

John Parfitt

John Parfitt of Newlands, Wellington - is an Auschwitz survivor.

He was not Jewish, gypsy or homosexual. He was a regular New Zealand soldier and, at the time, an escaped POW.

Captured by the Germans during the fighting in Tobruk in December 1941, John was handed over to the Italians as Libya was regarded by them as an Italian theatre of war. He eventually finished up at Campo 57 Gruppignano, near Udine in the north of Italy.

This was the main prison camp for ANZAC non-commissioned soldiers and held some 4,000 of them at the time of the Italian Armistice in September 1943. One of the conditions of that Armistice required the Italian army to hand over all Allied POW to Montgomery's 8th Army.

But the Germans had no intention of giving up the fight and moved swiftly to surround Campo 57. They crammed the entire prison population into two trains and took them to Germany. John ended up in the German "ausse narbeitskommando" of Odenberg in Poland.

During the unusually cold winter of 1944, John and 100 other prisoners, were sent out to work building a ramp over a railway line. At the time they were guarded by civilians (slave labour and civilian guards are both breaches of the Geneva Conventions).

"We refused to work because it was the middle of winter. The snow was over our boots and we were frozen stiff. To keep warm we set fire to a 44-gallon drum using sleepers. Then the guard kicked it over," he is quoted as saying to a NZ newspaper.

The civilian guards quickly sought the military guards who threatened to shoot them if they didn't get to work. John was one of 14 who held out. One of the soldiers then rammed a gun against his nose and loaded a round.

"We said to each other 'hold it, hold it don't bloody give in' then someone gave the order to unload."

One of the prisoners, John Durham, had convinced the German officer that it wasn't a good idea to kill defenseless POWs.

Instead the POWs were sent to another camp - Auschwitz.

He said Auschwitz's reputation was well known. He was put in a small room with 14 others and kept there without a break outside until the imminent arrival of Russian troops forced the Germans to round up their prisoners and march them towards Czechoslovakia.

"It was midwinter," he recalled. "We travelled 24 hours a day and had to keep moving to keep warm."

From Czechoslovakia they were sent to the German city of Nuremberg to clean the city's rail yards. But this job came to an abrupt halt when Allied planes bombed the region putting all trains out of action.

On the move again, John's travails finally ended when they encountered reconnaissance scouts from General George Patton's Eighth American Army. Their guards fled and after nearly three and a half years captivity, John was free.

By the time he got back to England the war was nearly over. John was sent to a hospital to recuperate and gain some weight. Like many other POWs, he seldom spoke of his war experiences - not even to his family.

However, in his 80s, he saw an item in an Australian newspaper about a compensation fund for former POWs who had been used as slave labour and successfully applied.