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To the Editor,

I am submitting my review of John McEwan's absorbing book. I took on the task because of Geoff Munton who helped me so much over the years based on our mutual interest in pre-War classic cars. His daughter is godmother to my daughter.

Since I received the book, Corgi toys have brought out a model of one of his old company's HGVs which carried very heavy loads such as power station generators around Britain and abroad. Sadly his POW experiences eventually told on his health and his company was folded up. But the model is a reminder of happier days.

George Bailey



'Out of the Depths of Hell: A Soldier's Story of Life & Death in Japanese Hands' by John McEwan, published by Leo Cooper in 1999 and reprinted by Pen & Sword Military, 2005, ISBN 1 84415 291 X.

**A personal review by George Bailey, in memory of Geoff Munton POW, a survivor of Changi.**

The sufferings of British, Commonwealth and American civilians, soldiers, sailors and airmen at the hands of the Japanese between 1941 and 1945 are well known. Films such as 'Bridge on the River Kwai' and TV series such as 'Tenko' have shown the scale of this suffering. We also know of the barbarity of the Japanese inflicted upon the populations of many East Asian countries from the time of their invasion of China in the 1930s.



Where John McEwan's absorbing account differs is that it is not another book on Changi prison or the Burma Railway. Instead he slaved for some 30 months in the notorious Kinkasaki copper mine on Formosa, now Taiwan, and somehow managed to survive.

His story is written in chronological order from his joining the 155<sup>th</sup> (Lanarkshire Yeomanry) Field Regiment, Royal Artillery, until his return home to Lanarkshire. Trained on the 4.5 inch howitzer, his Regiment embarked with their guns for overseas in mid-March 1941. After an enjoyable stay at Cape Town, their ship docked in Bombay. Three months of gun drill saw them going eastwards towards the west coast of Malaya, not northwards to 'win glory' in the Desert Campaign. Malaya was then at peace, Pearl Harbour lay in the future.

Expecting the Japanese to expand their war of aggression beyond main-land China, the Regiment moved up to the Thai border as part of the 11<sup>th</sup> Indian Division. Forewarned before Pearl Harbour that the Japanese 25<sup>th</sup> Army was on the move, the Regiment made its final preparations. Unfortunately the Thai Government gave the Japanese a right of passage across their country. John describes graphically the two months of the Regiment's fighting retreat along the length of the Malay peninsula, of what 4.5 inch shells did to individual Japanese soldiers when firing at them over open sights.

Battle-worn, John escaped personal injury to see the landing of the British 18<sup>th</sup> Division at Singapore, soon to go into captivity without the chance to fight. John joined them in Changi. Geoff Munton was another POW incarcerated there and I was honoured at his funeral to listen to two of his 'buddies' (one an eminent surgeon) discuss with me how the buddy system kept them alive. If one fell ill, the other looked after him until 'well again'. And vice versa. My next trip to Singapore was to visit the replica chapel outside Changi prison and record his passing in the book of remembrance for any fellow POW visiting the chapel.

John's description of digging the graves for Singaporean citizens about to be butchered is harrowing. He desperately tries to comfort a young pretty girl during her death throes and even after 50 years his sadness at her unnecessary murder wells up. His recounting of the POW 'strike' in Changi is a reminder that the British POWs took resistance as far as possible when dealing with a merciless jailer.

John with 999 other prisoners was selected to be transported to north Formosa in the rust bucket ship, the 'England Maru'. A vivid account of the conditions suffered during the 17 days is given, including having to defaecate while seated on a board suspended over the side of the ship. Ice-cold spray thrown up by the sea served to wash the British bottoms, an adequate substitute for toilet paper as it also washed away the parasites clinging to their bodies.

Disembarking as a 21 year old POW, he thought that life should get better. Little did he realise that the copper mine in its savagery was to exceed the brutality of the earlier places. The bestiality of the guards in cunningly extracting more work whilst giving more and more beatings is difficult to comprehend without having had similar experiences oneself. As is the



case with Elie Wiesel's 'Night' (1958)<sup>1</sup> where he describes his personal experiences in the Auschwitz concentration camp.

When Taffy Morgan kills the sadistic Corporal Tashi and pitches his body into the latrine pit, it is possible to understand the pleasure of the prisoners at being able to urinate and defaecate on to the corpse. Yet John's bitterness is not directed at the Japanese jailers alone. He also lays blame on the politicians and military planners for the faulty planning which led to Britain's greatest military disgrace. He refutes any suggestion that the soldiers who fought against such a fanatical enemy lacked valour. It was the generals who surrendered Singapore but it was soldiers such as John McEwan and Jim Powell who were punished for the British hubris.

Today's historians can more readily acknowledge that though the British Empire was defeated in the Far East in 1941, many of its 'servants' gave of their best and were not cowards for being surrendered into the captivity of the Japanese Empire.

This is a most moving book, especially in describing the tender reunion of Taffy with his Maggie and their two young children. Written by a survivor of some of the worst treatments experienced by British POWs, John retained enough Christian humanity to not wish to seek retribution from his captors. Thus at £10.99 it is a worthwhile purchase for historians exploring the treatment of Allied POWs during the Pacific War.

Postscript: In 2004, I took the opportunity whilst in Thailand to visit the site of the famous bridge built over the river Kwai at Kanchanaburi. Nothing remains but mud mounds where the wooden piers once were. Some 100 yards away is a steel bridge. Visitors can walk across the river along the track because trains run infrequently. At the end of the present railway line there is a large locomotive permanently left as a memorial, being one of those that worked the Burma Railway. Some miles on towards Burma lies Hellfire Corner. Seen from above, it is remarkable the depth of living rock that had to be cut away by hand tools and pneumatic drills. Within the cutting, the sides enclose the visitor making the experience claustrophobic. Yet right in the middle a tree grows tall out of the floor of the cutting. Beyond where tourists stop at the Australian Memorial, the hillside shows where boulders and stones were placed to build up a flat platform for the railway track. Many have now slipped down the steep slope making walking difficult. To finish the visit, the nearby modern museum records why the Burma Railway remains infamous.

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<sup>1</sup> Wiesel, E. (1958) Les Editions de Minuit, translated into English by Stella Rodway, published MacGibbon & Kee (1960)