

# Kempeitai: the Japanese Gestapo

IT is hard to believe that any organisation in recent history could be more feared, more loathed, more reviled, more insidiously evil than the Gestapo. Surprisingly, though, Nazi Germany's secret police were matched in method and superseded in barbarity by a similar wartime force half a world away.

By NIGEL BLUNDELL

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Germany's allies, the Japanese, went one sick step further down the road of depravity and their secret police, the **Kempeitai**, were behind acts of such evil that they put the atrocities meted out by the Gestapo in the shade.

Few today have heard of this vile organ of terror, yet tens of thousands died at the hands of the Kempeitai in their torture houses and prison camps. Scandalously, most of their members were allowed to slip away at the end of the war and were never brought to justice.

Now a new book aims to set the record straight and lay at the door of modern-day Japan the ultimate responsibility for the cover-up of these crimes against humanity.

Its author Mark Felton, a British historian living in China, reveals the Kempeitai's torture of Britons in China and Japan, their systematic degrading of women prisoners and, even more sickeningly, their perverted scientific experiments on POWs, including British soldiers.

The Kempeitai's most extensive torture chambers were at Bridge House in Shanghai. The victims were mainly Chinese but Westerners were also rounded up when Japan entered the war.

At the time of the Japanese takeover of the International Settlement in Shanghai in 1941, there were about 6,000 British and 1,300 Americans living in the city, mostly businessmen, bankers or journalists and their families.

One British journalist named Elroy Healey, who had made anti-Japanese broadcasts on local radio, was so severely beaten that he was driven insane and died in agony, crippled by his injuries.

Even diplomats were not safe. Sixty Kempeitai troops forced their way into the British Embassy in Tokyo, beat up the ambassador and arrested the information officer Herbert Vere Redman on suspicion of espionage. He endured 600 hours of torture before the charges were dropped.

The Kempeitai had developed their own special forms of torture and even published an interrogator's handbook. It advised that beatings should be followed by water torture, involving ramming a hosepipe down a prisoner's throat and then jumping on his stomach. Unsurprisingly, many died. Other methods involved electric shocks and intense heat, usually hot irons applied to the genitals.

The Kempeitai's terror regime held sway all across occupied Asia. A Malaysian resistance member, Catholic mother Sylvia Kathigasu, gave evidence at a British War Crimes trial in 1946. She had been held for three months, enduring



water torture, burning with red-hot irons and severe beatings. Metal slivers were hammered beneath her fingernails but still she would not divulge information.

Her torturer, Kempeitai Sergeant Ekio Yoshimura, had her young daughter captured and hung over a roaring fire, threatening to cut her down into the flames unless Mrs Kathigasu confessed.

The pair refused to talk and Mrs Kathigasu was sentenced to death although this was later commuted. She survived the war and was reunited with her daughter.

The Japanese military regarded women as little more than sex slaves. They charged the Kempeitai with rounding up women and girls to fill custom-built brothels throughout the occupied areas. Euphemistically known as “comfort women”, they were initially recruited from the ranks of prostitutes but young women were later forcibly taken from prison camps.



In February 1944, a group of Dutch women at a civilian internment camp in Java were taken from their families and repeatedly raped for four months. One of them was 21-year-old Jan O’Hearne.

“They dragged us away one by one,” recalls O’Hearne, who married a British soldier and now lives in Australia. “I could hear screaming and this large, fat, bald Japanese officer appeared, grinning at me. I put up an enormous fight but he just dragged me to the bedroom. I never thought suffering could be that terrible.”

At 86, O’Hearne is still calling for an apology from the Japanese for the treatment received by the “comfort women”. The Japanese government, however, has consistently refused to admit that they were anything other than prostitutes working willingly for the state.

For any act of resistance, terrible retribution was taken by the Kempeitai against interned Allies and often civilians. Shrunken rotting heads were displayed on top of iron stakes outside the Cathay Building in Singapore as warnings.

SEVEN months after the fall of Singapore in 1942, a daring force of British and Australian commandoes infiltrated the port and sank or seriously damaged seven Japanese ships. The Kempeitai were sent in to exact reprisals.

Elizabeth Choy, a British Chinese model who was awarded an OBE for her efforts to save her fellow prisoners, was tortured for 193 days. She told a British post-war trial: “When my interrogators could not get any information out of me they dragged my husband from Outram Prison, tied him up and made him kneel beside me. Then, in his full view, they stripped me to the waist and applied electric currents to me.”

Perhaps the most horrifying example of the Kempeitai’s methods lies in the barely-documented story of one of their camps known only as Unit 731 at Pingfang in Manchuria, which ranks in evil alongside Belsen and Auschwitz. Manned by Japanese scientists, up to 12,000 PoWs, women and children are believed to have been murdered there. Victims were infected with germs and parasites, then dissected, sometimes while still alive and without anaesthetic.

Limbs were amputated, frozen and then re-attached to different parts of the body to study the effects of gangrene on live tissue. Giant centrifuges were built to test how much G-force the body could take. X-ray radiation was also administered in fatal doses.

Incredibly, after the war, the Americans protected many of the Japanese scientists, offering them jobs, visas and immunity from prosecution in return for their biological and chemical warfare know-how.

With the end of the war imminent the Kempeitai operated a “leave no survivors” policy and oversaw the notorious death marches of British and Australian PoWs. They were still beheading captured Allied pilots two weeks after the official surrender in August 1945.



The Kempeitai destroyed evidence to cover their tracks and most of them vanished. Few were brought to trial.

Author Mark Felton, who lives in Shanghai and teaches history at Fudan University, reveals one final act of Kempeitai barbarism. In August 1945, 387 British PoWs being used as slave-labourers were at work in the mines of Japan’s Sado Island when their guards quietly withdrew after the surrender. A series of explosions entombed them behind thousands of tons of rock and rubble.

Dr Felton says: “The prisoners’ bodies remain inside the mine, forgotten victims of the Kempeitai.”

Source: Japan’s Gestapo: Murder, Mayhem And Torture In Wartime Asia, by Mark Felton