

Come on chaps ... we're on our way

CHRIS PEPPER

It is an amazing story of wartime courage, initiative and derring-do – but for more than 60 years it has gone largely unheralded and unnoticed.

It is the story of how South Australian Ralph Churches, now a sprightly 91-year-old, led one of the great escapes of World War II.

Armed with a stolen compass and a map torn out of a children's atlas, the young private managed to organise a mass breakout from a German prisoner of war camp without a drop of blood being spilled.

Recalling his story of mateship, heroism and daring, Ralph this week told how he managed to free nearly 100 PoWs with the aid of Slovenian resistance fighters.

And it was a story that he kept secret for decades.

In June 1940, at 22, Ralph, a boyish-looking bank clerk from the Mallee town of Lamerook, about 200km east of Adelaide, decided to enlist like thousands of other young Australians.

He had no idea how his life would change after he was captured a year later on a beach in Nazi-occupied Greece.

"I looked up and there were two very blond gentlemen pointing at a Schmeisser at my navel," he said.

"The Germans were so powerful and we were so pitifully weak. They just blew us out of the country."

From then, Ralph became infected with lice and suffered the horrors of overcrowding and food shortages in German hands.

"They put us on this train," he said quietly at his Fulham Gardens home. "We were in box cars. Quite a number died on the trip."

Sent to a work camp in southern Austria, he was determined to escape and return to his beloved wife Ronte, the country girl from the tiny farming community of Coorua, on the Eyre Peninsula, who he kissed goodbye at Outer Harbor in November 1940.

Ralph said he had been deployed to the South Australian-based 2/48th Infantry Battalion – which was to become Australia's most-decorated unit of the war, with four Victoria Crosses and more than 80 other decorations.

He served in Palestine, North Africa and finally Greece, where he was captured by German troops on the beach of Cape Maleas on May 6, 1941.

After he was processed at a high-security camp, he was sent to a work camp in Yugoslavia (now Slovenia), with minimal security.

Two failed escapes proved to be useful reconnaissance.

The first attempt consisted of giving his captors the slip in freezing temperatures. He was caught the next day and sent to a cell at a stalag for three days on bread and water.

A second similar attempt led to a week of the same punishment. He was sent out to a road-building group

in Solvania on the Austrian border, 10km north of Maribor. He eventually found himself at Stalag 17a Gratz among 100 British, Australian and New Zealand troops near Maribor, close to the Austrian border and the base for SS troops.

Acting as a translator, Ralph stole his map from a school student, and the compass (cover picture) was taken from the commandant's office.

The camp was surrounded by a single barbed-wire fence and lacked elevated sentry boxes and searchlights. It was here Ralph learned about the Communist partisans whose resistance against the Germans was revered.

The PoWs were sent to work every day to reballast a railway line. After 18 months on the job, on August 30, 1944, he made his move.

After making contact with a local partisan, through an English PoW sent to get water from a nearby house every day, Ralph and six others simply walked away from the rail track.

Their guards were aged Austrian troops as the tide of war turned decisively and German soldiers were redeployed to frontline positions.

Ralph gave them the slip after offering a cigarette to one of them, who wandered away to smoke it.

He met the partisans that night, but instead of celebrating his release, Ralph worried about those left behind and what their punishment might be. So, backed by 100 armed resistance fighters, he and another man returned to the rail line and released the whole working party the next morning.

The Austrian guards, aware that Germany was out of the war, lowered their guns and raised their arms.

"Come on chaps, we're on our way," Ralph ordered the startled PoWs.

AFTER a march lasting 14 days and 250km (inset cover picture) with the Germans in pursuit, the group made it to Semic in southern Slovenia and an Allied air base.

Ralph was eventually reunited with his wife at Keswick Railway Station two months later. They have three children, Bev, now 65, Steven, 53, and Neil, 50, four grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.

Ralph was awarded the British Empire Medal for his valiant efforts, but ordered to keep it quiet.

In 1985, after he was approached by a documentary crew, he found that his story had been declassified.

"I was bloody proud of my blokes," he said this week. "I led them through the biggest successful escape with no bloodshed."

Surrounding him on the walls are family photos, some recording parts of the remarkable escape.

His fingers now shake, but he still possesses all of the tools of that remarkable escape – his intellect, the map and the compass which he used to find freedom.



Picture: Tricia Johnson

MY HERO: Ralph gets a kiss from wife Ronte ... they've been married 69 years. **BELOW:** The young Digger in July 1940, shortly before he left for North Africa, and a map showing the location of his great escape

