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#### A Son's Memories

My father was a Sapper in Qld. Field Engineers, attached to the 2/40th in Sparrow Force.   
 There is little doubt that the greatest influence on my life, as for most of us, has been that   
 of our parents. I count myself very fortunate for the upbringing and education made   
 available to me.  
 My father had a hard childhood, the product of a share-cropping emigrant family from   
 London arriving on Australia's east coast during the Great War *[see 'Collector' magazine #11,  
 'Ode to the Universal Soldier' for his biography]*. After working on outback sheep and cattle   
 stations, dad served as a trooper in the Wide Bay & Burnett District Light Horse. He signed  
 on for the Royal Australian Field Engineers after the outbreak of war in Europe, a young  
 adventurer keen to visit Europe and see action. However Sapper (his new engineer rank)  
 Skennerton XQ10918 was re-assigned to Timor with 'Sparrow Force'. He was with the Royal  
 Australian Engineers accompanying the Tasmanian 2/40th infantry battalion, dispatched to blow up an aerodrome and munitions in an attempt to stall Japan's invasion of the Dutch East Indies. The Japs sent marine commando paratroops to take the island; they were decimated by the Tasmanians and engineers. A sea-borne landing of 18,000 Japs followed a few days later. Hopelessly outnumbered and outgunned, 'Sparrow Force' chose to capitulate on 23rd February 1942. Some made it into the mountains and operated with the Australian Independent Company (Commando) to harass the Japanese invaders for more than a year.

Dad never used the word 'surrender'. Interned in Timor and then Changi, they were shipped by cattle cart to slave labour on the 'Death Railway', the Burma-Thailand line in January 1943 for one and a half long years. After return to Singapore, dad was then shipped to Japan in September 1944. The 'Bayoke Maru' was the only vessel of a convoy of thirteen to survive typhoons and American torpedoes across the China Sea to the Land of the Rising Sun in late 1944, destination Nagasaki. After forced labour in the mines and steel mills where their numbers continued to dwindle, my father walked out of the Nagasaki prison camp after the second atomic bomb was dropped and the emperor surrendered on 14th August 1945. He was on his way back home within a few days, walking out of the POW camp with a few other diggers after they were placed under the command of a U.S. naval officer whom they reckoned was as bad as the Japs!

One principle I learned from my father, 'never give up and never quit'. He always considered that in the midst of any hardship or misfortune, the situation could only improve.

Along with my two younger brothers, I never witnessed any disagreement between our parents. Dad's gentle nature, practicality and manual skills were the product of a hard childhood, work-oriented youth and terrible experiences as a POW. After seeing so many mates die in Timor and the prison camps, dad attributed his survival to a rough upbringing and his implacable faith. My parents were practicing Christians and we regularly attended the Margate Baptist Church, another influence in my early years.  
  
I never once saw or heard an argument or anger with my mother, never heard him say he hated the Japanese, he had a wonderful nature, no doubt born out of the hardships and terrible things he saw in 1942-1945.   
  
My wife and I have been to Kinsayok on the Burma-Thailand line and seen the huge embankments they built, near their camp.   
I am interested to do a documentary of 'Sparrow' force as they fought so well in Timor, wiped out a parachute battalion of Marine Special Forces and then fought off 18,000 seaborne Japanese for 3 days. So much so that none of Sparrow Force seems to have been subjected to hardship as much as so many other POW's. Rod Beattie (curator of War Graves, Thailand & Burma) says it was the respect they earned on Timor. But wartime censorship and the Army HQ is not wanting to admit that they abandoned Sparrow Force on Timor, Gull Force on Ambon and Lark Force on Rabaul. So little has been made of their fine contribution. And the remaining old boys of Sparrow Force are rapidly 'dropping off their perches', as one of them so aptly put it! Dad talked little of it, even when prompted, there were just too many painful memories.  
  
My dear father departed this world on 2nd October 1996, at the age of seventy-seven, after many years of ill-health, primarily due to wartime service and incarceration by the Japanese.