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## **BOOK REVIEW**

# ***In good hands: the life of Dr Stan Stening, POW***

by Ian Pfennigwerth

Longueville Publishing: Woollahra, NSW; 2012; 334 pp.; ISBN 978 0 987 22783 6;  
RRP \$29.95



*In Good Hands* takes us back to those terrible months of World War II when the enemy's incursions southward into our near neighbourhood brought them perilously close to our shores.

The part played by our Royal Australian Navy in the history of Australia is often under-recognised in public perceptions. When we consider World War II, the Australian men and women who served in our Navy were few numerically in comparison with those in the other two services. And yet our Navy was there in the midst of the action, striving to the utmost, though far from Australia, and enduring extremely difficult circumstances of a deteriorating strategic situation and a cascade of tactical reverses. Its performance never deviated from the exceptional.

Naval ships sail from their home ports and are lost to public view. Almost without exception, their activities in defence of this country were, and still are, conducted well out of sight of almost all. In World War II, relatives and friends were rarely able to follow the progress of their menfolk. Wartime security restrictions meant that official communiques were the only means of knowing whether they were safe and well, or even where they were, until mail arrived; and that was sometimes months old.

My family had personal experience of this during the war as two of my cousins were serving in the Navy. Both, fortunately, returned home safely. The absence of news from them must have been extremely difficult for their parents – hoping that no news meant good news.

Imagine, therefore, the dilemma of the family of Surgeon Lieutenant Sam Stening<sup>1</sup> and all the other men of HMAS *Perth* who had no news of the ship and her company from mid February 1942 until the Japanese began to broadcast stories of a naval battle off Java in March, in which two Allied cruisers had been sunk. The Australian government had no news to convey, nor did they know what had happened to HMAS *Perth* either. Then came the government telegrams advising that husbands, fathers, sons or brothers were 'missing in action'. Finally, there was a broadcast by an Australian journalist from a prisoner-of-war camp in Java stating that about half of HMAS *Perth*'s company had survived her last battle.

Ian Pfennigwerth's book, *In Good Hands*, takes the reader through those experiences into the fate that awaited Sam Stening. Sam, a medical doctor, came from an outstanding medical family, who served their profession, their patients, their students and their peers with great dedication and continuing inspiration. Some of *Perth*'s survivors endured captivity in Java or Sumatra.

Others were compelled to work on the Burma-Thailand railway project, which cost so many lives and which has come to represent the prisoner-of-war experience of Australian service people in World War II.

Sam Stening was sent to Japan where, for over three years, he employed his medical and personal skills, battling the Japanese prisoner-of-war system, to save as many men as he could from death, disease, harsh climate, denial of medical supplies, overwork, starvation, poor working conditions, the indifference of the bureaucracy, and the brutality of Japanese camp personnel. His patients were mainly men of other nationalities and services. For the most part, he was isolated from any professional support network or from Australians. In two of the eight camps in which he worked, he was the only officer, and thus had command responsibilities to cope with, as well as his medical duties.

Sam was able to establish a tenuous contact with his new wife, Olivia, and his family from the prisoner-of-war camp, reliving them of the burden of not knowing his fate. However, his letters home went largely undelivered and there was concern about his survival in Japan. Those undelivered letters and his diaries show that he shared their concern. Even if he did survive the war, he worried that he would have been so changed by his experiences that he would not be recognisable nor welcome back.

Sam was wrong about that. His services to prisoners were formally recognised by the Australian, Canadian and United States governments, and with the loving and wise support of Olivia and his family. Following his repatriation, he was able to put his war experiences largely behind him and to re-establish himself in his chosen speciality of paediatrics.

Sam had a devotion to the health and welfare of children and he worked hard in their service, researching and trialling procedures that would ease their suffering, and pushing for the official recognition of his branch of medicine within the medical community. Sam was a pioneer in neonatal health, the prevention of childhood accidents, illnesses relating to allergy and, principally, the saving of premature babies. Both of the hospitals in which he did most of his work – the Women's Hospital in Crown Street and the Royal Alexandra Hospital for Women at Camperdown – are now gone, but there would still be many thousands of Dr Sam Stening's patients who owe their health, and sometimes their life itself, to his care.

*In Good Hands* is a different sort of biography, and an important addition to our naval history in an area less researched than most.

**Marie Bashir<sup>2</sup>**

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