

A Dedication to Jack Watson - A WW2 POW

The following slightly abridged paper was presented at the King Island 2025 Anzac Day Main Service by Key Note Speaker Mr Peter Watson. The paper was researched and written by Gary Barker, President of the King Island RSL Sub branch, and includes records from the Watson Family Collection.

Good morning. I have been attending Anzac Day Services for many years and last year happened to mention to the President of the Sub branch about my grandfather, and how little the family knew of his World War Two service in the Army. Little did I know that he would volunteer me to talk about Jack at today's service, but he did help me come up with some of the words! It really centres on this little green box, which is my grandfather's life while a Prisoner of War.

I have some memories of my grandparents and fortunately my parents Geoff and Peg were able to provide more information. But there is one common fact – Jack seldom spoke about what happened to him during the war including his time as a Prisoner of War from early 1942 to the end of the war in 1945. With some help, we now know a lot more about him due to the contents of the little green box.

Some here today may remember Jack; however, his real name was Christian William John Watson. He was born in Ringarooma in 1905 and arrived on King Island in October 1930 looking for work. He started with the Joubert family on their dairy farm near Manana. He then linked up with a chap named Ray Young and went driving bullock teams. Ray had a sister named Caroline and this was how Jack met his future wife, who was born on King Island in July 1909.

Jack and Carrie farmed at East Wickham and was where their only child Geoff, my dad, was born in 1934. Dad was seven years old when Jack enlisted to fight in World War 2 in June 1941. He remembers seeing him off at Currie Wharf when he went on the boat with the other chaps to go to Brighton in Tasmania. Jack, and a number of King Island mates, were subsequently posted to the Second Fortieth Infantry Battalion – later known as the Doomed Battalion.

With his father away, my dad remembers his mum doing all the milking and farm work on her own, but as he got older he did help. Carrie's mother Louise, who was a Grave, came to assist and after doing the milking would go down on the flats and slash the regrowth. This has helped me understand the important role of women on King Island during that war, not only with productivity and keeping the family together, but also the worry of a loved one serving overseas.

Carrie also took time to write to John Marshall [Chairman King Island WW2 Comfort Fund] in January 1942 where she mentions that Jack had asked her to say thank you for the Comfort Fund parcel he had received, and for the one they had sent to her young son Geoff – my dad. This shows the compassion islanders had for each other but, unbeknown to all, Jack was to become a Japanese prisoner of war a month later when he was captured on Timor.

Jack's Army Service Record has detailed entries from his enlistment to his capture on Timor, then there is a gap of over three years until he was repatriated. Many will know

how the Japanese treated their POWs, but surprisingly they did allow prisoners to send cards back home.

Carrie was sent four Notification Cards by the Japanese Imperial Army, where Jack was able to essentially advise that he was still alive. The format was initially sentences that could be struck through and later where the POW could write a short paragraph.

Three were sent while Jack was in the Number 4 Camp Thailand working on the Burma - Thai Railway in January and June 1944, with one being undated. Like a Postcard, but with set sentences on the rear side, a prisoner had the following options to strikethrough:

Your mails are received with thanks.
My health is good, usual, poor.
I am ill in hospital.
I am working for pay. I am paid monthly salary.
I am not working.
My best regards to:

While this appears to be helpful the reality was that the Cards were censored and any action that was taken to be a slight, however truthful, against the Japanese Imperial Army would result in brutal punishment for the individual. Prisoners soon realised a card with untruthful information was far better than no card being sent. At least the receiver would know the person was still alive.

Jack usually stated his health was good and he was working for pay – both highly unlikely. He would mention names to pass his regards to; however, some did not exist, and maybe this was an attempt to let the receiver know he had issues.

The last card was sent from Fukuoka in Japan where Jack was working, essentially as a slave, in a coal mine. Although undated, it must have been sent in mid-1945 just before he was liberated, and he was able to write a typed paragraph in his own words. The mine was near Nagasaki and one the thing Jack did mention was that they heard the bomb go off.

Let me close with a few words on the wooden box, with sliding lid, that Jack made while a Japanese Prisoner of War. It is made from scraps of timber of varying thickness joined by nails and was used to store his meagre rice ration. The RSL believe it is a rare example of an item that a King Island soldier used to survive.

Fortunately, Carrie saved the four Cards and used the box to store all her husband's documents. Now almost 80 years after Jack was liberated, we have a greater understanding of his war life and how fortunate he was to marry Carrie. Jack was not the same man after the war, smoked too much, could be a challenge to deal with after drinking, would lose control and disappear, and required hospitalization. However, there was an undoubtable will to survive and his return to farming at East Wickham enabled him to achieve some sense of normality, with Carrie's loving support. We owe them both a debt of gratitude.