

## **Australia has never been good at acknowledging its troops have been guilty of acts of inhumanity**

*Australia's telling of the Pacific war story is correctly replete with Japanese atrocities. But crimes against Japanese prisoners do not feature prominently*



*Visitors at the Kitano Tenmangu shrine in Kyoto on the 75th anniversary of Japan's surrender in the second world war last month*

*Paul Daley*  
Sat 5 Sep 2020

Seventy-five years after the end of the second world war in the Pacific, the human suffering of millions of combatants and civilians is easily overlooked in a binary focus on allied victory and Japanese surrender.

Three-quarters of a century later, Japanese humiliation still simmers in politics and among families of the surrendered or dead. On the other side, meanwhile, countless were the returned soldiers and their families who have long harboured seething hatred for the Japanese.

The Pacific war officially ended on 2 September 1945 when Japanese and American representatives signed documents formalising Japan's unconditional surrender aboard USS Missouri.

Some 71,000 British and commonwealth soldiers, including more than 12,000 prisoners of war – among them 8,000 Australians – died in the Pacific. At least 100,000 Americans died. Millions more people died during the Japanese occupation

of China and South Korea, and we often forget the hundreds of thousands killed when the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan.

Jack Le Cras, then a 19-year-old Royal Australian Navy seaman, recalled in an evocative interview with Fran Kelly on Radio National that the allied officials made maximum effort to belittle the Japanese military and civilian officials on board the Missouri 75 years ago.

“[Allied supreme commander Douglas] MacArthur was absolutely dead set on humiliating the Japanese as much as he could,” Le Cras recalled.

True stories of Japanese cruelty to prisoners of war (including by medical neglect, starvation and execution by beheading) were legion by early 1943. Australian troops fighting the Japanese in the Pacific islands were easily encouraged to view their adversary as sub-human.

“We are not dealing with humans as we know them ... our troops have the right view of the Japs. They regard them as vermin,” Australian commander Thomas Blamey told the New York Times in early 1943. Addressing his troops in New Guinea soon after, he said the enemy was a “subhuman beast” – a “cross between the human being and the ape”.

By 1944 the Australians needed no encouragement to demonise the enemy. Late that year a photograph was found on a killed Japanese soldier. It depicted the last seconds of the life of Australian special forces soldier Len Siffleet, a Japanese soldier poised behind him with a samurai sword about to behead him. This photo is prominently displayed at the Australian War Memorial.

Many Australian veterans later privately insisted that this photograph, once it made its way through the ranks, contributed significantly to the swift evaporation of compassion and mercy towards Japanese prisoners and battle-wounded.

For the Japanese, surrendering to the enemy was ignoble. Many preferred suicide. But others did choose surrender while others who were wounded had no choice.

Australia’s official telling of the Pacific war story is certainly – and correctly – replete with Japanese atrocities for which their officers were tried, post-war, and executed. But just as America’s horrific nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (which killed up to 220,000) is justified in the allied historical narrative of how-the-war-necessarily-had-to-be-ended, crimes against Japanese prisoners and wounded do not feature prominently.

It’s not so much that they’ve been hidden. Indeed, at war’s end they were much talked about and even referenced in newsreels. And they are still talked about in the families of our soldiers who committed such acts. But with time, they have diminished in popular cultural and official historical recall.

Author and former Australian War Memorial historian Peter Stanley says: “Virtually all Australian studies of the fighting against the Japanese refer both to Japanese treatment of Allied prisoners and wounded ... but also reveal that Australian troops killed Japanese wounded and did not give men who might have surrendered a chance

to react treacherously. Troops often had to be ordered, induced and encouraged to take prisoners – if only for intelligence purposes.”

Many Australian soldiers who were interviewed after the war – such as former major general Paul Cullen – confirmed captured Japanese were sometimes illegally bayoneted or shot rather than imprisoned.

“On one occasion, the leading platoon captured five or seven Japanese and moved on to the next battle. The next platoon came along and bayoneted these Japanese,” Cullen said in a 2001 documentary.

“The soldiers may not have known that the Japanese had surrendered and it was all in the heat of the battle. But I do believe it was a transgression.”

The war memorial has ample documentary, pictorial and other evidence of Australian atrocities committed against Japanese troops. This includes what are effectively “trophy” photographs of Australians posing with dead Japanese.

The institution holds a charcoal on paper drawing *titled Shooting wounded Japanese, Timbered Knoll* (1943) by artist Ivor Hele.

In their book, *Pacific Exposures: Photography and the Australia-Japan Relationship* Melissa Miles and Robin Gerster write: “The summary shooting of wounded Japanese (and some who were not wounded) was not uncommon, if conspicuously unpublicised. The official war artist Ivor Hele’s charcoal drawing of the calm execution of stricken Japanese at Timbered Knoll in New Guinea in 1943 was long suppressed.”

Stanley says while working at the memorial he tried to have the Hele picture hung in one of the galleries, but was told it was “too fragile”.

Sensibilities, just like that picture of the wounded Japanese, can also become fragile with time.

Australia has never been good at acknowledging that its troops – like those of the enemy – have sometimes been guilty of profound acts of wartime inhumanity. To deny this history whitewashes the ugliest truths of war.

The very worst examples can be found in Australia’s conduct of the war in the Pacific. And as Australia waits for an official report into alleged war crimes by Australian special forces troops in Afghanistan, it seems clear that the most unsavoury elements of our conflict history can easily repeat.

The difference nowadays is that our war crimes offenders are likely to be held to account.