

Name: Wesley Herbert JACK



SERVICE NO: WWII 17185

ARMED FORCE: Army

ENLISTMENT: 2NZEJ Nom. Roll 4, p.175

TRAINING: Burnham

EMBARKATIONS: Infantry Reinforcements
New Zealand Expeditionary Force (2NZEJ)

RANK: Private

POW CAPTURE DETAILS: 13 December 1941

- Stalag VIII-B (later 344), Lamsdorf, Poland
- P.G. 57, Gruppignano, Udine, Italy

POW SERIAL NUMBER: 33266

MILITARY DECORATIONS:

- War Medal 1939-1945
- New Zealand War Service Medal

CIVILIAN LIFE

Address before Enlistment: C/o Club Hotel, Timaru
Occupation: Barman, Timaru
Next of Kin on Embarkation: Mrs. V. Jack, 10 Raymond St., Timaru (Mother)
Relationship Status: Pre 1941 Single

MILITARY SERVICE BIOGRAPHY: Wesley Jack 17185, Private, 20th Battalion

After grueling training at Burnham Army Camp near Christchurch, Wes Jack departed for the Middle East with the Fifth Reinforcements. Burnham Camp was known for its rigorous preparation regimen, designed to equip soldiers with the necessary skills for combat. Wes underwent extensive drills, physical conditioning, and tactical training, all aimed at readying the troops for the challenging conditions they would face overseas. He left New Zealand in April 1941 and arrived in Egypt in May 1941.

His deployment took him through the harsh deserts of North Africa, where he was involved in key operations against Axis forces. During Operation Crusader, a British-led offensive aimed at relieving the besieged city of Tobruk, Wes was captured in Libya. The operation was a crucial effort to disrupt German and Italian forces, but amidst the fierce fighting, Wes found himself among those taken prisoner as the British attempted to push back the enemy and secure vital supply lines.

Capture and Early Imprisonment

On 25th November 1941, during a night attack to drive the Germans off Belhamed, Wes's platoon suffered heavy losses, reducing their numbers from 33 to just 11. Despite holding their position for four days, they were eventually overrun by Rommel's 21 Panzer Division. The German tanks

Service Person Record & Images: Military Service Years

captured them, treating the soldiers decently and declaring, "The war for you is over." They marched without water and were handed over to the Italians at Derna.

The journey to Benghazi involved cramped, standing-only lorry rides. From Benghazi, they were packed into the forecastle of an Italian destroyer bound for Brindisi, southern Italy. Conditions were grim; the men were seasick and had only spaghetti to eat. Upon arrival, they were marched to the Tukurano POW camp, enduring spitting from locals and relentless rain that turned their camp into a muddy cesspool. The food consisted mainly of spaghetti, macaroni, and a small loaf of bread daily. Red Cross parcels were scarce.

Life as a Prisoner of War

Wes's family learned of his capture through the Vatican after six months of uncertainty. He was later moved to PG 57 in Grupignano, northern Italy, a large camp housing 5000 POWs from various nationalities. The prisoners organized committees to maintain morale and hygiene, and Wes resumed boxing, using gloves provided by the Red Cross. They also played cricket with makeshift balls, a brief escape from their harsh reality.

In PG 57, they dug a tunnel 15 feet under the wire. Nineteen men escaped, but the rest faced repercussions. Wes was put in solitary confinement for five days after laughing at the guards' frantic search. The prison's senior British officer advised against escaping to avoid retribution from the Germans, who now controlled the camp after Italy's armistice with the Allies in September 1943.

Transfers and Hardships

Wes and his brother Albert were transferred to Markt Pongau in Austria, where they were registered and assigned POW numbers. Wes's number was 33266. They were then sent to Milowitz, a coal mine where they worked in grueling conditions, extracting ten tons of coal daily. The work was dangerous, and Wes narrowly escaped a severe injury when a mine ceiling collapsed on him, injuring his hand.

Despite the hardships, Wes and his fellow prisoners found ways to supplement their diet. They traded chocolate for eggs with a local woman, whom they nicknamed "Old Mother Droopy Drawers." The POWs also produced a handwritten camp newspaper, the Tiki Times, to keep up morale with news and entertainment.

The Final March and Liberation

In January 1945, as the Russian front advanced, the POWs were forced to march from Tost in a snowstorm, crossing the River Oder and traveling to Stalag Luft III in Sagan. Wes and a few others managed to escape the march and hid until the Russians liberated them. Despite their freedom, they remained cautious, eventually making their way to Odessa, where they boarded a ship back to England.

The journey to Odessa was grueling. They walked through harsh winter conditions, encountering frozen bodies along the way. At one point, a collision killed 18 men who had only been free for a week. In Krakow, they met American airmen who offered them a bath and a chance to fly back to England, but the Russian guards insisted on marching them to Odessa.

Return to Civilian Life

Upon arriving in England, Wes was sent to a rehabilitation center for New Zealand army POWs in Margate. After a medical check, he received leave and attended the BBC Victory Party concert in London (Image below). In August 1945, Wes sailed back to New Zealand on the transport ship



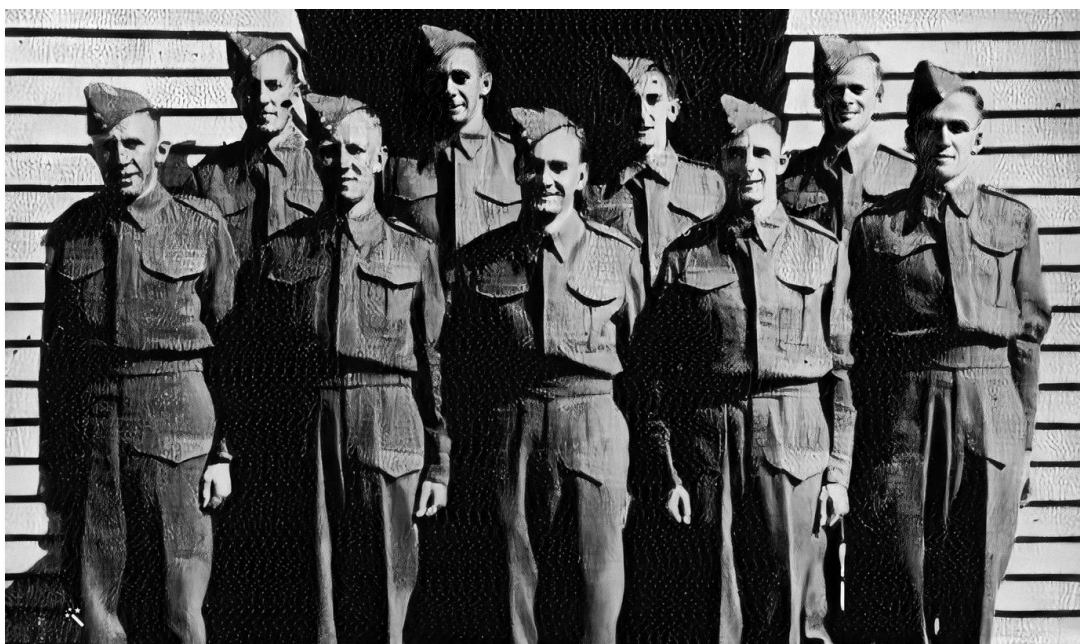
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'Stirling Castle'. He returned to Timaru, married his sweetheart Jean Robinson in November 1945, and continued to contribute to the community by coaching boxing. Despite the years that have passed, the memories of his wartime experiences remained vivid.

Reflecting on the War

Wes often reflected on the intense experiences he had during the war. The memories of being under constant threat from bombs and shrapnel, the hardships endured in the POW camps, and the camaraderie among his fellow soldiers stayed with him throughout his life. Wes's story is a testament to the resilience and spirit of those who endure the horrors of war and find ways to survive and thrive despite them.

WES JACK'S WAR SERVICE IMAGES



Wes Jack (Left) at Burnham camp



Wes Jack - bayonet training at Burnham Camp



Jean Robinson and Wes Jack



RMS Mauritania Troop Transport Ship



Wes Jack (center seated) getting hair cut



Wes Jack (standing 4th left)



Wes Jack – visiting the Pyramids and Sphinx in Egypt



Wes Jack (Center), Egypt



Wes Jack (standing), Egypt Camp



Wes Jack (2nd left wearing Star Rugby Jersey), Egypt



Wes Jack (2nd left), Egypt, just back from patrol

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PERSONAL

That Private W. H. (Wes.) Jack, of Timaru, who was recently reported missing, is now a prisoner of war was announced over the Vatican radio on Monday night.



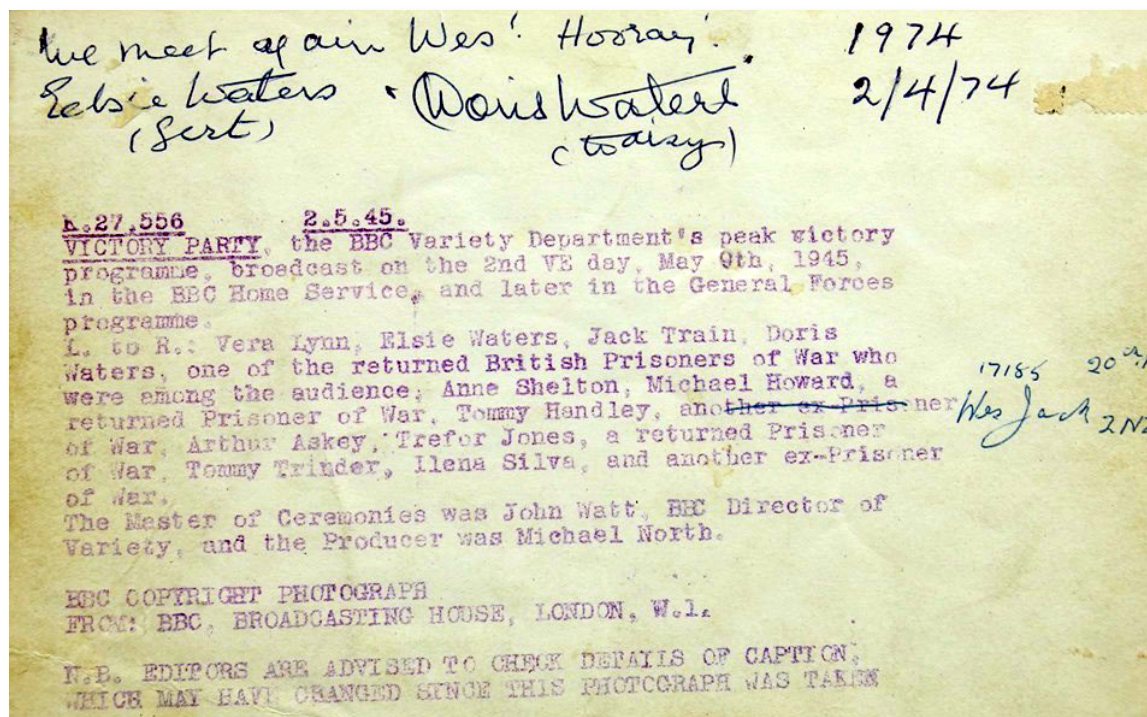
POW Campo 85 Tutarano



Wes Jack talks to fellow soldier in London filmed for BBC News after the war
[To see video of this click here](#)



Wes Jack attending BBC Variety Department's Victory Party 2 May 1945



L to R. Vera Lynn, Elsie Waters, Jack Train, Doris Waters, one of the returned British Prisoners of War who were among the audience. Anne Shelton, Michael Howard, a returned Prisoner of War, Tommy Handley, another Prisoner of War [Wes Jack from Timaru], Arthur Askey, Trefor Jones, a returned Prisoner of War Tommy Trinder, Ilana Silva, and another ex-Prisoner of War.

Service Person Record & Images: Military Service Years

USEFUL WEB LINKS FOR REFERENCE:

1. [Auckland War Memorial Museum - Online Cenotaph](#)
 - o [Wesley Herbert JACK](#)
2. [New Zealand War Graves Project](#)
 - o Contains images and information about New Zealand war graves and memorials around the world.
3. [New Zealand History - NZ Wars and Conflicts](#)
 - o Provides detailed accounts and images of New Zealand's involvement in various wars, including WW1 and WW2.
4. [Archives New Zealand - War History](#)
 - o Access to war-related records and images held by Archives New Zealand.
5. [Te Papa Tongarewa - Collections Online](#)

Features war-related collections, including personal stories and photographs of New Zealand soldiers

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- Your Name here
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- Auckland War Memorial Museum - Online Cenotaph
- New Zealand War Graves Project

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Source: Photographs Graham Jack's collection (Wes Jack's son). Compiled by David A. Jack (nephew)

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