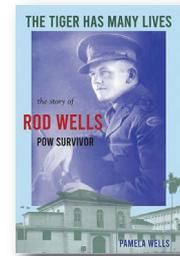


## BOOK REVIEW:

# *The tiger has many lives: the story of Rod Wells*

Compiled by Pamela Wells

*Sevenpens Publishing: Harcourt, VIC; 2022; 304 pp.; ISBN 9780995414495 (paperback);  
RRP \$34.99; Ursula Davidson Library call number 588.14 WELL 2022*



*The Tiger* is the autobiography/biography of Lieutenant Colonel Roderick Graham Wells, Royal Australian Corps of Signals, who served as a citizen soldier during World War II, becoming a prisoner of the Japanese in Singapore, and as a regular soldier post-war.

The book is written in the first person, but it is not clear how much of it was written by Wells himself and how much by his third wife, Pamela Wells (née Bennett) who compiled the book and had it published some 19 years after Wells' death. Nevertheless, it is a well-written and easy-to-read account of Wells' life from childhood to old age. In places, it provides fascinating insights into the defence of Malaya; life as a prisoner-of-war at Sandakan in British North Borneo and Outram Road Gaol, Singapore; service as a Signals Corps regimental officer in Australia and Britain in the 1950s and 1960s; and subsequent appointments in Australia's intelligence and foreign services in the 1970s and 1980s; followed by private employment as a security consultant; before retiring to Rushworth, Victoria.

Wells was born at Tatura near Shepparton in northern Victoria in 1920 and was raised on a small farm. He was educated at the Convent of Mercy, Tatura, and developed a strong interest in experimental science, especially mathematics and physics and their application to electronics. Conditions during the depression forced him to leave school early, get an electrical trades apprenticeship and undertake night classes at technical college.

After the outbreak of World War II, Wells volunteered for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Australian Imperial Force and was selected for officer training. Given his proficiency in electrical trades, he was commissioned into the Royal Australian Corps of Signals. He was posted to the 8<sup>th</sup> Divisional Signals Regiment and deployed with the 8<sup>th</sup> Australian Division to Malaya in 1941. As a signals officer attached to Headquarters 8<sup>th</sup> Division, he was based in Singapore with occasional sorties upcountry. He played a key part in first detecting that spies were sending details of allied deployments and plans to the Japanese and then, employing signals intelligence techniques, determined that the leaks were coming from the palace of the Sultan of Johore. For diplomatic reasons, however, no action was taken against the Sultan's son, the source of the leaks.

Following the fall of Singapore, Wells became part of B Force, the prisoners-of-war shipped from Singapore to Sandakan in British North Borneo to build an airfield for the Japanese. There he managed clandestinely to build and operate a wireless receiver and transmitter which enabled him to obtain news from the BBC and improve

morale among prisoners. After operating it successfully for some 10 months, he was detected, arrested and handed over to the Kempeitai, the Japanese military police. He was tried in Kuching, found guilty and sentenced to 12 years' penal servitude. He was shipped back to Singapore to serve his sentence at Outram Road Gaol. The cruelty of the Japanese towards their prisoners, including starvation rations, torture and solitary confinement, are well described. When eventually Wells was too weak to walk, he was sent to Changi hospital in the expectation that he would die there. Fortunately, the war ended before he did.

Post-war, he returned to university to obtain graduate and post-graduate qualifications in a range of disciplines which attracted him, including science and teaching. He became Head Science Master at Shepperton High School in 1950, but civilian life did not suit him. In 1951, he accepted a commission as a signals officer in the newly-formed Australian Regular Army. Here his scientific interests and training came to the fore, especially when Britain wished to test an atomic bomb at Maralinga, in the South Australian desert. Wells was seconded to the Department of Supply and became one of the Australian technical experts sent to Britain multiple times both for further training and for planning the testing. He was present when the nuclear device was exploded and participated in the subsequent evaluations.

In 1959, Wells retired from the Army and in 1960 was appointed as a scientific officer in the Department of Defence. He became involved with the British in classified research and development work on electronic equipment for secure communications. By the 1970s, he was travelling internationally regularly to check the security of Australia's overseas high commissions and embassies.

In 1978, he began work as a private consultant in the technical security and communications field. Clients included the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Melbourne in 1981. He and his wife travelled internationally extensively, including back to Borneo and Singapore. He finally retired due to ill-health in 1987 and eventually died of dementia in a nursing home at Rushworth, Victoria, in 2003 aged 83.

This biography will appeal to those with an interest in the history of the Royal Australian Corps of Signals and/or the experience of prisoners-of-war of the Japanese in World War II, especially in Sandakan and Singapore.

**David Leece**