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The unofficial World War II photographs of Alfred Huggins and Syd Grant

At the outset of World War II, the Australian government instituted strict censorship over the writings and photographs of civilian media and military personnel.¹ During the Greek campaign of 1941 – a short, violent and somewhat chaotic engagement, and a major undertaking for the Australian forces – there was also little opportunity for the official Australian war photographers who were there to record the events. However, in spite of the regulations and restrictions, two wool-classers from Victoria's Western District, who, after enlisting, participated in the campaign, appear to have been determined to capture 'their war' in photographs. Private Sydney (Syd) Carney Grant of the 2/8th Battalion and Sergeant Alfred Frank Huggins of the 2/3rd Casualty Clearing Station (see pages 71, 73) independently and unofficially created photographic collections that together constitute an impressive archive of almost 100 images of the Australian involvement in the campaign. The recent donations of these collections to State Library Victoria by the men's families make a valuable addition not only to the Library's collection but to the existing archives of the campaign, such as that held by the Australian War Memorial, in Canberra.²

In total, State Library Victoria's Sydney Grant photographic and manuscript collection contains 320 individual photographs, and the Sergeant Alfred

Private Sydney (Syd) Carney Grant, c. 1940–41. Sydney Grant, Sydney Grant photographic collection, MS 15995 (hereafter SG). (Except where noted by a PH number, images in this article are images captured by the author of original gelatin silver photographic prints.)



Frank Huggins collection contains 232 images in two albums (comprising 201 photographs and some postcards), from throughout their war service. The collections also include letters, audio recordings and other documentary material. At the time of writing, only a small number of the Grant collection's photographs have been digitised and are available online. This article is based on my review of the two collections prior to their donation to State Library Victoria; it was my pleasure to assist both families in their donations of the collections, Syd's in 2016 and Alfred's in 2019. Of course, a discussion of the collections' full scope and significance would require more pages than are available here. Instead, the article introduces the archive through a small selection of the Greek campaign photographs that demonstrates their importance in Australia's war records.



During April and May 1941, thousands of Australian defence personnel served as part of the Allied force sent to Greece to protect it against a German invasion. After arriving in Athens in March, the Australian troops – who would soon unite with New Zealand troops in the campaign to form the second incarnation of the Anzac Corps – moved to the north of the country. Throughout April, they participated in a series of major battles on the mainland then staged a dogged fighting withdrawal to evacuation beaches near Athens and across the southern Peloponnese before being transported to Crete. A German airborne invasion of Crete in May led to another series of bitter engagements and necessitated further withdrawal and evacuation, to Egypt.

On his return to Egypt following the campaign, Syd Grant wrote home that 'Censorship is very strict'.³ Indeed, one of his other letters home arrived with a section cut out of it, revealing evidence of the censorship imposed on Australian military personnel at the time.⁴ All private communications from the front were subject to this censorship. Under such conditions, private photography during overseas war service would certainly have been forbidden by both the Australian military and the Allied command. In order to document the Australian involvement in the war, official war correspondents and photographers (including cine-cameraman Damien Parer and photographer George Silk) were appointed by the Australian government. They operated under the government's military censorship regulations as an arm of the Australian Department of Information, travelling with the 6th Division as it left for the Middle East and participated in the Greek campaign.⁵

But Syd Grant and Alfred Huggins somehow bypassed the censorship regulations and took hundreds of photographs throughout their war service.



'Beyrouth.' Triple-exposure photograph of Sergeant Alfred Huggins, Beirut, Lebanon, c. 1941–43. Alfred Huggins, Sergeant Alfred Frank Huggins photograph collection, MS 16335 (hereafter AH). (Quotations in captions are the photographers' written descriptions of the images.)

Syd began taking photographs from the time of his enlistment, hiding his camera and rolls of film in his army canteen and sending negative film back to Australia.⁶ Alfred was a keen photographer before the war. Photographs from his service in the Middle East after the Greek campaign reveal him to have worked in the X-ray department of his unit, which would have provided access to film-developing materials – an ideal location for someone with photographic skills.

While many soldiers were discouraged by the censorship rules from taking their own photographs of the war, it seems more than likely, from the extent and content of Alfred's and Syd's photographs, that their colleagues were aware of the two men's photographic endeavours. Indeed, a copy of one of Alfred's Greek campaign photographs found its way into the hands of the unit's commanding officer Lieutenant Colonel John Belisario, who appears to have subsequently donated it to the Australian War Memorial.

Alfred and Syd travelled with their units from Australia, via a stop in the Egyptian port of Alexandria, to Piraeus, near Athens, the Greek capital. They recorded their journeys from Egypt to Greece in photographs and in postcards



Top: 'Just past Larissa towards Ellason [Elassona], Greece, April 1941.' SG.

Above: 'Greece – Ellisona by Olympus.' This probably depicts the 2/3rd Casualty Clearing Station camp site, located behind Allied lines, near Elassona, central Greece, April 1941. AH.

they collected along the way. Like many of the Allied troops who arrived in Greece in March, prior to the German invasion, they were able to enjoy the capital over a few days' leave and recorded their impressions in photographs and letters. They both visited the Acropolis. Syd mentioned his visit in a letter home and expressed a fear that the Australians would drink Athens dry of the local beer. The same letter recorded the enthusiasm of the Athenians for the Australians:



Top: 'In Greece and as cold as hell. Eating of course the customary bully and biscuits', April 1941. AH.

Above: 'Stick of bombs.' Greece, April 1941. SG, PHO224

We had a marvellous time when on leave, the people couldn't do enough for us and we appreciated it ... The city of Athens is a beautiful place, nice and clean, modern shops, trams, buses, the people very cheerful under the circumstances ... It was a lovely country and some day I hope to return to it. We were camped right near the sea about 8 miles [13 kilometres] out of Athens, everything lovely and green wild flowers lovely homes and just over the road the blue sea.⁷



‘Operation – Greece.’ Members of the 2/3rd Casualty Clearing Station operating on a wounded soldier during the Greek campaign, April 1941. AH.

The Allied troops then moved north to take up their defensive positions. Syd’s unit, the 2/8th Battalion, passed Larissa on the way to Ellassona in central Greece (see page 74) before reaching its destination at Vevi, close to Greece’s northern border. It was at Ellassona that Alfred’s unit, the 2/3rd Casualty Clearing Station, established its field operations; in one photograph, Alfred captured the scene of a camp with Mount Olympus in the background (see page 74).

In early April, the troops were subject to wintry weather; at Vevi they fought in snow-laden hills and valleys. Alfred’s photograph on page 75 clearly depicts how cold the men felt at the time.

The first battle of the campaign occurred at Vevi on 10–12 April. As the Germans invaded, they subjected the Allied troops to almost constant air attacks. Syd’s and Alfred’s collections depict these violent, terrible bombing raids and their results (see above and pages 75 and 77). Two of Alfred’s photographs from this stage of the campaign are particularly noteworthy. The first, taken as the Allied troops began their defensive withdrawal across the length of Greece, shows medical staff performing an operation on a wounded soldier in the field, by the side of a vehicle. From the start of the invasion, Allied field medical services like Alfred’s were often overwhelmed with casualties and constantly on the move.⁸ The second photograph portrays a field burial. Alfred’s photographic skills are obvious in this image, in his positioning of the burial party with the backdrop of the valley below and mountains beyond.

Alfred’s collection includes nine photographs taken by a German soldier, which Alfred obtained later, from an unnamed prisoner.⁹ While most depict



‘Greece – burial service.’ Taken behind Allied lines during the Greek campaign, April 1941. AH.

German paratroopers preparing for and taking part in an air assault, two are particularly important, as they show the arrival of the German occupation forces in Athens; they were probably taken on 27 April (see page 78).

As the Allied troops withdrew, they made their way to various evacuation ports. At Nafplio, in the Peloponnese, Alfred photographed the city as well as a downed German aircraft, one of the many which attacked the troops assembling there (see page 78). Syd’s unit headed further south, to Kalamata, where they were part of a large group of Allied troops of several nationalities. His photographs on page 79 show Australian, Greek and Yugoslav soldiers posing with local townsfolk.

Syd, unlike Alfred, was not evacuated as planned. Instead, he was among the estimated 8000 Allied soldiers captured by the Germans at the fall of Kalamata, on 29 April. However, he soon escaped, joining other evaders and escapers as they made their way along the coast of the Mani peninsula to the east of Kalamata. The next day, having travelled over 50 kilometres on foot, Syd was being hidden and fed by the villagers of Trahila, along with many other Allied troops. Syd’s collection includes a number of photographs of his time in Trahila (see pages 80 and 81). His images of supportive locals would have resonated with many of the other Allied soldiers involved in the campaign.

Syd was one of around 235 Allied soldiers evacuated from Trahila and other villages on the Mani peninsula in the early hours of 1 May. The photograph on page 81 shows some of the soldiers evacuated with Syd aboard the British warship *HMS Kimberley*. Syd’s are the only known photographs of the Mani evacuations.



Top: 'Captured from German prisoner.' German troops in Athens following its capture, April 1941. Note the use of horse transport on the right. AH.

Above: 'Greece – wreckage.' Nafplio, April 1941. With the Germans exercising effective air superiority, troops were subject to German air attack wherever they were located. AH.

Syd and Alfred arrived in Crete in the weeks prior to the German invasion of the island, which commenced on 20 May. Their collections contain photographs of the villages and surrounds in which they camped, including ruins of medieval churches and cemeteries. It was while he was based at the village of Neo Chorio – located 25 kilometres south-east of Chania – that Syd captured one of his particularly interesting images; it depicts a local villager and captures some of the informality and hospitality frequently



‘Greeks, Serbian officers and Australian soldiers Kalamata, 28 April 1941.’ SG, PHO232



‘Kalamato, Greece, April 1941.’ A gathering of locals and Allied soldiers. SG, PHO230



Top: 'Trachila where we were picked up by destroyers on May 1st at 2.30am south of Kalamata, 35 miles or so, April 1941.' SG, PHO235

Above: 'Two of the many Greek girls who fed us with bread and water standing at the entrance of an old church at Trachila Greece, 30 April 1941' (detail). SG, PHO233

experienced by Australian soldiers during the campaign (see page 83). Syd had probably enjoyed a glass or two of 'plonk', as he called it, with this gentleman.

Alfred and Syd were fortunate to be evacuated from Crete before the German invasion. Their photographs of Australian troops assembling next to and boarding transports in Souda Bay on pages 82 and 83 are unique in showing the bay shortly before it was extensively bombed. Alfred was evacuated on the transport MV *Lossiebank* (see page 82). Like many of the ships that departed



Top: 'Two fishing boats and Greek boy at Drachilia [Trahila] we were unable to get these going, Greece, 30 April 1941.' SG, PHO236

Above: 'A few of the lads on HMS Kimberley returning from Greece, 1 May 1941 – Max Woods [back row, second from right], Geo Knight [back right].' At sea. SG.

Greece and Crete in convoys, the *Lossiebank* was subjected to air attack during the voyage.¹⁰



This year is the 80th anniversary of the Greek campaign – a campaign from which little official war photography has survived. While the Australian War Memorial's collection contains important photographs of the campaign – most of which were taken by official war photographers – and includes some from



Top: 'Marching down to the Lossybank.' Presumably taken from aboard *MV Lossiebank* after Alfred boarded, 14 May 1941. AH.

Above: 'In the hold *Lossybank*.' Taken during the 2/3rd Casualty Clearing Station's evacuation from Crete to Egypt, aboard *MV Lossiebank*, c. 14–16 May 1941. AH.

the battlefield, most of its images depict scenes from behind the front. It is in this context that Syd Grant's and Alfred Huggins's collections are so significant: they not only expand the limited number of photographs of the campaign, but they do so with still rarer images of Australia's battlefield activities.

While the Greek campaign ended in evacuation and was diminished in the public mind as Australia faced more immediate military threats from Japan, it was nonetheless an important part of the war for Australian forces. Historians and researchers are indebted to Syd's and Alfred's photographic diligence and to their families' generosity in donating their collections for public use to State Library Victoria.



'The old [writing unclear] a real terror for the plonk at Neon Corinth, May 1941.' SG, PHO241



'The first lot to leave Crete from Suda Bay, May 1941.' SG, PHO251