Cowra, NSW. 16 September 1943. Group of Italian prisoners of war (POW) interned at No. 12 POW Group. Back row, left to right: 49731 A? Olivieri; 45651 A. Fazio; 49632 D. Mocchetti; 49373 U. Liberto; 46913 G. Villa; 49942 L. Volonteri. Front row: 45782 L. Gardini; 49884 I. Paniccia; 49436 L. Casinelli; 49792 A. Alessi. Note: The number is an assigned POW number. AWM Image 030149/21 Photographer Lewecki
Libya to Australia

7 Feb. 1941
Captured at Benghazi

16 Oct. 1941
Arrived at Cowra PW & I Camp

22 Oct. 1943
Arrived at Gaythorne PW & I Camp

15 Oct. 1941
Arrived in Sydney onboard ‘Queen Elizabeth’

20 Oct. 1943
Transferred from Cowra to Gaythorne
Late on 5 February, Combeforce arrived at the Via Balbia south of Benghazi and set up road blocks near Sidi Saleh, about 30 mi (48 km) south-west of Antelat and 20 mi (32 km) north of Ajedabia. The leading elements of the 10th Army arrived thirty minutes after the British who sprung the ambush. Next day the Italians attacked to break through and continued their attacks into 7 February. With British reinforcements arriving and the Australians pressing down the road from Benghazi, the 10th Army surrendered later that day. Between Benghazi to Agedabia, the British took 25,000 prisoners, captured 107 tanks and 93 guns of the Operation Compass totals of 133,298 men, 420 tanks and 845 guns.
Cyril Joly was an officer in one of the tanks and later wrote a classic account of the action:

From my position on the dune I watched an attack which was launched soon after dawn by about thirty Italian tanks against the position on the road. This was beaten off quickly and with little difficulty.

For a time there was silence on both sides. For all the efforts of the previous day, the Italian column still looked huge and threatening. I watched with apprehension the movements of the mass of vehicles before me. On either side of me, hidden behind the crests of other dunes and ridges, I knew that there were other eyes just as anxious as mine, surveying the scene before them. In the mind of each one of us was the sure knowledge that we were well outnumbered. Each of us knew by what slim margin we still held dominance over the battlefield.

Our threat was but a facade – behind us there were no more reserves of further troops. Even the supplies of the very sinews which could keep us going had almost run out. If we lost now we were faced with capture or a hopeless retreat into the empty distances of the inner desert. It was a sobering thought. I felt that the day, with all its black, wet dullness, was heavy with ominous foreboding. The scene before me was made gloomy enough to match my mood by the black clouds of acrid smoke which shrouded the battlefield like a brooding pall.

Gradually I became aware of a startling change. First one and then another white flag appeared in the host of vehicles. More and more became visible, until the whole column was a forest of waving white banners. Small groups of Italians started to move out hesitantly towards where they knew we lay watching them. Larger groups appeared, some on foot, some in vehicles. Still not able to believe the evidence of his own eyes, the Colonel warned, “... Don’t make a move. This may be a trap. Wait and see what happens. Off.”

But it was no trap. Italians of all shapes and sizes, all ranks, all regiments and all services swarmed out to be taken prisoner. I felt that nothing would ever surprise me again after my loader suddenly shouted: “Look, sir, there’s a couple of bints there coming towards us. Can I go an’ grab ‘em, sir? I could do with a bit of home comforts.” We took the two girls captive, installed them in a vehicle of their own and kept them for a few days to do our cooking and washing. I refrained from asking what other duties were required of the women, but noted that they remained contented and cheerful.

http://ww2today.com/7th-february-1941-the-italians-surrender-at-beda-fomm
Umberto Liberto ‘celebrated’ his 19th birthday in the deserts of Libya on 29th January 1941.

On the 7th February 1941, Private Umberto Liberto was captured at Benghazi.

He had served with the 4th Battalion Libyan Colonial Service for 10 months.
Queen Elizabeth

Umberto arrived in Sydney onboard ‘Queen Elizabeth’ 15\textsuperscript{th} October 1941.

This transport brought 948 Italian prisoners of war to Australia as well as German prisoners of war.
Cowra, New South Wales (1941–47)

The Cowra prisoner of war and internment camp was located several kilometres outside the town of Cowra in south-central New South Wales.

It officially began operation in June 1941, but it was several months before the first prisoners arrived.

Cowra was purpose-built to house prisoners of war, mostly Italians, brought to Australia from overseas and it operated primarily as a prisoner of war rather than an internment camp. Civilians interned at Cowra included local Italians and nearly 500 Javanese and Indonesians.

Cowra Prisoner of War Camp (NSW) consisted of four compounds with Compounds A and C housing 1000 Italian Prisoners of War.
L’Amico del Prigioniero

Catholic Prayer Book
Issued to Italian prisoners of war in Australia in Italian and Latin 1943

From the collection of Mitchell Library Sydney. Photo courtesy of Joanne Tapiolas
Cowra


Joanne Tapiolas © Footprints
Magenta dyed Army Issue

Prisoners of War and Internees were given red coloured clothing.

While in the camps or on farms, they could wear their personal clothing. But when moving between camps or going to church on a Sunday, they had to wear their POW uniform.

There were many terms used for the colour of the POW uniforms: burgundy, orange, pink, claret and red; but magenta was the official term.

In essence, disposal Australian army uniforms were dyed to make POWs stand out.
Italian prisoners of war sent to work on farms throughout Australia, where given a copy of *Pidgin English for Italian Prisoners of War*.

(photos courtesy of David Dander)
Gaythorne is a suburb in Brisbane. There are no remains of the Gaythorne PW & I Camp.
In Queensland

- **22 Oct. 1943**: Arrived at Gaythorne PW & I Camp
- **27 Oct. 1943**: Allocated to Q1 Stanthorpe and farm of TJ Thompson at Mt Tully
- **29 Dec. 1944**: Transferred from farm to Q1 Stanthorpe Centre
- **8 Apr. 1945**: Transferred to 8 ACH with suspected fracture of proximal phalanx right little finger
- **1 June 1945**: Discharged from 1 Australian Orthopaedic Hospital and returned to Q1 Stanthorpe
- **8 Apr. 1945**: Transferred to 8 ACH with suspected fracture of proximal phalanx right little finger
- **9 Apr. 1945**: Transferred to 1 AOH
- **26 Jan. 1946**: Wallangara Dental Unit Dentally fit
- **28 Sept 1945**: Discharged from 1 Australian Orthopaedic Hospital and returned to Q1 Stanthorpe
- **1 June 1945**: Transferred from farm to Q1 Stanthorpe Centre
- **27 Oct. 1943**: Allocated to Q1 Stanthorpe and farm of TJ Thompson at Mt Tully
- **1 Jan. 1945**: Allocated to the farm of PH Barringer Bapaume
- **9 Apr. 1945**: Transferred to 1 AOH
- **28 Sept 1945**: Wallangara Dental Unit Dentally fit
- **18 Mar. 1946**: Transferred from Gaythorne to Hay
- **26 Jan. 1946**: Transferred from farm to Q1 Stanthorpe Centre
- **1 Feb. 1946**: Transferred from Stanthorpe to Gaythorne

**In Queensland**
Gaythorne Prisoner of War & Internment Camp

Umberto went by train from Cowra 20th October 1943 to Gaythorne 22nd October 1943. On 27th October 1943, Umberto was sent to Stanthorpe and allocated to the farm of TJ Thompson at Mt Tully.

In Queensland, the Prisoner of War and Internment Camp at Gaythorne was the administrative authority for all Italian POWs in the state.

Gaythorne PW & I Camp, located at Gaythorne, Brisbane had a capacity of 1,800. Nationalities held were: PW – Italian, Japanese, Korean, Formosan, sundry and Internees – Italian, sundry. It operated from 1940-1946.

It had three compounds each of 300, one compound of 400 and one compound of 500. The Queensland Italian POWs were transferred from southern camps to Gaythorne.

From Gaythorne, POWs were sent to a Prisoner of War Control Centre: Without Guard (PWCC) or Prisoner of War Control Hostel (PWC Hostel). Some POWs however remained at Gaythorne, deemed ‘unfit’ or ‘unsuitable’ for work.

In a May 1944 inspection report it was reported that there was limited hutted accommodation at Gaythorne with the majority living under canvas. The site was 792’ x 189’ and consisted of six compounds. Residents included Japanese PWS, Javanese PWS, German Internees, an Italian Internee, and Italian PWs. There was no sports ground and the Italians exercised under guard on the rifle range adjacent to the camp.

NAA: BP129/1 NCCR 255/2/627, 1944-1946, Employment of Italian Prisoners of War – Queensland, National Archives of Australia
Identity Card for Umberto Liberto

[Image of identity card]
Volunteering for Farm Work

The Prisoners of War received a set of written instructions and contractual agreement which they were required to sign. Clause 8. Form of Understanding was provided in Italian and English:

Io sottoscritto....... Prigioniero de Guerra No..... avendo fatto richiesta per un’occupazione rimunerativa per un periodo di mesi sei a partire dalla data di questa mia richiesta, dichiaro che compiero qualsiasi lavoro che mi verra assegnato durante il suddetto periodo. Inoltre, mi sottopogo volontariamente alle regole di disciplina accettando le rate di paga stipulate per soldati semplici prigionieri di guerra per qualsiasi periodo di tempo durante il quale tale lavoro sara richiesto da me.
Main operational procedures and regulations for PWCC: Without Guards

- Prisoners were allowed to send two letters or two postcards or one letter and one postcard every week on approved Service of Prisoners of War Notelopes and postcards.
- Army to supply the prisoner with clothing (magenta dyed issues) underwear, footwear, blankets (4) and 1s/3d per day credit.
- Army to supply in accordance with Empire Policy from United Kingdom free issues of cigarettes: 35 cigarettes or 35 grams of tobacco per week.
- Prisoners allowed on a Sunday between 10 am and 4pm to go freely up to a mile from the property but to be wearing magenta dyed clothing.
- Army to issue free one razor blade per week subject to exchange of worn blade.
- Army to provide medical and other services and transport to and from medical facilities.
- Mobile canteen to visit farms on a regular basis to sell provisions: tobacco, matches, toothpaste, soaps.
- Prisoners attending Church services will not intermingle with Australian civilians at church or on the way to and from church.
- Prisoners to work a six day week.
- Farmer to pay to the PWCC £1 per week per prisoner of war.
- Prisoners were not to congregate with other prisoners.
- Prisoners were not to go to towns, shops or other houses.
- Prisoners were not allowed to leave the farm except to attend religious services.
- Farmer to supply the prisoner with food, accommodation and bedding.
- Army to supply farmer with ration cards for prisoners.
- Prisoners were not to receive money or gifts.
- Prisoners were not to send letters other than through official channels.
- Prisoners were not to fraternise with the public especially women.

MARIAMAR, Christmas Card 1941, AICPM; Tapiolas, Joanne Walking in their Boots, 2017.
Pay Sheet – Prisoners of War

Prisoners of War were paid 1s/3d per day credit for working on farms.

They could use their credit to purchase items from the Canteen Truck, build up a bank of credit and/or send money home.

Whilst in Australia, cash accounts for prisoners of war were kept regarding money in their possession when they arrived in Australia, money received for working on farms, money sent to family in Italy and money expended at canteens.

Prior to departure from Australia, balance of the POW cash accounts was presented to individuals. Money was paid out upon arrival in Italy.

NAA: J2258, 12 Italian Prisoner of War and Internees Pay Sheets, March 1945, Brisbane
A teenager to an adult

The photos were taken in 1941 and 1943. The photos combined with Umberto’s letter to his mother, gives credence to his words “You will not recognise your son – five years has been a long time.” His mother last saw her son when he was 18 years old. By the time he returned to Italy, he was almost 26 years old.

23.10.45
Dear Mum
A couple of lines so as to not leave you without any of my news that thanks to God is good, as I hope is the same for you. Last week my work employers sent you two packages. I hope that they arrive there. I have also sent you my photo and eight pounds Stirling but as yet have not receive a reply. Dear Mum, by now the worst has passed but there are still some months and then all will be finished. Your mail takes 5 to 6 months to arrive and not so often just now and then some letters. Anyway as for now it is not so important because all of this is coming to an end. You will not recognise your son – five years has been a long time. However, it could have been worse. Finally hugs and kisses to share around.
Yours Berto.

Translation from Italian to English by Morwenna Arcidiacono, Stanthorpe
Letter from Umberto Liberto to his mother in Italy 23.10.45
Special thank you to Reinhard Krieger, Brisbane who graciously shared letters from his collection for this project.

Photos from NAA: A367, C88668
In NSW and Victoria: 1946 - 1947

- **23 Aug. 1946**: Transferred from Hay to Liverpool
- **24 Aug. 1946**: Detached to N33 Middle Head (Interpreter)
- **14 Oct. 1946**: Reported escaped
- **5 Feb. 1947**: Transferred to Rushworth PW Camp Victoria
- **5 Feb. 1947**: Surrendered at Victoria Barracks
- **7 Feb. 1947**: Awarded 28 days detention for escape from N33 PWCH Middle Head
- **9 May 1947**: Awarded 14 days detention for refusal to work
- **17 July 1947**: Transferred to Attwoods 3 MD Detention Barracks
- **23 Aug. 1947**: Sent to 23 ADB for review of prescription glasses
- **24 Nov. 1947**: Repatriated General Heinzelman
Wanted

Q1 PWCC Nov 45 Dominant Personality, likes to have own way and employer lets him to a certain extent but gets the work out of him. Well education and a good conversationalist, speaks five languages and can read and write four languages.

Q1 PWCC Jan 46 A good type and well mannered. Has grasped a good command of English language. His standard of education is fairly high. Has at all times worked well and also got on well with his employer, who states that the P.W. is very trustworthy and can always be relied upon.

Attwoods July 47 The man behind the scenes in all the compound moves but very careful not to get into much trouble himself. Is just a talker mainly, and would not make a good leader.

Born 29th January 1922 at Instanbul Turkey. Next of kin father LIBERTO Francesco of via Re Erone 11, 31 Siracusa Italy.

Height 5’ 8”, weight 154 lbs, build medium eyes brown, hair black, complexion olive. Is a linguist and speaks Italian, English, Turkish, French and Greek and can write and read all the above except Greek. Has no known contacts.

Character Sketch

• Q1 PWCC Nov 45 Dominant Personality, likes to have own way and employer lets him to a certain extent but gets the work out of him. Well education and a good conversationalist, speaks five languages and can read and write four languages.

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• Attwoods July 47 The man behind the scenes in all the compound moves but very careful not to get into much trouble himself. Is just a talker mainly, and would not make a good leader

NAA: A367, C88668
Repatriation
General Stuart Heinztelman

Italian prisoners of war were transported by trucks and buses to Melbourne wharf for transfer to Kanimbla. The Kanimbla shipped the POWs to Fremantle where they transferred directly onto the General Stuart Heinztelman.

Photo contributed by Stan Svec http://www.navsource.org/archives/09/22/22159.htm