

Corporal Gordon McGrath VX9201

By Jim Claven

Born in Corryong 10 May 1919. Living at 509 Spencer Street Albury when he enlisted at Wangaratta on 7 December 1939 into B Company of the 2/7th Battalion (part of the 6th Division).¹ He is recorded as being 20 years old on enlistment but the family believes that he was only 15 and in fact celebrated his 16th birthday on his way to Europe! When he enlisted he was joining his father – Lindsay – who had enlisted at Wangaratta only a week or so before (on 28th November).

During his service overseas it looks like he took part in some of the most important battles of the 2nd AIF in Europe – the Battles of Bardia and the capture of Tobruk, then the Greek Campaign, the embarkation from Kalamata, the Battles of Canea , 42nd Street and the Rearguard for the retreat to Sfakia on Crete. After capture with most of his Battalion, he was held in transit camps on Crete (possibly Skines), Thessaloniki (Greece), before finally being sent to one of the “most notorious” camps in Germany, at Lamsdorf (modern day Poland).

The AWM records that the 2/7th Battalion opened its headquarters at the Royal Melbourne Showgrounds on 25 October 1939. It relocated to the newly-established camp at Puckapunyal on 3 November to carry out its basic training, and departed Melbourne for service overseas on 15 April 1940.

Gordon in the Middle East

Gordon and the 2/7th embarked from Australia on 15th April 1940, arriving in Egypt on 17th May 1940.

The AWM records Gordon’s Battalion conducted further training in Palestine and Egypt, before embarking on its first campaign - the advance against the Italians in eastern Libya - just before Christmas. It fought in the battles for Bardia (3-5 January 1941) and Tobruk (21-22 January 1941) and ended its activities in Libya manning defensive positions at Marsa Brega - the western extent of the advance.²

Gordon in Greece/Crete

The AWM records that on 19th April 1941 Gordon and the 2/7th embarked from Egypt for service in Greece. With the rest of the 6th Division, they had been deployed to Greece to resist the anticipated German invasion. For the 2/7th, the Greek campaign was essentially one long withdrawal through a series of rearguard positions, beginning on 16 April. The majority of the 2/7th was evacuated from Kalamata aboard the "Costa Rica" on the night of 26 April. On the afternoon of 27 April, however, the "Costa Rica" was crippled by German aircraft. The men of the 2/7th were rescued by a pair of British destroyers and landed on Crete.³ I have written about the evacuation from Kalamata.

Gordon’s service record states that on 7th May 1941 he was promoted to Acting Corporal and on 9th May he arrived on Crete. The AWM records that on Crete, the 2/7th were initially deployed to defend the coastline around Georgiupolis but, after the German airborne landings on 20 May, were soon moved up to join the fighting around Canea. On 27 May the battalion took part in a wild bayonet charge at 42nd Street that temporarily rebuffed the German advance. The 2/7th

¹ Unless otherwise stated all information is from Gordon’s Service File held in the National Archives of Australia.

² <https://www.awm.gov.au/unit/U56050/>

³ <https://www.awm.gov.au/unit/U56050/>

subsequently played a critical rearguard role as the Allied forces retreated across the island to Sphakia. As a result, the battalion was left behind and taken prisoner after the withdrawal of the last evacuation vessels from Sphakia on 1 June.⁴

Below are some photos of the commemorative service held at Sfakia in May 2016, held every year.



Sfakia Commemorative Service. Photos Jim Claven 2016

Recently a new memorial to the 42nd Street Battle was erected on Crete, funded by Australian's of Greek heritage. I attended the unveiling.



42nd Street Memorial, Crete, May 2016. Photo Jim Claven



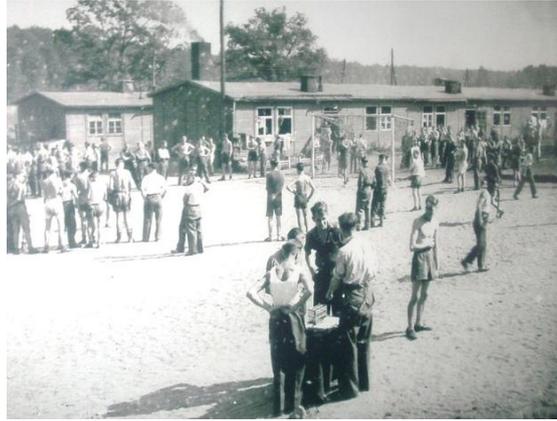
Unveiling of 42nd Street Memorial, Crete, May 2016. Photo Jim Claven

Gordon as a POW

6th June he is reported as missing on Crete, later reported as having been taken prisoner. He was reported as being in Stalag VIII in 1942, then in Stalag 344 in 1944. There were a number of Stalag

⁴ <https://www.awm.gov.au/unit/U56050/>

VIII's – listed as A (Gorlitz), B (Lamsdorf) and D (near Teschen). In 1943 Stalag VIII was re-named Camp No. 344.⁵ I would assume from this that Gordon was in Stalag VIII B/344 Lamsdorf. Lamsdorf, now called Łambinowice, is a small town in Poland. Lamsdorf was a notorious camp. There is a website with lots of information and photos of this camp.⁶

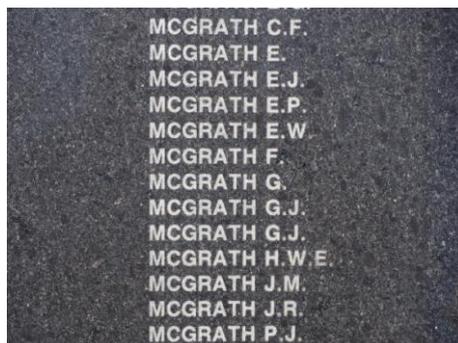


Lamsdorf POW camp. Source: <http://www.lamsdorf.com/>

During this time as a POW, Gordon would have spent time in the Thessaloniki POW camp on his way to Germany from Crete, most probably in June/July/August 1941. I have visited the camp and have written about it.



Me at the Australian POW Memorial in Ballarat. Photo Jim Claven 2012



Gordon's name is on the Ballarat POW memorial. Photo Jim Claven 2016

⁵ <http://www.lamsdorf.com/>; and, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stalag_VIII-B

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His name is inscribed on the national POW Memorial in Ballarat and on their associated website.⁷

Liberation and Return to Australia

He was liberated and arrived in the UK in May 1945. He arrived back in Sydney in July 1945. He was discharged on 9 August 1945.

Sources: National Archive of Australia/AWM/ <http://www.lamsdorf.com/>

More information: W.P. Bolger & J. G. Littlewood, *The Fiery Phoenix: the story of the 2/7 Australian Infantry Battalion 1939-1946*, (Parkdale: 2/7 Battalion Association, no date); and AWM52/8/3/7: 2/7th Battalion war diary

⁷ <http://www.powmemorialballarat.com.au/world-war-2-m-o.php>