

Hellfire: The Story of Australia, Japan and the Prisoners of War

Cameron Forbes

Reviewed by Dr Peter Stanley

There are two debates running in Australian military history at the moment. One is whether journalists make good historians. The other is whether Australians ought to take any notice of the Japanese in writing about the Pacific war.

My friend and colleague Michael McKernan and I are trading shots over authors' heads on both questions. In a senior moment he's said that I reckon that journalists shouldn't write history. I don't. I've said that some journalists' books don't make good history. He also says that Australians shouldn't take any notice of the Japanese but should stick to their own history: I disagree.

Cameron Forbes's book, *Hellfire*, adds fuel to our debate. It's a book – and a good one – written by a journalist which shows why we need to understand the Japanese perspective if we are to understand the Pacific war fully.

Australians still want to understand the massive disaster which befell those captured by the Japanese. The bald figures hint at the tragedy: 22,000 captured; 8000 dead – perhaps a quarter accidentally torpedoed by American submarines.

Like many journalist-historians, Forbes is better at conveying the stories of the individuals involved than at explaining the big picture. His account of Churchill and Curtin's stoush around the time of the fall of Singapore, for example, reflects the one-eyed orthodoxy which prevails in Australia. And he quotes too much and tends to ramble.

But Forbes is a skilful story-teller. The heart of his research (otherwise largely based on published sources) is his fifty interviews with surviving prisoners of war. It is their stories, refracted through Forbes's acute eye for a telling detail or a quote, which give this book its power. The people he introduces us to along the way – Pat Darling, John Wyatt, Allan Chick, Colin Finkmeyer, and many more, are worth knowing.

Forbes's re-telling of crucial episodes in the prisoner of war story covers the same ground as Hank Nelson's groundbreaking *POW: Australians under Nippon*. He brings those stories to a new readership. He writes of Outram Road Gaol, Sandakan, the sinkings of the transports, especially the *Rokyo Maru*, and of the women's camps on Sumatra.

Above all, he takes us through the agony of the Burma-Thailand railway. Ironically for such a long book, the railway gets less space than it deserves. (Notice how historians' books are getting shorter but journalists can't write less than one-and-half PhDs?) But what Forbes has to say goes to the heart of what we need to know.

He uses the experience of prisoners who survived to take us on a journey into the most prolonged and hellish ordeal Australians have ever faced in war. (Sandakan, Ambon and Hainan are close contenders, and he treats them too.) He spares us no detail to expose both the horror and the often surprising human responses.

Throughout Forbes is animated by two vital questions. First, how Australians were able to bear what was done to them (he is not much interested in those who shared the ordeal). Second, why their Japanese captors were able to

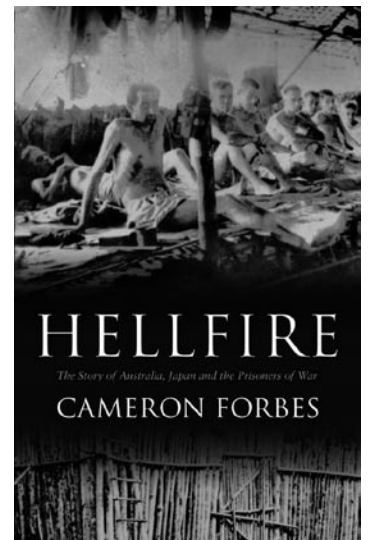
treat prisoners as they did. The stories Forbes tells help us to reflect on both questions.

This is a large-hearted book. He shows us prisoners who were victims but also survivors, who triumphed in spite of the brutality inflicted on them. He shows how the Japanese people also became the victims of a militarist regime. And that, Michael, is why it's important that we understand the Japanese side of the war.

While Forbes is wrong on an important point – Japan *has* apologised for its brutal war – there still hasn't been an adequate *explanation*. That's why we need to know the Japanese side of the story too, and Cameron Forbes's moving book gets us closer to that necessary truth. ♦

Cameron Forbes, *'Hellfire: The Story of Australia, Japan and the Prisoners of War'*, Macmillan, Sydney, 2005, Casebound and jacketed, 559pp., RRP \$45.00.

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