

**Filling the gaps in the story of an Australian hero of the Czech people  
- killed on the last day of World War Two in Europe, VE Day:**

**Private Lawrence Phillip Saywell, 17 Bde ASC**

**1 December 1919 – 8 May 1945**

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Lawrence Saywell was one of the first men to enlist in the 2nd AIF in 1939. Tragically, this unassuming but friendly Private and POW escapee, became the last Australian to die at the hands of the enemy in the European theatre of World War Two: on VE Day, 8 May 1945, alone in a field by a country lane, in the remote hills of Bohemia.

Some say he was murdered by a German SS patrol whilst fighting with Czech partisans, although that account is not entirely confirmed. The local villagers remember Saywell as a lively and engaging young man, who had a flair for languages – and as a hero. But sadly, due to Covid-19, the 75th Anniversary of his death, 8 May 2020 – coinciding with the 75th Anniversary of VE Day - was the first time that the annual commemorative services for him in Miřetin where he was shot and killed, and in Prague where he was reburied, were not held - also occurring with the first year that his Jewish birth and early life have been openly revealed.

Lawrence Phillip Saywell was born on 1 December 1919 in Neutral Bay, to Gertrude Harriette (née Greenwald) of New York, USA, and Montague Joseph Saywell of Sydney. (Montague had taken the surname of his stepfather after his mother, Rebecca, divorced Phillip Mendelson and, in 1902, married George Saywell, a director of several family companies). Gertrude gave birth to twin sons, George Montague and Preston Greenwald on 11 December 1920, but Montague died suddenly in 1924, aged 36. The family lived in New York, USA, then Bellevue Hill, NSW, where Lawrence attended Scots College and was likely a proficient student of French and German – an ability which would later have an impact on his life that he could never have imagined. The boys were bar mitzvah in 1932 and 1933 (respectively) at The Great Synagogue. Lawrence spent some time working on his uncle Norman Saywell's large sheep station in outback Queensland, before returning to Sydney in 1938.

He was one of the first Australians to enlist for WW2, in October 1939: NX 6461 Private Lawrence Philip Saywell - 6th Division AASC (Australian Army Service Corps), a non-combat unit – notwithstanding, or perhaps because of, his poor eyesight and attested that he was a “*wool buyer*”, with religion “*C of E*”.

Lawrence spent just two months at Ingleburn Camp before leaving for overseas with the first convoy of the 2nd AIF, disembarking in February 1940 at Kantara, Palestine (now Lebanon), to complete their training. In November, Lawrence was transferred to the 17th Brigade ASC in Egypt, to support the first Libyan campaign and on 30 March 1941 the unit sailed for Greece, with the ill-fated Allied expeditionary force. In the face of the relentless German advance, they served there only briefly, as by the end of April the majority of the 6th Australian Division, New Zealand and British soldiers were withdrawn to Crete, exhausted. The allied troops then put up an epic fighting withdrawal through the island's hills against the rapidly growing German invasion, which had been launched on 20 May. But heavy naval losses meant that most men were unable to be evacuated and like many, Saywell was reported missing on 5 June 1941. He had in fact been captured whilst driving an ambulance: one of around 5,700 Australians taken prisoner following the campaigns in Greece and Crete.

After transportation to Germany, Saywell was first held at Stalag VIIA at Moosburg, then Stalag VIIB (344) at Lamsdorf (now in Poland). He also spent time in the relative freedom of a number of labour camps, where his German language improved and he learnt to speak some Russian, even acting as an interpreter in a paper mill and befriending a young Ukrainian woman. Lawrence exchanged several letters with various members of his family.

Saywell and a New Zealand fellow prisoner, Sydney 'Mac' Kerkham (24 Bn) made at least two unsuccessful escape attempts and were finally successful in January 1945 when the Germans ordered the evacuation of prisoner of war camps, in the face of the approaching Soviet forces. In the confusion and the bitter cold of winter, Saywell, Kerkham and two Russians escaped from a camp at Pardubice, in the centre of what is now the Czech Republic, and found refuge with families near the village of Zderaz. It seems that in return, they offered to assist the Czech partisans in their sabotage operations. Although sometimes close to discovery, Saywell and Kerkham remained hidden, and - despite their relatively short stay - they became beloved by the local people.

In the first week of May a major national uprising against the Germans flared up in Czech lands, whilst the German army retreated westward. Hearing of this, Saywell and Kerkham came out of hiding and made their way to Miřetin, another village in the district. There, on 8 May 1945, the official date of the end of the war in Europe – now known as VE Day – but with the ceasefire possibly not yet communicated to such outlying areas, they encountered a confrontation between a retreating German column and a Soviet-Czech partisan group, which had taken about thirty German soldiers as hostages. Apparently Saywell offered his services as an interpreter and succeeded in getting the men disarmed and released. Perhaps believing it was now safe, Saywell later returned toward the village and, for reasons that are not clear, he was shot in the head by an unknown, fleeing German soldier – who was then purportedly reprimanded by his officer.

It seems there are several versions of the circumstances of Saywell's death, some slightly contradictory. Here are brief details from just three authentic accounts:

*"There was a German woman living in Miřetin and when no one was looking she slipped away and happened by chance to run across an SS detachment retreating before the Russians. She told them what had happened. There were 1,200 of them and they surrounded the village. Among those they caught was 'Larry'. He showed his papers proving that he was a regular soldier and at first they did not harm him. Then someone ordered him to be shot."*

*"He had come out of hiding to contact a friend in the village and was making his way across the fields when he was overtaken by a German. Saywell was unarmed. The German shot him and left him wounded on the ground. A second German appeared and shot him dead. Lawrence Saywell was then within a hundred yards of the village, and almost certain safety."*

As recently as 7 May 2020, for a story marking the 75th Anniversary of VE Day, Prague Radio interviewed Pavel Koutný, whose mother and grandfather knew Lawrence in 1945: *"[Kerkham] said that Lawrence was hot-headed. He was impulsive and all-action, and that's why he got involved in the expulsion of those Germans."* Seventy-five years later, there is sorrow in Pavel's voice when he recalls the fate of his family's friend: *"It's a very sad story. ... The boys really did their best, but it all ended in an unfortunate way. Lawrence just didn't know the territory here."*

Almost four years after his initial capture, Lawrence Saywell was the 242nd and last Australian POW to die in Europe: becoming an eternal hero figure of the Czech people, yet hardly known by Australians.

Private Lawrence Phillip Saywell's body lay in state in the village school until 10 May, when he was buried in the local cemetery and a Protestant clergyman conducted the service, with a headstone placed on his grave shortly after.

In October 1945, after a service at the cemetery, a special ceremony was held at the actual site of Lawrence's death, where the British military attaché Col. C. J. de W. Mullens unveiled a stone memorial, inscribed in Czech: "Near here the Germans murdered Lawrence Saywell, the English partisan, on the 8th May 1945 - Erected by the grateful inhabitants of the village of Miřetin". With both the Czech and Union Jack flags flying overhead, he asked them to *"notice that ... Saywell was an Australian who, in company with thousands of others from the British Commonwealth of Nations, gave up everything - without any compulsion at all - for the cause of freedom."* He remarked that *"when Saywell himself was already in sight of freedom he had stayed behind to help his [Czech] friends,"* and *"It will be a great consolation to his relatives to know that his grave is being well looked after and his memory respected."*

Some 500 people, including about 100 school children in national costumes, a brass band and a guard of honour of Czech soldiers, participated in the day's commemorative events. The pastor, who had only just come back after three years in a German concentration camp, spoke so movingly that many of his listeners wept, especially when he said that *"perhaps Larry's relatives did not yet know that he was dead. Even if they did, they certainly did not know where he was buried."* He could assure them, however, that *"Larry had a permanent place in the hearts of the villagers. They would tend his grave and his memorial for ever."* The following month, the President of the Czechoslovak Republic posthumously awarded Private Lawrence Saywell the Czechoslovakian Military Cross for his *"brave and eminent services to our State in the battle for liberation"*. In 2005 a further award of the Meritorious Cross was made by the Czech Republic.

Following another well-attended memorial service in Miřetin on 10 August 1947, Lawrence Saywell's remains were exhumed and, on 29 September, reinterred at the site of the future Prague War Cemetery, as part of the concentration of graves from small cemeteries scattered around Czechoslovakia. Whilst there is no religious symbol on his headstone, his family arranged for the following inscription:

'HIS DUTY NOBLY DONE. EVER REMEMBERED'

### **Afterword:**

Although none of Lawrence Saywell's surviving relations are Jewish - and some question how relevant his Jewish identity is to his story - one of his cousins remarked that *"Lawrence Mendelson/Saywell will always be remembered as a great Australian and Jew. His biological grandfather, Phillip Mendelson, was originally a Polish refugee. Lawrence probably heard many tales of persecution against the Jews in Poland and other similar nations from his mother and Mendelson relatives of his late father,"* so *"this was perhaps one of the reasons he decided to stay and help the Partisans."*

Lawrence Saywell must have been acutely aware of the compound risks he was confronting in Czechoslovakia: being an escaped POW, collaborating with partisans, and born a Jew. What chance would he have if he were captured by the Germans - and any single one, let alone all, of those facts were uncovered?

And yet, incredibly, he still stepped forward to protect enemy, German soldiers: words such as 'mercy' and 'compassion' are inadequate to describe this deed - in what became Lawrence Saywell's final act of bravery.

Finally, perhaps, the first and last chapters in the retelling of the life of this once ordinary man - whose humble service for Australia with a dash of pluck, took an extraordinary path to a tragic but revered end - are almost complete, 75 years later.

**Footnotes:**

The Australian War Memorial has Lawrence Saywell's medals and other ephemera donated by his family, and has a permanent display honouring him. Dr Peter Stanley wrote an article about Lawrence in the 2006 AWM's *Wartime* magazine.

Lawrence Saywell's name is one of 341 inscribed on the Australian Jewish War Memorial at the ACTJC Centre in Canberra, dedicated in 2018 by the Governor General Sir Peter Cosgrove on the centenary of Sir John Monash's knighthood. Peter Allen is currently preparing narratives of all of those inscribed, for the ACTJC to display on a Touchscreen in its Museum and for the military database of the AJHS website. When he realised that the imminent approach of the 75th Anniversary of VE Day coincided with Saywell's 75th Yahrzeit, Peter decided to undertake more extensive research of Saywell's background and fate.

Since February 2020, Peter has managed to track down and correspond/speak with several of Saywell's relatives, as well as: Allan Kerkham (the son of Sydney Kerkham d. 1990), Prof. Stanley, historians at the AWM and Lloyd Brodrick, Australian Ambassador to Poland, the Czech Republic and Lithuania. None of the latter, nor apparently the Czech government or people, were aware of Lawrence Saywell's Jewish identity.

**Postscript:**

Lawrence's twin brothers, George and Preston, both served in the Army and returned to live in Sydney after WW2 (d. 1969 and 2007). Their first cousin, George Saywell (not Jewish), who survived the war serving as a pilot in the RAAF, also died tragically: he was ferrying a Mosquito fighter plane to Japan in 1946 when it crashed in a storm, likely into the sea, and was never found.

Gertrude Saywell arranged for the names of her late husband, Montague, and of her son, Lawrence, to be included on the *Yahrzeit* Board of the Temple Emanuel (now The Emanuel Synagogue) and was active in the Sydney Jewish community after WW2. She passed away in 1972.

Lawrence Saywell's death is commemorated at Miřetin, Czech Republic, every year, when a ceremonial procession takes place between the site of his original grave and his memorial stone, which now has a plaque: "*The Australian ambassador to Poland and Preston Saywell - brother of Lawrence Saywell - visited Prosec and Miřetin in 2005 and placed flowers on both the grave and the memorial of Private Saywell.*" Sadly, the service could not be held on 8 May 2020, the 75th anniversary of Saywell's death, due to the Covid-19 shutdown.

The Australian War Memorial was planning to repeat its 2014 presentation of Lawrence Saywell's story at its daily Last Post Ceremony on the 75th Anniversary of VE Day, 8 May 2020, but it also had to cancel. Similarly, NAJEX had planned to honour Private Lawrence Saywell at its 2020 Anzac Day community service – also sadly cancelled. The AWM now plans to remember Saywell at its LPC in 2021.

The above is an edited version of a paper that Peter Allen intends to publish in a forthcoming journal of the Australian Jewish Historical Society. A greatly redacted, one-page narrative of Lawrence Saywell's story will be displayed on the Touchscreen of the Australian Jewish War Memorial at the ACTJC Centre, with additional images.