



NATALIA

Nelson Mandela 466/64 773/79 29. 7. 79
 Dear Mr Paton, *Alfred You. writing, Bevan*
Alfred Paton *29. 7. 79*
 This is my third attempt to reach you during the last 15 years. I
 wrote to you immediately & could send out more than just two
 a year, and I thanked you for your courageous response of June
 It was not so easy those days to come forward as you did and
 people are likely to forget that inspiring gesture.
 In the second letter I expressed my sympathies on the passing
 of your first wife. I pointed out that that tragedy, coming so soon
 the death of your friend, Chief Ruthuli, must have been especially
 difficult to endure. I mentioned the Browns, Kulpers and the
 asked you to give all a
 reached you and that your
 nents if they did not, then
 sense of gratitude is not
 the fore caution of registering this particular, to make sure the



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LUCK'S FAVOURS. Two South African Second World War Memoirs

by CYRIL CROMPTON and PETER JOHNSON

Fish Hoek, Echoing Green Press, 2010. 310pp. illus. ISBN: 978-0-9802501-9-0. R185

MANY South Africans were prisoners-of-war in Italy and Germany during the Second World War, and some have written about their experiences. One thinks, for example, of Uys Krige's *The Way Out*, which describes his adventures as an escaped prisoner in Italy. Though there are common elements, former POWs' stories are bound to differ from each other, reflecting different personalities and experiences.

Luck's Favours could easily have been "a book that never was", being published only when its authors were 94 and 89 years old. The publisher, who is Cyril Crompton's nephew, includes a note explaining the fortunate combination of circumstances and events that led to its publication. Without those, one story would have remained virtually unrecorded, and the other a forgotten manuscript among family papers. The two men were in different regiments (artillery and

signals) and did not know each other until recently. One was captured at Sidi Rezegh and the other at Tobruk. Cyril Crompton was born and bred in Pietermaritzburg, and it is he who gives the book its strong Natal connection.

Crompton's part of the book, "For the Adventure of It", tells how for him at the beginning of the war being a gunner in the Bluff Battery in Durban seemed too boring and too far from the action. He and a friend, youthfully unaware of possible dire consequences, deserted from their unit (swimming across the harbour entrance at night) and joined the Royal Durban Light Infantry (RDLI), which accepted them without question. After they had been ten days in training at Zonderwater near Pretoria the military police caught up with them, and they were taken back to Durban to face a court martial. Because they had deserted from their regiment in order to get closer to the fighting rather than further from it, and

had enlisted with the RDLI within 24 hours of absconding from the Bluff Battery, the court took a less serious view of their offence, which could have carried a thirty-year sentence, or even the death penalty. They were sent back to the Bluff, confined to barracks, stripped of their corporals' stripes and docked a month's pay. As they were now trained gunners and still hankering for more action, their CO later arranged for their transfer to the 1st South African Anti-Aircraft Regiment. So began the main part of Crompton's wartime "adventure" which took him to East and North Africa, Italy, Poland and Germany. At the beginning of his captivity he survived when the Italian ship taking POWs from North Africa to Italy was torpedoed by a British submarine. At the end of it he survived a horrific 900-kilometre march, lasting from January to April 1945, when the Germans moved POWs westwards away from the advancing Russians. This last episode is perhaps the most graphically described, and certainly the most painful to read.

Peter Johnson's part of the book is entitled "On the run in wartime Italy", and reveals the author as an inveterate escaper, who got away from his captors several times, only to be recaptured. Once, when a trainload of POWs was being moved further north,

allied aircraft bombed the marshalling yard and a German soldier, almost certainly against orders, ran along the train and opened the cattle-truck doors to let them out. Had it not been for that brave and humane action, hundreds of the prisoners would probably have been trapped in the trucks and burnt to death. After Italy had capitulated and the Germans were retreating up the Italian peninsula Johnson made his final escape and eventually linked up with Allied forces in L'Aquila. During the long periods he was on the run, he was helped by partisans in the mountains, by Italian peasant families, by a group of woodcutters, by an aristocratic lady who spoke flawless English and lived in a large villa, and various others. Once he suffered a serious back injury after a fall in the mountains, and was cared for while he recovered. With some families he spent quite long periods, forming very strong bonds of affection, and was very aware of how much they were risking by harbouring an escaped POW.

Crompton's and Johnson's accounts are well written, and both make compelling reading. The book has been well edited and produced, and is a worthy addition to South African war memoirs.

JOHN DEANE