‘HAD A SPOT OF BAD LUCK TO GET INTO THIS BUT I AM NOT ALONE’: GUNNER JACK SHOVELLER

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At prisoner-of-war camp PG57 Grupignano, in north-eastern Italy, Gunner Jack Shoveller received unexpected news. Puzzled authorities informed Jack that, according to records, he had died of wounds in battle at Ruin Ridge, Alamein, months earlier, on 27 July 1942. Jack certainly had survived, but had not forgotten his fellow soldiers of 2/3 Anti-Tank Regiment who were killed in action that night. From that perspective, he was lucky to be biding time as a prisoner of war. Jack’s thoughts, however, were to shift to his family in Sutherland, a southern suburb of Sydney. What official communications had arrived to their door? Would the Shoveller family have received a dreaded telegram to advise that he had been killed in action?

Indeed, Jack’s mother may have worried deeply that her son, approaching his 25th birthday in late 1942, had been lost to her. It had been two years since she had farewelled him from Sydney’s shores. As 1942 rolled into 1943 she would hear, unofficially, that Jack’s transition out of battle and into captivity had been a safe one. Thankfully, the networks of 2/3 Anti-Tank Regiment prisoners and their families were keen to share information, and to support each other. Compiling information from its sources, the Commonwealth’s Prisoners of War Information Bureau, Melbourne, heard, in February 1943, that another 2/3 Anti-Tank gunner, Bill Upston, had written to his wife from Italy, and made passing mention that ‘Jack was well and in camp with him’. The Bureau had also received a letter from the Australian Prisoner of War Relatives Association, to advise that the mother of Sgt Jack Withycombe, captured with Jack Shoveller, had received a radio message from her son through the Apostolic Delegation in late August 1942. Among the regimental mates with him in his transit camp, was ‘unwounded’ Jack Shoveller.1

Communications within officialdom sought some clarity regarding Jack. On 17 July 1943, a year after Jack and fellow troops of the regiment’s 12th Battery were taken prisoner, a letter was sent from Australia House, London, to the Department of Army, Melbourne. It was investigating the reports that Jack had been killed in action, and was attempting to ascertain its basis. Official reports were questioned, in the light of the receipt of a card from Italy. Confirmation was however considered prudent.

Meanwhile, a card has been received here from Gnr. Shoveller from Camp 57, but before advising his next of kin, it was thought desirable to confirm beyond any reasonable doubt that there was no possibility of impersonation, and that Shoveller was in fact alive. Geneva confirmed that Shoveller was alive and at 57, and a cable to this effect was sent to PrisWar Melbourne, 17 June.2

Following on from that letter card, Jack continued to write to home. He was keen to reassure his family that he was alive. In October 1943, The Australian Red Cross received an airgraph letter from their London arm, which carried an extract of a letter from Jack. They promptly forwarded the message from Jack to his mother Mrs P. Shoveller, at ‘Greendale’, Sutherland. The Red Cross Director annotated the letter with a positive note, that ‘we are sure you will be glad to have this information’. No doubt Jack’s family would welcome this message, but like

2 Ibid, p.60: Memorandum from Australia House London to Department of the Army Melbourne, 17/7/1943.
so many messages coming home, it was out of date by the time they read it. Jack was in German captivity by the time his letter reached Sutherland, but he must have wondered if the mix-up had been resolved.

I am a Prisoner of War in Italy, having been captured at El Alamein 27 July 1942; six months of the time I have been captured was spent in Libya from where I could not write home and only today I learned from the Italian authorities of this camp that I was posted as having died in a German field hospital the day I was captured, this information having been sent home to my people.

I was slightly wounded but am feeling quite well now and I would be very grateful if you could convey this new to my people in Australia – the address being Mrs T. (Thomas) Shoveller, Sutherland, Sydney.

The mistake made by the Germans about me having died and being buried at El Daba is hard to understand but it could have been my sergeant who was badly wounded and who may have been carrying my paybook, you may look him up and see what actually happened to him, Sgt. Bruce Templeman, 3 Anti Tank Regiment. I would ever be grateful if you could look into this.  

Both Bruce Templeman, and his driver Jack Shoveller, were to be ‘lost in action’ during the night of 26/27 July 1942 at Ruin Ridge. At midnight, under full moonlight, troops of their regiment’s 12th Battery were in anxious readiness to move forward into battle. Gnr Doug Frame was alongside Gnr Jack Shoveller, and Sgt Bruce Templeman. Frame overheard Templeman say to Jack that he was carrying a new paybook for Jack, and that he would give it to him when they reached the ridge. At 3am, Templeman asked Frame if they could swap trenches. The digging in the desert soil was wearing them out. They swapped respective positions, and at 7am a mortar shell exploded beside Bruce. Templeman was badly wounded in the back by a large shell fragment and was given first aid by Gnr Ben Lester, who held the wounds together for over two hours until Templeman was taken away by German stretcher bearers. Jack Shoveller’s greatcoat was handed over to comfort Templeman as he was transported to field hospital. Identity discs had been removed from Templeman, therefore the identification of his body came to the documents on his person, which comprised the new paybook of Jack Shoveller.4

As morning advanced on 27 July 1942, John Pope, another sergeant of 12th Battery, witnessed the wounds that had been inflicted on Sgt Templeman. At about 9am, the troops of 12th Battery knew that the situation was increasingly grim. Enemy forces and equipment had proved to be superior, and in defeat, they were ordered to surrender. For the fatally wounded soldiers, like Bruce, this battle would be their last.

He was severely wounded by shrapnel, the location of the wound being below the left shoulder, a large portion of the shoulder blade being displaced, a large area of the lung being exposed. At the time of my departure at 10am, he was still conscious but in my opinion he was in a dying condition.5

The survivors were moved through transit camps in North Africa, and then transported to Italy. Jack scribbled a letter card to his parents, on 9 October 1942, from a transit camp in

3 Ibid, p.49: Correspondence from Red Cross Bureau for Wounded Missing and Prisoners of War to Mrs P.M. Shoveller, 7/10/43.
Italy, nearly three months after being taken prisoner. It had to be brief to comply with censorship, but he did his best to reassure those at home:

Dear Mother and Dad,

I am all well and safe, so please do not worry about me. Had a spot of bad luck to get into this but I am not alone for I have several mates with me so all is OK.

Love to all at home, also Amy. Good luck, best wishes, lots of love, Jack.'67

This brief but welcome message arrived in Sydney late in April 1943. By then, Jack was in the camp at Grupignano. About a year after he had sent that letter card home, his prisoner location was to change again. The mop-up of the camp at Grupignano by German forces in September 1943 following the Italian Armistice was swift. Jack and large numbers of the Australian prisoner cohort were carted away to German captivity. Not only the receipt of letters to his family, but the updated entries on Jack’s service file were similarly slow to catch up with his movements. Jack was in German custody before clerical hands updated his file in December 1943 to say ‘Now reported POW in Italy’. The service file for Bruce Templeman was also updated with an entry penned in late January 1944, to read ‘Died of Wounds whilst POW 28/7/1942’.7

On that same day, Jack ‘Silver John’ Argent, commander of 12th Battery, and of the wider 2/3 Anti-Tank Regiment, put pen to paper. Jack Argent was keen to set the record straight regarding the apparent mix-up of two members of his regiment, Sgt Templeman and Gnr Shoveller, at the Ruin Ridge battle. Argent had little doubt that the body lying in Grave H 10 at El Daba cemetery was that of Bruce Templeman:

Templeman’s next-of-kin also presume this to be so, although they have not been officially informed of the fact. Several letters have been received from Shoveller since, by his mother and others from his unit.’8

1944 rolled into 1945. The end of the war was creeping closer, but in early 1945, Jack Shoveller is yet again, unaccounted for. Cipher messages and cables fire back and forth, as the authorities in London and Australia endeavour to verify this new report. The Red Cross Society received word from London on 30 July 1945: ‘NX33471 Gunner J.S. Shoveller officially believed deceased. No details known, Army investigating’.9 The following day, the Australian Red Cross Society acted on behalf of Jack Shoveller’s family, to send an inquiry to the Second Echelon. What has happened to Jack? The frustration of Second Echelon personnel is evident in their advice of 21 August 1945 to the Melbourne Red Cross: ‘The investigations made through Australian Army staff, London, have so far failed to obtain confirmation of death’.10

By this time, correspondence had settled regarding the incorrect reports that Jack died of wounds at Ruin Ridge. A new round of correspondence was to commence. By the third week of August 1945, witness reports had been solicited to check the veracity of the new reports that Jack died as a prisoner of war in Europe. Statements of witnesses were solicited, including Pte Donnington Bruton. A labourer from Swan Hill, Bruton was taken prisoner after being wounded in action at Greece in mid-1941, and he ended up in the same hospital as

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6 Ibid, p.76: Letter card sent from Italy by Jack Shoveller, 9/10/1942.
7 NAA B883, NX58486. Service File for Bruce Templeman.
8 Service File for Jack Shoveller, p.50.
Jack at Hospital 3B in Graz. They had been in the same camp together for sixteen months, and were both aged 27. Concerned that Jack had not received thorough treatment in the hospital, and that more was afoot, Bruton put forward a statement to the Victorian Echelon and Records on 3 March 1946. He was by this time, back home in Swan Hill.

Gunner Shoveller was admitted to 3B Graz on or about the 10 April 1945. I was a patient there myself and able to identify Shoveller as we had been in a working camp together for 16 months at 182 G.W. Graz.

When Shoveller was admitted to 3B, he was unable to speak. I tried very hard to get him to speak but he appeared to have something wrong with his mouth. The French and German doctors examined him and said he had typhus. Shoveller remained there until 15-4-45, he was then transferred to hospital 4B Graz. The Doctor there removed a signet ring from his throat. However Shoveller was dying then and he did die on 18/4/45. We buried him on the 22/4/45 Graz. I should like to state that Shoveller never received thorough medical treatment at the time.\(^{11}\)

Bruton added a poignant postscript to his statement: ‘The cause of Gunner Shoveller’s death is unknown’. Another Medical Orderly at Hospital 3B, Pte Joseph O’Halloran, whom Bruton had assisted in the burial of Jack, completed a statutory declaration, ‘conscientiously believing the statements therein to be true in every particular’:

Shoveller, Jack Stephen, was brought in by ambulance at approximately the 22/4/45, in a poor physical condition, suspected of having contracted typhus fever, and suffering from loss of memory. His condition could not be diagnosed. About the 25/4/45, Shoveller was transferred to 4B, where I continued to visit him. His illness remained undiagnosed. Approximately on the 28/4/45, I was told by a British patient that Gnr. Shoveller had died that day.\(^{12}\)

O’Halloran immediately arranged for burial and provided his identification of the deceased prisoner as Jack Shoveller. Joseph’s recollection of precise dates was a bit hazy, hence the citation of approximate dates within his declaration. When O’Halloran was repatriated via Sydney in August 1945, he was however clear that he needed to make a visit to Sutherland: ‘I had removed the photograph of the deceased from the personal effects prior to the burial and have since handed it to Miss A. Hewes, Auburn Street, Sutherland, whose name and address appeared thereon.’\(^{13}\) Amy, presumably a friend or girlfriend of Jack, was able to confirm for Joseph that the photograph was of Jack.

Capt Percy Abbott was another who knew Jack Shoveller, and was prepared to provide a testimony. Capt Abbott was also with 12th Battery at the Ruin Ridge battle. Although he was not a direct witness to the events surrounding Jack’s death, Abbott relayed details as provided to him by Pte H. Poulter, a medical orderly at 3B Graz:

After the Italian capitulation (he) was moved to Germany to near Silesia where he was in various working kommandos. On approx. 24 April 1945, Shoveller arrived at P.O.W. hospital 3B Graz (Surgical), was unable to walk and was in a coma. He was identified at the hospital by Pte Donald (sic) Bruton. Shoveller was treated at 3B by a French medical student who considered the illness to be meningitis. After about 10 days Shoveller was moved to Hospital 4B Graz (Physical) where he was treated by a German doctor. Death occurred on about 8 May. The German doctor is said to have told an English O.R. that death was due to poison. Buried at Pontogame Cemetery, POW Section. Pte Bruton being present. He apparently remained in a coma and felt no pain and was unable to eat or do anything for himself. There was no post-mortem.\(^{14}\)

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\(^{13}\) Ibid.
\(^{14}\) Ibid, p.29: Statement from Percy Abbott, undated.
There was further information communicated to Capt Abbott by Poulter. Jack had been living with a German couple, perhaps at a work camp location, but the relevance to Jack’s death is not stated. In addition, a brief report by a New Zealand private, E. Manley, said that Jack died about the 17 April 1945 in 4B Graz, but included no extra clue regarding the cause Jack Shoveller’s death.\(^{15}\)

An entry on Jack’s Service and Casualty form of March 1946 records the update that Jack was ‘Now reported died of disease typhus whilst POW hospital’. The statement by Pte Donnington Bruton is the accepted version of events. A handwritten summation by an assessing officer is scrawled at the bottom of Bruton’s statement. It noted that typhus was a prevalent disease of the time. It speculated that the ‘ring may have been swallowed during illness and possibly may have been a contributing factor to death. Removal of ring from throat should have caused recovery in the absence of any other complaints’.\(^{16}\)

An Internal Message of 21 March 1946 summarises that ‘after months of search for evidence death, information was received by recovered PW who states that he was with Shoveller when he died’, and that ‘notification to next-of-kin’ was ‘that Shoveller died of typhus on 18 April 1945’.\(^{17}\) This official determination would generate not only a death certificate for Jack Shoveller, but also the dispatch of another letter to the Shoveller household in Sutherland.

Regardless of the various causal factors, contributors and conclusions, Jack was to die only a matter of weeks before his fellow prisoners were released. Had he survived, he would have probably been with them, as they were liberated from German captivity. Donnington Bruton was on his own slow journey home to Australia, via the UK, within weeks of Jack’s death. Bruton was only days from Australia when the prisoner that he had assisted in burying was exhumed and relocated by British occupying forces to the Commonwealth War Cemetery at Klagenfurt. Bruton disembarked in Sydney on 29 November 1945.\(^{18}\) That day would have been Jack Shoveller’s 28\(^{th}\) birthday.

The precise details of dates and events vary across the testimonies that refer to the period leading to the death of Jack. Nevertheless, the general gist is clear. Gnr Jack Shoveller, former brickcarter’s assistant from Sutherland Shire, blue-eyed son to Mr and Mrs Thomas Shoveller, friend or lover to Amy, had suffered far more than a spot of bad luck during the four years since he had farewelled them all.

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**Editor’s note**

**Details in WW2 Nominal Roll:** Name: SHOVELLER, JACK STEPHEN; Service no: NX33471; DoB: 28 Nov 1917; Place of birth: SUTHERLAND NSW; Date of enlistment: 21 Jun 1940; Date of death: 18 Apr 1945; Rank: GUNNER; Posting on death: 3 ANTI TANK REGIMENT; PoW: YES; Roll of Honour: SUTHERLAND NSW

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\(^{15}\) Ibid, p.21: Statement by E.B. Manley, undated.  
\(^{18}\) NAA B883, VX6842. Service file for Donnington Bruton, p.17.