

Review in *The Mercury*, Durban

2 December 2010

of

Luck's Favours: Two South African Second World War Memoirs

by Cyril Crompton and Peter Johnson

Published by Echoing Green Press in October 2010

LUCK'S FAVOURS

Authors: Cyril Crompton and Peter Johnson

Publisher: Echoing Green Press

Reviewer: GRAHAM LINSCOTT

MY GENERATION only just remembers our fathers and uncles returning from World War II. Many were physically exhausted and emotionally drained after six years or so of warfare, thankful to be alive and back.

They slid gratefully into civilian life and spoke little of their wartime experiences.

Late at night there would be occasional reminiscences when a few of them got together over drinks and, through clouds of tobacco smoke, a cryptic yarn or two would be told, incomprehensible to anyone who had not been there. Soon the stories faded.

We of the next generation knew only that something absolutely momentous had happened in the lives of all of them; bonds had been created, terrifying experiences had been shared.

But it was in the past, deliberately stored in the attic rooms of memory, seldom disturbed.

War books appeared, of course. Some were scholarly analyses of the war; some were fiction.

It was the same war and the same cause but the characters

were mainly British or American. Few South Africans told their own stories.

This is now remedied in part by the publication, many decades on, of the separate stories of Cyril Crompton, now aged 94, and Peter Johnson, 89.

Both were taken prisoner of war and endured incredible danger and hardship.

Crompton survived the hell of Sidi Rezegh, in the Western Desert, which Field Marshal Jan Smuts was to describe as the World War II equivalent of Delville Wood. He was taken prisoner, survived a Royal Navy torpedo attack in the Mediterranean which sank the ship transporting him and his fellow-prisoners to Italy, then was sent to labour camps in Germany and Poland.

Then he survived a forced march back to Germany through the bitter cold of a Polish winter, a march in which they starved and hundreds of PoWs died before they were rescued by American forces pushing from the west. It is a harrowing account.

Johnson was taken PoW at Tobruk, was sent to Italy, escaped twice and was recaptured and

then eventually escaped again as he was being sent by train to Germany – getting away in the confusion and terror as the RAF bombed and strafed the very train in which he was incarcerated.

Johnson escaped into the mountains, where he was sheltered by Italian peasants (at great risk to themselves) and for a time linked up with Yugoslavian partisan forces who were harrying the Nazis inside Italy.

He encountered kindness, romance, a great deal of high drama and a great deal of heartache at having to move on. Eventually he met advancing British forces and was sent to England, then eventually back to South Africa.

These are vivid stories of years spent on the edge of survival.

The book's cover is based on the Red Cross parcels without which thousands of Allied PoWs would not have survived.

You put it down with the reflection that here is a generation with a story to tell – yet so few have actually told it. Also, here is a generation to which we today owe so much.

