

## The Australian Soldier

By David Svingen (adapted from a draft Toastmasters Club speech)

The 21-year old United States Marine Corps Private First Class stood on the beach at Jinsen Harbor, Korea. World War II had ended a few weeks earlier and his squad had been ordered to stand honor guard for the transfer of prisoners of war that had been taken captive by the Japanese. As the Marine waited, little did he know that this day would affect his life even more than his days fighting against the enemy.

As the transfer time approached, the Marine watched as about 50 prisoners disembarked from decrepit old buses and trucks that had parked at the top of the slope above the beach. The prisoners had been captured early in the war and mistreated for years by Japanese prison guards. The Marine knew that some of the prisoners were Australian because they wore the distinctive Australian military campaign hat at a cocky angle – the hat with the brim that folds up on the side. The prisoners formed a column two abreast, and although gaunt and malnourished, and wearing uniforms that were dirty and torn; the prisoners enthusiastically sang a military song as they marched away from their brutal captors and toward the landing craft that would take them to a hospital ship for medical treatment and eventually to home.

One Australian soldier in particular caught the young Marine's eye. The soldier was badly crippled from an old injury and stumbled as he negotiated the slope on crudely made crutches. Upon seeing the man struggle, the Marine Corps officer, Captain Rinka, dispatched Navy Corpsmen with a litter (or stretcher) to carry the crippled soldier. But the Australian soldier would have none of it; he regained his footing, waved the Corpsmen off, and began moving again on his crutches. A short time later, the Australian soldier stumbled again and the American captain again dispatched the litter bearers. This time the Australian soldier accepted help. However, he refused to lie down on the litter. He tossed his crutches on the litter, threw his arms around two litter bearers and continued on – upright and vertical.

The young Marine watched in wonder as this badly crippled Australian marched to freedom with his mates. The Marine thought about how difficult life must have been for the crippled Australian soldier in the prison camp, and how easy it would have been for the man to have just given up and died. The young Marine concluded that the Australian was alive because he had willed himself to survive in the camp, day after day, month after month, and year after year. When the captain gave the order to Present Arms, the young Marine saluted with enthusiasm and pride because this time he was saluting men for their bravery and courage and not because they outranked him.

My father, Dale Svingen, was the young Marine on the beach that day. Like most kids of our generation, my siblings and I were keenly interested in our father's wartime experience; and like most men of his generation, he was reluctant to share. Occasionally, however, we coaxed our father into talking about his World War II days, and more often than not, we heard about the Australian prisoner. From this story we learned that some soldiers became heroes away from the battlefield, and that our father greatly admired stubborn tenacity. Looking back I suspect



Dad hoped the story would also encourage my siblings and me to pick ourselves up when knocked down on the playground.

Many years later I heard the story again. During an interview for a public television documentary about World War II veterans, my father talked about the Australian prisoner. Unlike the story of my youth, this time Dad also described the impact the day had on his own life. As his tears ran down his cheeks, my father talked about the Australian soldier that had inspired him for more than 60 years. When the pressures of life would begin to overwhelm, Dad would think of the Australian prisoner that did not give up and that memory would give him the resolve to keep on trying.

My parents are now elderly and live with many health problems including the loss of vision and hearing, and mobility and memory. Not long ago, my son Kyle, my father, and I ate lunch at the VFW Club. After our meal, Dad updated us on his and my mother's health conditions in his typical understated, compassionate, and optimistic way. As he talked, I found myself thinking about the life lessons his words had for me, and when he finished, I said "Dad, I'm 53 years old and I'm still learning from you." My father looked surprised so I explained that his example was teaching me how to live a full life, how to grow old with dignity; and how to keep a positive attitude if faced with daunting health challenges.

Instead of immediately responding, my father leaned back in his chair, silently looked at Kyle and me, and slowly nodded his head for a few moments. Then, once more, my father talked about the prisoner that had inspired a young Marine all those years ago – once more, he told us the story of the Australian soldier.

And I more fully understood the character of the man that is my father...