

Fall of Singapore: Australian POWs' oral history charts memories of defeat and imprisonment

ABC RN By former ABC foreign correspondent Tim Bowden

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PHOTO: Allied soldiers are captured by the Japanese Imperial Army in Singapore in 1942. (Supplied: Wikimedia Commons)

It was more than 30 years after the end of World War II before Australian prisoners of war really began to tell the stories of what happened in the wake of the fall of Singapore.

Some had not ever told their families about the terrible things that happened to them. Many — quite wrongly, of course — felt slightly ashamed about being POWs.

Yet they had fought well before being captured, and those who survived the next three-and-a-half years had endured more life-threatening situations than their own army could have ever provided.

In 1979, when most of the POWs were in their 60s, I was contacted by historian Hank Nelson, who suggested we do a large oral history project for the ABC about their experiences.

In 1984, the 16-part series was broadcast by the ABC, and a companion book by Dr Nelson was published.

The revelations of the soldiers, and 24 surviving nursing sisters, also prisoners of war, are now part of Australian history.

PHOTO: Australian soldiers fire on Japanese forces during the Battle of Muar, Malaya. (Supplied: Australian War Memorial/011302)

The sudden shock of surrender

It had never occurred to the soldiers of the Australian Eighth Division that they might become prisoners of war of the Japanese. The British commander General Percival's order to surrender Singapore on 15 February 1942 came as a complete surprise.

Two days later, nearly 15,000 Australians and 35,000 British prisoners were ordered to march to Changi on the eastern end of Singapore island.

The apparently endless columns of men dramatised the enormity of the defeat, and the transformation of the white man, the tuan, from guardian of empire to prisoners of the Japanese.

Uncertain what their captors would provide at the other end of the march, men carried as much food, clothing and bedding as they could.

PHOTO: Percival and his party on their way to surrender Singapore to the Japanese. (Supplied: Imperial War Museum London)

"It was a kind of amble or shambles — a bit like refugees, fellows carrying everything they possibly could," remembered Ray Steele.

"As the march got long and hot they tossed stuff aside until at the end some of them arrived with very little."

There was a strong incentive to keep going.

"The story was that if we fell by the wayside we would be shot," said Cliff Moss.

"That didn't happen, but it made a lot of people keep on walking when they would have preferred to lie down.

"It got pretty tough, and the Chinese along the way helped us. They had to watch out for the Japs. They were flying Japanese flags on their houses, but they were running out with drinks for us. Without them we probably wouldn't have made it."

PHOTO: Allied prisoners lie in a corridor and look out of cell doorways in Changi Prison, c. 1945. (Supplied: Wikimedia Commons)

The march had been about 29 kilometres, not far for fit men, but the prisoners were exhausted by battle, ill-fed and depressed by defeat. At Changi they lay on ground or concrete. Gunner Frank Christie wrote in his diary: "All rooted, slept where we could."

Changi, with its rolling hills, lush vegetation, views of the sea and modern barracks, had been one of the best of the British garrison bases. But it had clearly been through a battle.

"Everything," Private Snow Peat said, "was upside down and the place was blown to buggery."

The barracks, once the home of 900 Gordon Highlanders, was crowded with Australians whose immediate concern was food. For the first few days they lived on the rapidly diminishing stores they had carried with them.

Rice, 'the eternal diet'

Don Moore remembered "some very tight rations". "There was just one biscuit with bully beef pasted over it for the midday meal," he said. "In the evening there was another meagre ration, some tinned vegetables smeared over a biscuit. Things were a bit tough.

"We were asking: 'Can't the cooks use a little bit of imagination? Can we get some more stuff?'

"Well, look," said the major, 'we've got quite a few bags of rice here. It's been coming in for the past few weeks. Would you eat that?'

"Oh Jesus! What do you think you're coming at? Of course, yes, yes, we'll eat the damn stuff!"

PHOTO: Over the next three-and-a-half years, Australians got to know their staple diet of rice well. (Supplied: Tim Bowden)

As far as rice went, Gunner Tom Dowling recalled having "every conceivable variety that existed: unpolished rice, mouldy rice, rice full of rats and weevils, sulphur rice and rice that smelt like shit".

"Nothing but rice. Our cooks didn't have the slightest idea of what to do with it. During the next four weeks we lived precariously on the results of their trial and error efforts.

"During this experimental period, we were subjected to all sorts of unpleasant concoctions — gritty half-cooked rice, rice

burnt black, claggy masses of rice. However tasteless or unpleasant, we ate it."

As the days passed the cooks improved, and begin to understand what they had to do with "the confounded stuff".

The Australians gradually became accustomed to it and for the first few weeks there was little else to eat. Tasteless though it was, they felt they were lucky just to have a feed and ate whatever they were given. They were all steadily going downhill, losing weight, condition and their spirits.

PHOTO: Private Leo Ayres was a prisoner of war on the Indonesian island of Ambon. (Supplied: Australian War Memorial/AWM116271)

Toasting the emperor's birthday

Humour became one of the essential elements of surviving. The Japanese revered their emperor, so it was natural to expect that come his birthday, there would be a flurry of excitement and festivity.

"The first time we encountered his birthday came shortly after the fall of Singapore, when at Changi we were called on parade and ordered to bring our drinking mugs," said Tom Dowling.

"We wondered what on earth we were going to do with the mugs, but did as we were told.

"Along came a Jap officer resplendent with gold braid and campaign ribbons, sword swinging by his side, and he stepped up onto a raised platform specially placed in front of the parade so that he could address us at eye level. 'Today is the emperor of Japan's birthday and we are to celebrate.'

"Having said that, the guards accompanying him, armed with flagons, move up and down the lines and half-filled everyone's mugs with sake. When the last of the mugs had been charged, the Japanese officer said: 'Now we drink to the emperor.'

PHOTO: Dutch and Australian POWs were held at Tarsau in Thailand in 1943. (Supplied: Wikimedia Commons/Australian War Memorial)

"We were in a bit of a dilemma. He had us by the short and curlies. The idea of drinking his sake was appealing, but to drink to the emperor's health was quite a different matter."

"'You will all drink to the health of the emperor,' the officer repeated sternly. There was no way the boys could bring themselves to drink to the emperor's health, so we just stood there blankly, carefully holding onto our half-filled mugs of sake."

Then out stepped Vern Rae, a rugged 15th Battery intelligence officer, hailing from the tall cedar country of Tasmania. In his big booming voice he thundered out: "Boys, we will drink to the emperor. FAAAARK the emperor."

A great roar went up from the Australians — "The emperor — FAAAARK the emperor" — and the Australians quaffed down their half-filled pannikins of sake.

The Japanese officer dutifully completed his toast. "Ah so ... FAAAARK the emperor."

Vern Rae's ingenious intervention had no doubt left the Japanese officer "pretty chuffed" that his emperor would be mightily pleased with his efforts at eliciting such an enthusiastic response from his vanquished foes.

PHOTO: Prisoners of war at Changi, photographed by George Aspinall. (Supplied: Tim Bowden)

Australians survived the best

In round figures, 22,000 Australians became prisoners of war of the Japanese in camps in Timor, Java, Sumatra, New Guinea, Ambon, Hainan, Borneo, Singapore, Malaya, Thailand, Burma and Manchuria. Three-and-a-half-years later, only 14,000 were still alive.

The Australians died mostly through malnutrition, preventable tropical diseases, random acts of brutality by prison guards and the stresses of slave labour projects.

In Sandakan 2,000 Australians and 500 British troops were marched into the jungle and slaughtered. Only six soldiers

survived, after breaking away into the jungle and being cared for by local people. It was the single biggest atrocity committed by the Imperial Japanese Army against the Allies in World War II.

Yet Australians survived three-and-a-half-years of captivity better than the British, Americans, Dutch and certainly local people, who without any military organisation died in their hundreds of thousands and still lie in unmarked graves.

PHOTO: POWs carry railway sleepers in Burma, around 40km south of Thanbyuzayat, c. 1943. (Supplied: Australian War Memorial/P00406.026)

The Australians survived because they were fit young men, most recruited to the AIF from country areas.

They had bush skills, which helped them put up rough shelters in the jungles of Thailand and Burma, start a cooking fire in the rain, and — importantly — good old values of Australian mateship.

Groups of between three and five would band together and look after each other. If one man came down with malaria or dysentery and could not eat his rice, his friends would share it, and then return the favour when they were stricken.

After the ABC broadcast the oral history of these prisoners of war in 1984, interest in the POWs' story intensified. There were more books published, plays, documentaries and a television drama series.

Though there are very few ex-POWs of the Japanese alive today to mark the 75th anniversary of the Fall of Singapore, their story has been told.

Tim Bowden is a former ABC foreign correspondent, radio and television producer, and author.

This article contains excerpts from a forthcoming book, featuring the uncensored and self-published memoirs of soldiers who spent time in Palestine, Syria, Greece, Crete, Papua New Guinea and the Pacific Islands during World War II.

Topics: world-war-2, history, community-and-society, 20th-century, singapore, australia, japan

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