

Entry type: Resource
Entry ID: AWH001192

Missing, Wounded and Prisoner of War Enquiry Cards

Repository	The University of Melbourne Archives
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Reference	2016.0049
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Date Range	1940 - 1973
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Quantity	59 boxes 13 m
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Access	Part restricted
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Finding Aid	http://gallery.its.unimelb.edu.au/imu/imu.php?request=multimedia&irn=87295
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Details

Red Cross Archives Series Reference: NO1. This series is comprised of approximately 60,000 cards used by the Central Bureau for Wounded, Missing and Prisoners of War of the Australian Red Cross to trace the welfare and whereabouts of members of the armed forces, and some civilians, during the Second World War, the Korean War and the Vietnam War. The series represents one of the Red Cross major wartime services: assisting family members to know the fate of armed forces personnel and others displaced by war. In early 1940 the Australian Red Cross began to rapidly scale up its divisional (i.e. state-based) missing persons tracing services which had been largely dormant since the end of World War I. The organisation also established a Central Bureau at its National Headquarters. This service operated from the Royal Australian College of Surgeons premises in Melbourne. The state bureaux were most often the first point of contact for members of the public seeking information about a family member, and directly handled some enquiries without reference to the Central Bureau. However all enquiries regarding missing members of the armed forces and prisoners of war, and some other inquiries, were forwarded to the Central Bureau. Often, next-of-kin first received notification from the Army, Navy or Air Force that a relative had been wounded, taken prisoner or killed. They then turned to the Red Cross in an effort to learn more about their family member's fate. The Central Bureau used channels of communication with the armed forces, other national Red Cross societies and its own searchers on the ground to gather information. It appears that two events gave rise to the creation of a card. Some were created when an inquiry was received from a divisional bureau on behalf of a relative. Others were created when a person was named on a casualty or missing list. The Central Bureau subsequently added details of its investigations and further information received about the person. A small percentage of the cards records that the next-of-kin were informed when the status of the subject of enquiry was determined. (e.g. deceased). Red Cross reports about the operations of the Bureau during the Second World War indicate that the Bureau also created a file for each missing person and used these cards as a summary of the information and transactions recorded in the file. The files are no longer extant. The vast majority of cards in this series date from 1940 to 1945. Of these, most relate to missing AIF personnel. The cards record their name, rank and service number (reg no.), and the name and address of their next-of-kin. For confirmed Prisoners of War, the cards also include a POW number. An entry was added to the card each time information was received, verified or sent onwards to next-of-kin. Entries are heavily abbreviated: a list explaining some abbreviations is available via the University of Melbourne Archives Online Catalogue. At the top of each card a summary of the person's status was recorded, for example: POW, deceased, repatriated, safe, recovered, located or liberated. These terms were crossed out or overtyped as new information about a person's welfare was received. During World War II Australians also sought Red Cross help to find displaced civilians both Australian and foreign citizens. A small number of cards from this period relate to civilians living overseas who were caught up in the war in either Europe or the Pacific. In these instances cards will record the person's last known whereabouts or residence instead of a military service number. In 1946 the Central Bureau and most state bureaux were wound up, and a National Tracing Bureau was established as part of the Red Cross extensive post-war work of assisting displaced persons and refugees. This continues to be a core function of the Red Cross and records associated with it are still held by the Red Cross (as at 2016). The card index was used again during the Korean War (1950-1953) and the Vietnam War (Australian involvement 1962-1973). Approximately 5000 cards relate to these conflicts and these are interfiled with cards from World War II into one alphabetical-by-surname sequence. Each card bears an index number allocated by the Red Cross. Common prefixes are K for the Korean War and SEA and V which both indicate that the card dates from the Vietnam War. Approximately 300 cards bear index numbers prefixed with F. It is not clear what this stands for, however these cards relate to World War II civilian prisoners of Nazi internment camps. These appear to have been added to the series some time after the end of World War II. The significance of other index number prefixes requires further research. Missing, Wounded and Prisoner of War records dating from World War I have been transferred by the Red Cross to the Australian War Memorial. These have been digitised and are available online (refer to AWM series 1DRL/0428). These include inquiry files, which provide an indication of the type of inquiry files which the Red Cross used during World War II in conjunction with this card series. The cards were digitised by the Red Cross prior to transfer to University of Melbourne Archives in 2016. Digitised copies of cards dating from World War II are available to researchers online. The University of Melbourne Archives has used card index prefixes to identify those that date from the Korean and Vietnam wars (see above) and these are not currently available online (as at 2016). However individuals who are the subject of an index card, or in some cases their next of kin, are invited to make an inquiry with the University of Melbourne Archives (archives@archives.unimelb.edu.au). More information about the operations of the National and Divisional Bureaux can be found in various records series held by the University of Melbourne Archives, including UMA Series 2015.0027 Annual Reports of the Australian Red Cross Society (See in particular reports for 1939-1940 (p22), 1942-1943 (p17) and 1946-1947 (pp18, 19, 36)); and UMA Series 2015.0033 Correspondence Files, National Headquarters (search on bureau or tracing) and history and operation of the unit from 1939-1940 in Item 2016.0054.00004.

Author Details

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