwards, "Life in Pudu After the Escape," *Apa Khabar: The Newsletter of the Malayan Volunteers Group*, edition 32, October 2012, https://www.malayanvolunteersgroup.org.uk/uploads/1/0/7/3/107387685/mvg_newsletter_edition_32.pdf, 5.

⁴¹ Drummond, *Papers*, 77.

⁴² For Drummond's references to Hackney and Wharton, see the entry for Saturday 21st March 1942 in Drummond, *Papers*, 77. See also AWM, 1010/4/64, Affidavit of Lt Ben Hackney, 2/29th Bn and others, 3-13; Mant, *Massacre*, 7-8, 22-52; Newton, *Grim Glory*, 184-185.

⁴³ Newton, *Grim Glory*, 398.

critical of them, that seems unlikely since no officer had ever read it.⁴⁴ Although Drummond is one of the few POWs to keep a diary in a single large, bound volume throughout the entirety of his captivity, he was not alone in being a reckless record-keeper. In Taiwan, British POW Arthur Titherington commented on “the naïveté of one of our own men, a Gunner Daly. Like a few others in the camp, Daly had been keeping a diary of some sort”. That diary’s discovery by a guard caused extensive searches, interrogations and beatings.⁴⁵ Major Bert Sagers’ diary survived three searches.⁴⁶ A number of other diarists found the risks too great and destroyed, dumped or hid their diaries; examples include Chaplain Chaim Nussbaum, Petty Officer Ray Parkin and ‘Weary’ Dunlop.⁴⁷ While senior officers had an excuse for record-keeping, the cavalier approach of inveterate diarists of the other ranks (ORs) such as Drummond is puzzling, but the explanation potentially lies in the different attitudes of earlier times when there was not the same aversion to risk we see in our present *milieu*. After all, this was a total war which cost the lives of over 50 million people.⁴⁸ It was a time when US Pacific Naval commanders authorised the torpedoing of Japanese convoys in full knowledge that some carried POWs,⁴⁹ and when POWs cheered while Allied aircraft bombed facilities and infrastructure attached to POW camps in full knowledge of the high likelihood that they or their comrades would be amongst the casualties.⁵⁰

A second significant factor contributing to the utility of Drummond’s diary was the decision of his daughter, Josie Williams née Drummond, as noted in her introductory remarks to the typescript, to “make a faithful copy, spelling mistakes and all”.⁵¹ There are few POW diaries in which the typescript remains so true to the original. Moreover, in the case of Drummond’s

⁴⁴ Drummond, Truth, p. 1 of letter to Brig. Cremor, 91, 122, 185; Drummond, Papers, 559.

⁴⁵ Titherington, *Kinkaseki*, 126–128.

⁴⁶ Maj. A.E. Sagers, “To Hell and Back,” 1945, MSS 10288A, State Library of Western Australia, 17.

⁴⁷ Nussbaum, *Chaplain*, 173; Ray Parkin, *Into the Smother* (Melbourne: Wartime Trilogy ed. Melbourne University Publishing, 2003), 369, 637; Dunlop, *Diaries*, xix–xx.

⁴⁸ John D. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Book, 1986), 3, 295.

⁴⁹ R.W. Christie, *Surviving Captivity: The campaign and POW diary of Bob Christie, 2/29th Battalion AIF 1942-1945*, ed. John Lack (Nth Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing with the 2/29th Battalion AIF Association Inc, 2010), 129.

⁵⁰ Moreton, *Surviving*, 129, 132-3, 140, 147, 161, 177; Fred Skeels, *Java Rabble: A story of a ship, slavery and survival* (Victoria Park: Hesperian Press, 2008), 107; Havers, *Reassessing*, 148; Athol Hill, “Kobe Burns Again!” *The 2nd Nineteenth* 36, no. 1 (1995): 8; Rod Allanson, *The Lost Legion: An account of an Australian Prisoner of War in Thailand and Japan and his subsequent involvement in Australian Intelligence* (Surrey Hills: Self-published, 1990), 43.

⁵¹ See Drummond, Papers, introduction.

diary, the typescript can be compared to the original. In Australian Pacific POW archives, that is rare indeed.⁵²

Newton's Background

To understand the different outlooks of Newton and Drummond, some information on the background of Captain Reginald William James 'Reg' Newton is required. Newton was born in Sydney on 22 December 1906. In 1921 as a 15-year-old he joined the militia. Working his way through the ranks, he served part-time in the organisation while doing shift-work, marrying and raising a family until he enlisted in the Second Australian Imperial Force (AIF) on 14 June 1940 with the rank of captain.⁵³ Newton was known to the men of his headquarters company in the 2/19th Battalion as 'Roaring Reggie', because of his tall and imposing frame, his loud voice and "his reputation for aggression on the parade ground".⁵⁴ While that nickname became an affectionate one, it did not start out that way and, in the period before captivity Newton was described as "overbearing", "bombastic", "pig-headed" and "most intolerant".⁵⁵



Figure 4. Captain Reg Newton's paybook identification photograph (NAA, Newton Service Record, 7).

⁵² Two other instances where it is possible to compare diaries to transcripts are those of Sgt Stan Arneil and Cpl Bob Christie. See Stanley Foch Arneil, AWM PR88/076, Diary, Letter, 1945; Christie, *Surviving*.

⁵³ NAA, ID 441646, "Newton, Reginald William James, (Sergeant): Service Number – 58625, Unit – 1st Cavalry Division Signals, Date of Court Martial – 10 August 1932," 1, 23, 36; NAA, Newton (Service Record), 4.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Hank Nelson, *P.O.W. Prisoners of War: Australians Under Nippon* (Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1985), 62.

⁵⁵ See Nelson, *P.O.W.*, 62; Peter Brune, *Descent into Hell: the Fall of Singapore - Pudu and Changi - the Thai-Burma Railway* (Crow's Nest: Allen and Unwin, 2014), 441; Tim Bowden, AWM S02922, Reginald William James Newton MBE as a lieutenant 2/19th Australian Infantry Battalion and a prisoner of the Japanese, 1940-1945, interview by Tim Bowden, 1982, Part Three, 17:30.

Reg Newton was captured by the Japanese in Johore, Malaya, on 10 February 1942 after only 26 hours under fire in the Battle of Muar.⁵⁶ He then spent eight months in Kuala Lumpur's Pudu Prison before being sent to Changi, then north again to work on the Burma-Thailand railway. From there he was dispatched to Japan (via Singapore's River Valley Road camp) where, for the last year of the war, he served as Senior Australian Officer in a camp in the Fukuoka group known as Ohama 9-B. Newton was able, in each of these locations, to keep mortality rates, for the parties he commanded, significantly lower than those of other parties in similar locations at the same time. Comments by members of his contingents, particularly on the railway which was where his skills had the most positive impact, are exemplified by Private Len Gooley's comment: "Just about everybody ... has said the same thing: if we didn't have Reggie Newton, a lot of us wouldn't have come home".⁵⁷

Drummond's eye-witness accounts, including his assessment of Newton as a "dictator", a "liar" and a "con-man", created a conundrum for a researcher seeking to understand how that hostility meshed with other more commonplace and positive commentary. It was possible Drummond's narrative reflected his perspective as an outlier. It was also possible the high survival figures under Newton's command had little to do with his leadership and everything to do with good fortune. Such queries craved resolution.

Drummond's Clash with Newton at Pudu

In the early phase of their captivity there was widespread resentment and resistance to military discipline within the 8th Division's ORs, all of whom were volunteers. Very few came from Australia's small professional peacetime army since many career soldiers had sailed from Australia with the 6th and 7th Divisions in January and October 1940.⁵⁸ In other words, the bulk of the men of the 8th Division were civilians at heart and the particularly "Bolshy" Drummond, who had been in the army since only June the previous year, was more civilian than most.⁵⁹ It is also possible an incident in the jungle and swamp beside the Muar road (which

⁵⁶ Newton, *Grim Glory*, 194, 312; Wigmore, *Thrust*, 238; AWM, AWM 52 8/03/2019, 2/19th Battalion War Diary, 35.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Brune, *Descent*, 644.

⁵⁸ Allanson, *Lost Legion*, 1. While it may sound perverse, even regular army soldiers had to volunteer to join the Second AIF. Such a provision was mandated under the Defence Act (1903). See for example Richard Travers, "The Original 2/1st Battalion: A Quantitative Study of an Australian Fighting Unit" (MA, UNSW, Australia, 2014), <http://unsworks.unsw.edu.au/fapi/datastream/unsworks:34684/SOURCE02>, 75, 108–111. For examples of the other ranks' resentment, see footnote 31.

⁵⁹ "Bolshy" is a slang term derived from "Bolshevik" describing someone deliberately difficult, uncooperative or rebellious. See the Oxford English Dictionary and, for an example of its use by a British POW describing

became notorious among members of the Victorian battalion) could have been a factor accounting for the remarkable militancy of that battalion's other ranks. Allegedly, a small group of officers took the only compass and map from a larger party of the other ranks and left the latter to their own devices. This incident, which was mentioned by Drummond and features in at least two other postwar memoirs, could have been a symptom but may have caused the 2/29th Battalion's ORs' subsequent views of their officers.⁶⁰ Furthermore, many ordinary soldiers were angered by what they saw as the scandalous mismanagement of the Malayan Campaign where defeat was of such a scale that one of its chief architects, Winston Churchill—in a disavowal typical of his postwar finger-pointing—described it as “the worst disaster and largest capitulation in British history”.⁶¹ In less grandiose terms, Bombardier Hugh Clarke referred to the Malayan campaign as “the greatest balls-up of a war anyone could have imagined”.⁶² In 1999, former 2/29th Battalion soldier Private L.J. ‘Paddy’ O’Toole, described being taken prisoner in Singapore as “probably the worst thing that’s ever happened to me in my whole life”. He was “ashamed” and “disgusted with the performance of the hierarchy and the army”.⁶³ Consequently, enforcing discipline in this initial phase of captivity was difficult for POW officers. These were times when many members of the ORs lived under the extraordinary illusion that they would be liberated in a matter of weeks, and when the need for group-unity in the face of implacable and uncompromising captors was not yet obvious to all.⁶⁴

Before 15 May 1942, there had been tensions between Drummond and Newton in Pudu Prison. According to Drummond, Newton “didn’t like me too much because he reckoned I was a rebel”.⁶⁵ The unspoken ill-feeling that had been building for weeks erupted in open confrontation on that date.⁶⁶ The only surviving accounts of the episode were written by Drummond.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, if one reads “between the lines”, as Commodore Collins

Australian POWs, see Reg Twigg, *Survivor on the River Kwai: The Incredible Story of Life on the Burma Railway* (London: Penguin, 2014), 119.

⁶⁰ John Lack and Peter Hosford, eds., *No Lost Battalion: An Oral History of the 2/29th Battalion AIF* (McCrae: Slouch Hat Publications, 2005), 202; Drummond, *Truth*, 71. Indeed, Drummond named the officer chiefly responsible as VX38985 Capt. Merton Conroy Morgan, 2/29th Bn. The allegation was then repeated in Brune, *Descent*, 670.

⁶¹ Quoted in Kenneth Attiwill, *Fortress: The Story of the Siege and Fall of Singapore* (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1960), 15–16.

⁶² Hugh V. Clarke, *The Tub* (Brisbane: Jacaranda Press, 1963), 165.

⁶³ Quoted in Lack and Hosford, *No Lost Bn*, 121.

⁶⁴ See Lasslett, *Diaries*, 29, 49, 83–84; Stanley W. Smith, *Prisoner of the Emperor: An American POW in World War II* (Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 1991), 26, 39; Jack Edwards, *Banzai, You Bastards* (Hong Kong: Corporate Communications, n.d.), 6, 26, 107.

⁶⁵ Bowden, Drummond Interview, Part One, 10:00.

⁶⁶ Drummond, *Papers*, 49, 52–53.

⁶⁷ Drummond, *Papers*, 79; Drummond, *Truth*, 107–108.

recommended in his foreword to Arthur Bancroft's memoir, much can be discerned. Under Australian military law, ORs charged with minor offences were brought to an orderly room where their officer heard evidence and, if appropriate, determined punishment. In Drummond's case, the crime that brought him to Newton's orderly room was unofficially substituting himself for his mate, Private M.A.E. 'Mal' Potter, on a sought-after work detail outside the prison's walls. While Drummond made light of the substitution, such arrangements were an offence in the First AIF and almost certainly remained actionable in the Second AIF.⁶⁸ It also seems from Drummond's accounts that his exchange with Newton was bellicose and undignified. After the encounter, Drummond wrote, "Dictator Newton is the greatest liar unhung", and that Newton told him his "defence was irrelevant" and that Drummond would have to "take his verdict without argument". He further charged that Newton then "confined his remarks to aspersion on 29th [Battalion] & myself".⁶⁹ Newton allegedly accused Drummond of being "the most selfish man in the Company", i.e., Pudu's "Australian wing". Drummond defended himself and his battalion, and "got a good few shots about the messing arrangements & in future hungry-guts ... [the staff sergeant who brought the charges against Drummond and whom Drummond believed was rorting the system] will only advise the mess orderlies & not serve himself".⁷⁰ As such, even according to Drummond's partisan account, Newton conceded on a number of grievances raised during their orderly room clash. Elsewhere Drummond recorded that Newton subsequently made changes for which he and the ORs had been agitating, including the end of compulsory physical training, revision of the process allocating men to work parties, and introduction of a system by which officers ate the same meals as the ORs.⁷¹ In further concessions, Newton later reduced Drummond's sentence, included him on an organising committee and, as Drummond told it, offered him a promotion which he refused.⁷² One of Drummond's close associates, Private Jack de Loas, who was not quite so unyielding, accepted his elevation to sergeant and became a firm friend and postwar supporter of Newton.⁷³ Accordingly, even if Drummond's hurt and angry account is taken as written, it shows that while Newton may not have been a popular POW leader in his early days at Pudu, he was willing to learn, adapt and improve.

⁶⁸ A "man swapping a guard [duty] with a friend could be charged with being absent" which was a serious offence. See Peter Stanley, *Bad Characters: Sex, Crime, Mutiny, Murder and the Australian Imperial Force* (Millers Point: Pier 9, 2010), 204.

⁶⁹ Drummond, Papers, 78–79.

⁷⁰ Drummond, Papers, 55, 79.

⁷¹ Drummond, Papers, 52, 90, 93.

⁷² Drummond, Truth, 79, 95, 121.

⁷³ Drummond, Truth, 121. See Newton's reply to the letter from 'Darky' Archer. "Letters to the Committee," *The Nineteenth* 3, no. 1 (1962): 20.

Newton's Legacy

Reg Newton was proud of his record as a POW leader. That pride was probably an important part of why he spent sixteen years of his life assembling, editing and partly writing his battalion's 727-page unit history.⁷⁴ Late in his life he wrote that his railway party, designated 'U' Battalion, had a survival rate better than that of "any other Battalion of all Nationalities who worked on the Line 1943-45".⁷⁵ Statistics indicate that was true from the Thai railhead and close to true for the whole of the Burma-Thailand railway's 415km length. Newton's pride extended to his time at Pudu. In 1982 Newton described Pudu as "a learning period" but said there was no "bad blood between officer and man, man and officer".⁷⁶ In a comment almost certainly written by him, his unit history concluded its section on the eight months spent there by noting that "the chaps knew that they had tried and solid leaders and it was best to let those in whom you had faith carry on to best the Japanese in all ways possible".⁷⁷

Table 1. Mortality rates during the three phases of Newton's POW leadership.

	Time Spent	Numbers	Deaths	Percentage
'Australian wing' at Pudu	8 months	178	9	5.1 percent ⁷⁸
'U' Battalion on the Railway	15 months	672	37	5.5 percent ⁷⁹
Newton's <i>kumi</i> at Ohama 9-B	12 months	254	3	1.2 percent ⁸⁰
	Totals:	1111	51	4.6 percent

Newton's success as a POW leader is best measured by two means: first by what men who knew him said and wrote, and second by examination of the survival rates his parties were able

⁷⁴ At the time of the history's publication in 1975, Newton stated that its production had been a work of 12 years but, in 1978, he clearly stated that work on the history began in February 1959. R.W. Newton, "Battalion History," *The Nineteenth* 16, no. 2 (1975): 3; R.W. Newton, "Editorial," *The Nineteenth* 18, no. 1 (1978): 3.

⁷⁵ This was written by Newton in an inscription on a book presented to the son of Capt. Bill Gaden in 1990. See Caroline Gaden, *Pounding along to Singapore: A story of the 2/20th Battalion AIF with the letters and diary of Capt. E.W. (Bill) Gaden of 'D' Force, POW 1940-1945* (Brisbane: Copyright Publishing 2012), 285.

⁷⁶ Bowden, Newton Interview, Part One, 3:00, Part Three, 28:00.

⁷⁷ Newton, *Grim Glory*, 404.

⁷⁸ See Newton, *Grim Glory*, 394–395, 400, 402–403; Lynette Ramsay Silver, *The Bridge at Parit Sulong: An Investigation of Mass Murder. Malaya 1942* (Sydney: The Watermark Press, 2004), 249, 263; Findmypast, "Pudu Prison Nominal Roll," accessed 8 March 2022, <https://www.findmypast.co.uk/>.

⁷⁹ See Brune, *Descent*, 642; Newton, *Grim Glory*, 528.

⁸⁰ For the Australians at Ohama, the mortality rate was 1.2 percent—which was significantly lower than the overall rate for Australians in Japan. See Mark Baker, *The Emperor's Grace. Untold Stories of the Australians Enslaved in Japan during World War II* (Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2021), xii; Newton, *Grim Glory*, 575, 580, 581; Roger Mansell, "Hiroshima Area POW Camp Rosters," n.d., accessed 24 November 2021, http://mansell.com/pow_resources/camplists/hiroshima/HIROSHIMA_rosters_RG407Bx103.pdf, 67ff.

to achieve in comparison with those of other parties in roughly the same locations at about the same time. It should be noted that survival rates constitute a rule of thumb rather than a precise gauge because many factors simultaneously affected survival but, for all the imperfections of the metric, I maintain that the performance of Pacific POW leaders should, at least in part, be measured by this criterion. Here, I will examine the second criteria first since it offers the prospect of a less subjective evaluation than the opinion of individuals which, as Drummond's diary shows, can vary widely.

Table 2: Comparison of mortality rates in the three phases of Newton's captivity with other parties in the same or similar locations.

	Percentage	Percentage	
'Australian wing' at Pudu	5.1 percent	17.2 percent	British POWs at Pudu ⁸¹
'U' Battalion on the Railway	5.5 percent	18 percent	'D' Force on the Railway ⁸²
Newton's <i>kumi</i> at Ohama 9-B	1.2 percent	14.4 percent	Non-Australians at Ohama 9-B ⁸³

Achieving precision with numbers related to Pacific POWs is difficult. The challenge of determining the exact number of Australians at Pudu is an instructive exemplar; the history Newton edited and partly wrote gave different totals at different times and the question has confounded researchers writing on the subject.⁸⁴ Moreover, forty years ago, historian Hank Nelson warned that "raw statistics" do not tell the full story of POW survival and that was particularly so on the Burma-Thailand railway where a range of factors could affect the dynamic.⁸⁵ These factors included the time a contingent worked on the railway, where they worked, which Japanese personnel controlled them, and the effectiveness of their POW leaders. According to figures compiled by Joan Beaumont, Green Force in Burma recorded a mortality rate very similar to Newton's 'U' Battalion, i.e., 5.48 percent compared to 5.5 percent

⁸¹ According to the nominal roll for Pudu which can be extracted from the Findmypast website, the number of Britons at Pudu was 1,114 and the number who died was 192. See Findmypast, Pudu Roll (Website).

⁸² Sweeting, "Prisoners," 571.

⁸³ This figure is based on numbers provided by Roger Mansell. There were 400 POWs of all nationalities in Ohama 9-B of whom 24 died; this makes an overall mortality rate of 6.5 percent. However, if the 254 Australians are taken out of the equation—including the three who died—the mortality for POWs of all other nationalities (21 deaths from 146 individuals) jumps to 14.4 percent. See Roger Mansell, "Hiroshima (Ohama) 9 B Nominal Roll Prepared for Liberation," n.d., accessed 24 November 2021, http://mansell.com/pow_resources/camplists/hiroshima/hiro_9_ohama/HIR-09_roster_1945-08-15_RG389Bx2070.pdf, 67ff.

⁸⁴ See Newton, *Grim Glory*, 394–395, 400, 402–403. See also Nelson, *P.O.W.*, 21; Katie Lisa Meale, "Leadership of Australian POWs in the Second World War," (Doctoral Thesis, University of Wollongong, 2015), <https://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/4620>, 109; Silver, *Bridge*, 249, 263.

⁸⁵ Nelson, *P.O.W.*, 66.

respectively.⁸⁶ However, mortality tended to be lower in Burma and one likely reason is the lower incidence of cholera in the upper reaches of the river system beside which the railroad was constructed.⁸⁷ Therefore, the contingents with which Newton's railway battalion is best compared are the other components of 'D' Force and also Dunlop Force which worked in similar places at similar times and lengths.⁸⁸ The mortality rate for Dunlop Force was 12 percent and, as shown in Table 1, for the 2,242 members of 'D' Force, it was 18 percent.⁸⁹ On that basis, and if compared with contingents working from the Thai railhead, the numbers support the notion that Newton was a well-performed POW officer.



Figure 5. Captain Reg Newton in the ruins of a cathedral, Malacca, 1941 (AMW, PO3835.001, Captain Reg Newton, Malaya, 1941).

The figures from Newton's time in the Ohama 9-B camp in Japan also add weight to arguments about his effectiveness, although it must be remembered that British POWs began arriving at

⁸⁶ Beaumont, "Privilege," 86.

⁸⁷ Rod Beattie, *The Death Railway – A Brief History* (Kanchanaburi: TBRC, 2015), 79.

⁸⁸ Precise numbers for Dunlop Force are also difficult to determine but a credible total for its members is 1,788, of whom 200 died. These figures are based on the work of Peter Henning, *Doomed Battalion: Mateship and Leadership in War and Captivity. The Australian 2/40 Battalion 1940-45* (St Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1995), 247-8, 384-5; Gavan McCormack and Hank Nelson, eds., *The Burma-Thailand Railway: memory and history* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1993), 160. However, according to former POW Neil MacPherson and his co-author, in February 1943 the total strength of Dunlop Force was 1,873. See Tony Carter and Neil McPherson, *The Burma Railway, Hellships & Coalmines* (Laurieton: Self-published, 2007), 98.

⁸⁹ The 2,242-figure total for 'D' Force consisted of 22 officers and 2,220 ORs. See Sweeting, *Prisoners*, 525.

that camp in November 1942, twenty months before Newton's party's arrival.⁹⁰ As a result, arguments can be raised about the comparability of experiences in two of the three main settings where Newton was imprisoned but those arguments have less force in relation to Pudu where Newton and his Australians were in the same place under the same conditions at the same time as their British counterparts. Moreover, while in command of about 1,100 men aboard the Japanese ship, the *Rashin Maru*, sailing from Singapore to Moji in Japan, only one soldier in his charge died during that seventy-day voyage—a voyage that, in peacetime, would have taken little more than a week. Another two soldiers died as a direct result of their ship-board privations shortly after the *Rashin Maru* docked at Moji making a mortality rate of 0.3 percent.⁹¹ By way of comparison, the *Singapore Maru* which sailed from Singapore to Moji in October 1942 carried a similar number – 1,080 men – of whom 63 died in that ship's thirty-five-day voyage. According to RAF Pilot Officer James McEwan, a further 127 died as a direct result of it, making a total death toll of 190 or a mortality rate of 17.6 percent.⁹² Because the *Rashin Maru* was not torpedoed and did not sink in the powerful typhoon it encountered on 13 August 1944, good fortune was at least in part a reason for the low mortality its POWs experienced. However, the centrality of the role played by dumb luck diminishes with each iteration of the argument for each phase of Newton's captivity. The fact remains that his performance in different settings, under different conditions, and at different times was consistently better than those of other parties with whom his contingent might reasonably be compared.

As intimated, the retrospective views of those who served under Newton are another important means of contextualising both how he was popularly perceived and the extent to which Drummond was an outlier. Railway survivor and 'U' Battalion member, Sergeant Geoff O'Connor, said Newton "was a byword on the line. He fought the Japanese all the way and in lots of cases he blocked them".⁹³ Private Bill Lowcock wrote that, if it had not been for Newton's "dedication to the welfare of his men ... very many more of us, ex U Bn., would not be alive today".⁹⁴ Driver Herb McNamara believed Newton's railway party "was the healthiest

⁹⁰ James McEwan, *The Remorseless Road, Singapore to Nagasaki: An RAF officer's account of capture and the Japanese prison camps in World War II* (Shrewsbury: Airlife, 2001), 195; Newton, *Grim Glory*, 573.

⁹¹ The one man who died was NX33624 WO2 Edward Walter 'Ned' Turner, 2/19th Bn. The two others who died because of the voyage were SX7619 L/Cpl John MacKinnon Dunn, 2/3rd MG Bn. Died: 14 September 1944 and NX59687 Pte Ronald Stewart Bathurst, 2/19 Bn. Died: 27 October 1944. See Newton, *Grim Glory*, 572–573.

⁹² McEwan, *Remorseless*, 185–186.

⁹³ Quoted in Nelson, *P.O.W.*, 62.

⁹⁴ Bill Lowcock, "Letter to the Editor," *The 2nd Nineteenth* 35, no. 4 (1994): 35.

on the Line”.⁹⁵ Private Allan Brideoake thought he was “very strict” but “[v]ery practical”, he had a hands-on approach and was “looking around all the time” for ways to get things done.⁹⁶ ‘Weary’ Dunlop described Newton as “a stout fellow”.⁹⁷ The highly-regarded ‘H’ Force medical officer, Dr Kevin Fagan, heard some officers say:

‘Oh so-and-so the men. I can’t do any more’. Whereas a fellow like Reggie Newton would be scrounging around trying to buy a few eggs for the sick, trying to organise the men to be together, finding out where everyone was and whether anyone needed a doctor – and all this before he even thought of eating or sitting down.⁹⁸

One of the members of a South Australian unit assigned to Newton’s party in Thailand, Private George Walker, believed “Reg Newton, was undoubtedly the greatest Commander on the Line”.⁹⁹ Consistent with the view that the Burma-Thailand railway was his *metier*, in the eulogy he gave at Newton’s 1994 funeral, Private Gus Halloran said:

in history we read of a few men who assumed greatness in a special place at a special time. In these circumstances, Thailand was the place, 1943/44 was the time, and Reg Newton was the man.¹⁰⁰

Drummond’s Legacy

As an iconoclast and self-described “rebel”, Private Alex Drummond was willing to talk in all three of his POW texts about subjects as taboo as homosexuality among POWs and had no qualms naming names in his diary, his later manuscript, or in the 1982 interview he gave to Tim Bowden.¹⁰¹ For instance, in his diary, Drummond, devoted a lot of ink to repeating the

⁹⁵ Don Wall, *Singapore and Beyond: The Story of the Men of the 2/20 Battalion* (East Hills: Sec. 2/20th Bn Assoc., 1985), 155–156.

⁹⁶ Lt-Col. Peter Winstanley, “Interview of Pte Allan Brideoake,” 2010, accessed 26 July 2023, https://www.pows-of-japan.net/videos/1nodescrip.php?vid=SOIAKDQdikU&num=1_of_1&title=Alan%20Brideoake%202/19%20Battalion, 30:00.

⁹⁷ Dunlop, *Diaries*, 358.

⁹⁸ Nelson, *P.O.W.*, 69. Similar comments were made by Sgt Geoff O’Connor, Pte George Shelly, Dr Roy Mills and Pte Alex Drummond. See Nelson, *P.O.W.*, 62; Pattie Wright, *The Men of the Line: Stories of the Thai-Burma Railway Survivors* (Carlton: The Miegunyah Press, 2008), 55; Mills, *Diary*, 52; Drummond, *Truth*, 188.

⁹⁹ George Walker, “Letter to the Editor,” *The 2nd Nineteenth* 35, no. 4 (1994): 38.

¹⁰⁰ Athol Hill, “Death of Reg Newton,” *The 2nd Nineteenth* 35, no. 3, (1994): 6.

¹⁰¹ Bowden, Drummond Interview, Part One, 1:00, Part One, 10:00, Part Two, 18:00, Part Two, 22:30.

often-unfounded opinions and rumours shared among the ORs.¹⁰² While rumours are an unreliable means of determining what actually happened, they are useful as a means of showing what soldiers were saying about what actually happened. The basis on which soldiers formed their opinions may have been wrong, but that does not detract from the importance of understanding what those opinions were.

Drummond never explained why he kept a diary. Perhaps he did so out of boredom or frustration. However, the commitment he made to doing so was both considerable and consistent. Drummond's meticulously written diary was compiled in cash ledger books he probably found in his first days at Pudu.

Although Drummond probably completed his unpublished manuscript in the 1960s, it is less clear when he started working on it. In a letter attached to the original now held in the Australian War Memorial, he explained his account was based on the content of his diary with "the more contentious parts removed".¹⁰³ Despite that claim, ample contentious material remained. In comparison to his diary, Drummond's unpublished manuscript attempted to tell a broader story. While Drummond's diary was written directly from his own experience and observations, his postwar manuscript was not. Comparison of his two texts is instructive since it allows readers to track the changes made from the diary to that later recount.¹⁰⁴ For instance, his manuscript, *The Naked Truth*, was written under the pseudonym Alexander Hatton, which was an expedient intended to allow the author to assume the perspective of a third-person narrator while using his real self as a character in his own account. The intent of this clumsy device can be guessed at when the Hatton-narrator described Drummond and his mate Private M.A.E. 'Mal' Potter as "two rather dubious characters" whose:

non-acceptance of their inferior army [status] and criticism of some officers at Kuala Lumpur had not won them popularity among the officers who shared Pudu gaol with them.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Drummond began his diary in February 1942 and, for the next three and a half years, reported rumours almost every day. To illustrate the point for the month of March 1942, see Drummond, Papers, 37, 39, 40, 42, 43, 44, 45.

¹⁰³ See p. 1 of an undated letter to the Melbourne 'Sun' in Drummond, Truth.

¹⁰⁴ Although undated, the manuscript contains a reference to the age of Sir Robert Brooke-Popham and to the 1966 publication of Ken Harrison's *The Brave Japanese*. See Bowden, Drummond Interview, Part Two, 42:20; Drummond, Truth, 4, 90–91, 192.

¹⁰⁵ Drummond, Truth, 67.

Time and age affect memory as Alistair Thomson noted when he wrote, “the past never alters, but memory and history change all the time”.¹⁰⁶ The 1982 interview with Tim Bowden that Drummond left to posterity was recorded on 24 November 1982. That interview was made for the radio series *Australians Under Nippon*.¹⁰⁷ Listening to the tape, it is clear Drummond was not in good health. Although only 71 years old, his memory was fading and he died just a year later.¹⁰⁸ While part of the shift in his recollections could be explained by the differing community values in the 1940s, 1960s and 1980s, some of Drummond’s 1982 comments were remarkably frank, even for an interview conducted four decades after the war. It is in that frankness that their value lies.

Of Drummond’s three text-sources, his manuscript is the least reliable document. In that manuscript, Drummond attempted to tell a wider tale and toned down his diary’s carping criticisms of officers. However, in something similar to pseudo-science, he referred to “interviews” he conducted with POWs which seem more likely to have been discussions in captivity around campfires and over pannikins of rice pap.¹⁰⁹ His tendency to draw on uncited sources confirming his pre-existing biases brought him undone when he expressed outrage at the actions of “Lt-Col. Feathstonhaugh” and “Maj. Woolley” as if they were real people; in fact, they were pseudonyms used by Lieutenant John Coast in his 1946 memoir. That problem was both compounded and confirmed when the Hatton persona referred to three Japanese guards complete with the inaccuracies apparent in Coast’s text and the same mis-spellings of their names.¹¹⁰ The scurrilous nature of the Hatton content is starkly illustrated by his reference to an unnamed 2/29th Battalion officer referred to only as “the Dashing Major”. This man had run a drapery business before his enlistment. According to Drummond in his Hatton guise, this officer would have been subject to formal charges if his pre-war propensity for “Looking at Young Maids’ Scanties before wrapping with intent to rape” were a crime.¹¹¹ While, from Drummond’s perspective, comments like these may have been consistent with him removing from his manuscript his diary’s more “contentious parts”, it would not be drawing too long a

¹⁰⁶ Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend* (Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2013), 1.

¹⁰⁷ Tim Bowden, “Australians Under Nippon,” (1984), <https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/carshot/australians-under-nippon/8248090>.

¹⁰⁸ Drummond, *Papers*, introduction.

¹⁰⁹ For examples, see Drummond, *Truth*, 4, 127, 150.

¹¹⁰ Coast, *Railroad*, 70–72; Drummond, *Truth*, 162–163.

¹¹¹ Drummond, *Truth*, 124.

bow to assert that wallowing in and attempting publicly to disseminate such toxic scuttlebutt would be a minority view in the 1960s just as much as it is now.

From the start of October 1942, when the Japanese emptied Pudu of all but a handful of British POWs, Drummond and Newton were separated.¹¹² At Changi, both were dispatched to their respective battalions' lines and, while Newton went to Thailand with 'D' Force in March 1943, Drummond was sent there with 'H' Force in May 1943.¹¹³ Along with 'F' Force, 'H' Force shared the tragic distinction of being the two worst-led and hardest-pressed contingents working along the Burma-Thailand railway's entire 415km length. Drummond's time on the railway under truly ineffective leadership led him to recant somewhat on his earlier criticisms of Newton, first in his diary when he described his experience in Thailand and later in his 1982 interview.¹¹⁴ In that first instance, on the railway at Konyu, while working on the infamous 'Hellfire Pass', Drummond encountered Newton's 'U' Battalion and noted in his diary entry for 2 July 1943 that that party's "Officers have got a bit of guts" because they stood up for their men if any received lashings.¹¹⁵ Then, more overtly and with direct reference to Newton, in 1982 he said:

With Reg Newton he was a con man and he did a good job by the blokes he went away [with to the railway]. Give him full credit for that—although we didn't get on very well together in Pudu Jail—and I admire him for what he did.¹¹⁶

While that compliment with its critical undercurrents falls short of the yardstick for unqualified praise, it is still a significant admission from an individual as anti-authoritarian as Drummond and, as such, constitutes a redemptive note on an otherwise thorny relationship. It should also be noted that Drummond's critical views of Newton arose from the first eight months of their 42-month captivity. His subsequent re-thinking of that earlier view—however qualified—

¹¹² After 2 October 1942, only 96 of the more than one thousand British POWs remained in Pudu. There were used by the Japanese as extras in a propaganda film depicting their victory in Malaya. See Children of Far East POWs (hereafter COFEPOW), "Prisoner of War Camp – Pudu Jail, Kuala Lumpur," accessed 9 December 2020, <https://www.cofepow.org.uk/armed-forces-stories-list/prisoner-of-war-camp-pudu-jail-kuala-lumpur>; Silver, *Bridge*, 263–265.

¹¹³ Newton, *Grim Glory*, 349, 528; Drummond, *Papers*, 178, 215.

¹¹⁴ The overall mortality rate for all POWs working on the railway was 22.8 percent whereas, for British members of 'H' Force, it was 37 percent. See Desmond Jackson, *What Price Surrender? A Story of the Will to Survive* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989), 66; Stu Lloyd, *The Missing Years: A POW's Story from Changi to Hellfire Pass* (Australia: Rosenberg Publishing, 2009), 198.

¹¹⁵ Drummond, *Papers*, 238.

¹¹⁶ Bowden, Drummond Interview, Part Two, 56:51.

should also be seen in light of later knowledge. In many respects, almost all British and Australian POWs were as babes in the woods during those first months of incarceration. Only a handful had ever left their home countries before. They had a lot to learn, particularly about the Japanese, and one of the oft-repeated lessons was that it was better for the ORs to take orders and punishments—however flawed they may have been—from their own officers than from guards who saw themselves as Asia’s new imperial masters, and considered European resistance as arrogant, disrespectful and offensive.¹¹⁷

Conclusion

Although Drummond must be seen as a hostile witness, he has proven to be an invaluable one. His recollections shed considerable light on the experiences, motivations and reactions of Australian Pacific prisoners of war. With so many men living “cheek by jowl” with their fellows in captivity, personality clashes were inevitable.¹¹⁸ Drummond described himself as a “rebel” and a “rather dubious character”.¹¹⁹ Newton described himself as “most intolerant” and “the Blunt, Black Bastard of the unit”.¹²⁰ Perhaps part of the problem was that Newton and Drummond were simply too similar: both headstrong men, confident in the correctness of their own convictions—one long inculcated into the military ethos and, the other, a civilian at heart who sought to use his peacetime politics to solve incarceration’s problems. In 1982 Drummond told Tim Bowden that he came to admire what Newton achieved on the Burma-Thailand railway, hinting at a redemptive conclusion to a previously thorny relationship. However, several parts of that 1982 interview suggest Drummond was not one of those veterans who found a Zen-like inner peace in the postwar era.¹²¹ Sadly, he comes across in that recording as an embittered and disenfranchised individual who was probably an outsider as a POW and

¹¹⁷ See testimony of Cpl Samuel S. Schulman, PFC William J. Cowand, Pte Kenneth W. Luton, Pte James O. Ard in United States Navy Judge Advocate General (hereafter USN JAG), NAID: 4687350, Container ID: 133, [Case Number 37801] Alleged Misconduct on the Part of Lieutenant Commander Edward N. Little, Lieutenant Commander, US Navy, while a Prisoner of War at Fukuoka War Camp Number 17, Omuta, Kyushu, Japan, Vols I-IV, April 1946-January 1947, 1947, 494, 524, 579. See also United Kingdom War Office (hereafter UKWO), WO32/15769, Enquiry into allegations against Representative Officer Limi Road [sic] Camp and No 1 P.O.W. camp Changi, 1946, 7; NAA, B3856 146/1/14, Tan Toey Prisoner of War Camp, Ambon – court of enquiry: Report of 1945, 13; Wall, *Singapore*, 172; Roy H. Whitecross, *Slaves of the Son of Heaven: The personal story of an Australian prisoner of the Japanese during the years 1942-1945* (Sydney: Dymock’s Book Arcade Limited, 1952), 187.

¹¹⁸ For POW references to living “cheek by jowl”, see Rivett, *Bamboo*, 209; Arch and Martin Flanagan, *The Line: A Man’s Experience; A Son’s Quest to Understand* (Camberwell East: One Day Hill, 2007), 34; Newton, *Grim Glory*, 604.

¹¹⁹ Bowden, Drummond Interview, Part One, 10:00; Drummond, *Truth*, 67.

¹²⁰ Bowden, Newton Interview, Part Three, 17:30; Newton, “Reply to Crocker’s Letter,” 13.

¹²¹ See Martin Flanagan’s comments on five men he knew well who included his father, ‘Weary’ Dunlop, Dunlop’s incredibly loyal batman, ‘Blue’ Butterworth, Tom Uren and Ray Parkin in Flanagan, *Line*, 104.

remained one ever after—someone who was a lifelong contrarian.¹²² Sadly, not all returned POWs were able to move on and grow from their dreadful experiences, to embrace life and love humanity as powerful personalities like Laurens van der Post and ‘Weary’ Dunlop did; the serenity those two men projected was far from a universal outcome and probably even uncommon.¹²³ That certainly is not as uplifting and positive an outcome as one might hope these events would produce, nor is it a reading conforming to what Robyn Fivush described as “the redemptive [master] narrative” Westerners expect trauma survivors to tell.¹²⁴ However, it is the reality and all those interested in this topic owe a debt of thanks to Alex Drummond and his daughter for having the honesty and the courage to preserve such honest “warts and all” accounts—accounts which go far beyond platitudes about “sacrifice, courage and mateship”. The heroism of those who endured the unendurable is, of course, evident in the record but the unattractive irritability and the in-fighting can sometimes be lacking. In that respect, Drummond’s accounts may be equalled but remain unsurpassed. Finally, Drummond was almost certainly a difficult subordinate and one who happened to be thrown into a situation where he encountered an officer every bit as obstinate as himself. Paradoxically, that officer’s obstinacy may have been exactly what Drummond and the challenging, unprecedented circumstances of captivity in Japanese hands required.

¹²² A newspaper cutting in Drummond’s papers described him as “one of the most popular men in the battalion” but my reading of his material makes me question that descriptor. See Drummond, Papers.

¹²³ See van der Post’s experience at a television interview about the dropping of atomic bombs years after the war in Laurens van der Post, *The Night of the New Moon* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1971), 29, 146. See Dunlop’s philanthropic work in Asia, including Japan, and the Boon Pong Fellowship set up in his name in Bill Griffiths and Hugh Popham, *Blind to Misfortune: A Story of Great Courage in the Face of Adversity* (London: Leo Cooper, 1989), 173–174; “The Weary Dunlop Boon Pong Fellowship Website,” accessed 29 March 2020, <https://www.surgeons.org/resources/member-benefits-services/scholarships-grants-awards-lectures-and-prizes/global-health-scholarships/weary-dunlop-boon-pong-exchange-fellowship>.

¹²⁴ Fivush, “Autobiography,” 16–17.

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