

**LEADERSHIP OF AUSTRALIAN POWS IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR**

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## CHAPTER 6: POSITIONAL AND INFORMAL DEMOCRATIC LEADERSHIP

Air Force Sergeant James ‘Dixie’ Deans and Warrant Officer Alistair McGregor Currie were two air force NCO elected positional leaders. The chapter begins with a brief history of both men in captivity, then examines how Deans and Currie balanced the needs of their formal groups with the unique nature of their leadership authority in order to create and apply a democratic leadership style in captivity. With an ability to adapt their leadership style in response to their men’s physical and psychological needs, both men became respected POW leaders who gained loyal followership.

### Sergeant James ‘Dixie’ Deans

Sergeant James ‘Dixie’ Deans bailed out over Berlin on 10 September 1940.<sup>1</sup>

Captured by the Germans, Deans was transferred into the custody of the Luftwaffe and interrogated at Dulag Luft before being transferred to his first camp, Stalag Luft I.<sup>2</sup>

Over the course of the war, Deans would be held in six camps run by the Luftwaffe for air force POWs<sup>3</sup> and, mixed service personnel camps at Stalag 357 at Thorn, then at Fallingbostal, which were run by German Wehrmacht.<sup>4</sup> Then, in April 1945, with the Allied forces approaching Fallingbostal, Deans and his men were forced to evacuate the camp via train and then on foot.<sup>5</sup>

For the most part, the conditions in the Luftwaffe camps were relatively stable.<sup>6</sup>

Permanent barracks had been built for housing the prisoners, there were regular arrivals of Red Cross parcels to supplement the German ration and to pass the time the POWs were allowed to participate in a variety of leisure and educational activities.

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<sup>1</sup> Gilbert, *POW*, p.137; Younger, *No Flight from the Cage*, p.24.

<sup>2</sup> J. Deans, Repatriation Questionnaire for British/American Ex-Prisoners of War no. 42218, p.1, TNA:PRO:WO 344\87\2.

<sup>3</sup> Deans was held in the following permanent Luftwaffe camps: Stalag Luft I, Stalag Luft III Centre Compound and Stalag Luft IV. See Deans, Repatriation Questionnaire for British/American Ex-Prisoners of War, p.1; J. Deans, Special Questionnaire for British/American Ex-Prisoners of War MI9/INT/SP/MIS-x, p.1, TNA:PRO:WO208/5439.

<sup>4</sup> Deans, Repatriation Questionnaire for British/American Ex-Prisoners of War, p.1; Deans, Special Questionnaire for British/American Ex-Prisoners of War, p.1.

<sup>5</sup> Deans, Repatriation Questionnaire for British/American Ex-Prisoners of War, p.1; Interview with Deans, reel 4.

<sup>6</sup> Camp History of Stalag Luft III (Sagan) Air Force Personnel, April 1942-January 1945, Part II Centre (NCO) Compound, pp.1-2; Protecting Power Inspection Report of Stalag Luft III, 13 September 1942, p.1, TNA:PRO:WO224/63A; Protecting Power Inspection Report of Stalag Luft III, 13 May 1942, p.2, TNA:PRO:WO224/63A; F. Seamer, Statements by Royal Air Force Personnel from Prisoner of War Camps in Germany and Italy, no.A402478, 23 April 1945, p.1, AWM54 779/3/129 Part 5.

Relations with the Luftwaffe Commandants and guards were, for the most part, relatively amicable.<sup>7</sup> The one significant exception to this was Stalag Luft IV in Heydkrug.<sup>8</sup> Stalag Luft IV already held 3000 NCOs when Deans and some of his formal group arrived.<sup>9</sup> This number grew to 6000, following large transfers of American POWs. From this time onwards, Deans' men experienced overcrowded conditions in temporary accommodation and Red Cross parcels became fewer and smaller.<sup>10</sup> In the aftermath of the Great Escape, the amicable relations with the Commandants established in previous camps ended.<sup>11</sup> Some prisoners were shot during escape attempts and the German guards were openly violent towards the prisoners.<sup>12</sup>

In Stalag 357 at Thorn and then at Fallingbostal, Deans' men felt the real impact of Germany's failing war effort. Deans' formal group arrived at Thorn after a particularly trying train journey of four days in overcrowded truck cars.<sup>13</sup> When they arrived at the camp, 7000 army NCOs were already there.<sup>14</sup> This figure soon reached 9000 POWs and kept climbing.<sup>15</sup> Shortages of German rations and Red Cross parcels continued.<sup>16</sup> At Fallingbostal, they found themselves in a reception centre for POWs who would soon be forced to leave the camp and march away from the approaching Allied

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Cornish, reel 4; Interview with Fordyce, reel 5.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with A. Kerr by J. Bannister for the IWM on 18 March 2003, reel 5; Interview with D. Winn on 4 March 2004 for the Australians at War Film Archive, no.1508, reel 8, <<http://www.australiansatwarfilmarchive.gov.au/aawfa/interviews/333.aspx>>, maintained by the Australian Department of Veteran Affairs, accessed on 15 June 2014; Interview with C. Younger by D. Firth for the IWM in November 2002, reel 5, IWM 23329; Dominy, *The Sergeant Escapers*, pp.107-110; Younger, *No Flight from the Cage*, pp.115-124.

<sup>9</sup> Field, 'Prisoners of the Germans and Italians', p.805; Mason, *Prisoners of War*, p.404.

<sup>10</sup> L. Frith, unpublished writings titled 'What a way to win a war,' p.75, IWM 94/25/1; Maher, 'My Experiences as a Prisoner of War in Germany', pp.19-20; Gilbert, *POWs*, pp.200-201; Rolf, *Prisoners of the Reich*, pp.147-148.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Deans, reel 4; Interview with Winn, reel 8; Dominy, *The Sergeant Escapers*, pp.107-110; Younger, *No Flight from the Cage*, pp.115-124.

<sup>12</sup> R. Davies, Statements by Royal Air Force Personnel from Prisoner of War Camps in Germany and Italy, no.A400342, pp.4-5, AWM54 779/3/129 Part 1; E. Maher, Prisoners of War Statements RAAF for Repatriation Conference, no.166727, 27 November 1945, NAA A.705 163/1/743; Clutton-Brock, *Footprints on the Sands of Time*, pp.100-106; Dominy, *The Sergeant Escapers*, p.81.

<sup>13</sup> Mason, *Prisoners of War*, p.404.

<sup>14</sup> Clutton-Brock, *Footprints on the Sands of Time*, pp.164-165; Mason, *Prisoners of War*, p.404.

<sup>15</sup> Clutton-Brock, *Footprints on the Sands of Time*, pp.164-165; Mason, *Prisoners of War*, p.404.

<sup>16</sup> J. Cassidy, Statements by Royal Air Force Personnel from Prisoner of War Camps in Germany and Italy, no.A413823, 21 June 1945, p.1, AWM54 779/3/129 Part 15; S. Smith, Statements by Royal Air Force Personnel from Prisoner of War Camps in Germany and Italy, no.A404310, 27 July 1945, p.1, AWM54 779/3/129 Part 8; Interview with A. Kerr on 3 March 2004 for the Australians at War Film Archive, no.1489, tape 7,

<<http://www.australiansatwarfilmarchive.gov.au/aawfa/interviews/1219.aspx>>, maintained by the Australian Department of Veteran Affairs, accessed on 13 May 2014.

forces.<sup>17</sup> Here Deans' formal group mostly lived in makeshift tents on the parade ground, with no heating or lighting, and existed on rations that fell below subsistence levels.<sup>18</sup>

On the open road in April 1945 Deans controlled an expanded formal group of about 12 000 men, spilt into sections of about 1000 each.<sup>19</sup> During the day Deans, rode between the groups on an old bicycle to ensure that the men had sufficient rations, were given rest breaks and were treated fairly by their guards.<sup>20</sup> At night, Deans cycled between the barns that he had arranged as a billet. Deans also had another challenge to deal with, British air strafing of his column. This final phase of captivity ended on 2 May when Deans' column was liberated by the American army.<sup>21</sup>

When Deans arrived in Stalag Luft I, his first camp, he found a formal group who believed that their elected leader was making life very comfortable for himself but not for his men.<sup>22</sup> An election soon followed, with Deans winning the vote. From this point on, Deans retained the position of MOC for the duration of his captive experience in six camps.<sup>23</sup> He did so because he won the right to act as the positional leader of his respective air force NCO formal groups through elections. At both Stalag Luft III Centre Compound and Stalag 357 Fallingbostal, for example, Deans was elected MOC as the previous MOCs were forced to resign by their respective formal groups.<sup>24</sup> At Stalag 357 at Thorn, where the formal group consisted of mixed air force NCOs and army other ranks, the acting SBO, Captain Bonham-Carter, aware of

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<sup>17</sup> Military Board Adjutant-General Officer in Charge 2 Echelon, Statements made by Repatriated Prisoners of War, Appendix, p.39, NAA: B3856 144/14/23.

<sup>18</sup> For an overview of conditions in this camps see Davies, Statements by Royal Air Force Personnel from Prisoner of War Camps in Germany and Italy, pp.1-2; Seamer, Statements by Royal Air Force Personnel from Prisoner of War Camps in Germany and Italy, p.1, Younger, *No Flight from the Cage*, p.146.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Morton, reel 1; Rolf, *Prisoners of the Reich*, p.166.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with H. Dawson on 10 May 2004 for the Australians at War Film Archive, no.2015, tapes 5 and 6

< <http://www.australiansatwarfilmarchive.gov.au/aawfa/interviews/1469.aspx>>, maintained by the Australian Department of Veteran Affairs, accessed on 12 May 2104; R. Watchhorn, unpublished writings section titled 'March out of Fallingbostal 8 April 1945', p.93, IWM 95/35/1; Interview with Deans, reel 4; Dominey, *The Sergeant Escapers*, pp.126-127; Younger, *No Flight From the Cage*, pp.234-243.

<sup>21</sup> Watchhorn, 'March out of Fallingbostal 8 April 1945', p.93; Interview with Morton, reel 1.

<sup>22</sup> Gilbert, *POWs*, p.139.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Buckingham, reel 2.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Deans, reels 2 and 4; Dominey, *The Sergeant Escapers*, pp.66, 117; Mackenzie, *The Colditz Myth*, p.127.

Dean's reputation, stepped down to allow an election of a new leader.<sup>25</sup> Deans won the majority of votes against his main opponent, the previous MOC of the army contingent of the camp, Regimental Sergeant Major Turner.<sup>26</sup>

It is important to note that different men formed Deans' formal groups. The Luftwaffe transferred POWs, either as individuals or in small numbers, from camp and camp, or from compound to compound within a camp. This ad hoc transfer policy meant that in his six different camps, some of the same men remained with Deans, while others did not. This changing composition of formal groups and, in the case of Stalag 357 at Thorn and then at Fallingbostal where the formal group consisted of mixed service personnel, makes Deans' ability to retain his position as MOC even more remarkable.

### **Warrant Officer Alistair McGregor Currie**

Warrant Officer Alistair McGregor Currie was an Australian member of the 12<sup>th</sup> RAF Squadron.<sup>27</sup> A sheep station worker in civilian life, Currie's war ended on 15 March 1942 when his plane was shot down at St. Nazaire in western France. He was interrogated at Dulag Luft and then transferred to Stalag VIIIIB/344 in Lamsdorf, Poland, on 15 March 1942. Currie spent two years and eight months in this camp. This was a mixed camp and was one of the worst British army other rank POW camps run by the German Wehrmacht.<sup>28</sup> Nor were the air force NCOs housed in their own compound. In a letter penned in October 1942 to his wife Bel, Currie described the Air Force NCO Compound in Stalag VIIIIB as a mixed compound with 1000 air force NCOs, of which 74 were Australian, and 500 other ranks from the army.<sup>29</sup> This mixed

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<sup>25</sup> Interview with C. Beckett by C. Wood for the IWM on 9 March 1986, IWM 16827; Younger, *No Flight from the Cage*, pp.187-189.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Buckingham, reel 2; Interview with Younger, reels 12-13; Dominy, *The Sergeant Escapers*, p.177; Younger, *No Flight from the Cage*, pp.187-189.

<sup>27</sup>A. Currie, Repatriation Questionnaire for British/American Ex-Prisoners of War, no.A407822, p.1, TNA:PRO:WO344/80/1.

<sup>28</sup> For an overview of the conditions of this Stalag see Interview with E. Hall, reel 2; Mackenzie, *The Colditz Myth*, pp.99-100. For an overview of this classification for Stalag VIIIIB see Letter to British Foreign Office from H. Satow President of International Red Cross Committee Geneva, 25 February 1942, TNA:PRO:FO916/244; Inspection Report by the International Red Cross on Stalag VIIIIB visited on 11 December 1941, pp.1-6; TNO:PRO:FO916/244.

<sup>29</sup> Letter to Bel from A. Currie, 2 October 1943, p.1, AWM PR00973.