
Darryl Bennet review of Peter Monteath, *Escape Artist: The Incredible Second World War of Johnny Peck*

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Approximately 30,000 Australian soldiers, sailors, airmen and army nurses became prisoners of the Axis powers in World War II. Most Australians know about those the Japanese captured and incarcerated in their occupied Asian territories; such expressions as ‘Changi gaol’ and ‘Burma–Thai railway’ are very familiar. Australians generally know less, however, about the country’s servicemen—some 8,000 of them—captured by the Germans and Italians. Peter Monteath is one of a number of historians who are performing a valuable service in telling the stories of Australian prisoners of war in Europe. Monteath’s latest book, *Escape Artist: The Incredible Second World War of Johnny Peck*, is an important contribution to the field.

Peck’s war was certainly extraordinary. It may readily be summarised from the pages of *Escape Artist*. Born on 19 February 1922, John Desmond (sometimes Desmond John) Peck falsified his age to enlist in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) on 15 December 1939. He sailed for the Middle East in January 1940 and joined the staff of the AIF’s Overseas Base in Palestine. From September he served with the 2/7th Battalion, which took part in the campaigns in North Africa (January 1941), Greece (April) and Crete (May). One of the men left behind in the hasty evacuation from Crete, he escaped twice from captivity. Following his recapture in April 1942, he was transported to Rhodes. From there, after a breakout and failed attempt to flee to neutral Turkey, he was sent in June to a prisoner-of-war camp in northern Italy. Twelve months later he escaped but was caught and imprisoned in a civilian gaol at Vercelli, near Milan. He was released in September 1943, when the armistice between Italy and the Allies came into effect.

Instead of making a quick, easy getaway to Switzerland, Peck stayed behind and set up an organisation to help other former prisoners evade local fascists and the German occupying forces. He estimated that his network guided more than 300 Allied soldiers to refuge in Switzerland by the end of January 1944. Earlier, he had merged the organisation with an Italian network run by Giuseppe Bacciagaluppi. Peck had

also begun carrying out sabotage operations with partisan groups. In February the Germans apprehended him. He reported that he was tortured, court martialled, sentenced to death and placed in San Vittore prison, Milan, to await execution.

Escaping in May 1944 during an Allied air-raid, Peck made his way to Switzerland. There, the clandestine Special Operations Executive (SOE) recruited him and, on 5 August, he crossed back into Italy as a British liaison officer with the partisans. After an anti-fascist coalition declared a free republic in the Ossola region in September, the Germans moved to put down the rebellion. Peck participated in the ensuing battle, claiming to have commanded 30 officers and 450 men of the republic's partisan army. In October, he made his last crossing to Switzerland and thereafter took no further part in the war. He had remained a private soldier throughout his adventures but he appears to have held informal commissioned rank while with the SOE.

It was obviously not the author's intention that the book would be a biography of Peck; it deals only briefly with his life before and after the war. His mother died when he was seven and his father remarried. By his own account, he had been unhappy at home and had run away at 13, although—judging from affectionate letters he wrote to his family during the war—any estrangement from his father and stepmother had soon ended.

From Switzerland in 1944, he was sent to the United Kingdom, where he married an English woman. Returning to Australia in 1945, he was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal—second only to the Victoria Cross among the decorations for gallantry available to soldiers—and commissioned as a lieutenant in the Australian Military Forces. After the war, he went back to England and had a successful career as a company executive. He died in 2002.

The author has been industrious in searching for primary and secondary sources in Australia, the United Kingdom and Italy. Peck's oral and written testimony, however, is the sole evidence he cites for much of the narrative in *Escape Artist*. If quotations from Peck's prose in the book are any guide, he was an accomplished writer, especially for a person said to have left school at age 13 and then to have worked as a farmhand before joining the AIF. To illustrate, pages 90–91 of *Escape Artist* reproduce passages from Peck's manuscript 'Captive in Crete', describing the hospitality of the local people. Although close to starvation under the German occupation, they felt honour-bound to share their scarce food with fugitive Allied soldiers. Peck wrote of them, in part:

They would share their last piece of bread with us and we would all sit around the table dipping the hard crust into a cup of olive oil and vinegar, and, if we were lucky, crunching away on a piece of raw onion. Sometimes the host, with vast ceremony after the repast, would bring out his only cigarette and, solemnly cutting it into three, would pass the pieces around with the air of an ambassador handing out cigars after a banquet.

Peck would have been a most unusual man had he not, consciously or unconsciously, selected what to place on record about his experiences. Moreover, he had the literary skills subtly to accentuate or elide. Some slanting of his account is only to be expected. There is evidence qualifying Peck's version of some events and Monteath either includes it without comment or omits it. For example, the historian Roger Absalom believes that Peck exaggerated the importance of his escape network in Italy compared to Bacciagaluppi's operation.¹ *Escape Artist* does not mention the point, perhaps because it is a minor one. But there are other instances in which the book might have made use of sources apart from Peck's testimony.

Peck's early army service in Palestine is a case in point. According to *Escape Artist* (p. 8), as early as March 1940 Peck was seeking a posting from the base staff to a fighting unit. His captain had recommended him for promotion, and his transfer to an infantry battalion was imminent. The plan came unstuck when the army discovered that he was underage. Rather than be sent home, Peck made a personal appeal to Lieutenant General Sir Thomas Blamey, the AIF's commander in the Middle East. Blamey ordered that Peck would serve as his batman until he decided he was mature enough for infantry duties. Monteath continues: 'What followed for Peck were some months of frustration, though devoid of any ill-will towards Blamey ... he continued to badger Blamey until he finally got his way' in September.

This telling ignores salient facts and is inconsistent with the timing of events, as documented in Peck's record of service² and other sources. Blamey did not arrive in the Middle East until 20 June 1940.³ The official record has Peck remaining on the base staff until he was posted to Blamey's headquarters on 12 August. Precisely one month later, he was transferred to the 2/7th Battalion. Blamey selected his personal staff with great care. Norman Carlyon, his aide-de-camp, reported that he chose his original batman because his civilian occupation of dry cleaner equipped him to look after the general's uniforms.⁴ This man could have been absent because he was ill or on a course in August–September 1940, or he may have been posted elsewhere and a permanent replacement not yet found. In either of these cases, Peck's employment in the role would have been temporary. Conversely, it is possible Blamey intended that Peck would be his permanent batman. But he is unlikely to have selected a soldier who made it clear that he wished to be elsewhere. Whatever the situation, the story of Peck's chafing for months of an 'indeterminate' (p. 8) period on Blamey's staff, while the commander assessed his suitability for transfer, looks like a romanticised reconstruction of events.

1 Roger Absalom, *A Strange Alliance: Aspects of Escape and Survival in Italy 1943–45* (Accademia Toscana Di Scienze e Lettere 'La Colombaria, Firenze, 1991), 52–53.

2 National Archives of Australia, B883, VX9534, PECK DESMOND JOHN, accessed 26 May 2018, recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRRetrieve/Interface/ViewImage.aspx?B=6211291.

3 *News* (Adelaide), 21 June 1940, 1, accessed 26 May 2018, trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/132009054.

4 Norman D. Carlyon, *I Remember Blamey* (South Melbourne: Sun Books, 1981), 7.

Peck was not a well-disciplined soldier. He was found guilty of five military offenses between April 1940 and March 1941.⁵ Three of the convictions resulted from his taking unauthorised days off and the fourth from his disobeying an order. The fifth is discussed below. Military officers are generally tolerant of other ranks who occasionally misbehave, if they are good at their day-to-day work and exhibit qualities required in combat. Peck's subsequent record would suggest that he was in this category. His captain may well have retained his good opinion of him and Blamey may have recognised his potential, too. *Escape Artist* does not mention his disciplinary record. Did the author believe it was another trivial matter, detracting unnecessarily from Peck's great achievements? If so, he missed an opportunity, provided by this independent evidence, to explore elements of Peck's character. There was another matter on which the author might have commented.

The pages of *Escape Artist* are enlivened by vignettes on a number of Peck's fellow escapees. Among those in northern Italy was the remarkable and redoubtable Sapper Jens Francis Jocumsen (1912–91), of the 2/7th Field Company, Royal Australian Engineers. He spent all his time with the partisans. Monteath compares him to Peck. Jocumsen 'craved direct engagement with the enemy, the action of a skirmish or a firefight', whereas Peck was 'an organiser, building a network ... dedicated to the task of rescuing men so that they might live to fight another day' (pp. 174–75). Jocumsen's instinct was to fight; Peck fought only when it was sensible to do so.

In a later report of his activities, Jocumsen identified two British liaison officers who, on arrival in Italy, 'commenced to sell their stores to the highest bidders' (p. 218). Monteath states that one of these officers was possibly Peck but he offers no commentary on the matter. Were they making money for SOE or were they profiteering? At the very least, the reader is entitled to be told that the author does not know the answer. Despite their different personalities, Jocumsen and Peck were friends, so Jocumsen was unlikely to report unfavourably on Peck. Perhaps Peck was not one of the officers involved. Or maybe Jocumsen saw no harm in profiteering.

Here, Peck's fifth offence in Palestine reenters the picture. He had been caught in possession of cigarettes pilfered from the officers' mess. Add an earlier fact—one Monteath does report—that Peck had stolen a bicycle to facilitate his flight from home as a teenager and Peck emerges as a man who might have been unscrupulous enough to profiteer. At any rate, available independent evidence confirms that, when young, he was rebellious, brazen and careless of conventional standards of conduct. The evidence Monteath accumulated for *Escape Artist* proves that he was also headstrong, brave, resourceful and intelligent. It is reasonable to suppose that his

5 NAA, B883, VX9534, PECK DESMOND JOHN.

less commendable traits were as important as his admirable qualities for performing audacious and deceptive deeds behind enemy lines, efforts that saved many lives and contributed significantly to the Allied war effort.

Historians are enjoined to write accessible prose and engage the general reader. Peck's story is ideal for popular history but this book takes informality in expression too far. Its clichés, mixed metaphors and disconnected participial phrases are distracting, and its intermittent awkward sentences can make for hard reading. In the discussion (p. 11) about the impending assault on Bardia, Libya, where Peck is to have his 'baptism of fire', we learn that Bardia 'would not be an easy nut to crack' and that 'the landscape surrounding it was a quintessentially western desert landscape.' Reflecting (p. 20) on the reception invading German troops would receive from the Greeks, the author observes that: 'With friends in high places in Greek politics, the military and the economy, a German presence was unlikely to provoke ... opposition'. On page 207 the Allies' improving strategic position is discussed. 'Yet', we are told, 'there was also a downside to this favourable turn of the tide'. These faults probably reflect the lack of time a busy academic has for drafting. Editing would have eliminated them. As with many scholarly books these days, the text suffers from the absence of competent editorial attention.

It is much easier to pick holes in a work of history than to write one. Notwithstanding the problems of evidence and editing in *Escape Artist*, Monteath tells the story of Johnny Peck's war with verve. Interweaving descriptions of broader geopolitical and strategic developments with the narrative of Peck's exploits, he has produced a lively, engaging, fast-paced account, certain to appeal to many readers.

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