

# Guns of February: ordinary Japanese soldiers' views of the Malayan campaign and the fall of Singapore

Review >  
Japan

Sixty years after its end, the Second World War still continues to fascinate the general public as well as scholarly academics. In recent years, the latter have veered away from treating this most terrible and significant of all wars purely as a military contest, towards an approach that privileges its social and cultural contexts. A component of this trend has been the effort to bring to light the experiences of the ordinary soldiers who daily put themselves 'in harm's way'.

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We now have works like Fritz' *Frontsoldaten*, and Linderman's *The World Within War*, which look at the German *Landser* (conscript) and the American GI respectively. To these must be added the book under review, which is really the first attempt - Toyama and Nonnaly's *Tales by Japanese Soldiers* notwithstanding - to showcase the Japanese fighting man of World War II. The picture that emerges is both fascinating and groundbreaking.

Frei, who died before completing the book, '...wanted the world to understand the Japanese army...as human beings rather than as automatons blindly serving the Emperor, or as inhuman fighters lacking emotion and compassion for their enemies' (p. xiii). To effect this, he eschewed a comprehensive approach, focusing rather on four soldiers, involved in a significant event in the Greater East Asia war - the lightning

Japanese conquest of Malaya and Singapore. This brings an immediacy to the book, so vital when discussing soldiers' lives at 'the sharp end of war'. It also helps that the four soldiers Frei chose - Warrant Officer Arai Mitsuo of the 114<sup>th</sup> Regiment, Captain Ochi Harumi of the 11<sup>th</sup> Regiment, Major Onishi Satoru of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Field Police Unit, and Sergeant First Class Tsuchikane Tominosuke of the 4<sup>th</sup> Regiment - wrote memoirs detailing their wartime experiences. Frei, a historian of Japan, plumbed these assiduously, along with other Japanese language sources, to write this book.

Frei more than succeeds in realizing his purpose. The Japanese soldier emerges from the pages of the book as a real person, with hopes, desires, aspirations, and fears. For instance, we are told that Private Miyake Genjiro, part of the first amphibious wave hitting the beaches at Singora, upon hearing the Japanese declaration of war against the Allied powers, thought there was '...nothing more

useless than the Japanese Army' (p.6). And Warrant Officer Arai knew something big was afoot when soldiers were ordered to put some of their hair and fingernail-clippings into small red envelopes for the folks back home. These, ominously, would constitute their last remains in case they didn't make it back alive (p. 5).

Particularly interesting are the contents of the mail Japanese soldiers received. Besides the inevitable letters from girlfriends, Japanese soldiers received little 'comfort bags' which contained such things as patriotic drawings by grade-school children, '...mascots, dolls of the province, temple charms, ornamental paper, photographs, usually some food, pressed flowers, anything the folks at home thought would brighten up the spirits of their men at the front.' (p. 41) A unique feature of the comfort bag was the 'Thousand Stitch Belts': wide cloth belts on which a thousand different women had stitched a thousand red

dots. These were supposed to protect the wearer against enemy bullets. They clearly did not, but it nevertheless cheered the Japanese soldier to know that 1000 women back home had spared a bit of their time to think of him. Frei further humanizes the Japanese soldier by detailing some of the chance encounters they had with locals during their drive to Singapore. Ochi, for instance, met a bewitchingly beautiful Eurasian woman, whom he dreamed of undressing (p. 49). At Alor Star, Tsuchikane made friends with Taro, a thirteen-year-old Indian boy, who was obviously fascinated by the sight of Japanese troops drilling (p. 51). Also illuminating, given the rather high-handed way the Japanese Army was later to act, is the way their military police came down hard on men of Tsuchikane's unit caught breaking into and looting a civilian home. Particularly telling is Tsuchikane's fear that the incident '...would bring dishonour on the Imperial Guards and the disgrace would reach all the way to their villages back home' (p. 52).

Fascinating vignettes like this are peppered throughout the book, as are some

thought provoking facts. For instance, the men of Ichikawa detachment, which included Ochi, and which had been constantly on the move, had lost on average ten kilograms during the campaign. Ochi himself had gone down from 71 to 55 kilos, a daily weight loss of 340 grams.

Complete with taut battle descriptions (pp. 85-97) and photographs - the one of a tanker getting a haircut amidst palm fronds with his tank in the background is particularly apt - this is a first rate book, and should be essential reading for anyone interested in the Second World War in Southeast Asia. There could have been a few more maps, and some rigorous fact-checking - the Zero was a fighter, not a bomber (p. 37) - but these are minor quibbles, and do not detract from the overall excellence of the book. <

- Frei, Henry. 2004. *Guns of February: Ordinary Japanese Soldiers' Views of the Malayan Campaign and the Fall of Singapore, 1941-42*. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press. ISBN 99 71 69 27 32

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