

A Son's Memories of his Parents

My name is Geoff Watson, and I was born on King Island on the 19th of January 1934, the only child of Christian William John and Caroline Olive Watson who were farmers at East Wickham.

My father, always known as Jack, was born in Ringarooma, Tasmania, on the 23rd of November 1905. He arrived on King Island in October 1930 and found work with the Joubert family who had a dairy farm near Manana. He then linked up with a chap named Ray Young and went driving bullock teams often used to harrow paddocks. Ray had a sister named Caroline and this was how he met mum, who was born on King Island on the 28th of July 1909.

I was seven years old when dad enlisted to fight in World War 2 in June 1941. He was a very fit man, being a farmer, and had also worked on the construction of the Egg Lagoon Drain, often using pick and shovel. I don't remember the topic of his enlistment being discussed at home, but I was at Currie Wharf when he went on the boat with the other chaps to go to Brighton in Tasmania. I was very frightened as there were large gaps between the wharf deck planks, I could see the water, and did not want to fall in.

With dad away, mum did all the milking and farm work on her own, but as I got older I did help. I remember that her mother Louise, who was a Grave, occasionally came to assist and after doing the milking would go down on the flats and slash the regrowth. I don't know how many mum was milking, but when I left school aged 14 there were 34 cows, all hand milked.

As for the effect of the war on me I just had to do everything for myself and soon learnt not to take any nonsense from other people. I got belted, but then again I did more belting than what I received, and that was how I grew up. When dad was taken as a Japanese Prisoner of War in February 1942 it must have affected my mother. I do not remember her ever feeling sorry; she just kept on running the farm. When I look back on it, she was protecting me.

At the end of the war, we went to the airport to meet dad. I can remember him walking down the steps of the old DC3 plane. He was in uniform and looked a bit thin. He did go back to work on our farm and used to get out of bed very early and head off to the dairy to do the milking. However, his time as a POW did cause him to suffer. We might be sitting down to have a meal, and he would suddenly throw his knife and fork down and storm out the door. Probably four or five hours later he would turn up again, but within days he was on a plane heading off to a hospital in New Norfolk to get treatment for his nerves. This happened at least three times and went on for a few years.

Mum did not cope with this, and I remember at one stage she hid all the knives from dad. While dad got treatment there was nothing for the wife and family, who just had to deal with what was occurring at home. That was how it was, and I also remember him suffering from malaria.

If I asked him what had happened to him in the war he would tell me in stern voice, 'What do you want to know about things like that for?' I suppose he was just protecting me from what he had endured and suffered. The one thing he did tell me about was

infections in his legs when he was working on the Thai - Burma Railway. All they could do was to use a little spoon to scoop out the pus.

Later he was moved to Japan to work in a mine, and he told me they heard the bomb go off that the Yanks dropped. They got ready to go to work the next morning and none of the Japanese guards turned up. Then someone told them it was all over. He ended up on a Yankee aircraft carrier where they were fed and looked after. So well, that when dad came home he had two Army kitbags full up of cigarettes, cigars and tobacco. It was not bad stuff, noting that dad smoked for the rest of his life.

The RSL used to have a dinner where all the ex POWs would get on the grog a bit. Now, dad wasn't good on the grog as he wanted to brawl and all that sort of thing. The good thing was that he never drank at home. If you read his memories in Marilyn Addison's book¹ he mentions that he was keen to enlist, but there is nothing about what he went through while a POW. I have no doubt he was a damaged man for the rest of his life.

The one item my family still has is dad's small wooden box, with sliding lid, that he brought home from the war. I was told that he used the box to store some of the meagre rice rations that the Japanese supplied. Dad died on the 21st of October 1995, and mum joined him six days later, and they rest side by side in our cemetery.

Transcript of Oral History Interview by Gary Barker and Geoffrey Watson at Netherby Home, King Island Hospital, on 7 January 2025. ©

¹ Addison M. Title: King Island a glimpse of the past. Self Published, 1995, ISBN 0 646 26094 4