

ANZAC Project Centenary Interview on 2 November 2015 with John Jess

Tape A

AA Can you give me your full name please?

JJ Just John Jess.

AA Can you give me your date of birth please?

JJ 1 October 1913 which makes me 102.

AA You look great for 102 I have to tell you. Where were you born?

JJ I was born in Northern Ireland.

AA When did you come to Australia?

JJ I came to Australia in 1960 with my wife and three sons. I had been in the army before that as a regular soldier in the British army. I had joined the army in 1934. I came home from the army and became a postman in Northern Ireland. I decided that wasn't the life for me so I immigrated to Australia with my family.

AA Was there something that made you decide to join the army? Did you think about it much before you joined?

JJ I wanted to see the world. I didn't join to fight; I just wanted to see the world. It was my only way out. I was about 21 then.

AA Did your parents have a military background?

JJ Oh no, my father worked in the gasworks in Belfast. We were a family of seven, five boys and two girls.

AA Which part of Northern Ireland were you from?

JJ I was born in County Antrim.

AA How did your family feel about you joining the army? Were they OK with that?

JJ They were OK. They said you have made your bed you have to lie in it. My father and brother took me down to the boat and I went to Manchester in England. I trained to be a soldier, they wakened me up there.

AA So you had no idea that war would break out five years after that. How did you feel when war broke out in 1939, were you worried?

JJ No, not in the least. Where was I in 1939, I was in Singapore when war broke out. In 1942 with the invasion of Pearl Harbour was when we came in against the Japs. I was in Singapore then, I wasn't captured then.

AA When did they capture you?

JJ Sir Shenton Thomas was the Governor of Singapore and Percival was the military leader. They were bombing the place silly, the aircraft had all gone and we were left on our own more or less. People were trying to get away in boats. Most of them were sunk in the Malacca Strait trying to get away, but they had left it too late.

5 mins

There was an incident where one boat was sunk and the people were trying to swim ashore, I don't know how many there were. The Japs picked them up on shore and turned them back and made them walk back into the water. This is genuine. They then shot them when they got out of their depth. No-one survived. They machine gunned them.

AA Did you see that?

JJ No, we were defence in Singapore and were in pillboxes all off east coast. But the Japs never came they came in from the west coast where it was almost impossible to come in, there was so much swamps there. There were Australians there too, but not enough to stop them. The Japs just swept in. They blew up the connection with Malaya, Johor Bahru the bridge. Our people blew it up and I think they blew up the water supply as well.

AA You were in Changi were you?

JJ I wasn't in Changi very much as the Japs used to come and take us out on work trips. Most of the time we were away. One time we were digging a great big hole, they were going to bury oil drums in it to save them from getting bombed up. We worked on that for a long time, Australians as well as British.

AA Did you get to meet many Australians?

JJ Oh yes, but we didn't mix much. The Australians worked on one part and we worked on another. We never mixed much; they tried to keep us separate. Even as prisoners they kept us that way.

AA How do you feel about the Japanese now?

JJ I have no animosity about them. I never had bad dreams about them. They were definitely uncivilised at that time, about 50 years behind other countries. They believed their Emperor was God; the soldiers would die for their Emperor. They were fanatics.

AA It's hard for us to understand. We don't want to die, we would rather be caught than die, but they think differently.

JJ Life was cheap for them. They had severe discipline, which is why they got so far I think, coming down into Malaya.

AA How did you feel after the war, did you have nightmares?

10 mins

JJ Strangely I didn't have any antagonism against the Japs at all. I was only hit once on the back of the head trying to get out a lorry that was dug in, that was the only time I got hit. They would tell you to do something once and if you didn't do it they would get angry and say "you sabotage". It didn't affect me at all, no nightmares. I must have been in some kind of a trance or something. I knew once we were captured we wouldn't be getting out of there for a while. The food was awful, just rice and water you might say, which was supposed to be soup.

AA Did you get sick?

JJ Oh yes, most of us were sick. I had berri berri. Even my genitals swelled up.

AA It must have been a relief when the war was over and you left there.

JJ I was one of the fittest to go. I was one of the first away. We were waiting in Colombo and there was a big fleet of British and Yankee stuff waiting to invade Malaya, boats everywhere and they were toot tooting when we went past. They were waiting for the invasion of Malaya but it never came I don't think.

AA Did you get married before the war or after the war?

JJ I got married after the war when I went home from the army. I was 31 then. We had three sons and they all came out with me. We were in a hostel in Cabramatta and they went to school there.

AA Did you keep in touch with old war mates after the war?

JJ Just one fellow who was from Dublin. He had diphtheria. I used to visit him. He was separated from the rest of the people. He was the only visitor I had after the war; he only came once I think. He was a big Irishman. I never made contact with anyone else at all.

AA After you came to Australia, did you ever go back to Northern Ireland at all?

JJ No, I didn't but my wife went home for a month's holiday.

AA Did you talk about the war with your sons much?

JJ Strangely enough they never bothered. The Japanese were good gentle people in themselves. I have this from King George VI you might be interested in.

15 mins

AA I will read it out. It's from Buckingham Palace. "The Queen and I bid you a very warm welcome home. Through all great trials and sufferings which you have undergone at the hands of the Japanese you and your comrades have been constantly in our thoughts. We note from the accounts we have already received how heavy those sufferings have been. We know also that these have been endured by you with the highest courage. We mourn with you the deaths of so many of your gallant comrades. With all our hearts we hope that your return from captivity will bring you and your families a full measure of happiness which you may long enjoy." That was signed by the King.

JJ I was lucky in a way because I was on a batch to go up to the railway and I was taken off because I had a temperature of 103 degrees with malaria. Of the 200 of them, half of them died of cholera, so I was lucky in that way. Later on I wound up in a batch.

AA How long did you have malaria?

JJ I didn't have it long and it didn't come back on me after that. I was lucky that I got a temperature. But my mate got malignant malaria, a spinal sort of thing and he was actually going to Taiwan to the mines. An American submarine picked some of them up and he was one that was picked up. That was the last we saw of him.

AA It must have been hot comparing Northern Ireland with Singapore.

JJ I enjoyed Singapore. I was pretty fit as I did a lot of running. I never missed a work party. If you didn't go to work your rations were cut. The more you worked the more rations you got, the less work you did the less food you got. We dug these big slit trenches as a graveyard. I never thought that I would get out of there alive.

AA So it was a combination of good luck and your good health that you survived.

JJ Definitely, I didn't take anything too seriously. I just looked to a better life ahead.

AA That's maybe also why you survived.

JJ Possibly, because the diet wasn't too good. Even when I came back to Changi, I got dysentery. It was terrible, that's a bad disease along with the berri berri and a little bit of malaria.

20 mins

I went with the second batch of 200 a good while after, the Thai railway finished at Ban Kong. We had to walk up from there and half of them fell out and died. The Japs wouldn't give them a hand to get up and maybe killed them for all I know. We had to move on and leave them. We carried all the rations, rice and anything we could find to help us.

AA I suppose you never ate rice again after the war.

JJ I don't like it now. Sweet rice is alright with milk.

AA Did they give you fresh water?

JJ There was plenty of water. We didn't have trouble with water. Rice is nothing but water if you think about it.

Here's a letter from the Queen, the Governor General and another from Tony Abbott for my 100.

AA Did you ever think you would make it to 100?

JJ Never. My family never thought I would make it to 100 because I was fussy with my food. The army changed all that, once I joined the army. I was a different person. I just seemed to take to it. I never had any trouble in the army. I was very fit. I was a lazy bugger before I joined the army, that's the best of it. I was delivering papers for this shop for four years. I wasn't thinking of it as exercise. I was carrying all the papers up the steps and peddling my bicycle but I never thought of it as exercise.

AA You still walk now.

JJ Yes, I use a stick but I have no trouble with my legs. There's nobody marched more than me and I did athletics and the legs are still good. I don't have any trouble with my knees, no pains or rheumatism.

I have to tell you this. When we got to this camp after marching up from Ban Kong, it was a sort of distribution camp with a hospital with toilets next to the beds. It must have been terrible. The Japs asked for volunteer drivers. I thought that this was an easy way out of there. I could drive a motorbike but couldn't drive a car at the time. My mates told me to come with them and I learnt to drive and there was another bloke there who couldn't drive at all either. It would have been terrible if they found out. I was lucky that way. There were 20 of us. We got into this camp and a couple of days afterwards they decided to get these six trucks over a 40 mile difference. We had to get them out of the muck. This big Chevy had a winch in the front and a half inch steel rope. Every time we bogged we would put it around the nearest tree but we got them all out. It was hard going up the hill and all the muck. It didn't affect me all that much.

25 mins

AA You seem mentally strong.

JJ I must be, it didn't seem to affect me. There was this big American Chevy and there were 20 of us on the back of it. They pulled the logs from beneath us and we got bogged straight away and the driver got a bit of a walloping from the Japanese, sabotage again. I was the number ten driver. They could have shot us. I was silly enough to do it, but I did it.

The blokes that worked on the railway were just walking skeletons. It made you wonder how they stood up. You could see all their bones right down.

AA So, you weren't too bad.

JJ I was in the last batch up and first back to Changi. I was lucky that way.

AA Were some of the Japanese worse than others?

JJ Some were real buggers. I saw one give one of our officers who was in charge slapping his face. We didn't like this man ourselves and we used to call him the Smiling Assassin. But it was awful to see him getting knocked about. I was disgusted to see him getting knocked about but there was nothing we could do about it. They would shoot you on the spot if you attacked them.

I didn't think that I would get out. We wouldn't have got out if it hadn't been for the atom bomb, the jungle being the way it was. The Yankees would come up from India in the B29s. The British were defeated in Burma, they drove them right back into India. There was a General Slim who said that there would be no retreat from now on. He said you stay where you are and we will reinforce you. There's always reserves waiting for you. They had aircraft coming from India and started pushing the Japs back. But no retreat, we just had to stay there. The Japs would come up against you and go round and come back and you would think you were surrounded. I didn't get that near to them myself. The Japs were everywhere. That's how they got down into Malaya. They were on bicycles and all sorts of stuff. There would be hard defence into the water but they had boats to take them round the back. They were everywhere.

Tape B

I was so lucky to get out of it. Blokes would be dying of cholera. You would be burying your mate today and tomorrow you would be getting buried yourself. The Japs were scared to death of cholera.

AA So cholera was a bigger fear than malaria and berri berri.

JJ Cholera was the worst of the two. I had no trouble with malaria. I don't know if it was malaria.

AA Did the Japanese get cholera?

JJ You wouldn't have known. They wouldn't go near any person who had cholera. I wasn't close to the railway, but some of our blokes must have gone through hell. They were just skin and bones. I thought we were bad until we saw them. I didn't even get to see the railway. You wonder how they survived. They would take hundreds of them up into the bush and say that was their camp. There would be nothing there. It would be raining and maybe monsoons. That's how bad they were. They did it with the Chinese in Thailand too. They were forced labour and some of the Thais too, anything to get the job done. I think the Yanks bombed with the B29s. The Japs couldn't get near them, they were too high. They bombed the Japs silly in Singapore. When it was taken over, the only thing I saw getting taken over was a bloke coming down in a parachute to Singapore. He was the first bloke in, he was lucky that he wasn't shot. They must have known about him coming.

AA Did they have a doctor in the camp?

JJ Oh yes, we had a doctor but he had no medicine. If you went to him with dysentery he gave you castor oil. He was a good bloke but he could do nothing about it as he had no medicine. They didn't give him the Red Cross stuff. The Japanese kept it for themselves; it wasn't distributed amongst the troops.

5 mins

AA Did you ever see what the Japanese ate?

JJ They ate the same as us. I don't think they got any preference. They got a bit better food with vitamins but other than that they had hardships like the rest of us. One of our blokes went and robbed the camp of something and the Japs missed whatever it was and turned the camp upside down looking for this thing whatever it was. I think it was a wireless. Must have been a brave man that did it.

AA When you are that sick and weak I suppose you are willing to try anything, take a risk.

JJ We would eat all sorts of things, cook snails and anything that was edible, snakes even. There was a snake hibernating behind my bed. We ate it, it tasted like chicken. The Japs used to call the rats "roof rabbits" and they ate them. There were a few Yanks captured there too.

AA There were a fair few rats there were there?

JJ Oh yes. There was a monkey escaped once and got on the roof and was throwing poo down on us. I think that was in peace time, there was a park outside our camp packed with monkeys. There were too many in the park actually.