

## ‘Local lad’ shares story

4:03 PM Wednesday May 17, 2017



By Gerald Ford

Wairarapa character Jim Simmonds, 97, has recently completed the story of his extraordinary life.

Mr Simmonds has been by turns a ditch-digger, a soldier and radio operator, a prisoner of war, a beekeeper, a dairy farmer, and a pioneer irrigator and bore driller.

Highlights from Mr Simmonds experiences have now been set down for posterity in his book *A Local Lad, My Life Story*.

The colourful, large print book details Mr Simmonds' childhood beginning on a dairy farm in Kahutara, where he was the fifth of seven children.

There are tales of fishing, gelignite, haymaking and mischief making.

Young Simmonds left school at 11 and a half and worked first as a ditch digger and then as a dispatch rider for the home guard.

There he found opportunity to doctor his personnel file, changing his date of birth so he could enlist in the army, where he was a signalman and dispatch rider.

Private Simmonds sailed to war via Australia and India, not that the men were told where they were going.

The men trained in Egypt and were mobilized to Greece and then Aleppo, Syria.

As a dispatch rider his job was to take radio messages to the front line by motorbike. He travelled to Aleppo, Syria, to El Alamein and Benghazi, and he was one of 4000 New Zealanders captured in the lead-up to the Battle of Alamein.

Simmonds was moved through various desert camps and sailed to Italy.

He was treated in hospital for malnutrition, for close to seven months, and then moved to a camp “near the Austrian border and a tunnel that went through to Germany.

Men in the camp produced the Tiki Times and managed to hide radios from their German guards to hear news of the war.

“It looked as though we weren’t going to win it and we all thought we were going to stay in Germany forever,” Simmonds writes.

“We were given one meal a day and needed to make it last; one poor little spud, a cupful of cabbage soup, a little square of bread, a level teaspoon of sugar, a teaspoon of ersatz coffee, which was made from nuts and wood shavings.”

In the camps the men developed their own language, a mixture of Arabic, Italian and English.

At a camp in Poland Simmonds worked in a coal mine.

When the Russians were coming and he knew the prisoners would be marched back to Germany, he decided to “take my chances with the Russians” – who treated New Zealanders and Australians very well.

Finally he reached Warsaw and caught a train to Odessa on the Black Sea.

There he got a berth on a British cargo ship headed to England via Cairo and Athens.

There, he caught the boat home. “It was 1945 and I was twenty-five years old.”

On his return to New Zealand Simmonds took up beekeeping and met his wife to be, Dorothy Nagel.

“In those days, everyone liked white honey and it was easy to sell but not Manuka, because it was brown honey and had a terrible flavour – it still hasn’t changed.”

Simmonds’ Kahutara farm became the site of New Zealand’s first helicopter crash.

He was a pioneer driller for artesian water in the district.

Mr and Mrs Simmonds raised five children. Many of the children and grandchildren have written tributes in the book, including daughter Elaine Gooding, who wrote the foreword.

She writes of a hardworking man who would help his neighbours, who had many talents including as an engineer, and was generous to those in need.