

Sketchbook sheds light on dark period

By Genevieve Cooper

When Graham Bettany of Oakbank flicks through a scrapbook documenting his father's youth, he opens a window into one of the world's darkest periods.

His father, Des Bettany, was a British prisoner of war (POW) in the notorious Changi camps on Singapore Island having been captured during the fall of Singapore in World War II.

To keep himself "sane", the artilleryman (who trained as an industrial chemist before the war) escaped into his childhood passion for art and drew scene after scene of POW life and wartime experiences into carefully hidden sketchbooks.

But unlike other well-known artists in Changi such as Murray Griffin and Ronald Searle (whom he met while inside), Des Bettany often chose to draw the lighter side of life.

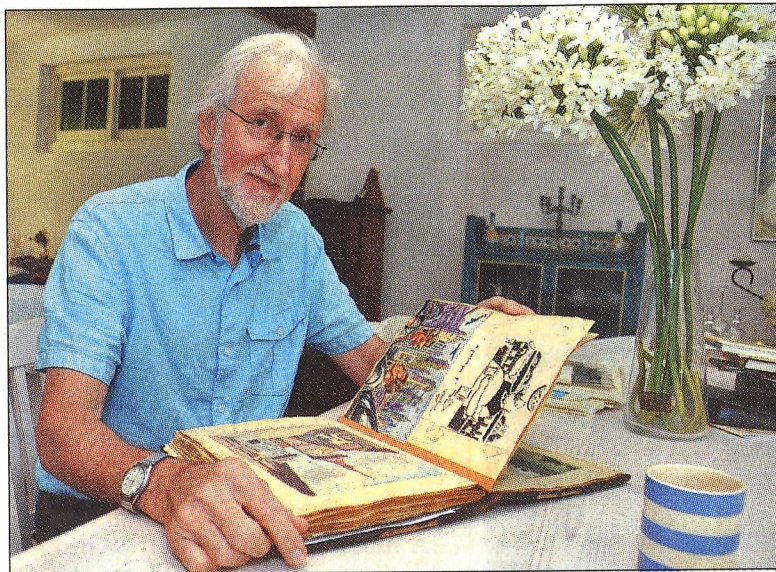
Many of his illustrations were caricatures of people in the camps and cartoons telling insider jokes from Changi or contrasting prison life with remembered civilian life.

Graham Bettany said his father had a very English sense of humor and a strong sense of the ridiculous.

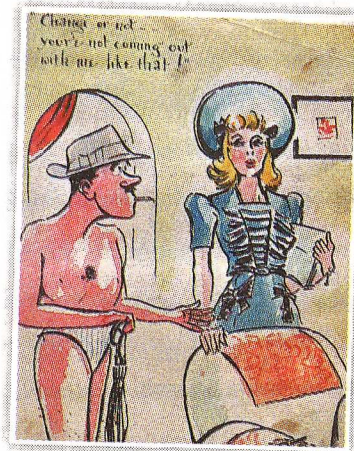
"This is more lighthearted than reality," he said. "He exaggerated – the people look reasonably healthy and fit, and they weren't.

"It was wishful thinking, a lot of it."

Mr Bettany was also involved in painting the programs for the many amateur theatre and music productions put on at the camps.



Oakbank architect Graham Bettany with a sketchbook of his father's POW art. BELOW: One of Des Bettany's Changi cartoons and the artist on the British military transport ship en route to Asia, standing left.



Sets for theatre productions were often made from old tents into backdrops.

Paints for the sets and for drawing in general were scrounged for many sources including being created from colored earth, sometimes discovered from digging latrines.



Not all of Mr Bettany's POW art survived the war.

A sketchbook of satirical political cartoons lent to a fellow POW was discovered by Japanese guards.

Via interpreters, Mr Bettany had to explain his work to the Japanese commandant and various senior officers.

He later told his family he was lucky not to have been given "a short haircut" in punishment.

After the war – aside from the occasional cartoon birthday card – Mr Bettany rarely drew a comic piece but he never went back to chemistry.

He studied art in Leeds and became an art teacher.

His first teaching post in Australia, after emigrating with wife Irene and eldest son Graham in 1958, was a technical high school in Whyalla.

He transferred to the South Australian School of Art in Adelaide and was the acting principal when he retired in 1974.

Graham Bettany said he and brother Keith and sister Ruth (arts co-ordinator at Heathfield High School) knew about their father's album of sketches that he kept in his wardrobe but their father rarely spoke about his wartime experiences.

That changed to some degree in 1995 during the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II when he caught up with two colleagues from his old artillery unit living in Australia and some of his artworks were published in Rob Linn's book, *Their Sacrifice: Australia Remembers 1945-1995*.

"Over the course of that we overheard some conversations but there's still a lot we don't understand about some of these cartoons," Graham Bettany said.

"No-one who wasn't there could ever really understand what they went through."

Des Bettany died in 2000 at the age of 81 having spent most of his life with a sketchbook in hand.

THE FALL OF SINGAPORE

Next Wednesday, February 15, marks the 70th anniversary of the fall of Singapore to the invading Japanese.

Singapore was the major British military base in South East Asia and was considered impregnable. However the battle lasted just seven days and is now considered one of Britain's greatest army defeats.

The tactics, speed and savagery of the Japanese surprised the British-led military and was a wake-up call about the fighting abilities of the invaders.

Tens of thousands of military personnel and civilians were killed in the invasion and about 80,000 British, Indian and Australian troops became prisoners of war (POW), ending up in the notorious Changi POW camp.

About 9000 of these men died building the Burma-Thailand railway.

Graham Bettany said his father never wanted his war work to end up "lost in a warehouse somewhere" – although some of it is featured in books and at the Changi museum – so the family honored his wish by sharing the art privately and through the website www.changipowart.com.

"We feel very privileged to have this and it will become part of our family history and hopefully our kids will continue to look after it," he said.

"We hope that through this people will understand more about what went on in these POW camps, what life was like for the POWs and how ingenious they were."