

## A Summary of Vic Petersen's Army Years, 1939-1945

Charles Amos George Victor PETERSEN

Born at Bridgetown, Western Australia, 27<sup>th</sup> August 1913

Passed away, Hollywood Repatriation Hospital, Western Australia, 30<sup>th</sup> January 1995.



Rank: Private, Australian Imperial Forces (AIF). Army Number: WX571

B Company, 2/11th, City of Perth, Battalion (Bn), Australian Imperial Forces (AIF), 1939-1945.

German Prisoner of War (POW) Number 4538/Kreta



1904-1949 Rising Sun Badge

2/11 Bn Colour Patch



### Enlistment and training

Vic was one of the many Australian men who volunteered for service at the outbreak of WWII. He enlisted into the army on November 1939, and commenced training at Northam Military Camp, Western Australia (WA). Three weeks later the newly formed 2/11<sup>th</sup> Battalion was transferred to Rutherford, New South Wales (NSW) and shortly afterwards up the road to Greta NSW to continue army training.

During this time at Greta, Vic was befriended by the Swan family. Mr Bertram Swan, a WWI veteran invited two soldiers to his home for New Years Eve. One of the seven Swan children, a teenage daughter Merle, was later charged on behalf of the Swan family with letter writing to "Mr Petersen" during the war years.

In March 1940, the battalion later returned to Perth for pre-embarkation leave. This was the last opportunity for the soldiers to visit their families and friends before sailing to the Middle East.

After farewell marching through the streets of Perth, the battalion departed on the 20<sup>th</sup> April 1940, onboard the hospital & troopship HMHS NEVASA with one of the <http://www.clydesite.co.uk/clydebuilt/warships/vessel.asp?id=10496> escorts ships being the Royal Sovereign Class Battleship HMS RAMILIES (<http://uboot.net/allies/warships/class.html?ID=55>).

Arriving in Egypt via Suez Canal, the battalion continued training, acclimatising to desert conditions in Gaza and Egypt.

### North Africa campaign

The 2/11Bn was part of the 6<sup>th</sup> Division

<http://www.diggerhistory.info/pages-conflicts-periods/ww2/pages-2aif-cmf/6-div-aif.htm> under General Mackay and Allied Armies General O'Connor.

Commencing 3rd January 1941 the first Australian military engagement was against the Italian Army who was holding positions along the North African coast.

(<http://www.awm.gov.au/atwar/thismonth/jan.htm>),

This was a victory resulting in gaining control of Bardia and Trobruk in Libya and the capture of 90,000 Italian soldiers. (<http://www.w2australia.gov.au/scrapiron/index.html>)

A handover was made to troops' fresh from Australia who to garrison at Trobruk whilst completing their own desert training, these included West Australians of the 2/28th Battalion. There was a football match between the 2/11 and 2/28 Battalions. The spirit of this football match continued after the war, with annual cricket matches, and as the 'diggers' & 'rats' grew older, it became lawn bowls.

<http://www.anzacday.org.au/history/ww2/anecdotes/tobruk.html>

### **The Battle of Greece 1941**

The next action the 2/11Bn was against the German Army in northern Greece. The Yugoslav and Greek armies, which had earlier held off Italian army attacks, collapsed against an intense German attack, which resulted in the Germans having to provide direct support to the Italians.

([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation\\_Marita](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Marita))

(<http://www.germanwarmachine.com/campaigns/1941/greece.htm>)

(<http://www.athensinfo.com/history/t8-88wwII.htm>)

Australian, New Zealand and British (British Expeditionary Force) were continuously attacked by German Stuka dive bombers using machine guns and bombs. There were Panzer tanks and battle experienced SS troops from the elite 'Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler' division.

([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1st\\_SS\\_Division\\_Leibstandarte\\_SS\\_Adolf\\_Hitler](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1st_SS_Division_Leibstandarte_SS_Adolf_Hitler))

This resulted in a retreat back down to south of Greece. On 26<sup>th</sup> April 1941 a night time embarkation from Greek ports of Nauplion and Kalamata to Crete was made, thus allowing the bulk of Commonwealth forces to escape.

([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_Thermopylae\\_%281941%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Thermopylae_%281941%29))

This daring evacuation of 50,000 Commonwealth forces from Greece is recorded as a major achievement of WWII, logistically more successful than the earlier Dunkirk evacuation. This finally resulted in the Greek Army negotiating an armistice only to Germany, refusing to surrender to the Italian forces.

### **Battle of Crete 1941**

On the island of Crete, 42,500 Commonwealth forces dug in waiting for the expected German invasion. The Germans continually bombed Crete until 20<sup>th</sup> May when they then commenced the largest ever aerial invasion consisting of parachutist and gliders supported by 1209 aircraft 63 small ships to carry three infantry divisions. After many fierce battles there were huge losses on both sides, the Germans captured Crete, in June 1941. Vic along with many others of the 2/11Bn were forced to surrender on the evening of 6<sup>th</sup> June. Approximately 12,000 Commonwealth forces were captured unable to escape to Egypt.

Thus started Vic's incarceration as a Prisoner of War (POW). On the night of his capture, Vic was bitten on the neck by snake causing severe pain and paralysis. This resulted in him being separated from his mates of the 2/11Bn. The German doctors saved Vic, saying "another three minutes and we could not have saved you" and later an orderly stated, "Your life was saved but it was very difficult". Vic had great respect for German doctors and orderlies after this experience.

This resulted in Vic being separated from his mates in the 2/11Bn who were transported to Stalags in Germany.

Three months later, when Vic's health restored, he and other prisoners were forced to dig up 80-100 year old olive trees so that the Germans could build more air bases. This hard work and as the Germans provided very little food caused Vic's weight to drop from 11.5 to 8

stone. Thankfully the local Cretan people would sneak food to the prisoners. Vic was given POW number 4538/Kreta.

### **Transfer to Germany**

Eventually, as the snowy winter set in of January 1942, the Germans transferred Vic and the remaining Allied prisoners, via Salonika in Greece. After 15 days crammed into rail cattle trucks with very little food, they finally arrived in Stalag VIII B at Lamsdorf in Sudatenland, Germany. Due to forced labour, Vic was happy to work on the railways rather than in the dangerous coal mines. This resulted in some movement through a variety of work camps and stalags (Stalag 344 & Stalag VIII A Gorlitz July 1944). When given the opportunity, the POWs would sabotage railways by not repairing to engineering specifications, however, doing so at risk of punishment.

[http://www.historyonthenet.com/WW2/german\\_pow\\_camps.htm](http://www.historyonthenet.com/WW2/german_pow_camps.htm)

During these years it was the Red Cross parcels that provided additional food, clothing and reading material that made the hardships a little more bearable.

**Photo:** A propaganda photo taken by Germans to show Vic was well.

It was 8<sup>th</sup> May 1945 when the Germans said, "You can put your tools away, work finished, the war is over". Vic's work party assembled at Tranutenau with other nearby work parties, waiting for transport to England, ending a period of being a POW for almost 4 years.

The journey home started with a train ride to Prague, where the Americans provided truck transport to an air force base near Pilsen. Finally travelling on board a Lancaster bomber and eventually arriving at Eastbourne England May 1945. Return to Australia was via the cruise liner Mauritania II via Panama Canal, Pearl Harbour, New Zealand and onto Sydney.

<http://www.greatoceanliners.net/mauretania2.html>

### **Years following the war**

In later years Vic settled on a semi rural property in Southern River, near Perth in WA with his wife Merle. Remember the Swan girl who was to write letters? They had two sons Phillip and Colin.

Vic was a staunch supporter of the Return Services League (RSL), 2/11Bn Association and Ex-POW Association. He kept in contact with many comrades in England, New Zealand and Australia till his death.



**Logo's of the  
Returned Service League  
and  
Ex Prisoner of War Association**



Vic passed away in Hollywood Repatriation Hospital on 30<sup>th</sup> January 1995 aged 81 years.

### **The RSL Ode:**

*"They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old;  
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.  
At the going down of the sun and in the morning  
We will remember them."*

The Ode is taken from the eulogy *For the Fallen*, by English poet and writer Laurence Binyon  
**Honour Board and Memorials**

### **Honour Board**

Vic's name is recorded on the honour board in the Harvey (WA) library, the town where his parents lived when he enlisted for the army.

### **Ex Prisoner of War Memorials**

There are a number of memorials dedicated to Australian Ex-Prisoner of War. In Western Australia, located in Kings Park and in Ballarat, Victoria, a national memorial was dedicated in February 2005. Merle & a Phillip attended this service.

[http://www.ballaratgenealogy.org.au/ex\\_pow\\_memorial.htm](http://www.ballaratgenealogy.org.au/ex_pow_memorial.htm)

### **2009**

Merle Constance Petersen (nee Swan), passed away at The Mount Hospital, Perth, Western Australia on 26 March 2009 following complications from heart surgery.

Vic and Merle's sons are currently living:

Phillip Petersen ESM  
30 Hannan Place,  
Huntingdale. W.A. 6110

Colin Petersen  
25A Tyres Road,  
Roleystone. . W.A. 6111

**Lest we forget.**