

Java Rabble

Fred Skeels OAM

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Reviewed by Dr Andrew Robertson

In September 2000, I reviewed 'Proud Echo' by Ronald McKie for *Australian Military Medicine*¹. 'Proud Echo' narrated the history of the Battle of Sunda Straits, and of the events that followed, from the accounts of individual sailors. On the night of 28 February – 1 March 1942, the United States heavy cruiser, USS HOUSTON, and the Australian light cruiser, HMAS PERTH, having survived the disastrous Battle of Java Sea, sailed from the port of Batavia to force a passage through the Sunda Strait, when they met a major Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) task force. After a fierce battle of several hours duration, both Allied ships were sunk.

Fred Skeels OAM, an 18 year old gunner on HMAS PERTH at the time, narrates the story of the lead-up to the battle, the battle itself and the aftermath of the sinking, including his experiences as a prisoner of war. Fred Skeels was one of the 229 out of 681 officers and men who returned home, with 357 killed in action and 105 dying as prisoners of war.

The book is well-written and compelling to read. The book is essentially in two parts. The first part relates to Mr Skeels' service on HMAS PERTH up

until her sinking. The second part, which occupies the majority of the book, details his experiences as a Japanese prisoner of war, firstly in Java, then on the construction of the Burma side of the notorious Thai-Burma Railway, and, finally, after being moved through Saigon and Singapore, as a worker in a coal mine in Japan itself. The constant battle to stay alive under horrendous conditions, the impact of disease and starvation on the men, their final release and the aftermath post-war, including the need for psychological support, are well portrayed in this book.

'Java Rabble' reminds us of the major psychological and physiological impacts that prisoners of war may undergo, particularly if the captors are brutal, and the support that may be needed on their repatriation. Mr Skeels' memoir is worth reading by all those interested in Australia's war at sea in World War II and in the experiences of the prisoners of war.

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References

1. Robertson A. Proud Echo. *Aust Mil Med* 2000; 9(2):114.