



Captured: The Forgotten Men of Guam
Review by JAMES PEREZ VIERNES

Captured: The Forgotten Men of Guam by Roger Mansell. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2012. 255 pp. \$24.43.

Published post mortem and edited by Linda Goetz Holmes, Roger Mansell's *Captured: The Forgotten Men of Guam* attempts to uplift out of historical obscurity the stories of World War II American prisoners of war (POWs) taken at Guam in December 1941. Drawing heavily from firsthand accounts to include diaries, interviews, and various archival sources, Mansell offers a rich narrative of the plight of these POWs who, as he maintains, were thrust from an otherwise uneventful tour of duty on a sleepy tropical island in the Pacific to the trauma of a violent invasion and years of subsequent internment and forced labor in Japan. Overall, this intimate glimpse into the POW experience as told largely through the words of the prisoners themselves enhances what has grown to become a vast historical record that memorializes POWs of other, more prominent battlefields across the large terrain on which World War II conflicts transpired. Indeed, *Captured* is primarily concerned with Mansell's assertion that "In the histories of the Pacific war, the story of Guam's defenders rarely exceeds a sentence, if that – and yet their saga is one of the most heartbreaking and inspiring of the entire war" (vii). In this spirit, and as indicated in the very subtitle of *Captured*, the work appears at first glance a promising addition to World War II history that will operate in two distinct contexts – that of Guam and those who defended it. But as the saying goes, one should not necessarily judge a book by its cover.

The first two chapters of *Captured* offer a skewed and mundanely romantic portrait of Guam that echoes a persistent militouristic gaze applied to the island that has become an all too common fixture of canonical historiography. Guam is portrayed simply as a "muddy footprint" where daily life is largely uncomplicated (Mansell 3). For most of the first two chapters, Mansell generically defines the indigenous Chamorro population of Guam simply as "natives." Likewise, the American military and civil service personnel stationed on the island are equally oversimplified as men who lead uncomplicated lives of leisure on the island (3). Although Mansell eventually begins referring to "the natives" using the appropriate term Chamorro, his recognition of this term is tucked away among a sizable list of endnotes. Mansell actively employs and appropriates the leisurely and paradisiacal view of prewar Guam reminiscent of what one former Pan American employee described as, "From the beautiful sunrises to the spectacular sunsets, every day was filled with fun and good friends – snorkeling, fishing, picnics, hiking, and the simple pleasures of sunbathing or reading" where official duty ceased by midday (4). Mansell's characterization of prewar Guam is all too reliant on this sentiment and

undermines the otherwise vibrant and complex social, cultural, and political landscape that was Guam in the first half of the twentieth century. Even Guam's bustling commercial, employment, travel, and communications hub is reduced by Mansell simply to "the tacky town of Sumay" (4).¹

The introductory chapters of *Captured* largely situate Guam ahistorically in their failure to provide any meaningful historical context through which readers might understand the island's pivotal role in the drama that came to be called the Pacific theater. Further, this lack of a sound historical context fails to consider the broader issues associated with the U.S. colonial administration of Guam and the manner in which such issues manifested themselves in the specific wartime context in which this work is situated or among those historical actors central to *Captured's* narrative. This is perhaps reflective of Mansell's concern resting exclusively with those temporary American fixtures on the island landscape who found themselves at the crossroads of warring nations in December 1941, rather than with their Chamorro counterparts who are largely marginalized in this particular history.

Mansell's dismissive and oversimplified treatment of life in prewar Guam is mirrored in instances of superficial attention afforded to critical indigenous Chamorro agents in the island's World War II history. While some of the war atrocities suffered by Chamorros in the name of defending U.S. interests and honor on Guam are touched upon, many are relegated to the periphery of endnotes. Namely, the Guam Insular Force Guard composed of Chamorro men is scantily mentioned and their role in the defense of the island largely underplayed. Chamorro historian Pedro C. Sanchez has aptly noted that it was indeed this group of indigenous men who served as one of the last lines of defense during the invasion of Guam (181). Similarly, Guam historian Robert F. Rogers notes that "It was mainly the valiant Chamorros of the Insular Force Guard and a handful of tough U.S. sailors who upheld American military honor on Guam in those dark early days of World War II" (169). As former U.S. Naval Governor of Guam George McMillan reported to the Secretary of the Navy, "...these fine natives are entitled to recognition for the showing they made on this occasion." (qtd. in Sanchez 181).

Given the dearth of historical attention afforded to the members of the Guam Insular Force Guard, both Rogers and Sanchez make calculated efforts in their respective histories to mention these Chamorro men by name and provide more detailed accounts of their participation during the Japanese invasion. The extent to which these Chamorro men actively participated in the defense of Guam as narrated by Mansell, however, is largely diminished in his claim that American, rather than Chamorro men, defended Guam. As he contends, "The entire defense of Guam lay in the hands of some eighty members of the Guam Insular Force and eleven members of the Insular Patrol..." who were exclusively American (Mansell 27). Where *Captured* affords these American enlisted men their due historical attention, Chamorro men of the Insular Force Guard remain largely nameless and their narratives consigned to passing and shallow discussion.

To Mansell's credit, there are brief moments at which more promising treatment of Chamorro wartime agency arises, but these remain somewhat limited and intensely underdeveloped. Mansell does venture briefly into the layered and complex roles that Chamorros played in protecting and feeding Americans in the immediate aftermath of the Japanese occupation of Guam. Defending Americans and keeping them well fed despite the dangers this entailed and despite universal malnourishment among the indigenous population is largely misunderstood in the historical canon. U.S. Navy Radioman George Tweed who evaded capture and went on to be the only American to survive the two and a half year occupation of Guam is a case in point. Here, the canon celebrates American endurance and devotion to duty and country

as manifested in Tweed's survival. Conversely, those Chamorros who kept Tweed and others concealed and alive have been celebrated as diehard patriots who risked life and limb in the interest of preserving the last remaining symbol of the United States on Japanese occupied Guam. Mansell's narrative offers some opportunity to complicate this oversimplified and fundamentally inaccurate understanding.

Voices of dissent in relation to the prevailing historiography of American heroism and Chamorro patriotism arise, as Mansell points out, in the sentiments of those who fed and protected Americans during the Japanese occupation. Occupation survivor BJ Bordallo, for example, is recognized as noting that "Knowing that people were being killed or maimed, if Tweed had really been a hero, he would have turned himself in so that the wholesale brutalization of our people would cease." (qtd. in Mansell 156). To an extent, Mansell lends credence to Bordallo's interpretation of the Tweed narrative and the larger issue of exaggerated American heroism and bravery. He notes that "Natives were told, 'If we find that you have aided [Americans] in any way, we will kill your entire family.'" (40). Despite this pervasive threat, Mansell highlights numerous instances of Chamorro efforts to protect the defeated Americans in hiding and the brutal consequences that resulted, ranging from vicious beatings to public executions. Mansell further names many of these individuals affording them deserved historical attention. In this regard, *Captured* offers some prospects toward challenging the hero narrative exclusively attributed to Tweed and other Americans.

On occasion, Mansell further complicates the binary positioning of American heroes and Chamorro patriots in his acknowledgement that such acts were more than mere expressions of American loyalty. Speaking to the potential of violence or death that Chamorros faced for helping Americans, Mansell notes that "Despite the threats, the Chamorros continued to hide the men, although they would rather have had them leave." (40). In this regard, Chamorros are not only revealed as active participants in the war experience, but perhaps more significantly, as those who acted not necessarily out of duty or allegiance. Here, Mansell is presented with an opportunity to more critically investigate the complexity of Chamorro responses to the occupation experience, and in doing so, expanding representations in the historical canon. Much to the dismay of this reviewer and perhaps many others, however, this is never pursued and the matter is discussed merely in passing without the reflective critical discussion that it warrants.

The weight of *Captured's* impact is rooted not in more critically considering prevailing historiographies as they relate to Guam, but rather, in its attention to POWs and their imprisonment in Japan. As one can expect, the narratives of these POWs in Japanese prison and labor camps speak of a horrid time of forced labor, physical and verbal abuse, and other maltreatment. Although this is very much a driving theme in the overall narrative of *Captured*, the volume is perhaps more valuable in Mansell's attention to the posture assumed by these prisoners despite their otherwise oppressive circumstances. *Captured* offers a clear glimpse into numerous cases of prisoner resistance against the Japanese in which the POWs would resort to looting and thievery, manipulating guards to their will by creating situations in which such guards might lose face before their superiors, outright physical violence, and even convincing their captors that English expletives were complementary (Mansell 136-7). The attention Mansell draws to such acts illuminates considerably the active and resistant role that American POWs played in seemingly hopeless situations. More significantly, the actions of these prisoners are positioned not as isolated tantrums that merely expressed American disregard for the guards, but rather, as meaningful acts that had the broader effect of hindering the establishment of complete Japanese authority and impeding the success of their captors in exploiting prisoners to their

benefit. As Mansell notes, “Taking every opportunity to thwart the Japanese or increase [American] morale became the mission of every man” (138).

These ostensibly small acts of resistance had far greater implications than simply challenging authority within individual prisons or labor camps or serving as small moral victories for weary prisoners. Indeed, many acts had the larger impact of thwarting the overall war effort for the Japanese. Acts of sabotage in which prisoners inconspicuously damaged or destroyed Japanese military equipment, contaminated food supplies, or “accidentally” dropped entire shipments into the harbor were commonplace in the daily forced labor of American POWs. Mansell notes that “No effort was considered too small a chance to sabotage the Japanese” (101). The overall result of these small but recurring acts of sabotage ultimately led to what former POW Bob Epperson characterized as “a nightmare to the front-line Japanese troops” on the receiving end of delayed or destroyed food and supply shipments (Mansell 102). Here, Mansell illustrates the key role that American POWs played in contributing to larger U.S. imperatives during the war.

Mansell’s consideration of prisoner resistance is further strengthened in the particular attention afforded to the defiance demonstrated by female POWs. While the larger historical record of POWs in particular and World War II more broadly is predominantly a masculine enterprise, *Captured* considers the role of women to some extent. Mansell does not merely make mention of the presence of women among POWs, but lends attention to their value as formidable agents of resistance in tandem with their male counterparts. U.S. Navy Chief Nurse Marion B. Olds is presented as a fluid example. In response to male Japanese guards’ disregard for the privacy of female prisoners, especially when they were undressing, “Nurse Olds was seen by all ‘stomping into the commandant’s office and shouting at the top of her lungs’ demanding privacy for her charges” (Mansell 61). In one fellow POWs summation, “In no uncertain terms, [Olds] made it clear that her nurses were going to have their privacy respected” (62). Here, Mansell and others not only acknowledge the presence of women in the larger POW narrative, but afford them the recognition their agency merits in ways that further round out the complex layers of the POW experience.

Apart from Mansell’s examination of prisoner resistance, there is notable attention afforded to the everyday lives of prisoners during which both intracultural and crosscultural conflicts emerged. Mansell underscores various disputes and tensions that arose among American POWs of varying military rank who found themselves amid “the breakdown of military discipline” (73). This breakdown fostered a situation in which “Instead of acting as a united military unit service to protect one another, the men simply began to look out for themselves (Mansell 73). Moreover, tensions between American prisoners and others such as the British arose, further complicating any assumption of constant balance or accord among the imprisoned. These conflicts lend to a close look into the complexities encountered by all POWs whose anguish was not merely rooted in resentment toward their captors, but rather reflective of human interactions and relations in myriad multiplicities.

Overall, *Captured* offers a richly detailed and captivating glimpse into the history of POWs specifically captured at Guam. Through powerful narratives offered by POWs themselves, Mansell affords these former prisoners much deserved voice in telling their stories on their own terms. These stories not only provide a personal account of a critical time in history, but they further speak to larger matters of historical agency, intracultural and crosscultural encounters, and even issues of gender as they surfaced among Americans who found themselves thrust into war and captivity. Although there is some effort invested in illuminating these issues

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as they relate to the Chamorros of Guam, Mansell misses many opportunities to engage in critical discussion that might otherwise advance a vast albeit limited historical canon of World War II. *Captured* largely fails in its attempt to recognize “the forgotten men of Guam” as many Chamorro men, and indeed women, are essentially overlooked. Still, *Captured* shows potential in offering those with an interest in the human experience of World War II a fair sampling of oral testimony that is largely accessible and even endearing. More critical historians and other readers, however, may find this work tremendously limited in its contribution to advancing growing discussions of historical agency and new directions toward expanding a largely limited but entrenched canonical historiography of the Pacific War.

References

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¹ Prior to World War II, Sumay village was located on the shores of Apra Harbor in the southern region of Guam. Sumay had experienced considerable growth since the late nineteenth century and became the commercial, employment, travel, and communications hub of Guam by the outbreak of the war on the island in 1941. By that time Sumay was home to ten percent of the Guam's residents. Sumay was eventually destroyed during the U.S. recapture of the island in 1944 and its resident population removed to facilitate the construction of the present-day U.S. Naval Base Guam.