



2013-021

Craig B. Smith, *Counting the Days: POWs, Internees, and Stragglers of World War II in the Pacific*. Washington: Smithsonian Books, 2011. Pp. ix, 260. ISBN 978-1-58834-355-0.

Review by John J. Hurt, The University of Delaware (hurt@udel.edu).

This curious book consists of the life stories of several people, military and civilian, who were prisoners either of the Japanese or the Americans during World War II. Craig Smith encountered them more or less randomly in his private life as a business executive in California. Thus, they were not chosen to represent larger groups or to further some overarching thesis, nor do their individualized accounts make much difference to general scholarly interpretations of the war.

After recording the interviews some years ago, Smith had his subjects review the transcripts and then wrote the chapters of a projected book from the perspective of each interviewee. We do not, therefore, have here the raw oral interviews themselves. In the mid-1980s, Smith visited sites in the Pacific and the United States where his subjects had labored and survived. Upon his retirement, he set to work on completing his book.

Smith juxtaposes the prison experiences of a single US Marine, Pfc. Garth Dunn, with those of Simon Peters, a civilian engineer in the Philippines, and his wife Lydia, and of Mitsuye (Mitzi) Takahashi, an American citizen of Japanese descent interned with her family in a camp in the Sierra Nevada region of California. He also includes the story of Ensign Kazuo Sakamaki, the first Japanese POW in the war, and Sgt. Masashi Itoh, who became a straggler on Guam in 1944 and returned to society only in 1960.

Not much unites these diverse experiences, except the overwhelming desire of the survivors to, well, survive. For example, nothing compares with the brutal treatment Garth Dunn endured, when his unit surrendered on Guam after Pearl Harbor. Most readers will know something of the deprivations, beatings, and killings that the Japanese inflicted on their prisoners. Dunn suffered or witnessed all of these, but also had the good fortune to work as a stevedore in Japan and thus had the opportunity to steal food from incoming ships, a vital dietary supplement. Dunn's survival is a testament to the loyalty and comradeship among American prisoners and the absolute need for psychological resilience. Also critical was the surreptitious help they received from fellow workers, contract laborers from Korea.

The fate of Simon and Lydia Peters (originally Solomaniuk) was rather different. The Japanese interned them briefly in facilities at Davao, on the southern Philippine island of Mindanao; but, since Simon was Russian and Lydia Latvian, they were soon released as citizens of countries not at war with Japan. Their challenge for the next three years was to survive in an alien environment. Like Dunn, they were helped by others, especially Filipinos. But there was only so much their neighbors, themselves victims of a harsh occupation, could do; in the end, the Peters had to rely on their own resourcefulness to find shelter and food in the jungle. The will to survive carried them through, but the American liberation of the Philippines came just in time. Simon and Lydia were suffering from malaria and malnutrition; both weighed less than a hundred pounds. Garth Dunn's weight had fallen to 118 from 175 pounds, so he could not have held out much longer either.

Mitzi Takahashi fell at another point on the spectrum. Wrenched from her home and her job in a Los Angeles bank, she and her family spent the entire war in a crowded wood-and-tarpaper shack at Manzanar barracks in the California desert, where the wind blew sand through cracks and crevices in the walls. But they at least had adequate food, water, and medical care and managed, in their own show of resilience, to organize their micro-society and conduct themselves with stoic dignity in the face of a gravely unjust official US policy. Mitzi herself found work in the camp administration, got married, and gave birth during her long years at Manzanar. She was, of course, elated when the camp closed in November 1945 and the prisoners went free.

Smith brings in the wartime stories of two Japanese servicemen. Ensign Sakamaki, a graduate of Japan's naval academy, was taken prisoner, unconscious, on a Pearl Harbor beach after his midget submarine malfunctioned and ran aground. He was not only the first but the sole Japanese POW for the next seven months. Like some five thousand other Japanese captives, he lived in several prison camps in the United States, eventually overcoming his desire to honor his warrior code by committing suicide. (His American captors refused to help.) His initial impressions were of the kindness and humanity of Americans (in contrast with the Japanese civilians who abused Dunn and his comrades) and, realizing the strength of his enemies, of the long road ahead for Japan. Having suffered no particular mistreatment, Sakamaki returned to Japan after the war and took up a career with the Toyota Motor Corporation.

Finally, Masahi Itoh, an Army sergeant, was reassigned in 1944 from Manchuria to Guam to defend the island against the expected return of the Americans. When US forces landed, Itoh fought for a short time and then escaped into the jungle. He eluded capture for the next sixteen years, at first with a small group of other stragglers and then on his own. He always believed that Imperial Japanese Army forces would return and wondered, not knowing the war was over, why they were taking so long to recover him. Meanwhile, he honed his survival skills and recorded his experiences in a diary. In 1960, at long last, he emerged from hiding into a transformed world and returned to Japan on an American plane. (He half expected his old enemies to drop him into the Pacific en route!) Smith discovered Itoh's diary, lost in 1946, in the National Archives and had it translated. He also visited Itoh in 1987 to interview him and return his diary after four decades.

These personal histories unfold in chronological order, with shifts from subject to subject as the war progresses. Smith describes his subjects' postwar adjustments, too. Throughout, he skillfully blends their disparate life stories into a compelling, well-written narrative. If there is some central theme, it is the survivors' unwavering determination to rebuild their lives after the war; they never give way to rancor or bitterness and asked nothing but a fair chance to get ahead. Neither Garth Dunn nor Simon and Lydia Peters expressed hatred of the Japanese. And Mitzi Takahashi forgave her fellow Americans from the very beginning. Her readjustment was perhaps the most difficult: "We were not like other prisoners, now free to return to our homes and families. We had no homes, and our families were interned with us. We had to start over" (196). And, somehow, one hopes that the unflinching Sergeant Itoh never quite lost faith that, had he only persevered a bit longer in the jungles of Guam, the Japanese army might one day have recovered him.