

Soldiers Without Guns

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In 1942 the residents of Albury were asked to welcome soldiers in a newly formed 4th Employment Company (Aliens) which was stationed locally to tranship munitions and military equipment at the increasingly busy and strategically sensitive break-of-gauge.

The newcomers were hailed as friendly or refugee aliens. Many were Jews from Poland and Germany or Greeks who had fled Europe just before the war.

Although military authorities were suspicious of all people who had been born overseas and were not British citizens, alien volunteers were permitted to serve in units which were unarmed and were not at the front.

The friendly aliens in Albury were accommodated in tents at the old showground, now part of Scots Schools.

They worked at a special military platform in the Albury Railway Station yard. In 1944 a new platform was erected and covered so that transhipment operations could more easily continue 24 hours per day and through all kinds of weather. The covered platform with its different gauge lines still stands in the yard as a Second World War relic.



4th Employment Company men transferring airplane fuel tanks
at Albury Railway Yards in 1944

The soldiers moved huge quantities of materials, including ammunition, bombs, telegraph poles, and, once, a portable hospital. Timetables were tight and the traffic in the yard was sometimes intense.

Border Morning Mail pictured the men taking part as a unit in army sports day competitions. It noted their presence at special Greek Orthodox functions held for visiting Greek leaders at St Matthews Church. It reported visits by Melbourne-based Jewish welfare groups. It told its readers about how the men presented concerts in their recreation hut for other units and townspeople.

The 4th Employment Company was not a fighting unit. Its members did not risk life and limb on battlefields. Their most common injuries were crushed toes or fingers and bad backs.

At the end of the war there was some debate on whether employment company members should enjoy the reconstruction benefits available to former soldiers.

That debate took place amidst wide uncertainty about the place of European foreigners in the kind of Australia emerging from the war. One of the champions arguing the cause of those who served in employment companies was Arthur Calwell who was to become Minister for Immigration.