

Battles for POWs, at home and away

**AUSSIE SOLDIER:
Prisoners Of War**
By Denny Neave and Craig
Smith.
(Big Sky Publishing, 17
Rilatt St, Wavell Heights,
Queensland, 4012, \$34.95)

WE remember today the many soldiers who did not come back from war.

This book reminds us of those who did come back after suffering years of starvation, brutality and disease as prisoners of war.

The story is told largely in words of the men themselves.

The wars range from the Boer War to the Korean War.

The scale of abuse and the atrocities were far worse under the Japanese, particularly on the Thai-Burma railway, where the chance of dying was one in two. We have read much about it.

Jack Thorpe recalls: "I don't know what poor Captain Drower had done to offend the Japs in our last days at Tamarkan, but when we finally left the camp he had been buried upright near the guardbox for some days with just his head sticking out. Every bloody Jap who went anywhere near the guardhouse would walk over and kick him in the face".

Many years later Thorpe discovered that Bill Drower had survived and gone on to enjoy a successful career in the British diplomatic corps.

But Australians taken prisoner by Turks in World War I suffered brutality too. One in four died in captivity.

George Handsley described

one camp as hell on earth: "Floggings were given daily on the slightest pretext and very often we received thrashings for offences of which we were ourselves totally ignorant."

Australian prisoners in German camps, say the authors, faced rough treatment and got little food, but there were few deliberate killings or war crimes. About one in 12 died in captivity.

Of 22,376 Australians captured by the Japanese in World War II, 8031 died in captivity.

Allies committed crimes too: "At Biscari airfield in Sicily, US soldiers massacred more than 70 German and Italian POWs".

And of course we should not forget Guantanamo Bay.

Eventually there was the euphoria of war's end, and men with emaciated bodies came home.

John Prosser remembers: "A group of us got on the old steamer Nairana and the next morning we arrived off Tamar Heads, the first sight of Tasmania after five years.

"We eventually arrived in Launceston, tied up and got off the ship. There was my mum and my three sisters. They had a banner across Mulgrave St. It had on it 'Welcome home John our loved one', and then I knew we were home, free."

● In **THE MISSING YEARS, A POW's Story From Changi To Hellfire Pass** (Rosenberg Publishing, \$32.95) Stu Lloyd tells the story of British Capt. Hugh Pilkington, a former rubber plantation owner in Malaya.

He was wounded by a Japanese sniper and was in

hospital in Singapore when the Japanese captured it.

He survived the massacre at the Alexandria Hospital, in which the Japanese were "killing patients, doctors and bayoneting people on the operating tables".

● There is plenty of brutality too in **HELL'S HEROES**, by Roger Maynard (HarperCollins, \$33).

It's the little-known story of POW camp 4-B on mainland Japan.

Of 300 Australians there, 60 died. After the war, eight of the guards were executed.

● **PAYNE VC** by Mike Colman (ABC Books, \$35) is the story of Warrant Officer Keith Payne, whose bravery in the Vietnam War won him the Victoria Cross.

Like many returned servicemen, he had another war to fight when he came back, in his case 10 years spent in a haze of alcohol and prescription drugs.

● Ernest Brough was one of the few soldiers who successfully escaped from a POW camp in World War II.

Captured in North Africa in 1942, he was taken to a camp in Austria. In 1944 he and two others escaped and there followed a hair-raising flight to Bosnia.

He tells his story in **DANGEROUS DAYS** (HarperCollins, \$35).

● **ON THE HOME FRONT, Melbourne In Wartime, 1939-1945** (Melbourne University Publishing, \$33) is a reminder that all was not smooth sailing at home as Australians waited for a possible Japanese invasion.

— NOEL SHAW