

Private Joseph Newman, MM

One that got away

In March of 1915, a 21-year-old miner was one of the many who volunteered for service in the Australian Imperial Force. During his medical examinations, the doctors noticed that this recruit bore the scars of a very tough life—a rugged and bent nose, several scars and a missing finger to name a few. The man had a brusque manner and gave the impression of being something of a rough diamond, one who would ask no favours and give no quarter. This recruit was a Balmain boy and proud of it.

Joseph Lewin Newman was posted to 'C' Company of the 2nd Division's, 17th Battalion. He commenced military life at the main training camp at Liverpool, NSW—a vast 'city' of canvas stretching along the flat eastern bank of the Georges River.¹ After the fitting of uniforms and the issue of equipment, life for Newman became an endless round of marching, basic musketry and the non stop haranguing of the drill sergeant.

In late April 1915, a wave of excitement rippled through the camp. News had arrived that members of the 1st Division had landed at a place called Gallipoli. The early reports stated there had been many casualties, but that the Diggers had fought magnificently and the landing at ANZAC Cove was being acclaimed as Australia's 'baptism of fire' and the 'birth of a nation'.



Private Joseph Newman, MM. (Author's collection)

On 21 May 1915, Newman climbed the gangplank of the troopship *Themistocles* en route to Egypt for additional training. He was to land on the Gallipoli Peninsula on 20 August 1915.² The 17th moved into a place known as Reserve Gully for a short period of acclimatisation.³ The officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) visited the front lines to familiarise themselves with the terrain and the battle strategy—to ascertain what would be expected of them when the orders came for the battalion to enter the fray. None were prepared for the carnage that was to follow a week later at the battle for Hill 60.

By this time, the ANZACs had been at Gallipoli for some four months and many of the men were suffering the ill effects of the deteriorating conditions brought about by primitive sanitation, plagues of flies, fleas and lice and poor diet. The longer the Allies remained at Gallipoli, the more casualties they suffered from the debilitating diseases that were rife among the troops.

Newman may have been lucky enough to dodge the Turks' bullets, but within three weeks of landing at Gallipoli he was struck down by illness. He was



AWM H02784. Gallipoli. 'Chatting'. (Hunting lice in his clothing to delouse himself).

hospitalised on 9 September and his condition was serious enough to warrant his being transferred to London General Hospital in October of that year.¹

After several months of treatment, rest and recuperation, he eventually rejoined the battalion—now in France—on the first anniversary of the ANZAC landings. Three weeks later, Newman was again hospitalised, this time with scabies, a disease that would plague him on and off for years.

Newman was a typical Australian larrikin and life in the army made little difference to his general behaviour. While undergoing treatment, he was frequently on charges of being absent without leave (AWOL), of insubordination and for failing to attend parades.¹

Private Newman rejoined his battalion in January of 1917, as it moved up to the Somme. On 15 April 1917, 'C' Company was positioned astride a sunken road near the village of Lagnicourt—in the throes of a battle that had been seesawing for two days. Opposing the Diggers were 23 specially selected battalions of the German Army. Early that morning the Germans launched a savage attack, which overwhelmed and surrounded Newman's platoon. The Diggers made a fight of it, but heavy casualties and depleted ammunition left 15 survivors—including Newman—with no option but to surrender.⁴

They were marched to the village of Douai, then on to Lille, increasing in number to 130 as other prisoners joined them en route. On arrival, they were thrown into the Fort McDonald dungeon and subjected to barbaric conditions. The

prisoners were confined to their cells and not permitted to exercise. The sanitary arrangements consisted of a single tub that the Germans would not allow to be emptied, even when it became full and overflowed.

Later the men were moved to Avelin to work in an ammunition and stores depot. Here, conditions were even worse. The treatment by the guards was brutal and the food was little more than a swill of white cabbage and sauerkraut. The prisoners were stripped of their woollen uniforms and stout boots, which were replaced with cheap, light cotton attire, cotton socks and wooden clogs.⁴

Next, the prisoners of war (POWs) were shunted to St Amand where, with other prisoners from many Allied nations, they were forced to harvest cabbages under the blazing European sun, with little water and no headress for protection.

Newman was afforded a brief respite when he was ordered to a convalescent camp in Wez, Belgium. He knew that there was nothing wrong with him, but offered no resistance when his sergeant major advised him to keep quiet and enjoy the rest. He would later attest that it was a good three-day break.⁴

Morale reached an all-time low when the internees were marched to the railway station at Orchies—destination Germany. The first staging camp was at Czersk, in East Prussia. This camp held between six hundred and a thousand Allied POWs, including about a hundred Australians. Here the Diggers sat and waited for seven days before being sent to a big camp at Heilsberg, close to the Russian border.

Again they sat and waited. Finally they were moved to the depot camp at Goldap, where, shortly after their arrival, the prisoners were separated into working parties and sent to work on local farms and in nearby forests. By this time it was January 1918.

Newman was assigned to a 15-man work party comprising five Russians, four Australians and the remainder British or French. The work was hard, but the group was guarded by slack Germans who believed it was inconceivable for the prisoners to escape back to the Allied lines. Many of the prisoners were now receiving a weekly Red Cross parcel—a Godsend for Newman, the difference between life and death for many others.⁴

From conversations with two of the Russians, Grosberg and Grevin, Newman learned of an escape plan. The pair had been prisoners for the past three years and had managed to stockpile a considerable amount of German money. However, as the Russians did not receive food parcels from the Red Cross or from home, they lacked the vital rations to undertake the journey.⁴ This weakness in their escape plan gave Newman the opportunity to join them.

Late one night, under the noses of guards—who still believed there was no risk of escape—Newman and his two comrades climbed out of a window and simply vanished into the darkness.

Movement was only possible by night, forcing the trio to lie low during daylight hours. Fortunately, the nights were fairly warm, making travel relatively easy.⁴ The countryside they traversed was mainly forests and marshlands, but the latter were infested with mosquitoes, which, when disturbed, attacked the escapees, inflicting savage bites.

Newman was elected the leader and guide for the group. He had a modicum of bush experience and also some knowledge of navigation. The only map the party possessed was one torn from the back of a German pocket book, yet during their four-week journey they covered a staggering 560 miles (900 kilometres). Just before they crossed into Russia, the escapees dropped their guard, a lapse which almost led to disaster.

The trio entered a village in daylight and as they turned a corner they were confronted by a German sentry post. When questioned they admitted to being Russian and escaped POWs. However, the German was suspicious, believing that Newman was in fact an 'Englander' and should be taken to the local commandant. The sentry told the other two that, as Russia was no longer supporting the Allies, they were free to go.

Newman was determined not to be returned to custody so kept a firm grip on the jack knife he had hidden in his pocket. He was sure his fellow Russian escapees would come to his aid if required.

Suddenly, a German civilian standing nearby intervened. The man approached the sentry and made it quite plain that he either allowed all three to go free or suffer the consequences. Reluctant to face an ugly or awkward situation, the sentry hesitated while he pondered his options. Expecting the worst Newman strengthened the grip on his knife. A coward at heart, the German soldier shied from the intimated confrontation and grunted at the trio, 'Clear out. I haven't seen you'. The three thanked their German 'rescuer' and quickly fled from the village before the sentry had time to change his mind.⁴

On entering the Russian town of Bezankovitch, the trio reported to the Bolshevik authorities. They were well treated and given passage on a steamer to the port of Vitepsk. Here they were given a rail pass to Petrograd where Newman was to contact the British Consul. It was here, at the consulate gates amid much emotional backslapping and handshaking, that the three friends finally parted company. The British Consul, Mr Le Page issued Newman with Russian money to tide him over till a passage to England could be arranged.⁴

Newman learned that a direct journey to England was not available for some months, but that a ship bound for Montreal, Canada was departing the seaport of Archangel in a week's time. Unwilling to wait, Newman boarded the ship for Canada and arrived in Montreal on 8 July 1918. After a brief stay he gained a passage on the SS *Corsican*, arriving in England on 8 August.⁵

Upon his return to the AIF, Newman spent a brief time in hospital. He expected to be returned to the front for further action, but before he was cleared for active duty, the armistice was declared. Newman's larrikin nature precipitated a few more brushes with the military for breaches of discipline, before he finally boarded the Australia-bound troopship *Czar* in March of 1919.

In April 1920, Newman learned that he had been awarded the Military Medal in recognition of gallant conduct and determination displayed in escaping from captivity.⁶

Author's note: Little is known of the POWs of the First World War. Books and articles are only just now starting to come to light. Yet here is the story of an Australian who in four weeks—with little knowledge of either the country or the language and without a compass—trekked more than 900 kilometres to make contact with an Allied force in the hope that he would be reunited with his unit. Joseph Newman was a Digger who at no time during his captivity lost his will to survive and who tackled adversity head on. Some 3647 Australians were taken prisoner during WW1.⁷ This is the story of one who got away.

Notes

- 1 National Archives of Australia: B2455, WW1 Service Records, 1074 Private JL Newman, MM
- 2 AWM 8, Unit Embarkation Nominal Rolls, 17th Battalion AIF, 1914–1918 War
- 3 Mackenzie, K W, *The story of the Seventeenth Battalion, A. I. F. in the Great War, 1914-1918*, Sydney, 1946
- 4 AWM 30, Prisoner of War Statements, 1914–1918 War
- 5 AWM 1DRL/0428, Australian Red Cross Society, prisoner of War Department
- 6 AWM 28, Recommendation Files for Honours and Awards, AIF, 1914–1918 War
- 7 The Australian War Memorial's website <http://www.awm.gov.au> provides details of WW1 statistics.