

**Craig Collie and Hajime Marutani, *The Path of Infinite Sorrow: The Japanese on the Kokoda Track* (Allen & Unwin, 2009)**

The Japanese side of the 1942 to 1943 Papua New Guinea campaign, focused on the Kokoda Track, is a significant subject in an area of World War II history that has new publications every year. Collie and Marutani's book, however, brings very little new to this subject. Their work basically draws on secondary sources, along with a few interviews with prominent Japanese survivors and the ATIS (Allied Translation and Intelligence Service) reports of Japanese captured documents. The authors do not even indicate in what collection the ATIS documents are located (they are in the Australian National Archives). Throughout, the referencing is inadequate and the work does not make any new contribution to better understanding the Japanese side of the conflict.

For the most part the military history is presented in a confused and anecdotal way, in contrast to Peter Brune's superb military history *Bastard of a Place: The Australians in Papua*, which covers the same time period and battles as Collie and Marutani. Brune focuses on the Australian side, but does so by bringing in the broader context of military strategy of Australia and its Allies (the U.S. and Britain) in a way almost absent in Collie and Marutani. Brune explains how U.S. General MacArthur's arrogance and lack of full frontline information, when he was based in Australia after the defeat in the Philippines, led to his pressuring Australian General Blamey to dismiss key Papua New Guinea campaign officers General Rowell, Australia's senior commander of the Papuan campaign up to the victory at Milne Bay and the successful 'fighting retreat' down the Kokoda Track. Blamey further removed Rowell's senior commanders Potts, Clowes and Allen who had been directly involved in the desperate delays that slowed the advance of the Japanese down the Track and then pushed them back north. Prime Minister Curtin went along with MacArthur in pushing Blamey into these appalling decisions. No comparable discussion of the Japanese high command's interplay with civilian politicians and military within the cabinet is presented by Collie and Marutani. They do cover the standard reference to Army versus Navy rivalry over Japan's military strategy and the allocation of military resources.

If Collie and Marutani have not done scholarly military history, as Brune has done, one would at least expect that their book would be a social history focusing on individual soldiers' experiences, as Anthony Beevor has done on the Eastern Front (*Stalingrad*, 1998; *A Writer at War: Vasily Grossman with the Red Army 1941-1945*, 2005). The contrast, however, is that Beevor delved deeply into both German and Russian primary sources, even though his book eventually became a popular international bestseller, while Collie and Marutani have uncovered no new sources or even explored archives in Japan. Outstanding scholarship can also lead to popular and very readable publications, but Collie and Marutani have managed to do neither. Another possible model might have been the approach of Charles Happell in his *The Bone Man of Kokoda* (2008), which tells us the story of Kokichi Nishimura in a complex biographical narrative. Happell discusses the war, but focuses heavily on Nishimura's later life and return to the Kokoda Track. Collie and Marutani also interviewed Nishimura (in 2005), yet we get no real sense of the man's deeply

Book reviews: *The Path of Infinite Sorrow: The Japanese on the Kokoda Track* by Craig Collie and Hajime Marutani. David Palmer.

*Transnational Literature* Vol. 4 no. 1, November 2011.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

obsessive character grounded in extreme Japanese military loyalty and sense of honour. Nishimura instead comes across as just another participant in a tragic defeat.

What, then, is *The Path of Infinite Sorrow*? It is basically one more derivative military narrative history for the mass market, a market where hundreds of such publications appear each year internationally. Of what interest might Collie and Marutani's book be to military and social historians of World War II, particularly the Japanese side of the conflict? Their subject has actually become a major area of contention internationally among historians, among those in the broader field of Japanese Studies, and between nations, including China, Korea, Taiwan, Australia, and Japan. This broader area of debate is discussed nowhere by Collie and Marutani. The decade-long invasion and war in China preceding the invasion of New Guinea, a Japanese invasion where its troops committed hundreds of atrocities, is explained by Collie and Marutani through the illustration of the massacres at Nanking in 1937:

Perhaps Nanking is better understood from the perspective of the brutalizing nature of war. Although Japan's soldiers prevailed in China, the fighting had been tough. ... Like all militaries, Japan's was built on harsh discipline and the dehumanization of the enemy. (22)

Later, they state that 'the quality of officers in New Guinea [according to survivor Imanishi] was far lower than in China ... they were more inclined to stand back and give orders, seldom joining the troops in their assigned tasks' (95). The 'assigned tasks' in China, as is now widely acknowledged by scholars outside Japan, was primarily occupation and genocide.

This view that both sides were dehumanised by war pervades Collie and Marutani's account of the Kokoda battles. At the desperate fight by the Australians to hold and finally retreat from Isurava, some Australian soldiers who were wounded were left behind by those retreating with the expectation that they would be taken prisoner by the Japanese and be treated as POWs, as was the case in Europe. Brune relates how the Australians discovered their mistake while waiting in the outlying jungle when they heard the cries of their mates being tortured and finally executed by the Japanese occupiers of the village. They learned that all Australian wounded had to be evacuated no matter what the cost, and much of Brune's account in the first part of *Bastard of a Place* documents how Australians carried this out on their own, mostly acting as their own carriers.

Collie and Marutani cite Brune, but never mention Japanese torture of Australian wounded. They do not mention how Australians carried out their own wounded even in the worst of conditions, and never left them as suicide warriors as the Japanese routinely did with their wounded. Collie and Marutani refer to 'difficulties with Korean labourers' (91) and 'volunteer Formosan and Korean labourers' (128) along the track, but never mention the use of Korean 'forced' (slave) labour throughout the Japanese empire including New Guinea.

On the issue of war crimes, Collie and Marutani again equivocate. They do not cite the published Tokyo War Crimes Trial transcripts, nor do they mention the most important recent study by Yuma Totani. Instead they repeat the tired cliché of

‘victor’s justice’ and mention dissenting Justice Pal as ‘the only judge with significant experience in international law’ (281). One of the most serious charges of war crimes involved treatment of prisoners, including torture and cannibalism by Japanese troops. Collie and Marutani treat the well documented accounts of cannibalism along the Kokoda Track and later along the northern coast as understandable, as

the Japanese, at times, were starving. Soldiers on the brink of death, already in mental and physical no man’s land, might well suppress any moral obligations to the thought that one more meal could get them to another day. (164)

Totani, however, cites evidence presented before the Tokyo War Crimes Trials of the November 1944 memorandum on training officers:

This document gave instructions about dos and don’ts when eating human flesh, reading in part, ‘Although it is not prescribed in the criminal code, those who eat human flesh (except that of the enemy) knowing it to be so, shall be sentenced to death as the worst kind of criminal against mankind.’<sup>1</sup>

In other evidence, a Japanese soldier testified that eating ‘enemy’ flesh was considered permissible by his officers.<sup>2</sup> The problem of cannibalism therefore was one of command and policy, not just a spontaneous response to hunger and possible starvation. The contrast with Australian troop behaviour is verification of this. Yet Collie and Marutani never address the problem of upper level rules and discipline in this area.

The book concludes with a final reference to Yasukuni Shrine:

The veterans of the Kokoda campaign were finally at peaceful rest in the luminous fields of Yasukuni Shrine. In the innocence of young boys, everything is joyful and the world is full of hope. (291).

Yasukuni includes the ashes of Class A war criminals and has been the source of major conflict between Japan and China in the last decades. It also is the central rallying point for Japan’s far right who embrace militarism as a positive value that was lost when Japan was defeated in World War II. But to Collie and Marutani the context of that Shrine and the responsibility for the tragedy dealt by those in power in World War II Tokyo to ordinary Japanese, to say nothing of the millions of non-Japanese lives lost, need not be mentioned. If Japanese militarists were responsible for the war and for the invasion of New Guinea, one will not learn it in this book.

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<sup>1</sup> Yuma Totani, *The Tokyo War Crimes Trial: The Pursuit of Justice in the Wake of World War II*, ((Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008) 158.

<sup>2</sup> Totani 158.