



BOOK RELEASE

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Bamboo Cage

The P.O.W. Diary of Flight Lieutenant Robert Wyse, 1942-1943

Jonathan F. Vance, Editor

Volume 13 in the New Brunswick Military Heritage Series

Too young to join his brother in the Royal Air Force in World War I, Robert Wyse enlisted in the RAF in the late 1930s. Too old to be trained as a pilot, he became a flight controller and served throughout the Battle of Britain. In late 1941, his squadron was despatched to the Far East. The Japanese soon invaded, and Robert Wyse, along with tens of thousands of his comrades, became a prisoner of war. Shortly after arriving in his first prison camp, Wyse returned to keeping the diary he had begun en route to the Far East. Although P.O.W.s were forbidden to keep diaries, Wyse persevered and hid his journal, usually in a bamboo pole beside his bed. Over two years, he kept a detailed record of life in various camps in Sumatra, only ending in December of 1943 when it became too dangerous. He buried his notes, intending to return to claim them after the war.

The diary is a remarkably detailed and frank portrayal of life as a prisoner. Wyse was sharply critical of some of his fellow P.O.W.s, either for botching the defence of Java and Sumatra or for failing to provide the proper leadership in captivity. Nor did he hesitate to describe the savage conduct of his captors, although sometimes clearly struggling to find the words to adequately describe the brutalities he had witnessed.

The reader follows Wyse as his body deteriorates because of starvation, beatings, hard work, and illness. The healthy adult who had travelled to the Far East was reduced to a skeleton weighing roughly seventy pounds. He watched, virtually helpless, as his fellow prisoners dropped dead of disease, exhaustion, and overwork. Cut off from the outside world, he wondered what he was missing, both at home and in the war.

But there were a few moments of pleasure to enliven the darkness. Wyse and his comrades played baseball, when their captors permitted. The Dutch civilians of Sumatra were selfless in doing whatever they could to assist the prisoners, and some of the other captives showed incredible self-sacrifice in helping their comrades to survive the camps. If Wyse's P.O.W. diary reveals the depths to which human beings could sink, it also affirms that they are capable of great things.

Bamboo Cage: The P.O.W. Diary of Flight Lieutenant Robert Wyse, 1942-1943 is volume 13 in the acclaimed New Brunswick Military Heritage Series. Published by Goose Lane Editions in cooperation with the Gregg Centre for the Study of War and Society at the University of New Brunswick and the Canadian War Museum, this series is part of the New Brunswick Military Heritage Project.

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ABOUT THE EDITOR

Born in Burlington, Ontario, **JONATHAN F. VANCE** was educated at McMaster University, Queen's University, and York University before joining the Department of History at the University of Western Ontario in 1997. He was named the Canada Research Chair in Conflict and Culture in 2001. His research focuses on the First World War, aviation, national building projects, prisoners of war, and social memory. Among his books are the award-winning *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (1997) and *Unlikely Soldiers: How Two Canadians Fought the Secret War Against Nazi Occupation* (2008).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ROBERT NICHOLSON WYSE was a native of Moncton. He joined the RAF as a flight controller during the Second World War. Wyse spent over three years in enemy hands (the first two of which are described in this diary) before being liberated in the late summer of 1945. He was hospitalized for some time and didn't return home until late 1946, his health ruined by the privations of his imprisonment. He died in 1967 at the age of 67.

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