



Oldest graduate's startling survival story

"We learned quickly to eat the maggots – they supplied our protein and supplemented the handful of rice we were fed daily."

That memory is still vivid for the oldest graduate of the School of Business, W.P. (Percy) Wellington whose three and a half years in a Japanese prisoner of war camp interrupted a career that started when he first became a student at what, in 1929, was the Faculty of Commerce at the University of Otago.

The Japanese also left him with a hearing deficiency as the result of a brutal beating with batons, brought about largely through difficulties with being understood. "We learned Japanese –we had to –and I can still speak it quite fluently." Percy was encouraged by the Dean of Commerce in the 1930s, Alan G.B.Fisher, to seek a Master of Commerce but after completing a lot of work, including reviving his French (a language was an integral part of the degree), he found he could not sit for the degree because he didn't meet terms in Philosophy and Psychology.

Nevertheless he lectured in commercial law and accounting at the university and at King Edward Technical College as well as setting up a private practice. Before the war, he was earning about £6 a week and paying his mother £1 a week for board and keep.

Mr Wellington tried to join the New Zealand navy and air force on the outbreak of war but was judged to be too old for them. Instead, he went to Singapore and enlisted with the RAF. When the Japanese arrived, he escaped with many others on a ship which was sunk soon after leaving port. In Java, he was caught along with another notable Commerce graduate, Jim Valentine.

His wife, who was keeping his practice going in Dunedin with the help of a retired accountant, was told he was missing, presumed dead but she followed the advice he'd given her before leaving, sold nothing and maintained the business.

During his time in prison, Percy kept his mind sharp by concocting lectures and papers on law and in particular on auditing, and writing them up on miniscule pieces of waste paper – a collection he still has.

The atomic bomb, he is convinced, is the best thing that ever happened. The Japanese, he believes, were determined to exterminate every European in the Far East and the bomb saved millions of lives.

Eventually released and weighing just six stone seven pounds, half of what he was when captured, ("we were all very sick"), Percy was flown back to New Zealand by way of Singapore, Borneo and Brisbane where he learned about a pitched battle between "the yanks and the Aussies" at a town called Archerfield.

It was brought about, he says, by the locals' concern for the way the Americans were conducting themselves with local women.

Back home in Dunedin he resumed his practice but the war wasn't quite finished with Mr Wellington. His wife was startled to open a letter one day in which the Air Ministry in London advised it was calling him up for active service. A quick note to the ministry straightened things out.

Perhaps best known in Dunedin in recent years for his partnership with Geoff Ellis in the company W.P. Wellington and Ellis, Percy has been associated with a number of companies including Snowwhite Laundries and Preens and Newton Dry Cleaners.

He has served organisations as disparate as the Otago Retailers' Association, the Transport Licensing Authority, the RSA, the stock agents and woolbrokers' associations and Columba College's board of governors.

His myriad interests include Rotary, the English Speaking Union, the National Party, the Royal Commonwealth Society and extensive welfare work.

Percy Wellington turned 94 earlier this year.