Toilet Radios and Cat Guts: Allied uses of objects in prisoner of war camps during the Second World War

By Stacey Astill

'I am firmly convinced that if I'd had enough cigarettes and bars of chocolate I could have got a Tiger MK IV tank. You could get anything with coffee, cigarettes and chocolate.'[1] – Harry Sell

One of the striking features of Prisoner of War (henceforth POW) memoirs and writings is the repeated discussions of the use of space and objects which occurred within the camps. This aspect was evident in both Allied and Axis POW's daily lives, as well as those of interned civilians. Creativity and arts appear to be a common feature of internment, dating back to 413 BC when 7,000 Athenian POWs detained in a quarry were provided with sustenance or given freedom in exchange for performing plays.[2] Creative behaviour manifested in a variety of ways during the Second World War, as demonstrated by the plays, art and even bonsai gardens that were created within the camps. In this study the use of space and objects will be explored in relation to a variety of traditional arts such as painting, drawing and poetry, but also in terms of the more unconventional use of objects within the camps such as: bed slats from the POW's bunks, tin cans from Red Cross parcels and their accommodation which ranged from purpose built to castles.

In their small confines, POWs had to contend with the issue of monotony. Boredom itself is a much defined, and debated term within psychology; however, researchers make claims that strongly suggest an existential link to boredom. When one is bored '…they consider their activity situation or life to be meaningless.'[3] This is still a problematic situation affecting prisoners today, as exemplified by Richard Wener's study on the creation of humane secure facilities. Boredom is not just an issue for those in spaces such as solitary confinement, but for the prison population in general. Researchers believe this widespread issue could explain why inmates are willing to volunteer for research programmes.[4] Although

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[1] Major Ian R. English and Harry Moses, *For You Tommy the War is Over* (Oxford, Alden Group Ltd, 2006), 96.
[2] Plutarch, *Life of Nicias*, XXIX.2-3.
[3] Wijnad, Tilburg, Igou, 'On Boredom and Social Identity: A Pragmatic Meaning-Regulation Approach', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 3 (2011), 1680.
[4] Richard Wener, *The Environmental Psychology of Prisons and Jails: Creating Humane Spaces in Secure Settings* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2012), 179.

it is thought of as a minor issue, there have been strong links between boredom and depression.[5]

The need for stimulation is evident in the writing of POWs.[6] Both Geoffrey D. Vaughan (a war artist) and Major G. B. Matthews (a senior British medical officer in Stalag Luft III). Both of these men addressed the mental health issues that boredom caused in the camps. Vaughan touched on the compulsions surrounding food consumption, classifying three subsections of "Loner" (a POW who did not have a food sharing syndicate): 1) Scoffers 2) Disciplined men and 3) Hoarders.[7] Matthews examined the POWs around him and categorised four of the most prominent factors responsible for mental health problems in the men. [8] Firstly, apart from time spent in solitary confinement, the lack of privacy meant that POWs had no personal space (see Figure 1). Secondly, prisoners were surrounded by barbed wire, guards and severely restricted by a variety of regulations that governed their sleep, meals and hygiene, causing frustration. Thirdly, the monotony of each day and continuous confinement left POWs with little opportunity to leave camp or experience any change of scenery. Lastly, the area of confinement itself was often very depressing. Basic amenities were sorely lacking and living quarters were cramped at best.[9] All of these factors demonstrate why it became so important for the POWs to use the space and objects around them in an effective manner. Prisoners needed to create a sense of normality and attempt to remain mentally healthy, and this involved making the best use of the space and objects they had access to. Many, such as Colonel Henry Cary Owtram, recognised the importance of engaging troops either alone or in groups to prevent adverse psychological issues.[10] The arts appeared to provide a natural solution.

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[5] Ibid.
[6] George Patterson, *A Spoonful of Rice With Salt* (Durham: The Pentland Press Ltd, 1993), 43.
[7] Geoffrey D. Vaughan*, The Way it Really Was* (Devon: The Granary Press, 1985), 31.
[8] Arieh J. Kochavi, *Confronting Captivity: Britain and the United States and their POWs in Nazi Germany* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 56.
[9] Kochavi, *Confronting Captivity,* 56.
[10] Sears Eldredge, 'Wonder Bar: Music and Theatre as Strategies for Survival in a Second World War POW Hospital Camp' eds. Gilly Carr, Harold Mytum, *Cultural Heritage and Prisoners of War: Creativity Behinds Barbed Wire* (Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 21.

Figure 1 Camp quarters depicted by Gordon Horner

Plays were common in many of the Stalags in Europe. In one case, Twelfth Night was actually toured through various Stalags since the guards had been so impressed by the production.[11] The performance of plays and musicals was also strongly encouraged in camps across Thailand – such as Chungkai – as a strategy for survival.[12] Chungkai was a POW hospital camp and its inhabitants were all suffering from illness associated with the construction of the Thailand-Burma railway.[13] Many suffered from at least a mild form of post-traumatic stress disorder due to the effects of the 'Speed Period', a time of brutal treatment. Japanese project engineers pushed Allied POWs to their limits so they would meet their deadlines.[14]

Sears Eldredge asserts that the performance of shows – such as the popular musical comedy *Wonder Bar* – which was humorous and familiar, allowed POWs some escapism and gave them memories of home.[15] At Chungkai the challenge for the men was not just the logistics of performing the musical, they also had to build the theatre it was performed in. After gaining permission to plan and build an amphitheatre, the POWs formed a theatre committee, planned the building and completed it in two months. The theatre was built on a valley – one slope held the stage and the opposite slope had the seating. To each side were

[11] Claire Harder George C. Kieffer, "The Second World War Experience Centre," *The RUSI Journal,* 147(3), (2002), 92.
[12] Eldredge, *'Wonder Bar'*, 19.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid., 21.
[15] Ibid., 19.

stage houses, one for wardrobe and another for make-up. There was even an orchestra pit at the bottom of the valley.[16]

The use of objects even extended to the building of a double bass for the orchestra, its body was carved out of tea chests and the neck was a log the POWs had taken from the river. The strings were made from telephone wires and it took four men to tune it. It was made in sections as the available materials were not big enough to make the body in one piece. Cow hooves were used to make the glue that held the instrument together.[17] This tenacity and ability to continue to create, despite adverse conditions showed the ingenuity of the POWs. Similar stages were common in most camps, and figure 2 shows Gordon Horner's depiction of the stage at Cheiti PG.

Figure 2: The camp stage by Gordon Horner.

The camp plays are recalled by many POWs, there are still existing examples of posters and programmes that were designed by prisoners or commissioned from camp artists. John Durnford, a POW in Chungkai stated '…whether anyone realised it or not, one of the most important factors in our complete recovery at Chungkai was being able to listen to music' and George Chippington hypothesises that '…we owe our theatre experts a great deal. They feed the imagination and sustain the spirit within.'[18] Gordon Horner was taken captive near Knightsbridge in 1942. He travelled through many Italian camps before being moved to

[16] Ibid., 22 and 23.
[17] Ibid., 31.
[18] Ibid., 21.

Moosburg after the Italian armistice of September 1943. He states that the camp educators and artists '…made a narrow life full and rich for the chaps.'[19] This notion of plays or music imbibing the men with good spirits is echoed in Horner's memoir *For You the War is Over*, where he remarks that they sang often to keep their spirits up and states that '…Tony Watson did a lot to cheer us up for his song and dance of the Lambeth Walk' and adds that they sang '…Tuturano Transit Camp is famous for its fleas' to the tune of *John Brown's Body*.[20] The presence of fleas was a very real issue, but the Italian guards were less able to punish men for singing a song about the fleas than they would men who took part in a more serious protest in the form of a strike or vocal campaign.

In many of the camps there were a variety of instruments brought in by the soldiers, sent by the Red Cross or made in captivity. Fred Hill, a Salvation Army Officer, described going back to collect his instrument after his capture; '… When I think about it now it seems ridiculous that I should actually go up to one of the German soldiers, in the middle of the street battle and ask if I could return to the building to collect my piano accordion.'[21] These specific events and descriptions encapsulate the reason for selecting these three typologies of behaviour – creativity, humour and resistance. These behaviours are intertwined – by singing the songs (of a protesting nature or otherwise) the prisoners were creating music to boost morale, using humour to make the situation less hopeless and also rebelling by speaking up about their conditions. Figure 3 shows the programme for a camp show, designed and distributed within Adelsdorf – a working camp. Figures 4 and 5 respectively, show Gordon Horner's sketch of entertainment at his camp's officer's club and Tommy Sampson with his trumpet.

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[19] Eldredge, *'Wonder Bar'*, 31; Gordon Horner, *For You the War is Over* (London: Falcon Press, 1948) no page numbers, self-published.
[20] Horner, *For You the War is Over*.
[21] Fred Hill, *Prisoner of War: The Gospel According to Fred* (London: Avon Books, 1994) 22.

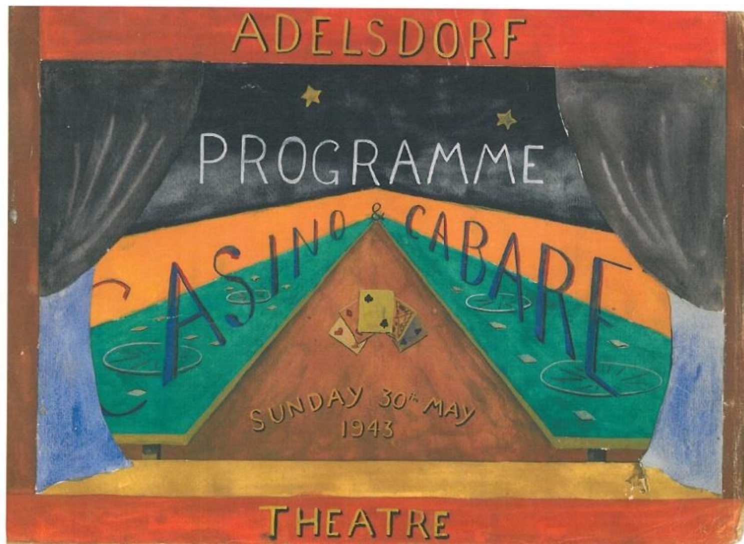

Figure 3: Adesldorf Theatre courtesy of Alan Barrett.

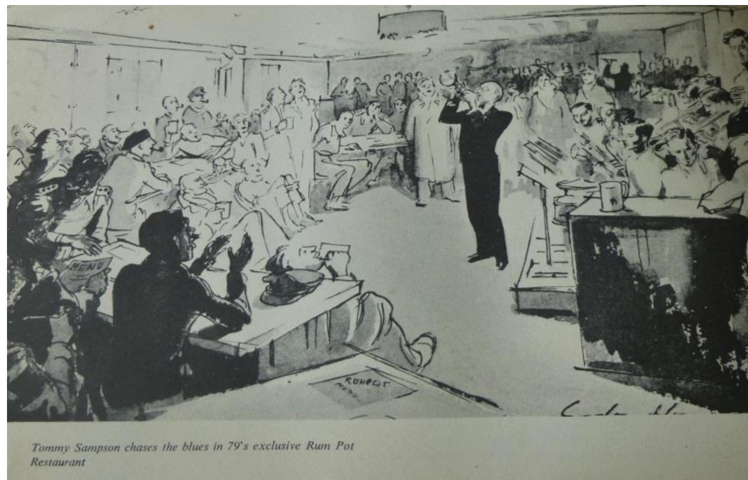

Figure 4: Tommy Sampson playing in the Rum Pot Camp Restaurant by Gordon Horner.

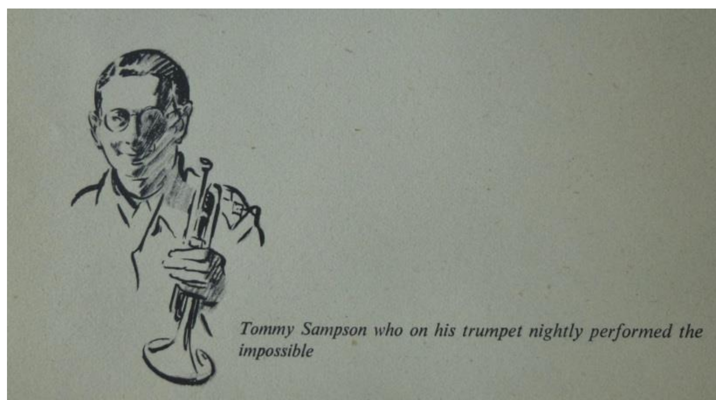

Figure 5: Musician Tommy Sampson by Gordon Horner.

At Dalag Luft – an interrogation camp – the poem *Can You Take It?* by an anonymous author, was found on the wall. It offered words of support and encouragement to all the Allied POWs who found themselves in the cell:

You know there is a saying
That sunshine follows rain,
And sure enough you'll realize
That joy will follow pain.
Let courage be your password,
Make fortitude your guide;
And then instead of grousing,
Just remember those who died.[22]

There is less discussion of general support however, and the concept of using art and creativity as a release could explain the poems about issues such as sand in the Italian camps or Bombardier Mordue's extended and facetious description of the noise levels in camps written in Stalag 357, November 1944.[23]

A lack of equipment was universal to nearly all prison camps. Taking POWs was difficult for any military as they then had to be cared for in accordance with the Geneva Convention. The sheer amount of prisoners meant that POWs were not often placed in purpose built facilities and many were imprisoned in ex-factories, barracks (such as those described by members of the 129th Regiment capture in Crete), hospitals (in central Berlin) or even castles (such as where Horner was held). Those captured in the North African campaign in areas such as Derna and Tobruk were frequently detained in circles of wire in the middle of the desert. Vaughan even experienced being detained without a solid perimeter. Their group was packed tightly together and the edges were patrolled by Italian guards. G. Harris describes a similar experience; his group were detained between Knightsbridge and Tobruk, and then taken to Derna where they were left to sleep exposed in the desert, under the watch of patrolling guards.[24]

Both Vaughan and Harris found the camps in Italy consisted of little more than groups of tents '…with plenty of barbed wire and very little in the way of food or water.'[25] Alan

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[22] Poetryfiresidehour, *Can You Take It? By Anonymous Read by Gordon Bird* http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gAjOwFB6UY0 24/08/2013.
[23] Rolf, *Prisoners of the Reich*, 77.
[24] Vaughan, *The Way it Really Was*, 12; G. H. Harris, *POW and Fugitive* (Aldershot: Gale and Poldon Ltd 1947), 1-2.
[25] Vaughan, *The Way it Really Was,* 16.

Barrett describes his accommodation at Stalag VIIIB as lacking windows and bitterly cold.[26] In a situation where the Axis powers were unable to provide suitable accommodation for POWs it was very unlikely that there would be suitable stoves, mess tins or even cutlery. The lack of cooking implements furthered the need for creativity and innovation within the camps.

One of the primary needs was an item for boiling water that could also be used for cooking, if the food was available. Red Cross parcels did not only provide a source of food but the containers were often reused, initially as plates and dixies, but also as materials for more creative projects such as a clock – incorporating springs from a steel helmet – or a fully-working engine.[27] Arguably, the most useful item was the blower stove. Vaughan's memoirs include diagrams of the various incarnations of the blower stove – beginning with two tins positioned opposite one another, one with an air intake pipe and the second, smaller tin with a grill on top and fuel source inside. These were connected via a tube which sucked in air from the first tin to ensure that the fire in the second tin had a constant source of airflow. This eventually progressed to the final design, which had an inflow pipe with a belt driven fan. It was operated by turning a handle, which turned the fan and produced a steady flow of air into the fire. Vaughan insists this could boil a pint of water in four minutes.[28] This ability to create items from scarce materials even extended to the building of items such as radios. The radios were used to glean news, which was extremely precious in the camps.[29] The making, disguising and transportation of radios was always a difficult process.[30] In Harry Watson's camp the radio was hidden down the long drop toilet, hung from a string on a cup hook under the lid. It could only be seen if one was to push one's face through the seat and into the hole, so they were sure it was safe.

Harry Sell, a member of the Durham Light Infantry imprisoned by the Italians, writes that upon moving camp post capitulation Sell and the others involved took parts of the radio to reconstruct later, the men were then split up. Sell built a soldering iron in order to create a new radio, constructing it with candle grease, barbed wire, pieces stolen from German

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[26] Alan Barrett, Interviewed by Stacey Astill, personal interview, 28th December 2012, St Johns, Isle of Man.
[27] Alan Barrett, Interviewed by Stacey Astill, Skype interview, 27th August 2013, St Johns, Isle of Man.
[28] Vaughan, *The Way it Really Was*, 23.
[29] A radio built in Stalag VIIIB and kept inside a hollowed out log is on display in the Museum of the Manx Regiment, Ronaldsway.
[30] Vaughan, *The Way it Really Was*, 98.

loudspeakers and bartering for the remainder of the parts he required.[31] Figure 6 shows a radio constructed by Manx POWs and its hiding place.

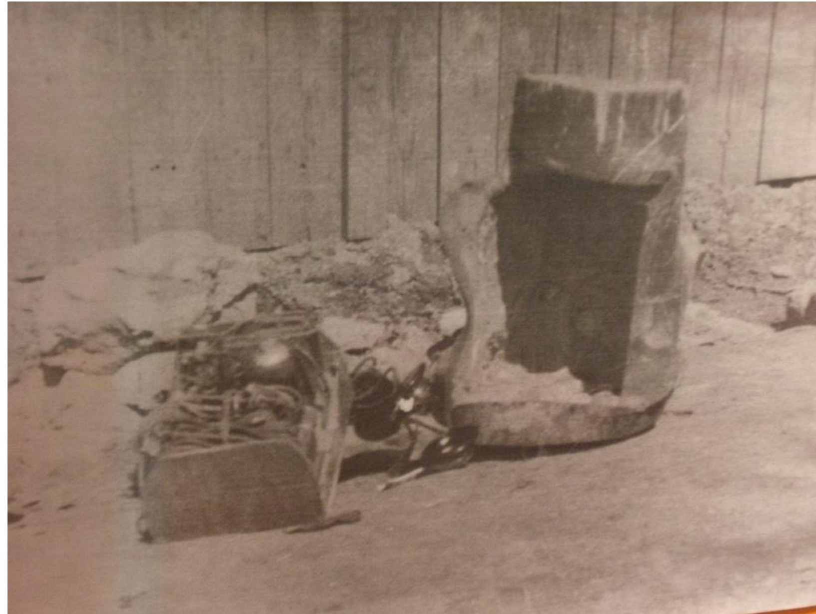

Figure 6: Picture of radio taken in camp, it was hidden in the hollowed log to avoid detection. Courtesy of the Museum of the Manx Regiment

The POWs also built up their own camp economies. Nearly any object could be exchanged or sold within the camps, including those that the POWs had created. Although prisoners who engaged in work were paid in lagergeld, the money was not available to all POWs and could not be used to buy anything from non-designated shops. Consequently cigarettes became currency within the camp. Dean Croushore hypothesises that cigarettes were the perfect medium of exchange as they are all in standard units, therefore 'pricing' could be consistent – outside of inflation. Cigarettes are also durable and safe to exchange multiple times, lightweight for ease of transport and each cigarette represents a small unit of value so change is easily given.[32] Creating this universal currency (used in camps across the Pacific and European theatres) allowed POWs to continue some modicum of normal life, holding regular marts and events.[33]

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[31] English and Moses, *For you Tommy the War is Over*, 96; *Ingenious POW Radio Goes on Show*, BBC News news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/4460319.stm 18/08/2013.

[32] Dean Croushore, *Money and Banking: A Policy-Oriented Approach* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006) 48-49.

[33] Evans Arthur Evans, *Sojourn in Silesia* (Online: Ashford Writers, 2011) Kindle version, 1444. ; J. W. Pocock, *The Diary of a Prisoner of War 1940-1945*, HP2.86.134. National Library of Scotland. ; Vaughan, *The Way it Really Was*, 21.

Vaughan speaks of one man who bartered several of his cigarettes with a guard so that he would throw him some broken scaffold board from outside the camp perimeter. The man then broke up the board into bundles and sold them as firewood. Vaughn writes that '… He was both an opportunist and a gambler and amassed some thousands of cigarettes with which he played the market, always dealing in shortages.'[34] Similar attitudes were taken throughout the POW camps. M. McKibbin of Stalag 383 talks of various rabbit stud businesses being set up. Arnold Forrester, a Manx Journalist who posted articles to the Isle of Man from Stalag VIIIB, noted that Scottish men had even managed to make their own kilts in preparation for ANZAC day celebrations in 1943.[35] Creativity could produce a cigarette fortune or allow a POW to create many objects they could not obtain otherwise, which could provide links to national identity or home life.

In Fred Hill's account of POW life as a Salvation Army Officer he talks about the importance of breaking the monotony. He discusses a day where gossip was rife about a man who had committed suicide – although this was obviously very morbid, Hill goes on to state that '… it broke the awful monotony of life; at least something had happened' further adding '… to get the men arguing or discussing something or other than food was the great need.'[36] As Vaughan summarises '…food dominated much of our thinking'[37] and many POWs have included detailed descriptions of their rations in their memoirs.[38] There are even examples of POWs having imaginary dinner parties with each member of the group talking about their hypothetical course.[39] Such obsessions could become unhealthy – once a man started living in his head he became 'Stalag Happy'.[40] Clair Cline's famous violin goes some way to demonstrating how doing something was important to POWs. He initially occupied himself with carving models and writing letters to his wife, stating that '…Men coped in various ways: Some played bridge all day, others dug escape tunnels (to no avail), some read tattered paperbacks.'[41] However, he reached a point where carving aircraft no longer interested him and looked for a new project to keep him busy. This was the point he decided to build a violin – however, this was not a lone project. Cline states that many watched curiously, some even

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[34] Vaughan, *The Way it Really Was*, 21.
[35] 'Manx National Anthem In Prison Camp', *Isle of Man Times*, 12 June 1943, 5.
[36] Hill, *The Gospel According to Fred*, 78.
[37] Vaughan, *The Way it Really Was*, 19.
[38] Vaughan, The Way it Really Was, 19; Harris, *POW and Fugitive*, 7.
[39] Harris, *POW and Fugitive*, 5, 16-17 and 21; English and Moses, *For You Tommy The War is Over*, 61
[40] John McMahon, *Almost a Lifetime* (Vicksburg: Shamrock Publications, 2000), 82. ; Vaughan, *The Way it Really Was*, 31; Stalag Happy is a POW term for 'becoming mentally unstable'.
[41] Claire Cline, 'The Prison Violin', *Guidepost Magazine*, 1997

helped with scraping the glue from chairs to stick the body of the violin together. Even the guards were involved, providing Cline with cat gut for strings and a real violin bow.[42] This creativity provided a sense of activity and togetherness which was characterised in a variety of ways, such as the Tynwald Club's lectures to others about the Isle of Man, or the shows and plays that were performed.[43] Whatever the activity, it was important for POWs to be stimulated and social – those drifting from the groups were a cause for concern and something those in positions of authority such as Colonel Owtram and Fred Hill tried to avoid.

Prisoners in the European theatre were at risk of suffering the negative psychological issues associated with boredom. Barrett states in an interview that it was essential to stay busy, building things '… kept your hands and your mind busy and that's what you needed.'[44] The daily void, left by a lack of activity, could cause depression and other mental health problems which some POWs used their creative projects to avoid. Arts and crafting have historically been present in prisons. In 1824 the Maine Prison opened and contained a wide variety of workshops for prisoners.[45] This is still seen in various penitentiaries, with Prison Services claiming it helps to reduce reoffending and the Prison Arts Foundation being created to provide access to arts and crafts for all prisoners and ex-young offenders in Northern Ireland.[46] This value was recognised by some POWs, but creativity also provided a method of gaining items and objects which the prisoners could not easily obtain. Some of these were for resistance, others for entertainment or necessity, such as the blower stoves and wireless radios.

The aim of this article was to discuss the role of creativity for Allies in POW camps during the Second World War. Much of the behaviour in POW camps was centred on coping mechanisms. Creative pursuits helped to keep the prisoner's minds and hands busy, which in turn helped to reduce their ability to dwell on captivity. Humour was an aspect of camp life which often came across in creative means (such as the songs and plays which poked fun at the camps or guards). Humour itself was a defence mechanism used by POWs against the worry of loved ones at home, their captors and even – as Barrett describes – a method of

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[42] Ibid.
[43] "Tynwald Club", *Isle of Man Examiner*, 13th July 1945, 5.
[44] Alan Barrett, Interview by Stacey Astill, 2013.
[45] Jeffrey D. Merrill, *Maine State Prison 1824-2002* (Chicago: Arcadia Publishing, 2009), 75.
[46] *Prisoners at HMP Cardiff and Parc Prison Learn to Sew*, BBC News Wales www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-14152517 22/08/2013.; *About PAF*, Prison Arts Foundation www.prisonartsfoundation.com/about/ 28/08/2013.

helping their fellow prisoners cope with captivity.[47] Major English reinforces this, stating that '…In the column there were the jokers who did so much to keep the spirits up amongst the men [during the forced marches].'[48] J. E. Nardini's study in 1952 asserts that humour was a survival factor for POWs in the Pacific theatre, while later studies such as Linda Henman's have furthered this research by identifying the links between humour and resilience in American POWs captured during the Vietnam conflict.[49] These factors also apply to Allied prisoners in the European theatre who experienced similar stressors in terms of captivity, starvation and concern for well-being. Humour offered comfort, solidarity and a demonstration of resilience to captors. Prisoners used their creativity and humour for sustained resistance, which provided prisoners a purpose. Some actions were more subtle than others, American POW, Don Jurgs' working party never directly challenged the well-armed guards, yet they planted trees upside down, broke equipment and generally made a nuisance of themselves.[50] Avoiding direct, physical engagement with the guards did not detract from the concerted daily actions of POWs. Instead the breakages, slow-downs and other inconveniences were efficacious and sustained forms of resistance. Creative, indirect resistance through humour or other subtle methods allowed POWs to continue to fight with less blatant methods. This would have been impossible without the ability to use the objects around them creatively and the drive to maintain humour and resilience throughout their capture.

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[47] Alan Barrett, Interviewed by Stacey Astill, 2013.
[48] English and Moses, *For you Tommy the War is Over*, 146.
[49] J. E. Nardini, 'Survival Factors in American Prisoners of War of the Japanese', *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 109 (1952), 241; Linda D. Henman, 'Humor as a Coping Mechanism: Lessons from POWs', *International Journal of Humor Research*, 14 No. 1 (2008) 83.
[50] Don Jurgs, Interview by Amanda Rhodes, Prisoner of War Oral History Project Andersonville National Historic Site, July 16 1992.

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