

Lest We Forget Rex Kropp (1920 - 1984)



captured by the Germans while serving in Greece
during World War II



Photograph courtesy of Kilcoy District Historical Society Inc.

Rex Kropp

Born: Villeneuve, Qld - 22 August 1920
Parents: Stanley Sampford and Lily May (McPherson)
Schooling: Villeneuve State School
Occupation: Farmer's Hand
Status: Single
Lived: Villeneuve Qld

Service: Australian Army
Service Number: QX17579
Conflict: Second World War 1939-1945
Enlisted: Kelvin Grove - 31 July 1940
Unit: 1 Australian Corps Troops Supply Column
Rank: Driver
Embarked: Sydney - 27 December 1940
Disembarked: Middle East - 2 February 1941
Embarked: Alexandria - 4 April 1941
Disembarked: Greece - date unknown
Service: Palestine, Libya, Greece
POW: 29 April 1941 - Kalamata, Greece
Imprisonment Force: Germany
POW Number: 7425



As the Allied campaign in the defence of Greece came to a close at the end of April 1941, Rex Kropp of Villeneuve was one of the thousands of Allied soldiers captured by the advancing Germans at Kalamata, Greece. AWM 069885



Durchgangslager (Dulag) Corinth - 30/4/1941 - 12/6/1941

Used as one of the major German POW centres in Greece to hold British, Australian, New Zealand and Serbian prisoners of war, it was notorious for its dreadful conditions - constant shortage of food and water; unspeakable sanitary conditions; verminous barrack huts alive with lice, bedbugs, spiders and rats.

German camp authorities generally expressed little regard for the POWs under their care.

Due to the poor diet, the prevalence of lice and the proximity to open latrines and their army of flies in summer, many POWs rapidly became debilitated with malaria and dysentery.

A lifeline for the prisoners was a visit from the International Red Cross in June 1941 but, more importantly, the regular supplements to their diet provided by the local Greek community, often thrown over the perimeter enclosure.

"Attempted to escape from Corinth Camp with three Greeks on 6 April 1941 ... was free for one week ... recaptured by Greek police near Lamia ... handed over to the Germans ... the Greeks were separated from me when arriving at Corinth Camp."

"I was imprisoned for three weeks and treated very badly by the German Gestapo."

Rex statement on a General Questionnaire for British/American ex-POWs completed at Naples, Italy, 15 June 1945

The camp was dissolved at the end of June 1941, when the last prisoners were moved to Dulag 183 in Salonika (today Thessaloniki).



Dulag 183 Salonika - 12/6/1941 - 22/7/1941

It was the main POW transit camp to which almost all Allied prisoners were transported from the various temporary camps to which they were allocated on capture.

The camp held thousands of prisoners in terrible and inhumane conditions.

Rex said, "While in Greece - dysentery ... short of food ... dirty"

As stated by Rex on a General Questionnaire for British/American ex-POWs completed at Naples, Italy, 15 June 1945

CASUALTY SECTION		2nd ECHELON	ARMY NO. ☒
Other Names	R. <u>KEX</u>	Surname	<u>KHOPP.</u>
Rank	<u>Plt</u> <u>Kalamata Greece 7425</u>	Unit	<u>1 Corps Troops Supply Column.</u>
Next of Kin	<u>S.S. Khopp</u>		
Address of Next of Kin	<u>Villeneuve, Kilcoy Line</u>		
Relationship	<u>Father</u>		
Religion			

AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

AWM2020.556.7

Stalag XVIII-D (306) - 28/7/1941 - 3/8/1941

A German POW camp that opened in the spring/summer of 1941 in Marburg an der Drau, Yugoslavia (now in Maribor, Slovenia).

By July 1941, Stalag XVIII-D contained nearly 4,500 British and Commonwealth prisoners captured in Greece and Crete.

Conditions during the time Rex was held there were very poor.

Particulars of Casualty	Advice No.	Date	Authority	Echelon No.	Telegram Sent	Acknowledgment Received
MISSING - BELIEVED PRISONER	4948	129 24.4.41	3014	6275	30.5.41	
CONF. P.O.W. INT. CORINTHIA	7		INT Red Cross	022	25.6.41	
P.O.W. Confirmed	7366	166	C	3014	No Advice	
Returned Stalag XVIII-D	AC 32			E1721	12.9.41	
Returned Stalag XVIII-B	AC 32			E5069	7.10.42	
POW No 7425	AC 32			021313	31.11.43	
RECOVERED POW SAFE ALLIED HANDS	11441/215	N.D.G		CAS 6114	25.6.45	
RECOVERED POW ARRIVED UK BY WESTERN EUROPE	11441/215	N.D.G		CAS 1723	29.6.45	

AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

AWM2020.556.7

Pour l'envoi - Tasse sur une 40 Rpt.
Kriegsgefangenenpost **LUFT POST**
Postkarte **13 BAGDAD**
4 **EXAMINED**
An geprüft **By 253**
16 **MISS. A. TRIM**
17.IX.42
Gebührenfrei
Absender:
Vor- und Zuname: **REX KROPP**
Gefangenenummer: **9425**
Lager-Bezeichnung: **M.-Stammlager XVIII D**
Deutschland (Allemagne)
Empfangsort: **VILLENEUVE KILCOY LINE**
Straße: **QUEENSLAND**
Land: **AUSTRALIA**
Landesteil (Provinz usw.)



Kriegsgefangenenlager **Datum:** **September 6.42**

Dear Audrey, Well Audrey this is just a few lines to thank you for writing. I received your letter OK and also one from Betty at the same time. I get Noreen's letters very well and you know what they mean to me. I suppose you can play the Accordion well now. I have one also and a violin. Well cherrus Audrey until I get another spare card. Your old pal Rex

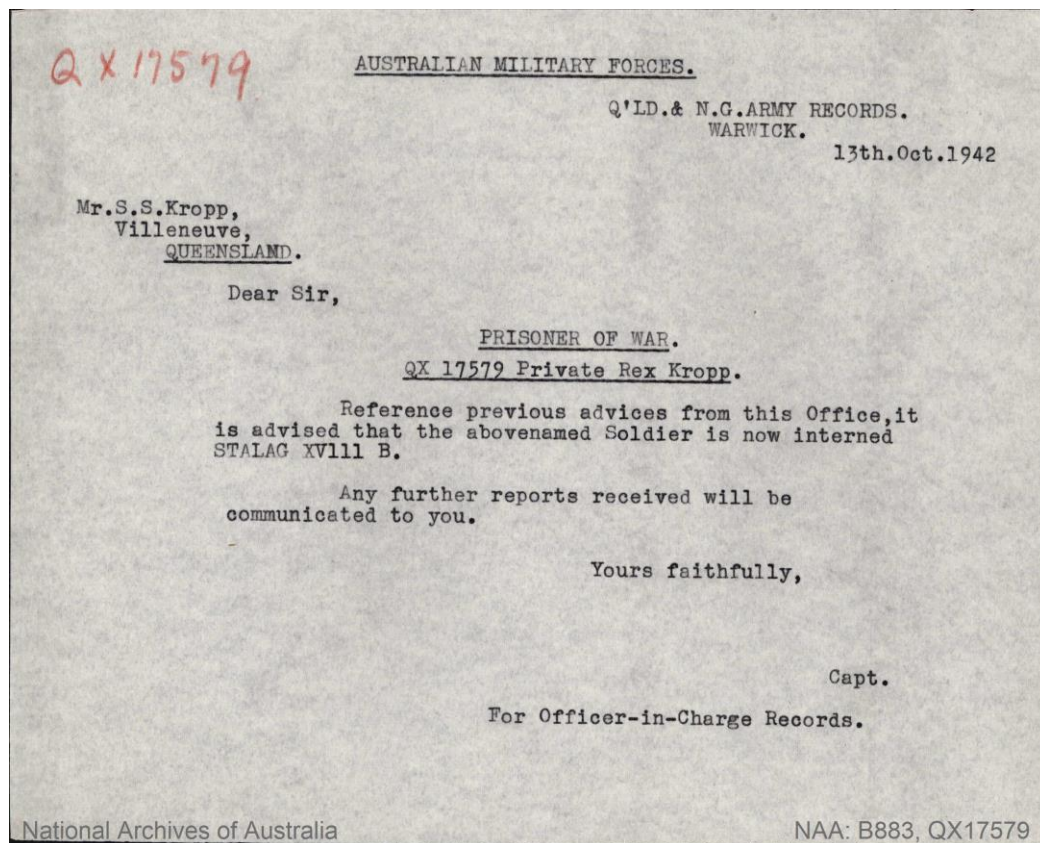
Stalag XVIII-B - Spittal an der Drau, Austria

On a General Questionnaire for British/Americans ex-Prisoners of War completed by Rex in 1945, he made no mention of his imprisonment in this Stalag.

His Australian Army records indicate that, in 1942, he spent time in this Stalag or perhaps in one of its sub-camps.

At this Stalag located in the Austrian Tyrol, a POW could improve his situation and living conditions by going to a work camp, several hundred of which surrounded Stalag XVIII-B.

Preliminary research suggests this camp's history - first designated as an Oflag, then redesignated as a Stalag, then as a Zweiglager (sub-camp) of Wolfsberg (Stalag XVIII-A)



Rex did say ... suffered from scabies and dermatitis
... 26/12/1941 - 3/3/1942 ...
dirty small room ... no washing facilities

NOT filled in ☒ APP A - Answer to APP C (ITKVS)
via Civil Paragraphs.

PART I

TOP SECRET

M.E.G. 62170

WIS-3

GENERAL QUESTIONNAIRE FOR BRITISH/AMERICAN EX-PRISONERS OF WAR

1. No. Q411579 RANK SENIOR SURNAME KROPP K9
CHRISTIAN NAME REX
DECORATIONS

2. SHIP/R.N., U.S.N. or MERCHANT NAVY:
UNIT/ARMY IN AUSTRALIAN TROOPS 1st Gen.
SQUADRON (R.A.N. or R.A.F.)

3. DIVISION (ARMY, COMMAND (R.A.F. or R.A.F.)

4. DATE OF BIRTH 22-8-20

5. DATE OF ENLISTMENT 20-6-40

6. CIVILIAN TRADE OR PROFESSION FARMING
(OR TRAINING DURING WHILE P.W.)

7. PRIVATE ADDRESS VILLENEUVE HUGOY, 1st DECEMBER
AUSTRALIA

8. PLACE AND DATE OF ORIGINAL CAPTURE 29-4-41 MALAMBA

9. WERE YOU WOUNDED WHEN CAPTURED? NO

10. MAIN CAMPS OR HOSTELS IN WHICH IMPRISONED

Camp No.	Location	From	To
	CORINTH	20-4-41	12-6-41
	SALONICA	12-6-41	22-7-41
30.6	MARBURG	22-7-41	2-8-41
297/L-4/A	WOLFSBERG	4-8-41	20-3-45

11. WERE YOU IN A WORKING CAMP?

Location	From	To	Name of Work
KUMBERG	4-8-41	20-3-45	FARMING

12. DID YOU SUFFER FROM ANY SERIOUS ILLNESSES WHILE A P.W.?

Name of Illness	From	To	Duration
DYSENTRY	29-4-41	2-8-41	WAS IN LIAISON
SCHISTOSOMIASIS	29-4-41	2-8-41	

13. DID YOU RECEIVE ADEQUATE MEDICAL TREATMENT?

DYSENTRY - NONE AT ALL. SCHISTO - YES.

Kriegsgefangenenpost LUFTPOST NACH NORDAMERIKA

Postkarte

Taxe perçue

140 Rpf

Zedings

18 XII 42



Gebührenfrei

Absender:

Vor- und Zuname:

Rex Kropp

Gefangenennummer:

7425

Lager-Bezeichnung:

M.-Stammlager XVIII B

Zweiglager

ARB. KOM. 2974

Deutschland (Allemagne)

A. TRIM

Empfangsort:

Villeneuve

Kilcoy Line

Straße:

Queensland

Land:

Australia

Landesteil (Provinz usw.)

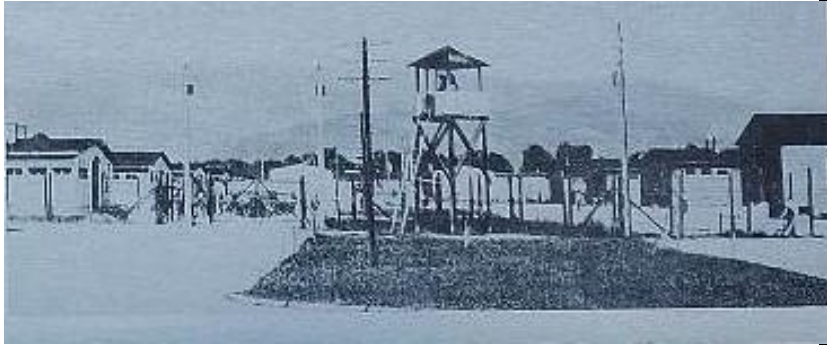
Kriegsgefangenenlager

Datum:

November - 29 - 42

Dear Audrey, I was very pleased to receive your letter the other day & also the snap of Ron, He is growing into quite a big lad now. I suppose you yourself has changed quite a lot as it seems a long time since I left. How is Walter and mum doing. Give them my love. Thanks for writing your loving pal
Rex

Stalag XVIII-A - 4/8/1941 - 20/3/1945



Stalag XVIII-A operated as a POW Camp from 1941 to 1945. It was located at Wolfsberg, Austria, with a branch camp at Spittal an der Drau.

Roughly two-thirds of these POWs had been captured during the Greek and Cretan campaigns of 1941; many of whom were Australians and New Zealanders.

A prisoner did not usually stay long in Stalag 18A, as it was a clearing camp for scores of working camps throughout Austria.

Within a few days he would be assigned to a Work Party (Arbeitskommando), normally consisting of a group of 15 to 20 men, and sent on.

The 'lucky' ones would be assigned to farm work, where there was at least a chance of adequate food. The less fortunate might be sent to an iron mine, a quarry or a timber mill, where the hours were long and the work hard.



Working Camp 297/L - Kumberg

A Working Camp of Stalag XVIII-A located in Kumberg, Austria, near Graz.

From here, Rex was sent to do farming work. Whether this working camp was the only one he was assigned to is now lost in the passage of time.

Ron Trim, President of the Woodford Historical Society, remembers a Rex POW working farm snippet

... the produce grown was predominantly cabbages which were then pickled as a food source to feed the German army ...

It was the farmer who provided Rex with shelter, food and information when he returned there after his first escape attempt and encounter with unfriendly Russian soldiers in February 1945.



Rex's escape story verbatim

"In February 1945, I also left camp and hid from the Germans in the mountains, as it was said that the Germans would be marching all prisoners of war to Salzburg. I decided to try and break camp and hide until the Russians came.

While in hiding, I was fed by the people I worked for. I hid out until I was informed on 12 May 1945 that the Russians had occupied the land, so I came out to the Russians and then was robbed of all my clothing, pay book and prisoner of war identity disc. Then the Russians accused me of being a spy and often tried to frighten me into saying I was, by standing me against a wall and shooting at me.

Then let me go after hours of bullying, so I went and hid in the farmer's barn for three weeks. I was fed by the farmer.

While in hiding it was said by the farmer that English troops would be coming in to occupy Graz, so I thought it best to wait until they came, but after three weeks of waiting, I gave it up and escaped to the British line at Kaflach on 5 June 1945.

Arriving at Kaflach (Koflach), I was fed and next morning went by truck to Klagenfurt. I stayed at Klagenfurt overnight and the next day. On the morning of 8 June 1945, I was flown to Udine. From Udine to Forli by truck one day's travel.

From Forli to Encona by truck one day's travel. From Encona to Rome by train travelling all night till the next day. Stayed overnight at Rome and went by truck the next day to Naples. Arrived on 13 June 1945."

Extract from General Questionnaire for British/American ex-Prisoners of War completed at Naples, Italy, 15 June 1945

The British and their allies captured Naples, Italy on 1 October 1943.

It was the first major European city to be liberated by the Allies.

Additional information supplied by No QX17579 Driver R Kropp, 1st Australian Troop Supply Column, AIF - General Questionnaire for British/American ex-Prisoners of War completed at Naples, Italy, 15 June 1945

"On the 12 May '45 after having escaped from Kumberg Working Camp and having been in hiding from approximately 14 February 1945 until I made contact with the Russian troops, I was sheltered and fed by the people for whom I worked while a POW.

I met two Russian soldiers on horseback in Kumberg. They asked me what my nationality is and I replied that I am English. In support of my statement I produced my pay book and prisoner of war identification disk. In my presence, they destroyed my pay book and threw my identification disk away.

I was then taken to what I thought to be the Russian Police at a place called Neufaiseo where I was again asked what my nationality is. Again I replied that I am English but I was accused for apparently no reason to be a spy.

I made every endeavour to explain to the Police by gestulating with my hands that the two Russian soldiers who had brought me in destroyed my pay book and POW identification disk.

I produced my hat on which I had the Australian badge, and which is still in my possession, but the Police stated that anybody can get hold of a hat and badge like that.

After I was interrogated there for about three quarters of an hour, I was taken to some nearby woods by three Russian policemen. When we reach the wood, a tree was pointed out by one of them, and by means of signs I was told to say my prayers. I did not say my prayers, as I was frightened to close my eyes.

After that, they asked me again whether I am a spy. I replied that I am not a spy, and again tried to explain that I am a British POW. They then fired a burst of shots with an automatic pistol over my head.

After they had fired these shots, one of them asked me again whether I am a spy. I understood from his question that he wanted me to admit that I am one, but I replied again I am British and a POW.

Another Russian policeman then arrived, apparently of higher rank and said I could go and mentioned something about the Commandant. Once I got away, I kept out of the Russian hands and returned to the place where I had stayed before.

I eventually made contact with the British troops at Kaflach (Koflach) on 5 June 1945.

I have heard from reliable farmers, and also from an American whose name I do not know, that a number of British soldiers are wandering about in the area of Graz as the Russians will not allow them to cross their borders."

Lest We Forget Rex Kropp, one of the many thousands of young men from the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand who were sent to Greece and Crete in 1941 to fight a battle they had no chance of winning.

Many were then left behind and had to endure four long years as prisoners of war. They survived this ordeal by a mixture of fortitude, ingenuity and a certain sense of humour.

EM/xd
Colombo

Visite de Camp : Eric MAYER. 59

 Copie conforme
ARCHIVES DU CICR

STALAG XVIII A, WOLFSBERG.
Visité le 25 Février 1945.

Commandant : Poste vacant.

HOMMES DE CONFIANCE.

Français : M.d.L. d'ORIGNY, No. 92575.
Britannique : Sgt. Maj. STEVENSEN Ernest, No. 3672.
Belge : Sgt. JACQUET André, No. 50332.
Yougoslave : Sgt. SIMIC J. No. 22269.
Hollandais : Sgt. MICHEL Peter, No. 106083.
Polonais : Asp. PADIAK George, No. 222270.

EFFECTIF.

Nationalités	Total	Au camp principal
Français	15.600	600
Belges	604	40
Hollandais	163	4
Yougoslaves	55	22
Polonais	308	108
Américains	40	6
Britanniques	9.700	1.000
	26.010	

- Les Britanniques se répartissent comme suit :

Australiens	2.000
Néo-Zélandais	1.500

le reste de l'effectif comprend surtout des Anglais.

SITUATION ET LOGEMENT.

De grands changements sont intervenus depuis notre visite du 28 Octobre dernier. En effet, le camp principal de Wolfsberg a été durement bombardé par l'aviation alliée le 18 Décembre 1944 à midi trente, par excellente visibilité. 72 bombes explosives ont été lâchées sur le camp, dont 46 sont tombées à l'intérieur du camp, tuant :

18	Français
4	Belges
4	Hollandais
10	Britanniques
-	Yougoslaves et Polonais.

3715 1945

.../...

Zuh

The long road home to Villeneuve



Map out Rex's journey from captivity to recovery to repatriation

Rex was held captive in the **Graz** area of SE Austria in 1941. His daring escape started in the February of 1945 when it was rumoured that the Germans would be marching all POWs to Salzburg.

He hid out and was fed by the people he worked for until he was informed on 12 May 1945 that the Russians had occupied the land. He came out of hiding to the Russians, an experience that saw him being interrogated before a trigger-happy firing squad of Russian policemen and bullied into hopefully admitting he was a spy before being allowed to go.

Rex returned to the farmer he worked for until early June 1945 who then informed him the English troops would be coming in to occupy Graz. He escaped to the British line at Koflach 76 km in distance from Kumberg.

Now safe in British hands, he was taken by truck the next day to **Klagenfurt**, and on 8 June 1945 was flown to **Udine** in Italy, trucked to Forli, trucked from Forli to Encona, trained from Encona to **Rome**, and then trucked to **Naples** arriving on 13 June 1945.



After such an extended period of captivity, it must have been hard for Rex to believe he was finally free. Recovery was only the first stage in his repatriation process.

His Australian Army record states Rex arrived at 1 AIF Transit Camp in the United Kingdom on 9 July 1945. This camp had the role of receiving and documenting the soldiers who would then be allocated to one of four reception camps to be established to hold them before shipping home might be possible. The average wait turned out to be approximately three weeks, significantly less than the six months originally thought to be feasible.

QX17579 Driver Rex Kropp, 1st Australian Troops Supply Column, now aged 25 years, disembarked in Australia on 7 September 1945, and was discharged at Redbank on 30 October 1945.

The experience of captivity, recovery and the process of re-adjustment post-war can only be imagined, as Rex is no longer with us to tell his story.

The Villeneuve community did celebrate the return of a beloved son and, on 19 March 1949, again celebrated when Rex married Phyllis Joyce Johnstone.

