

Digger's Story

Surviving the Japanese prisoner of war camps was just the beginning.

Why do young men volunteer to go to war—to protect our freedom and democracy? “I don't bloody think so,” says Digger (David William Barrett).

Does rank give you a right to food when others starve? Digger doesn't believe so. Officers in Changi found themselves sharing with others no matter how loudly they protested!

How do you survive when beaten, starved and humiliated in a Kanchaburi railway camp? You stick together, that's what you do. You scam, lie, steal, cheat and hate the bastards with as much energy as you love and protect your mates.

What can you do as a lowly medical orderly, whose only surgical experience has been sewing up the cadavers in Changi, when someone with a gangrenous foot ulcer asks if they will die? You tell them straight—“yes you will mate but I'll take it off if you'll let me”.

And what do you do when at long last you are released from captivity into the big bad city of Bangkok and you are asked to share a straw mattress in a hall with 250 other blokes? “You tell them to stick it, ” says Digger. You and your mate go to the nearest Jap camp, take a truck, order them to fill it with office furniture, drive to a market, sell everything and set yourself up in a first class hotel. And you revel in your first taste of the good life, as you check out the equipment you haven't used in a very long time.

But what happens when the first letter from home tells you that your Mum died a year ago. It's like a rifle butt to the head. Meeting her again, was the only dream you had allowed yourself for three and a half years? So who cares about home now, you agree to return to the railway as the medical orderly on a small party who are to locate and log the graves of all who died there. You discount the fact that there are only 12 in your party and that all the Japs are still on the railway and still all armed. And if you are lucky you get a pat on the back from the diarist on the party—

We were silly not to have taken 'Doc' (Digger) with us in the morning—for he had actually dug many of the graves and carved some of the names on the crosses. Had he not quite openly and repeatedly said “I do know where there are more cemeteries; I ought to for I have dug some of the graves and was stationed here for 18 months”—anyhow he has played his part and but for him we would have missed 534 graves.

With continuing communication between David Barrett, the subject of this story, and the author, for the past three years, they are in the best position possible to put together David's tale as graphically and as honestly as possible. Nothing has been held back. David's memory is sharp despite his 90 years and endless hours of MP3 files tell of sadness, pain, and much humour in his life's experiences. Where possible the experiences and action in this book have been confirmed against other contemporary accounts. David also has copies of every letter he has ever written, together with all the letters written to him—as well as many other objects and photographs.

While experiences during captivity occupy a large portion of this story David's years from 1986 to the beginning of this century were as exciting as any he lived

Brian Robertson

previously. Experiences during these relatively recent times document fully for the first time the story of the Australian Ex-POW Reparations Committee founded by David. He was determined to get an apology and monetary compensation from the Japanese. It was a task with many set backs but David used the hatred and need for revenge that drove him during captivity to also drive this project. Japan was by now Australia's major trading partner and no one, but no one, wanted to upset that relationship. That didn't stop David. He upset everyone including the Japanese Ambassador in Canberra, the Australian Government the Japanese Government and especially Sir Edward (Weary) Dunlop. He was eventually successful in taking the case to the United Nations and through them to the Japanese. He travelled frequently to Japan and in 2001 each and every Ex-POW of the Japanese during WW2, or their surviving widows, received the sum of \$25000.00. Unfortunately this money came from the Australian Government not the Japanese Government. The upside is that David now has many Japanese friends!