

Private William ‘Harry’ Malthouse

Shattered hopes

In Sydney’s Royal Botanic Gardens, an old man tended the immaculately kept garden beds. As he heard the faint music of an approaching military band, he placed his shears down and stood up to get a better view. As the band turned the corner of the city street, he could see it was leading ranks of khaki-clad soldiers, marching tall, heads held high and faces that expressed resolute determination. They were headed for Circular Quay and the ships that would take them to war half-way round the world. His thoughts turned to his own son who had just enlisted. That afternoon, as he made his way home, he noted the recruiting sign he had passed every day for months. Today he stopped. The words, Have you done your bit? seemed to beckon him.



AWM A02744. December 1914. ‘A’ Company, 15th Battalion during a march through Melbourne.

‘Harry’ Malthouse presented himself for enlistment in the AIF on 13 July 1917, lowering his age by seven years to 46.¹ As the enlistment sergeant considered the application, he looked at Harry with a wry smile. ‘You’re a bit long in the tooth aren’t you, mate? War’s a young bloke’s game.’ Malthouse remained silent. ‘Look. We’ve got some blokes up in New Guinea. It’s not the front, but you’d still be in it. You interested?’

Harry Malthouse thought for a moment, then replied in his broad British accent that he was willing to give it a go.

With the outbreak of war in 1914, the Germans were already heavily entrenched in the islands to Australia's north. A special expeditionary force, the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force (AN&MEF) was raised to seize German New Guinea and the strongly fortified garrison at Rabaul.²

In a brief yet bloody campaign, the Force seized the islands and took on the job of administering the newly captured territory. While many of the volunteers opted to enlist in the AIF, others remained with the AN&MEF and settled into the somewhat boring routine of garrison life.³

Harry received his orders to sail on the SS *Matunga* on 27 July, his basic training to be undertaken when he arrived in New Guinea.¹ As he stood at the base of the gangway and bid an emotional farewell to his wife, he told her, 'This war will be over soon. I'll be back before you know it.'

As the *Matunga* made its way north, Malthouse pondered what lay ahead. Certainly the warm tropical climate would be a nice change from the cold Sydney winter.

The *Matunga* had sailed the route many times. This time, she carried a number of AN&MEF personnel who were either reinforcement or men returning from leave in Australia. She also carried a full cargo of stores for the garrison and a load of urgently needed coal—fuel for the inter-island steamers and the Australian patrol vessel based at Rabaul.³



AWM J03109. The S.S. *Matunga*, the first commercial ship to arrive after the occupation by the Australian Navy and Military Expeditionary Force (AN&MEF), at Madang wharf, in what was formerly German New Guinea, late 1914.

On 6 August, the *Matunga's* lookout reported smoke on the horizon. The ship's officers attempted to identify the approaching vessel, but were not duly concerned as the powerful Australian Naval Squadron had cleared the area of enemy ships. They had received no warnings to the contrary on the ship's wireless.⁴ The *Matunga* signalled the appropriate recognition code, but received no reply. Perhaps she was a neutral vessel, they thought.

The mystery ship pulled alongside the *Matunga*, maintaining the same course and speed. The 'visitor' showed signs of age and a few rust patches, but all seemed in order. Then without warning, flaps flew open revealing gun barrels, which were manoeuvred and aimed at the *Matunga*.⁴ Harry and the others on deck stared in disbelief as the German battle ensign was unfurled on the mast of the aggressor.

The *Matunga* was ordered to heave to. The captain considered making a run for it, but he knew that it would be a futile gesture as they would be fired upon and sent to the bottom in minutes. He had no choice but to order 'All stop'. As the attackers approached, the senior AN&MEF officer assembled his troops on the deck and warned them they were about to become prisoners of war (POWs). Harry Malthouse was devastated. This scenario had not entered his mind when he enlisted.

Rifles drawn and bayonets fixed, the boarding party scrambled onto the deck. With a snap of heels and a curt salute, the young Prussian officer stated, 'The captain of the raider *Wolf* sends his compliments and begs to inform you that you are now his prisoners'.⁵

A second boat brought aboard a 'prize' crew, whose job it was to sail the *Matunga* to a secret destination. As the *Matunga* sailed north-west, the *Wolf* kept her guns trained on her while the crew and passengers were locked below decks.

Suddenly, the engines stopped and the noisy rattle of the anchor chain echoed through the ship. As the hatch cover slammed open, the armed Germans rushed into the hold. 'Raus! Raus!, (Get out! Get out!) they ordered as they forcibly manoeuvred the soldiers and merchant seamen onto the deck.

They were anchored in the small cove of a lush tropical island. Clutching their meagre possessions, the Australian troops and crew were forced down their ship's ladder and transferred to the *Wolf*.

Reviewing the men assembled on the deck of the raider, the German captain addressed his latest 'guests'. 'Behave and you will be treated fairly, if not, you will be severely punished', he told them. The men of the *Matunga* were made to move below decks where they met the crews of a number of other Allied vessels that had also fallen victim to the *Wolf's* deception.⁵

For the next two weeks, working in sweltering heat, the prisoners were forced to shift the *Matunga's* cargo to the holds of the *Wolf*. When the transfer had been completed, the prisoners were assembled on the raider's deck and compelled to watch as the seacocks of the *Matunga* were opened and the ship slipped below the surface, plunging to the bottom of the ocean.⁶

'Gentlemen, we have one more task to complete and then we are bound for Germany and what will be your new home', the captain informed them. Harry Malthouse was distraught. Six weeks ago he had been a civilian, now he was a prisoner of war bound for Germany.

En route, the *Wolf* paused briefly outside the entrance to Singapore Harbour, to sew a minefield, before again setting course for Germany via the Cape of Good Hope.⁵

A search failed to find any trace of the *Matunga*. The Allied commanders were at a loss as to the whereabouts of the ship and those aboard her. Many believed that she had fallen victim to the severe storms which often plagued the area, or had been swamped by a huge wave. One thing was certain, the *Matunga* and her crew and passengers had completely disappeared.

As the *Wolf* pulled into the docks, a large crowd of cheering Germans was waiting to give a hero's welcome to her captain and crew.

It had been a long, hard voyage for the POWs who, for most of the journey, had been locked below decks. When the prisoners were disembarked, the German captain presented each in turn with a souvenir of his journey, a small book entitled *The Exploits of the Raider 'Wolf'*. Sarcastically, he expressed the hope that their time as his 'guests' had been a pleasant one.⁵

It was a bleak day when Harry Malthouse walked through the gates of Gustrow Prisoner of War Camp. He wasn't really a soldier. He hadn't received any military training. What was he doing here? He should have been home in Sydney tending his flowerbeds.

Because of the secrecy of the *Wolf's* mission, Harry and his captive comrades were not reported as POWs until they docked in Germany. Consequently, the Red Cross was unaware of their fate.⁷

Life in Germany was arduous. Many of the POWs were used as forced labour on road and rail works. Those like Harry who were older, ill, or injured, were assigned lighter duties on many of the local farms.⁷

Malthouse plodded away in the fields, but his heart was not in it. He had never before experienced such cold as the northern European winter. It affected his health and ability to work, and poor performance resulted in a reduction of rations. He was forced to live on the thin, tasteless soup that was little better than coloured water and provided little or no nutritional value. But Harry was ill and

unable to keep down even these meagre rations, so his health and strength rapidly deteriorated.

As they lay in a barn one night, a couple of Harry's mates—two members of the British Army—watched him as he lay on his bed of straw. They felt sorry for the old man who was suffering so badly as a result of his imprisonment. From the bottom of their haversacks, they scrounged the last remnants of their Red Cross parcels to give to their Digger friend.

Harry, too weak to work, was taken from the farm and returned to the POW camp. He was immediately admitted to the hospital where the doctors diagnosed him as suffering severe gastroenteritis, but they could do little to treat his condition as drugs and medicine were in short supply.

While an inpatient, Harry struck up a strong friendship with a young medic, an Englishman by the name of Phelps. One day, the young medic entered the ward and told Harry, 'I've got a surprise for you old chum—letters from home'. The old man's eyes filled with tears as he read the letters, over and over again. Phelps was a good listener when Harry prattled on about his wife and children. The chance of seeing them again afforded the only glimmer of hope in the old man's wretched life.⁸

Able to speak fluent German, Private Phelps acted as interpreter for the doctors. Each month, they would do their rounds and decide who among the sick and wounded should be deemed suitable for repatriation. Each month, Phelps suggested Harry Malthouse but, each time, the doctor was adamant the journey would be too much for him and that the old man was better off here with them.⁸

It was now late 1918 and the Germans were retreating on all fronts. One night, as Phelps did his final rounds, he asked Harry, 'Can I get you anything?' Harry grabbed the young medic's arm and pleaded, 'I've got to get home, mate, or I'm going to die here. I won't survive another winter.'

'You'll be all right, Chum. I'll speak to the doctors again.'

Finally came the news they had waited so long to hear—the war was over. Phelps wasted no time relaying the news to Harry. Some of the prisoners chose to make their own way to neutral Holland then back to England. The sick and injured would remain behind, as would the medics who would care for them.

In late November, Phelps appealed to the doctor, once again, to allow Malthouse to be repatriated. The doctor considered carefully before he placed the old man's name on the list of those to be sent home.

'Harry! Harry! You're going home!' Phelps cried excitedly. The old man, now wizened beyond his years, smiled weakly.

'That's grand lad, that's grand.'

As the final list was posted, the wards were abuzz. Phelps checked and re-checked the list but could not find the name he sought so desperately. He looked for the doctor and demanded to know why Malthouse's name was not included.

'I've changed my mind', said the doctor. 'We can take care of him just as well here.'⁸

Phelps knew the old man would be waiting for news and it was with a heavy heart that he went to inform his friend. This news was the last straw for Harry. The deprivations of life as a POW, his age and illness had been surmountable odds while he carried the thought he would soon be on his way home to his family. The last vestige of hope was now destroyed. In his heart, he knew he would never see his loved ones again.

Malthouse simply lost the will to keep fighting.



AWM H15477. *The grave of Private William Henry Malthouse of the 2nd Australian Navy and Military Expeditionary Force (AN&MEF) who died as a prisoner of war at Gustrow, Germany, on 7 December 1918. Part of the inscription on the headstone reads, 'Erected by his Australian fellow prisoners of war'.*

Notes

- 1 National Archives of Australia: B2455, WW1 Service Records, 79736 Private WH Malthouse
- 2 Bean, CEW, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, Volume X, the Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1936
- 3 Signaller LC Reeves, *Australians in Action in New Guinea*, The Australian News Company Ltd, 1915
- 4 Statements by recovered POWs detailed in Bean, CEW, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, Volumes IX & X, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1936
- 5 Nerger, KA, *Exploits of the Raider Wolf*, produced by ship's crew members
- 6 AWM Photographic Database, Accession Number H15477, information accompanying photograph of Malthouse's grave
- 7 AWM 1DRL/0428, Australian Red Cross Society, Missing and Wounded Enquiry Bureau
- 8 51010 Private H Phelps, London Scottish Regiment, witness statement, 11 Carthcart Hill, Highgate, N19