BOOK REVIEWS


'Ve live not as we would but as we can.'

Memarder

Like most Britons of my generation I fought in World War II and for me that included over four years on active service much of the time in and out of action. But I have always wondered how I would have faced up to being a prisoner of war. Consequently, I found this book of considerable interest.

Of the many books I have read about Hong Kong and the Japanese War I know of none where the research was more thorough or the contents of the book more detailed. With the project spanning over 20 years and numerous persons and institutions having been consulted this is not surprising. Chapter One deals with the run-up to the Japanese attack on 8 December 1941, and Chapter Two deals with the ‘Eighteen-Day War’ during which the Crown Colony was overrun. As many as 10,000 women were estimated to have been raped although this figure, arrived at by a Chinese physician, can have been little more than an educated guess. Nor would the Japanese tolerate interference in their “right to loot.” The remaining eight chapters of the book deal with prisoners of war and life in the camps. There are copious notes, a long bibliography and an adequate index.

Generally, internees, for example civilians in Stanley, were treated less badly than prisoners of war, for instance other-ranks incarcerated in Shum Shui Po Camp. But whoever they were and wherever they were incarcerated too little food plagued prisoners constantly. Pet dogs and regimental mascots that followed men into camps were eaten, although a few would rather starve than partake of culturally forbidden foods. A few persons fattened maggots to eat in order to obtain much needed protein while others trapped birds and snakes. By the end of the war prisoners were on average down 20 to 30 per cent in bodyweight. One prisoner is reported to have go his years in camp. This seems har...
Although there were Red Cross food parcels occasionally, these were much fewer and further between than for POWs in Europe. Some food was passed through the wires by Chinese women—some from the Wanchai bar district—loyal to their menfolk, often at great personal risk to themselves. As with most members of the armed forces during the Second World War great dependency was placed on cigarettes. In prison camp they also served as a form of currency. In spite of spartan living conditions gambling took place sometimes for cigarettes or for Red Cross food parcels.

Constant hunger brought out the worst in people. There was unfairness, selfishness and stealing. Yet there were many staunch characters and mutual support was vital to see an inmate through. Three or four men bonded together stood a better chance of survival than the loner. There were few suicides but many just “gave up the ghost” and ended it all. We are told there was no evidence of religious conversions as conditions in camp worsened. The number of deaths among British Army Indians is recorded as being higher than for Canadian or British soldiers partly because conditions in their camp was worse. Pressure was put on Indians to enlist to fight against the British. That so many resisted was a demonstration of strength of character and loyalty to the British cause.

Illnesses such as diphtheria, dysentery and malaria were ever present together with a shortage of medicine and medical facilities. Operations were sometimes carried out without anesthetics. Some inmates’ hair turned white overnight while others lost their sight. One prisoner even set himself up as a “bone crusher” breaking limbs on demand so that fellow prisoners could be given time off from work.

Accustomed to a western lifestyle, differences in culture exacerbated the situation. European POWs did not enjoy a diet based on rice. Nor did they care for Japanese or Chinese tea without milk and sugar. A number of prisoners believed moxi-bustion, where pressure points on the body are stimulated not by needles but by burning mugwort, was a form of torture although the Japanese may not have always administered treatment with the comfort of the patient in mind.

Mention is made in the book of a POW, although no name is given, who complained while on parade to the Red Cross that prisoners were
being starved. The complainant was later severely beaten by the Japanese. This prisoner could well have been HKBRAS member the late KMA Barnett although the book does not say so.¹

When I have talked to ex POWs I have seldom heard mention of acts of kindness by Japanese guards. As an ex-POW Dr Solomon Bard, who is well known to many HKBRAS Members, holds views which many regard as exceptional. He maintains there was ‘no unprovoked cruelty within his experience.’² There are also instances quoted, in Long Night’s Journey into Day, where individual Japanese were considerate to prisoners. This was more likely if a prisoner spoke Japanese.

To counterbalance instances of kindness there was the case of the American prisoner who requested permission to urinate. Permission was refused. Eventually, in agony, he broke ranks and urinated nearby. Afterwards he was made to lick his urine off the wall.

There is no doubt that, by and large, prisoners were severely treated. We have to remember, however, there was a war on and, in many cases, Japanese guards were little better off than their prisoners. Generally, when the war turned against them, both Japanese service personnel and civilians readily tightened their belt the extra notch. Japanese soldiers were brutalised from the day they entered service. Life in the Hong Kong camps, however, was not as bad as being a prisoner in Manchuria (Unit 731 and others) where inmates were subjected to inhumane medical experiments. In some camps in German-occupied Europe there was state-sponsored genocide, among the Jews for example, the full details of which did not come to light until the end of the War [Hon. Editor - As an aside, I recently paid a visit to Auschwitz, an experience which will haunt me for the rest of my life].

Most prisoners in Hong Kong could envisage the war continuing for several years more and, when the Allies started to fight back and for the Japanese the going became even tougher, Allied prisoners were under the impression they would eventually be killed off in batches. The atom bomb saved the day. Although I fought against the Germans and the Italians, and not the Japanese, I remember no one at the time shedding tears at the dropping of the bomb on Japan.

Although bushido and chivalry are in some respects similar this is
certainly not always so. A Japanese soldier who does not fight to the death receives little respect from his fellow countrymen. Consequently, enemy troops who did not fight to the bitter end could expect, and in the eyes of the Japanese deserved, severe treatment.

One of the findings of this 20-year long study was that a surprising, almost 10 per cent of prisoners, survived the malnutrition, hazardous working conditions and frequent beatings et cetera with no accident or illness that resulted in hospitalisation or lost working days over the entire incarceration period.

There are few typographical errors in the book although the name, Sir Thomas Ho Tung, is quoted (page 64) when obviously it should be Sir Robert. I have brought this error to the attention of the author. Having said that this is a splendid book which, I repeat, has been well researched and written. It is a good read. I recommend it to anyone interested in the subject.

Long Night’s Journey into Day may be purchased from the Wilfrid Laurier University Press, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada N2L.

DAN WATERS
