

Bush Bunny Tells His Story Of War Survival

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DICK Johnson attributes surviving three-and-a-half years in Japanese POW camps, including the infamous Changi, to being a "bush bunny who took what came, when it came".

Born in Parramatta, 91-year-old Mr Johnson spent his childhood on a property out from Yeoval with his four brothers and four sisters.

He started school aged seven.

"Prior to that I had never seen another child," he said.

"We used to travel the seven miles to school in a horse and sulky, arriving at about 10am.

"The teacher hated me because I was backward, and I hated school. I left school when I was 13 going on 14."

Mr Johnson then went to work on properties in northern NSW.

Aged 21, he enlisted in the army, joining the 2nd Reserve Recruiting Depot and undertaking training at Wallgrove, Ingleburn and Bathurst.

"After we completed our training we marched to the railway station and caught a train to Sydney, where we embarked on the Queen Mary in February 1941," he said.

"We threw messages to our family onto the wharf, hoping someone would pick them up and pass them on and then headed to Western Australia via the Great Australian Bight.

"While we were at sea, the Japanese broadcast that they had sunk the Queen Mary.

"We weren't allowed off the ship in Perth because the Queen Mary couldn't berth there.

"I thought we were going to the Middle East, but when our three-ship convoy left Western Australia, the escort ship circled us and the other two ships went to the Middle East, but we went to Singapore.

"We arrived in early 1941 and went to the English barracks at Port Dickson in Malaya."

The 2/18 Battalion comprised 1000 men. They spent their time at Port Dickson exercising, marching and training.

"We did an 11-mile circuit each day," Mr Johnson recalled.

"After a few months at Port Dickson, we were moved to the Mersing Barracks, which was formerly a school."

The Japanese entered the war on February 8, and invaded Malaya.

"I was on the beach in one of the most forward positions at one of the places the Japanese could have landed," Mr Johnson said.

"They would have known we were there because a chap amongst us was telling the villagers everything and divulging our passwords.

"A group of our men got together and said they were going out that night ... that chap never returned."

Mr Johnson said the Australian forces were on the east coast of Malaya, with the west coast defended by English and Indian troops.

"The English and Indian forces were being forced back which meant we, in turn, had to retreat, but we did them a lot of damage in the process," he said.

"They had bombs, planes and tanks and we had not much more than rifles and machine guns.

"We had to retreat or be cut off.

"Eventually we ended up back in Singapore and the Japanese threatened to blow Singapore off the map if we did not surrender."

The Allied forces capitulated on February 15, 1942.

"We got a message to put our ammunition in a certain spot ? men caught with a rifle were beheaded," Mr Johnson said.

"We had no idea what would happen next, but I didn't know it would be as bad as it turned out to be.

"I guess we expected reasonable housing and food, but we got little food other than rice.

"Nothing could have prepared us for the conditions we were to experience.

"But I was a country bunny, and was therefore better off than a lot of the city chaps."

Australians' legendary ingenuity also came to the fore during the men's incarceration.

"When we surrendered we were in an English residential area, and one of the boys found a saxophone in the roof of one of the homes," Mr Johnson said.

"He could play the sax, but it had no reed, so we had to make one.

"Some of the men also made flip-top cigarette packs from pieces of aluminium and blade razors from car springs ? all without the use of tools."

After surrendering, the men were marched the 20-odd miles to Changi, where Mr Johnson stayed for about three weeks.

"We then went out to different camps, wherever they needed work done, and we mostly stayed in houses or sheds," he said.

"In the Chinese areas the latrines were bore holes with a rail on top and you sat on the rail.

"The Chinese would come and empty the pans onto their market gardens ... since then I've always washed vegetables!

"We had to work by day, and work by night. Everyone had to carry a mug of rice – an enamel mug – and a spoon.

"Sometimes we got soybean stew, which was just like water but in the barracks we occasionally got a fish head or skeleton which added a bit of flavour."

The men went to extraordinary lengths to build and hide wirelasses in order to find out what was happening in the outside world.

"We hid the wirelasses in all sorts of places, including mattresses and rice bags," he said.

"The worst day was when the Japanese began using swords to poke through a bag of rice where we had a wireless hidden.

"They missed the radio by this much," Mr Johnson said, indicating about half a centimetre.

"While we had no idea of what was going on, in the latter part of the war we saw B24 bombers going over.

"The Japanese must have known what was going on, but we were not allowed to look up."

Mr Johnson said the lowest point of his imprisonment came when the men were fed corn instead of rice.

"Everyone's health deteriorated," he said.

"We tried cracking it but we could not grind it up much.

"Everyone was getting worms.

"There were two types – one like an earthworm, about 12 inches long and a quarter of an inch thick, and the other like a springy sea worm, which came out of your mouth.

"Being hopeful kept me going.

"I lost a lot of mates and losing a mate was like losing a brother. In bad times, you draw closer together."

While the Japanese were "very fond of using a sword on the neck" there was the "odd good Japanese", Mr Johnson said.

"One section had different epaulettes, and a private wearing those epaulettes could tell an 'ordinary' sergeant what to do," he said.

"Our party was making roads with baskets and hoes and the Japanese in charge was a brute.

"Down the road there was a road roller which had an engine the same as one we had on our farm.

"One day it wouldn't start and the Japanese in charge of the road roller got me to fix it.

"I filled in time to keep away from the Jap in charge by pulling the plug to release the air pressure.

"When I eventually went to go back to my group the man in charge of the road roller told me to stay with his party,

"He took us to a clump of bushes to rest and threw a packet of five cigarettes to us and gave us a light.

"We had to smoke all the cigarettes because if we were found with them in camp the Japs were very fond of using a sword on the neck.

"The Japanese punished the Chinese villagers by beheading them and leaving their heads on posts.

"If others tried to remove the heads they, in turn, would be beheaded."

Mr Johnson said the war brought out the best and worst in human nature.

"It brought out the worst in the Japanese army, especially," he said.

"They had power and did what they liked and got away with it.

"They used such brute force to show they were in charge.

"If the situation was reversed, the Aussies would have behaved sternly, but definitely not with the Japanese brute force.

"It is not in our nature to be like that."

Mr Johnson says he bears no animosity to the private Japanese people, but "if any army men are alive I would hate them forever".

"War should be avoided at all costs, but as far as my idea is, while ever there is human nature there will be war and there has been since year one," he said.

"I don't think we will ever learn."

Mr Johnson said when they became aware the Japanese were dumping incendiary devices in the sea, they reckoned the war was close to being finished.

"When the Japanese said the war was finished, our officer went to the commanding officer and told him his men would not do any more work, and he agreed," he said.

"We then went to different camps, without the Japanese, and it was then that I got malaria.

"There was very little treatment but I didn't have the really bad form of malaria.

"The Chinese were willing and waiting to help and they got eggs and vegetables into our camps."

Mr Johnson's family was never notified that he was a POW.

"The Japanese made out they were going us a good turn by letting us send the occasional card home with 10 words on it," he said.

"One of mine reached my family two years after I had written it."

Two of Mr Johnson's brothers also served in World War II.

His eldest brother first went to Darwin, then Borneo, while his youngest brother served in New Guinea.

"All three of us came back," he said.

"My mother had a brooch with three stars, signifying she had three boys serving in the war.

"When I came home some of my family said they knew I would come back, while others said I was dead.

"But, like a bad penny, I turned up."

After the war, Mr Johnson went back to working on properties in NSW and Queensland.

He then undertook a woolclassing course in Tamworth.

"The technical college teacher invited me to a party just before Christmas, telling me there was someone coming that he wanted me to meet," he said.

"He introduced me to the dressmaking instructor, Mary Bird. We had something in common and were married on January 27, 1962."

Mr Johnson got work in the wool scour plant in Rankin Street, Bathurst and, when it closed, he went to work at the gasworks.

At the age of 70, Mr Johnson began a new "career", getting involved in spinning and weaving.

"I went to a garage sale and a chap said he had a cheap spinning wheel," he said.

"I thought I would do it up and sell it, but my wife decided to tell everyone, including my sister, Helen, in Lake Cargelligo.

"She said to bring it over and she would teach me to spin.

"I then joined the spinners and got the job of equipment and maintenance officer, a job I did for 18 years.

"I find spinning very relaxing."

Mr Johnson puts his long life down to good food – presumably with a three-and-a-half year gap – and not over-imbibing.

To describe him as a survivor seems an understatement.

"When I was 16 I had tetanus and three doctors said they didn't know how I survived," he said.

And the legacy of his war-time incarceration?

"Time is a healer ... I have a different life altogether now."