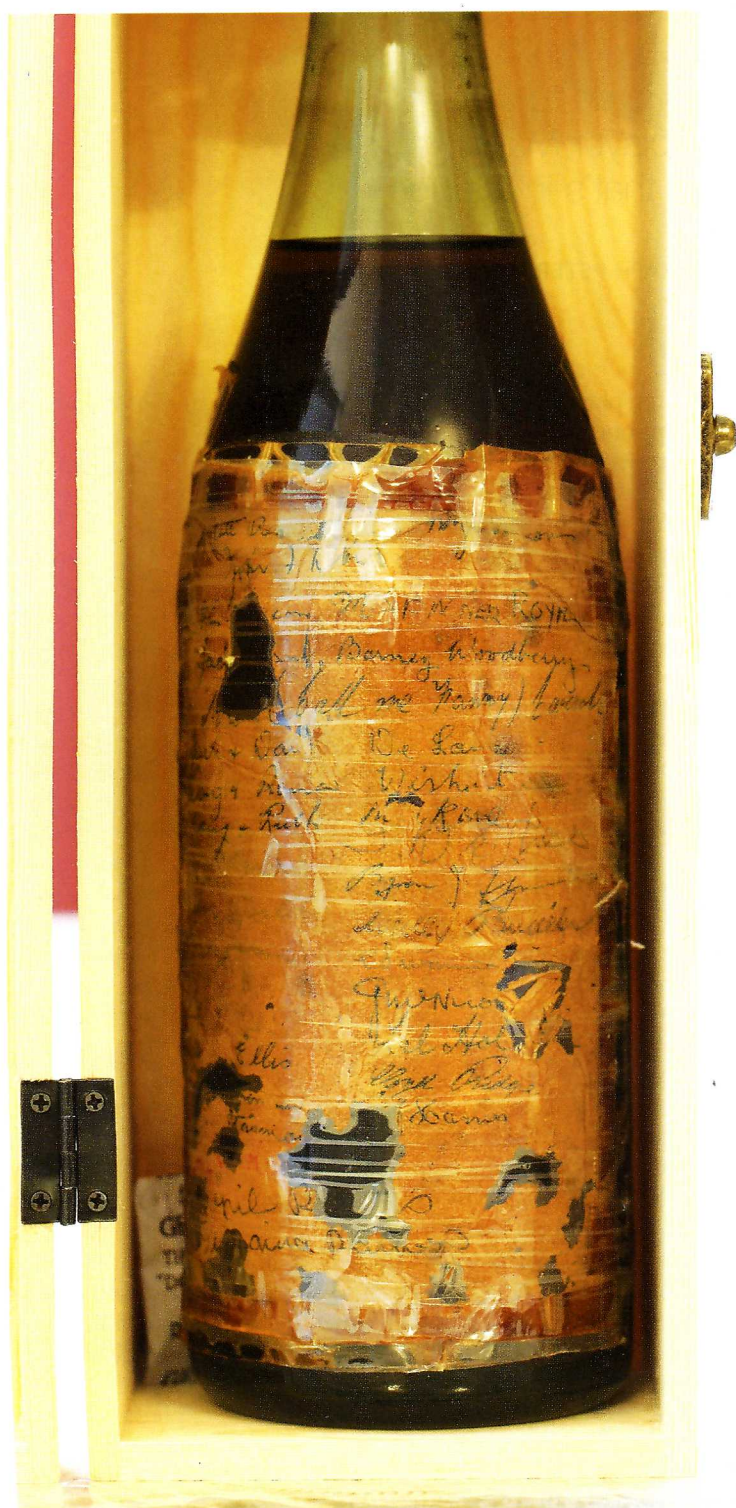


# Message in a bottle

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**F**OR THE SECOND HALF OF WORLD WAR II, machine gunner Bill Schmitt survived Changi, the Japanese POW camp in Singapore that is part of our Anzac inheritance. This is how Bill did it: “We had mates, in little groups of three or four. If one or two of us got sick, we all looked after each other. We had loners in Changi, who didn’t come back.”

Bill was one of the first out of Changi on August 30, 1945, after Allied planes dropped pamphlets with the deathless words, in English and Japanese, “In accordance with the terms of the surrender of all Japanese forces signed by His Majesty the Emperor the war has now come to an end”.

Bill came back to Adelaide on September 25 that year. He is 94 this month. He still has his pamphlet. A bottle of sake, or Japanese rice wine, also came back with what are believed to be the signatures of the last 50 Australians out of Changi, including the man who liberated the sake – fellow South Australian Percy Johnson.

Time has faded the list of names, but Bill reckons he can identify one – “Wishart, I think Vic, from the Riverland ...” Of course, world war is no respecter of state boundaries, so the names could be from anywhere in Australia. But Bill did know Percy Johnson? “He was a patient in the bed next to me in Changi,” he says. “Then when he came home, he lived near the Warradale Hotel. I was in there one day and said, ‘There’s Perce!’”

The war was like that. And that is the reason the keepers of the Changi sake bottle believe it is worth preserving and researching the names further through conservation. They see it as a symbol of Australian courage and sacrifice in what returned serviceman Brian Selby says was a different world. “The bottle could be considered an icon for the general public who know only today’s world. It is also a unique piece of memorabilia.”

Brian is president of the SA and NT branch of the Malaya and Borneo Veterans Association. The majority of its members are too young to have served in World War II, but they revisited many of the significant combat zones during the Malayan Emergency of 1948 to 1960 and the later Indonesian confrontation from 1962 to 1966.

So the link with the privations of Changi and the Burma railway is strong, and Brian is one arc in the tight circle that keeps its eye on the sake bottle, still with its original crown seal and label intact.

“OZEKI Made in Japan,” it says, “brewed and bottled by B. Osabe Shoten Ltd, Mazu Nishinomiya HYO – Japan.” After the war, Percy Johnson must have known he wasn’t going to live long, because he gave the sake bottle to Max Swaffer, his next-door neighbour in Oaklands Park, who had been in Army communications during the Japanese surrender and the Korean



## Sketches from inside

Des Bettany was in the Royal Artillery when Singapore fell to the Japanese in early 1942. He spent the next three years in Changi, where he was sufficiently impressed by his Australian comrades to migrate to Adelaide with his family after qualifying as an art teacher.

Des, who died in 2000, sketched life in Changi. His children Graham, Ruth and Keith have recorded it at [www.changipowart.com](http://www.changipowart.com). On the website, Des writes of the optimism that never left him in Changi. The night of the D-Day landings in 1944, "when the report reached us, the whole camp within and without the jail began to stir and murmur, to the consternation of the Japanese".

At such moments in Changi, thoughts turned to home, freedom and future. In "Welcome home ... darling!" Des imagined a world vastly changed by technology that today isn't so far from the truth.

He very nearly got the "short haircut" for a book of political sketches that fell into enemy hands. Those particular Changi images did not survive the war, but enough of Des's sketches remain as proof that humour will get you almost anywhere – even out of a POW camp.



**Above:** Another souvenir from World War II is Des Bettany's collection of sketches and cartoons depicting life in Changi and his ideas of what life would be like after the War, such as this futuristic cartoon titled *Welcome home ... darling!* **Right:** Two Changi survivors – Bill Schmitt and the precious Japanese sake bottle. **Opposite page:** The signatures of what are believed to be the last 50 Australian soldiers to come out of Changi are still visible on the sake bottle.

War. Max's son Peter, a history buff, is now unofficial custodian, but the bottle spends most of its time in the hands of Mike McClelland, a former patron of the Marion RSL.

Mike carries it around in a cardboard cylinder inside a wooden wine box. This year he will visit schools and colleges to highlight the significance of the Changi sake bottle. "It's for the enlightenment of young people," Mike says. "Not to talk about warmongers, to talk about the Australians and their allies who did so much and had so much taken away from them."

On his way back to Australia, Bill Schmitt was aboard the same transport ship as Weary Dunlop when the Japanese captured them. He was lucky more than once. He didn't go to the Burma railway and the River Kwai with Weary and the men because he had amoebic dysentery. A doctor kept him in Changi to try out a new sulphur drug on him.

Instead Bill helped build the Changi aerodrome, now Changi International Airport. He lived on rice and a few greens, slept on concrete and dropped from 73 kilograms to 43. He was lucky again when the surrender came, because he and his mates had been set to work digging their own graves.

Bill was lucky yet again back home. Apart from callouses on his shoulders and hips from the concrete, he had the nature to recover from his Changi ordeal and lead a long and happy work and family life. About 50,000 POWs entered Changi. Many thousands were not as lucky as Bill, who has an AM for his services to ex-POWs.

Just the same, the Changi experience did affect him. "It gave me a lot better idea of my values," Bill says, "but it was a hard way to find out." And an old bottle of rice wine from Japan should be a permanent reminder of that.

