

BOOK REVIEW

1000 Days on the River Kwai, by Cary Owtram. Pen & Sword Military, 2017. 168 pp. ISBN: 1473897807.

This book, written by Colonel Cary Owtram in 1953, was taken from his personal secret diary, written during his prison term in the Chungkai camp, near Kanchanaburi. Colonel Owtram was a British officer who served with the 137th Field Regt, Royal Artillery, and the 11th Indian Infantry Division in Malaya in the period between December 1941 and February 1942. After being captured by the Japanese, he was a Prisoner of War (POW) in Changi Camp, Singapore, and Malaya (February–May 1942) and in Ban Pong Camp and Chungkai Camp, Thailand (June 1942–August 1945).

1000 Days on the River Kwai traces three years of Colonel Cart Owtram's life, a precious document capable of witnessing the war that took place in Singapore, Malaya, and Thailand. Over a chronology of the war, this book paints various facets of the life of prisoners in the camps set up by the Japanese.

From hospitalities he received from South Africa to disastrous battles, navigating through intensive labor as a prisoner, and his management of the camp securing officers' paychecks and working with secret organization to get medicine and food supply for his soldiers, the sharpness of memories and descriptions makes the story vivid, dragging the reader directly onto the field. The book was slightly modified from the original journal to modify some of the language used by the author toward the Japanese and concludes with a heart-touching chapter written by Owtram's two daughters walking through their memories about the absence of their father during their lives in England. Cary Owtram's journey began in September 1941, when the 137th Field Regiment boarded Liverpool for a tropical country, but none of the soldiers knew which one. The first stop on that trip was in Freetown, Sierra Leone, and then on to Cape Town, South Africa, where, as the author says, "the hospitality showered upon us was positively embarrassing, and our four-day stay was all too short" (p. 1).

Navigation ended after about two months, when the ship landed on 29 November at the port of Singapore. Since then, the story of the movement of troops along the western Malaya coast begins. The troops reached almost the borders with Thailand, traveling northward and touching cities like Sugel Patani (Sungai Petani) and Alor Star (Alor Setar). Their first battle was on 12 December 1941. From that moment, the troops continued Southwards, touching Ipoh, Bidor, Tapar (Tapah) and Sungkair (Sungkai), Teluk Anson (Teluk Intan) and, after the disastrous battle on the banks of the Slim River, Colonel Outram and his men continued to Kuala Lumpur and later in Singapore, where they were captured by the Japanese following the surrender of 15 February 1942.

The first prison camp was in Changi—one of the busiest airports in the world today—and, after being transferred to Birdwood Camp on 26 June, Colonel Owtram left his battalion to join the 1st Indian HAA Regiment RA in Singapore. From there, they moved along the Malay Peninsula for five days and four nights, until they reached Ban Pong station in Thailand. The conditions in the Ban Pong camp were much more critical than Changi, and the troops were divided into groups of 200 people per hut, each one 7-feet-wide, one of which was only for officers.

The death of the first soldier dates to 20 July, and since that moment, many hundreds of soldiers succumbed to POW life. Between 1942 and 1945 it is estimated that 6,982 of them were buried in the War Cemetery of Kanchanaburi. The so-called “Death Railway” was built using the forced labour of more than 61,000 allied prisoners, of which more than 12,000 died. On 11 October 1942, the colonel and the other prisoners were forced to march to Chungkai Camp, in the immediate vicinity of Kanchanaburi, 53 km from Ban Pong and 127 km from Bangkok.

The descriptions of the railroad construction are not based on a direct experience, given that the officers were exempted from forced labor. Actually, on 24 June 1943, the colonel was appointed as Camp Commandant, with more than 5,000 people, of which 200 were officers. During his period of management of the Camp, the colonel had the opportunity to better organize the hospital, the kitchens, and even managed to organize theatrical activities with shows highly appreciated by all the soldiers, even those from Japan and Korea.

One of the most curious aspects recounted by Cary Owtram is certainly the establishment of rates of pay for officers—\$200 for a lieutenant colonel—of which “. . . they deducted \$45 for food and maintenance, then paid us all \$30 in cash and credited the balance to accounts opened in our names in the Yokohama Specie Bank” (pp. 36–37). The money would apparently be available for withdrawal in Japan.

Among the most interesting characters included in this POW story is Boonpong Siriwechapan, a Thai merchant from Kanchanaburi, who belonged to the “V” organization, which operated secretly to help allied forces against the Japanese. Boonpong did all the possible to ameliorate the prisoners’ life in Chungkai, helping financially many soldiers, furnishing them medicines and food, and becoming the intermediary between them and some merchants of Bangkok eager to help Allies forces. For his fundamental support, Boonpong was awarded in 1948 the King’s Medal for Courage by the British Government.

The book represents a very important historical account, which further enriches the genre of war tales in South-East Asia, representing a work of great interest, not only for followers of the sector, but also for all those who want to deepen their

knowledge of the Second World War and all the suffering it caused. In the appendix to the book, the letter written by ex-prisoner of war A. B. Miller reveals Owtram's modesty and altruism, who, having repeatedly defended his soldiers from the harassment of the Japanese, received beatings in their place.

Fabrizio Martino

Mr. Martino is teaching at Kasetsart University in Bangkok and has master's in communication science from the University of Perugia.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed or implied in *JIPA* are those of the authors and should not be construed as carrying the official sanction of the Department of Defense, Air Force, Air Education and Training Command, Air University, or other agencies or departments of the US government or their international equivalents.