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One man's war for his freedom

David Knowles

"I CAN'T remember much of my 21st birthday, but I do know I spent it as a prisoner of war."

Not many people have spent their coming of age in such circumstances, but Peter Johnson (89) certainly did, taken prisoner at Tobruk and spending nearly two years on the run in Italy.

In the lounge of his home in Westville, Peter vividly recalls those years and, to a casual observer, it's a tale of high adventure, typical derring-do, the sort of stories to excite many people, young and old, as they listen wide-eyed, begging for more.

Sure it is a tale of adventure, but it's a true story of a young man's struggle for freedom during a time when the world stood on its head.

Peter and Cyril Crompton (94), the latter having connections to the Crompton family of Pinetown, have put their war memoirs into print, the result being *Luck's Favours*, a book containing Cyril's story - *For the Adventure of It* - and Peter's - *On the run in Wartime Italy*.

Cyril fought at Sidi Rezegh (21 to 23 November 1941) as part of the 1st South African Anti-Aircraft Regiment, in a battle Jan Smuts compared to the South African stand at Delville Wood in WW1.

Taken prisoner at the battle, Cyril begins his journey as a POW, highlighting numerous incidents, friendships and meetings with those from his schooldays at Maritzburg College.

Peter, as a signalman, was captured at Tobruk and made numerous escape attempts, most ending in recapture and time in solitary.

"It was an incredible time. When I did get away, I stayed high in the Appenines as it was safer above the snow line. There was a time where I spent a few months with some Yugoslav partisans, ambushing German convoys in the narrow valleys, taking food and supplies.

"I met wonderful Italian people who, despite being very poor and not having much in life, assisted me and gave me refuge, knowing full well that harbouring and assisting Allied prisoners meant certain death."

And so Peter's story continues until he returned to England at the end of the war before coming to



Peter Johnson with his war diary and new book, *Luck's Favours*.

South Africa.

"I have often been asked what motivates a person to do what I did, what drove me to strive for freedom. It's something I can't answer and perhaps it's an instinct we all have to be free," he said.

From a shelf in his study, Peter pulls a small, brown book, the binding weak through age.

"This is my original diary I kept in those years. I wrote in pencil and battle to read it now as it has faded, but I can pick up on things and the memories start flowing," he says, as he looks in the front of the diary where he still has names and addresses of his mates from the war.

Luck's Favours - the title comes from the phrase *Luck favours some* - often used by Peter in his story, is available at bookshops countrywide.

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