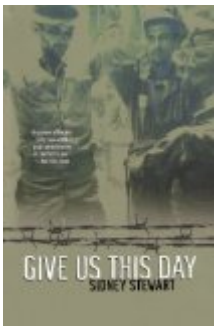
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Sidney Stewart.** *Give Us This Day.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999. 254 pp. $13.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-393-31921-7.




**Reviewed by** Robert C. Doyle

**Published on** H-PCAACA (May, 2000)

Few personal memoirs tell the story of captured American soldiers in Japanese hands better that Sidney Stewart's classic tale of desperate fighting on the Bataan Peninsula; forced surrender of an entire army; the Death March from Mariveles to San Fernando; life and death in miserable prison camps such as Camp O'Donnell and Davao Penal Colony; several ocean passages on the vile "Hell Ships" from the Philippines to Taiwan and Mukden, and final liberation by Russian troops who streamed into Korea in 1945. A stunning read it is, but this book is not for the faint of heart: it highlights the scale of human pain inflicted by Japan while reminding readers not only of commonality of Japanese barbarity toward Allied POWs but also how badly some prisoners treated others in their efforts to survive.

The title is somewhat misleading. It is not an overtly religious captivity narrative of the Puritan Jeremiad variety; rather Stewart weaves an increasingly sad story of himself and his friends as they migrate from the battlefield to the prison pen, while he simultaneously memorializes the thorough selflessness of Father Cummings, a civilian Roman Catholic missionary priest who joined the American soldiers in their Bataan surrender simply because he felt an overwhelming need to serve those who needed pastoral help the most. It was in the overcrowded hold of an overheated Japanese transport under fire from American aircraft en route to Taiwan where Stewart derived his title. While the POWs wailed in their miseries, Father Cummings calmed and comforted them with the words of the Lord's Prayer much the way Father Peter Whelan (1802-1871) served the Union POWs in Andersonville in 1864. In the end, however, Father Cummings, as well as all Stewart's closest friends, died in captivity one by one, leaving Stewart, who learned enough Japanese to communicate with his guards from time-to-time, in the lasting and unenviable position of being the sole survivor of his small group.

Unlike so many Pacific theater POW narratives written by former American, British, Commonwealth, and Dutch soldiers and internees that revile and damn the captors, Stewart presents his captivity experience during World War II as a gut wrenching tragedy, one that goes well beyond

mere survival and the usual hazards and miseries of being a prisoner of war. Following Laurens van der Post's "chaotic revenge" theory set forth in *Night of the New Moon* (1985), Stewart writes, "You cannot hate them any more than you can hate a man who is crazy, for he does not know why he does what he does" (142).

Most interesting and thoroughly unique is Stewart's dichotomy of fright and fear. "Fright is a thing of the moment," he wrote, "attacking on a second's notice," whereas fear functions as an "ulcerous growth" which lives inside each prisoner and gnaws at one's spirit every moment. One can never be rid of it; one can only control it (45). Despite its relatively small size, this seminal memoir tells us graphically how powerful the human spirit is and how elevated human dignity can become even in the most horrible circumstances imaginable. It is well that a major press saw fit to reprint this book.