

A Doctor's War

Rowley Richards

Reviewed by Professor Frank Bowden

In his introduction the Principal Historian of the Australian War Memorial describes Rowley Richards as the most remarkable of all the returned servicemen that he has met. The extraordinary narrative this book presents provides an explanation, at least in part, for this assessment. Richards, now in his late 80s, has recorded the account of his time as the Medical Officer of the 2/15th Field Regiment, Royal Australian Artillery, 1941-45 during the fall of Singapore, as a Prisoner of War on the Burma railway and in a Japanese labour camp. His story is based on the diaries and medical records he kept, hid and ultimately recovered after the war.

The inherent problems of autobiography are important here: an independent account of his actions would, perhaps, allow the measure of the man to be more clearly realised. For Richards is, by his own admission, an old fashioned chap and a little disdainful of the modern tendency to public display of emotion. He appears to comply only reluctantly with his editor's repeated requests to not just write about what happened but to say how he *felt* about events. His testament is factual, if unimpassioned, but it is impossible to put down.

Immediately after the Malaya debacle and the Allied surrender, Richards was transferred to Changi prison, which he describes as a 'virtual paradise' compared to the horrors he would soon experience on the Burma railway. Richards had only recently graduated and he struggled with the challenge of providing medical care in the middle of a jungle with little or no facilities. He suffered beatings at the hands of the guards when he literally bartered for the lives of his sick patients, protecting them from the insane work schedules that the Japanese were attempting to enforce.

For the atheist Richards, cleanliness is next to godliness. And the British, in his opinion, were as far from the divine as it was possible to be. Indeed, his contempt for the British PWs is quite arresting – while he is prepared to record the occasional acts of kindness and fairness displayed by his Japanese captors, he is uniformly disdainful of the British soldiery's attitude to personal hygiene. His description of a Brit purposefully defaecating on an Australian in one of the primitive latrines is one of the more strangely shocking episodes of the book.

The medical details do not dominate the text – in fact I was a little disappointed not to learn more about the medical problems that he faced. Although these were pre-penicillin days, sulphonamides had been used before the war with considerable success – he rues the lack of these drugs and describes an episode where he was forced to perform 'auto-haemotherapy' on a patient with severe pneumonia. He withdrew a sample of blood from his patient which he then injected into the same patient's thigh muscle in an attempt to stimulate the immune system. The soldier lived.

On the way to Japan his transport ship was torpedoed by an Allied submarine. While drifting in a life-raft, he instructs his men to drink seawater diluted with fresh water. To the 'nameless scientific types' who criticised him after the war for recommending this, he writes: '...Who has the right to apply textbook advice to extraordinary circumstances... or... to pass judgement on situations they have not lived through?' (So it is with considerable trepidation that I note here that he ascribes the disease pellagra to Vitamin B12 deficiency while it is actually a deficiency of niacin, ie. Vitamin B6).

Richards' sangfroid is disarming. He describes the 'enormous value' of having men in his lifeboat who had already survived the sinking off HMAS Perth. These survivors advised the ranking officer that all knives in the boat should be collected in case one of the men ran amok as the days proceeded.

After rescue by another Japanese ship and after a tense and unpleasant voyage to Sakata in the north of Japan, Richards is assigned to a labour camp for the remainder of the war. Here he befriends a number of Japanese civilians – these became lifelong friendships – and he spends the rest of the war in 'relative comfort' after the hell of the jungle and shipwreck.

In an epilogue Richards explains that he wrote his story so that his memories of the war can be passed on to present and future generations with the hope of providing a better understanding of where Australia has come from and in which directions it is heading. By strange coincidence, I read the book while I was visiting Hiroshima. On a wet afternoon I toured the Peace Memorial Museum where the original minutes of the US committee charged with the choice of targets for the first atomic bomb are on display. I read the detached record of the deliberations that determined in which city 40,000 Japanese lives would be extinguished in an instant.

In the evening, I followed Richards' account of the personal inhumanity meted out by the Japanese who caused the death of 16,000 captured Allied soldiers on the Burma railway. Although these events have become emblematic of the sufferings of Australians at the hands of the Japanese, I could find little or no bitterness in this book. In light of the current geopolitical situation, we could all do with a dose of his tolerance, fairness and equanimity. ♦

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