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Brian MacArthur, *Surviving the Sword: Prisoners of the Japanese in the Far East, 1942-45*. New York: Random House, 2005. Pp.xxx, 458. ISBN 978-1-4000-6413-7.

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*Surviving the Sword* contains a remarkable amount of shit. Hardly a page passes without a reference to diarrhea, dysentery, cholera, latrines, toilet paper, or the lack thereof. Every military history should be as honest. Brian MacArthur's gripping account of the experience of the mostly British and Australian soldiers held captive by the Imperial Japanese Army in the Far East during the Second World War is a reminder that war is unspeakably nasty.

MacArthur's purpose is to remind an oblivious world of the forgotten men of a forgotten theater. The basic task is not especially challenging. The events are circumscribed in time and space, well documented, and intrinsically interesting. The difficulty lies in bringing the reader to comprehend events described by one survivor as not "so bad as you think and worse than you can ever imagine" (152). But MacArthur does an admirable job in this compelling work. Indeed, the smoothly-written accounts of excrement, not to mention torture and torturous medical procedures, are almost as pleasant to read as they are shocking in content.

The first—and best—of the work's three parts begins with the fall of Singapore and offers a roughly chronological narrative of the disparate fates of two groups of men—those who remained for the duration of the war in nearby Changi Camp and their comrades sent north to labor, suffer, and die on the notorious Thailand-Burma Railroad. In this part we are introduced to the general pattern of the prisoner of war existence and to the heroes of MacArthur's story, especially Col. Philip Toosey, the senior officer at Tamarkan Camp, and Australian Lt. Col. E.E. "Weary" Dunlop, the senior medical officer at Hintok Mountain camp.

Part II is a set of thematic chapters on subjects like survival, religion, smoking, and officers. Much of the detail is fascinating, but there is considerable repetition of ideas introduced earlier, and the occasional efforts at analysis fall flat.

The third part expands the story geographically to describe the Fepow (Far East prisoner of war) experience in Japan, the Island of Haruku, North Borneo, and, for the last year of the war, back at Changri. Even if these moving episodes add little novelty to the catalogue of horrors already presented, they are essential to MacArthur's self-imposed mandate to tell the full story of the forgotten prisoners of the Far East.

MacArthur, a career newspaper editor, is more journalist than historian, and the strengths of the work are those of good journalism. It is enormously readable, a 400-page book digestible in a single sitting. Descriptions of atrocity, suffering, and courage are more effective for the crisp and superficially dispassionate style of presentation. By eschewing the contemporary American tendency to treat captivity itself as a form of heroism, MacArthur allows us to reflect upon the prisoners' wide range of responses to their ordeal. This is very

much a book about people, and MacArthur presents much of the story in the Fepows' own words, smoothly interweaving personal accounts and historical narrative.

The book's flaws reflect the difference between journalism and history. The smooth integration of various statements from diaries, memoirs, and letters may enhance the book's literary grace, but it impedes the precise identification of sources and gives MacArthur no opportunity to weigh their value. Publishers may dislike footnotes, but the endnotes are too few and, in the absence of markers in the text, difficult to use.

I will emulate MacArthur in paying excessive attention to the work's only "source" criticism, that aimed at director David Lean's 1957 film, *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (77–8). Since film is fiction, it would have sufficed to note that Col. Toosey, the actual commander at Camp Tamarkan, was nothing like Alec Guinness's portrayal of Colonel Nicholson. Apparently unwilling to trust his readers to know the difference between drama and fact, MacArthur feels compelled to exaggerate Toosey's differences from Nicholson's. Thus, if Nicholson was a collaborator (not, incidentally, an adequate description of this complex character), then Toosey necessarily was not. MacArthur's determination to distinguish the real Toosey from the fictitious Nicholson obviates any detailed effort to explain Toosey's effectiveness in dealing with the Japanese. "Dealing" is a key word here, for the camp commanders had necessarily to collaborate, in the non-pejorative sense used by MacArthur (78), with the Japanese. Toosey occasionally came to the brink of sheer, suicidal resistance; typically, however, he managed to improve his men's lot by gradually assuming more and more control over both camp operations and the building of the bridges (62, 78). Elsewhere, MacArthur implies the importance of establishing a form of *modus vivendi* with the Japan when he criticizes two other senior officers: "neither Harris nor Kappe was as effective as other Allied commanders in dealing with their Japanese captors. They failed to eke out concessions, so the men became progressively more exhausted and increasing numbers fell sick" (116). Soldiers' responsibilities in captivity have been the subject of much discussion and national soul-searching in the past century. A nuanced picture of Toosey's balance of compromise and resistance would contribute to that valuable conversation.

MacArthur prefers to tell simple, if gripping, stories rather than analyze the complexities of cooperation and collaboration. For example, the chapter "Survival" insists on the importance of "the will to live." Though admitting that "some men lived by the law of the jungle," MacArthur underestimates the extent to which a POW camp might become a Hobbesian world. His version of the will to live is "allied" with "a sense of common humanity—which embraced comradeship, compassion, and courage, as well as self-sacrifice, pride, and fortitude" and proved "the greatest savior of lives" (153). If only this were necessarily true.

MacArthur ignores the implications of his own darker anecdotes. He draws no conclusion from the observation in the chapter on the black market that "stealing was rife—even from fellow prisoners, even from men on their deathbeds" (226). Conditions at Camp Sonkurai were so cruel, he admits, that "sentimentality was fatal, and the men became hardened" (132), a proposition in stark contrast with the thesis that prisoners survived by helping one another. The story of the man who died from apathy in spite of the care he received is meant to illustrate the generosity of his friends, but one might focus instead on his despair's source in the repeated theft of his possessions by other prisoners (134).

One chapter is an encomium to religion as the source of “the most uplifting moments of captivity” (189), but MacArthur overplays the reports of believers. Only one telling reference to “the indifference of most of the men” (193) puts religion in perspective, suggesting there is more to be learned about the experience of the average prisoner in the chapters on books and letters.

To see the Fepows’ world in horrific microcosm, one need only look at the chapter on “Jungle Medicine.” Here MacArthur describes the physical consequences of prison conditions, the brutal unconcern of the Japanese, and the desperate measures taken by camp medical staff to save what lives they could. One is simultaneously appalled and inspired by the ingenuity of the doctors in improvising medicines and medical instruments. And doctors showed indescribable courage as well, whether the moral courage to cut an ulcerous leg to the tibia with a sharpened spoon or the physical courage to accept regular beatings from the Japanese as the price for keeping sick men in hospital (208–9).

Although MacArthur’s heroes were mostly officers, the chapters on “Officers and Gentlemen” is the most accusatory in the book. He lays plenty of charges against selfish officers while overlooking some crucial questions: What is the proper role of officers in a prison camp? What is the justification for distinctions between officers and other ranks? Where is the line between enforcing military discipline to maintain morale and doing so out of selfishness? Should one praise the generosity of the officers who contributed a third of their pay to the sick or wonder that they, who did no physical labor, accepted the wherewithal to supplement their rations while their subordinates died of malnutrition? MacArthur seems to beg the question when he criticizes officers who took uniforms from other ranks while praising those whose neatness of dress increased their status, and therefore their effectiveness, in dealing with the Japanese (287). In the end, however, whatever arguments one can make for the military utility of a distinct officer class, MacArthur’s statistics illustrating the difference in the mortality rate between officers and other ranks are shocking.

Given that *Surviving the Sword* is only slightly analytical even within its own sphere, it is not surprising that MacArthur makes no effort to discuss POWs more generally, other than to reiterate the point that the death rates for British and Australian prisoners were much higher in Japanese than in German camps. That difference is enormous, but the Fepow experience looks slightly less shocking if compared to the far higher POW death rates on both sides during the Russo-German War. The story of prisoner mortality is even more interesting if one considers the Korean War. Although conditions for prisoners in Korea were not as bad as those in Japanese camps, the mortality rate for American (though not British) captives exceeded the Fepows’ 27%.

Comparisons of Fepows with prisoners held in Germany might have been more productive than MacArthur imagines. His laudable desire to demonstrate that the Fepow experience shared little with that of the characters in films like *Colditz* (1955, dir. Guy Hamilton) and *The Great Escape* (1963, dir. John Sturges) ignores the fact that neither did that of most of the British prisoners of the Germans. Virtually no one escaped from the Japanese camps, but escape from German camps was also rare and, more to the point, on very few prisoners’ minds. Moreover, if prisoners held in Western Europe suffered less deprivation and brutality than those in Asia, there were distinctive psychological stresses associated with captivity. It would be worth studying whether, in addition to their physical

sufferings, Fepows suffered to the same degree the feelings of failure, guilt, loneliness, and that desperate desire to be alone which oppressed residents the *Stalags*. Perhaps such psychological ailments were to be found mostly in the relatively comfortable camp at Changri.

If the psychological state of POWs warrants further study, so too does that of their captors. Why did they starve men whose labor they required to construct an important railroad? Why did they allow special meals for Christmas (185) while withholding Red Cross parcels and, most inhumanely of all, mail (380-1)? Why force the men to live in conditions likely to bring the Japanese themselves into close contact with cholera and dysentery? How did they square their treatment of other soldiers and other human beings with their vision of soldierly honor and human decency? To answer these questions is not McArthur's problem, but offering a few paragraphs about *bushido* merely underscores the poverty of our understanding.

Much about the POW experience defies rational analysis. It is not hard to fathom why some prisoners greeted the end of the war by murdering Japanese guards, sometimes, returning to a ubiquitous subject, by drowning them in latrines. But how does one explain the actions of the British lieutenant who, having called a parade for the specific purpose of accepting his erstwhile captor's sword, generously returned the surrendered blade (378)?

Incidents like these make *Surviving the Sword* a great human interest story, if not a great work of history. In his well-written book, Brian MacArthur vividly brings the story of the Fepows to a general audience. I highly recommended it to anyone interested in the POW experience or, more generally, in the behavior of human beings under inhuman conditions.