

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Roger Mansell. *Captured: The Forgotten Men of Guam.* Edited by Linda Goetz Holmes. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2012. 288 pp. \$33.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-61251-114-6; ISBN 978-1-61251-123-8.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey

Roger Mansell was a professional engineer and army veteran with a deep interest in the issue of prisoners of war (POWs). He first became aware of the subject through one of his employees, a survivor of a Japanese POW camp who never forgave his captors for the mistreatment he suffered while in their custody. Mansell wound up spending two decades and countless sums of money researching the conditions in the Japanese camps. He then paid to create and maintain online databases for every Japanese POW camp, where survivors could share their stories and get in touch with their former comrades-in-captivity. To call Mansell's efforts a labor of love would be an understatement. His toils not only helped former POWs reconnect with one another, they created a treasure trove for future researchers and a way to preserve and consolidate the survivors' stories before all of them are gone. Unfortunately, Mansell died in 2010, and thus never saw his final work in published form. Linda Goetz Holmes undertook the task of completing Mansell's manuscript, bringing out the well-researched story of American personnel captured during the Japanese invasion of Guam in 1941. She was an excellent choice as she has authored three other well-respected books on American POWs in Japan and was able to finish the work with a light touch, allowing Mansell's voice to remain dominant throughout the narrative.

Mansell's research includes a lot of material that is unavailable anywhere else, as he conducted extensive interviews with the Guam survivors. Their story has often been overshadowed by the greater number of captives taken in the Philippines, particularly those subjected to

the notorious Bataan Death March. The Guam prisoners were subjected to the cruelties of their captors longer than any other body of American POWs in Japanese hands, but their mortality rate (3 percent) was considerably lower than the average (28 percent) for American POWs in the Pacific. Mansell attributes this to group cohesion of the personnel involved, and the way that they managed to look out for each other in the direst of circumstances. This book would be even stronger if Mansell had investigated this issue further—what made the Guam prisoners able to survive their captivity?

Mansell's narrative begins as a study of a relatively small group of prisoners, but expands to look at the overall Japanese treatment of Allied prisoners before resuming its tight focus near the end of the work. The expansion is somewhat unfortunate, as other works have done a better job of analyzing the overall situation, while this book's greatest strength is in its unique examination of the Guam captives. More descriptions of their experiences, and a better follow-up of how their postwar lives unfolded would have answered many of the lingering questions that the text raises. Mansell had a tendency to accept eyewitness accounts at face value, despite the passage of several decades between the events and the interviews. As a result, the POW stories occasionally contradict one another. Some of this problem could have been alleviated by more archival research, even though the true gold of this story is found in the interviews. Holmes was part of the effort to declassify much of the archival material, and thus is very familiar with what is available. However, she may have felt it inappropriate to heavily modify that aspect of Mansell's work. A more thorough

consultation of secondary sources, particularly for contextual information, would have also enhanced Mansell's discussion.

This book has returned to a subject that for many years has been somewhat taboo, and done so in an unabashed fashion. The Japanese public is understandably ashamed of the behavior of some Japanese military personnel during World War II. Unfortunately, that shame often translates into efforts to forget the past and pretend that the atrocities did not happen, and that the actors should not be subjected to scrutiny. Some apologists have equated the POW camps with the U.S. government's decision to intern Japanese immigrants and their families, in the mistaken belief that the two wrongs somehow cancel one another out. In the opinion of this reviewer, historians and the public would do well to examine the injustices of both camp systems, in excruciating detail, as a means to ensure that similar acts do not occur in the future.

Production of this work might have been somewhat rushed, in the hopes of finishing the work before the author's death. When that failed, it might have been helpful to slow down the process and make Holmes a co-author rather than an editor, allowing her to bring her expertise fully into play to fill some of the gaps. A handful of careless errors somewhat mar the work, especially in the citations, where the careful reader might be surprised to learn that a kilogram is equal to 220 pounds, or that the Japanese attacked across the Own Stanley Mountains (*sic*). While on the subject of production decisions, the use of military rank abbreviations without providing a glossary or appendix to clarify their roles and precedence will confuse and annoy some readers, especially those who have no experience as enlisted sailors.

More material on the occupation conditions in Guam might fit well with the experience of its POWs. Mansell or Holmes should have also investigated internal divisions within the captive population in greater detail. U.S. Navy personnel held all of the key camp administrative positions, and lived marginally better for that fact. This created deep resentment among the rest of the captives, a fact that is mentioned repeatedly but never really explored in depth. Some analysis of interservice rivalries, particularly backed up by interviews of survivors from both sides of the divide, would make for an interesting discussion of these prisoners' history.

Overall, this is a very good piece of historical writing. The interviews allow the reader to learn much more about the POWs as individuals, and their graphic descriptions of the atrocities they witnessed are a testament to the depths of Japanese depravity in the POW camps. Mansell is understandably outraged by the descriptions, and it shows in the narrative. Of course, sometimes bias can be a good thing when discussing outrageous acts. A more clinical and detached description would not enhance this book, and Mansell is sympathetic without simpering, admiring without worshiping. The narrative is a bit repetitive at points, and the shift from chronological to geographic organization and back can be a bit jarring. The author clearly suffered from the same problem as virtually every other historian, in that cutting material proved almost impossible, even when it might be irrelevant or redundant. However, such failings are so commonplace as to be the norm, and have been for as long as history has been written. It is a tragedy that Mansell did not live long enough to experience the feeling of having his book in print. His family should take pride in the product he managed to create, and the legacy of helping POW survivors that he has left behind.

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