

[Tribute to Hank by Dr Peter Stanley, read at the remembrance service for Emeritus Professor Hank Nelson AM at University House, ANU on 24 February 2012]

Friends and colleagues, and especially Jan and Hank's family

Hank was eight in 1945, in Boort, country Victoria. One of his memories of that year was of being among school children greeting a frail man, a returning prisoner of war, who left the railway platform without speaking. He heard talk of distant places – Kanchanaburi, Kokoda, King's Lynn. And as he matured as an historian, and especially as an historian of Australia's relationship with its region, Hank was moved to write about the war.

Hank produced four major 'war' works. I can't talk about all of them individually, but I want to pay tribute to what he did both on paper and in person to help us understand.

First, *POW: Australians under Nippon*, which as we all know came out of that fertile collaboration between Hank, the broadcaster Tim Bowden, and dozens of former prisoners of the Japanese. This was the second but perhaps the greatest of Hank's oral history-based projects. The radio series and the book achieved what few historians can hope for. Before *POW*, former prisoners of war had been regarded as a macabre embarrassment. Hank's words, and his choice of the former prisoners' words, informed us and liberated them anew. The returning prisoner of Boort finally spoke through him.

Another collaboration, in another medium - *Angels of War*. (Hank was a great collaborator – this time with Gavan Daws and Andrew Pike). And again, it opened our eyes to wartime relationships between Australia and the people of Papua New Guinea, again using oral history, and the insight he had into that country.

Lastly, *Chased by the Sun*, about the air war over Europe but inspired by his affection for the people of rural Australia, a book also about the Australia Hank loved, another recurrent theme in his work.

What unites all of these ventures is people. In every one of them Hank told us about individuals, usually people he knew. And he was able to share his knowledge and his empathy prodigiously: with listeners, readers and viewers, with those who were, as he said, travelling in memory, and those like many of us here, colleagues and students, all admirers, who wanted to understand. To all of us Hank vouchsafed his knowledge with generosity, verve, wisdom, humour and humanity.