

# Shocking survival

German war vet 'rolled' with corpses to escape Russian prison camps

By ALEXIA RUMLEY

IT is 1942, World War II. Their German company is surrounded. Their soldiers captured. They are loaded into cattle trains, destined for Siberia. Destined for a Russian prison camp.

Bodies litter the ground. Some alive, many dead and one pretending. He lies amongst the corpses. He is thrown out with the corpses and he spends the next year getting home through enemy territory.

That man was Noosa resident Frank Mineif, and as he and friends celebrated his 80th birthday last month, many paused to celebrate his triumphs, his traumas and all the devilish stories that make up the chapters of his remarkable life.

"The war started when I was about 16-and-a-half and I went into the army when I was about 16 and nine months," Mr Mineif said.

From the age of 5 or 6, all German children joined the Hitler Youth. It was compulsory.

"In the army I was a Morse code operator in the tanks. Company 219. We had to get the Morse code right. It wasn't as modern as today. We had to do it by hand with the tapper.

"I was in the war in the Ukraine, after Stalingrad when the war started to go the other way. We were stationed at Budapest but that got surrounded by Russian troops so we had to escape at night through the Danube River. Then we continued through Hungary into Austria - that was through the Alps - we still had tanks and then we ran out of petrol with the tanks so we had trucks.

"The Russians were behind us, always very close and then the war finished in May and our commander said, 'Now try to get home'. What did he mean get home? We were still very far from home. We tried at least to get to the Americans but we didn't succeed. We got caught by the Russians near the Hungarian Czech border and were



**FAMILY:** Frank with his sister and parents.

shipped to Russia.

"We were transported to somewhere near Stalingrad and there we were tried. We were destined for Siberia. We were put on cattle trains and transported. Near Murmansk, on the way to west Siberia, I escaped.

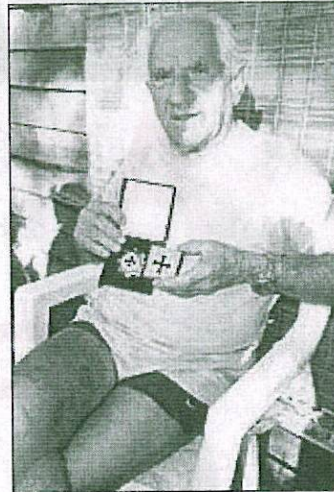
"I escaped by trying to sleep like the dead. We were in cattle wagons, it was cold and people were dying. If I had gone to the prison camp I would probably have died. So I organised to be thrown out with the dead by rolling through the dead ones.

"The dead were in between, and after a while they didn't watch the dead ones. Once they didn't look anymore, I climbed under the wagon, then you could hang on and, before the train got speed, you fell off.

"I was lucky they didn't count the dead ones at that stage.

"Anyway, I was able to escape not far from Murmansk. It took me about a year to get home through Lapland, Finland to Sweden. In Sweden we stowed away on a ship to Denmark, then to Germany.

"So it took me one year to get home on foot or on whatever you pinched: bikes, boats, whatever you could get on the way.



**TODAY:** Frank with his Iron Cross bravery award.

After more than year and a 1700-kilometre journey, Mr Mineif returned to Richenburg (now Liberec). There his family had a textile factory but the communist revolution was in full swing and Mr Mineif's father, a socialist, was ordered to leave town.

"I returned in about 1947 and the communist revolution had started and all non-communists had to leave.

"My father was anti-Nazi but he was not a communist, he



**IN UNIFORM:** Frank as a young man.

was a socialist and a successful business man and they did not like that. The police commissioner was a friend and he warned my father to leave right away or we would be put in a concentration camp.

"During the war, the only reason my father didn't get put into a concentration camp was because I was a war veteran and highly decorated.

"Other people who were leaving were allowed to take their furniture, so we organ-



**SAD HISTORY: The Hitler youth.**

ised to be smuggled out in wardrobes before they came.

"Then we went to Bavaria where we had another little factory. Soon after that I had a fight with my father, because he left my mother, so I took some of the machines and started my own spinning and weaving factory in another town.

"Then I came to Australia in 1954. I moved to Melbourne where I went to court for parachuting off the tallest building; that was in the early 60s.

"But I have been in Noosa now for about 16 years and this is where I met my wife. I have three daughters; one in Margaret River, one in Melbourne and my first daughter is in Germany.

"I lost contact with my father. I saw his grave last time I was in Germany. I have seen a lot of the world and travelled around but Australia is the best place to be."