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**CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES DURING
WORLD WAR II IN CHINA**

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CHRISTIANITY AND CHINA

There are records to show that Christian missionaries have lived in China since the Nestorians in A.D. 635. Access to China by foreigners of all sorts was extremely difficult until the second Opium War Treaty of Tianjin in 1858 when China was forced to allow all foreigners including missionaries free access inland.

China had been at war with Japan since skirmishes began in 1931. I was born in 1935 in Hankou which comprises a third of the large industrial city known as Wuhan, near the centre of China. My father and grandfather were medical missionaries. By 1939 Japanese soldiers controlled nearly half of China confronted by Mao Zedong (Mao Tse Tung) in the northeast and Chiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai Shek) in the southwest (figure1).

At the end of 1941 Japan declared war against the United States after Pearl Harbor on December 7th and against Britain on December 8th. We had become enemies of Japan.



Figure 1. Principal contestants in China 1937-1945.
(Map of China showing Emperor Hirohito in the East, Chiang Kai Chek in the south and Mao Tse Dung in the Northwest).

The choice was to be repatriated in exchange for Japanese POWs or be interned in concentration camps around Shanghai. Repatriation was for the minority and more likely to be for Americans. My parents and I were allocated to go to Yangzhou (figure 2) Camp C with 600 other prisoners situated 200 miles north of Shanghai. It took a whole day travelling by river boat and a canal barge made more unpleasant with absent toilet facilities. For example men found it relatively easy to relieve themselves overboard; not so for the unfortunate women. We arrived at the City of Yangzhou on March 14th 1943 welcomed by Commandant Yamashita who told us that the

camp was our home until Japan had defeated all her enemies and our governments would pay for our accommodation!
A respected member of the Shanghai police force (George Grant) became Camp Representative to the Japanese, a job which he did very well. Yangchow was a regional capital. In medieval times it had been a major centre for collecting the old salt tax, also for collecting and sending rice to Beijing. Our over-crowded camp had been an American Mission school before Pearl Harbor.



Figure 2.

Map showing location of Yangzhou POW camp related to Shanghai

For the next two and a half years it was for us a matter of survival the mind and survival of the body.

SURVIVAL OF THE BODY.

Apart from one unfortunate case none of us were physically abused. However all 636 internees remember being chronically hungry especially in the last six months.

Food.

Ration cards were issued at once to prevent claims for double rations. Food came from several directions:

- Food from our captors was variable. Protein and fat in the form of tough greasy pork was standard. Starch came from rice in the summer and cracked wheat in the winter.
- Parcels containing jam, sugar, peanut butter and the occasional fish paste should have arrived every six months. Towards the end of the war the parcels were often empty due to pilfering either along the journey from Shanghai or by our guards at the Camp destination
- Each internee had a meagre allowance of money provided for visiting traders which came through the Swiss Embassy in Shanghai. When galloping inflation arrived the \$5.00 dollars a month bought less and less.
- A providential allotment provided some vegetables and later the arrival of nanny goats (figure 3) made a huge difference. I shall never forget each cup of goat's milk tasted like nectar once every ten days.



Figure 3 Imported goats for internees.

Water

It was impressed on us all the importance of every single drop of water needed to be boiled before it was consumed. Figure 4 shows canal water which was augmented by well water. Canal water was brought into the camp in wheel barrows (figure 5) then stored in large tanks called “kongs” which allowed the sediment to settle and the fluid above the settlement to be treated with alum and chlorine. Water was collected at meal times in thermos flasks on a daily basis.



Figure 4.

Water brought up from the Grand Canal for general use.



Figure 5.

Wheel barrows modified to carry water to the Camp.
(Sketch by POW Kenneth McAll, permission of daughter Elizabeth Lester)

Nutrition.

Every adult lost some weight; no doubt many parents parted with some of their meagre rations for their children. I remember asking my parents for something to eat between meals and seeing the pained look when they could do nothing. My father like many others lost about two kilos in weight. Weight loss was beneficial for some Shanghai businessmen, at the same time many alcoholics had to “dry out”.

International Red Cross food parcels containing cigarettes and canned food should have arrived every six months. These were divided as fairly as possible, cigarettes made a useful form of currency for bartering or exchange around the camp.

The camp’s three doctors and two nurses monitored the nutrition as best they could to ensure a reasonably balanced diet however meagre. Occasional protein appeared in the form of occasional buffalo meat, but reliable protein came from grounded Soya beans in the form of white “milk” (figure 6).

Figure 6.

The “Milking Fathers”
grinding and extracting soya
bean milk.



In 1945 food was scarcer still, not helped by Japanese pilfering. This was bad for morale, bad for discipline and risked violent outbursts towards the close.

Vitamins.

When Commandant Hashizumi arrived to take over from Yamashita, the medical advisors obtained permission to add tomatoes to augment the meagre vegetables provided. The above-mentioned goats' milk provided Vitamin D and calcium.

Medical events.

There were eight deaths: five men, one woman and two boys*. Adult causes of death were from heart failure or pneumonia. One boy rapidly died from diphtheria, but an eighteen-year-old lad, convinced he would never leave the Camp alive, died from causes unknown the very weekend of Japan's surrender.

Malaria was a universal threat with limited amounts of Quinine. The Red Cross eventually found mosquito nets for the foolish few who had come without them. The trouble was from smaller mosquitoes that could get through the mesh to cause the disease. At the end of the war I shall not forget the rigors which shook my cot every three days due to the tertiary form of malaria. Fortunately Mepacrine provided by American parachute rapidly got me better. I was grateful for the cure but my deep yellow-stained skin (a side-effect of

Mepacrine) lasted about two years in England providing me the nickname of “Chinky”!

Bed bugs were a nightmare for many; it caused more concern in winter because they invaded our bedding that time of year. A lit candle near the beds provided little defence against infestation.

Amoebic dysentery caused some hospital admissions towards the end of the war. Thankfully emetine injections provided by the International Red Cross and the Americans were painful but effective.

Acute appendicitis did occur several times. An interesting case confronted my father, surgeon to the camp, when he was asked to see a guard with abdominal pain. Appendicitis being diagnosed my father recommended transfer to the Japanese military hospital in Shanghai. Commandant Hashizumi said the last guard with appendicitis had died from post-operative complications in Shanghai; why could not this patient have his appendix removed locally?

The patient arrived in theatre accompanied by four gowned guards wearing masks pointing pistols at my father. At his request the guns were re-holstered on the promise of secrecy. The patient's good recovery not only saved the surgeon's life, it made the acquisition of essential supplies like chloroform and dressings much easier!



Figure 7. Front aspect of the hospital;
the operating theatre on the extreme left.

The camp dentist was a resourceful man from Shanghai; he had brought his drills and the pulley system but had to leave his electrically-driven motor behind. Therefore the drill had to be propelled by a duo of strong men who rotated the pulleys by hand. When amalgam was no longer available, he inserted temporary fillings into each cavity which could easily be replaced in the camp or with amalgam after the war.

One prisoner was beaten for not getting permission to use some piping for repairs, but as this happened towards the end of the war, it might have been an act of frustration against Japan's reversing fortunes. He was forced to kneel in the snow

for four hours until relieved by strong remonstrance from our Camp Representative. There were no other physical abuses, this being a civilian POW camp.

SURVIVAL OF THE MIND.

Lack of privacy.

The packing of 636 internees (Prisoners of War) into a small Missionary Boarding School premises was no mean achievement. Life had changed for everyone. Business Taipans used to have servants to do everything were shocked to be sharing parts of one room with others instead of owning a mansion. Eurasians had to re-learn how to assimilate into a white-dominated company. Missionaries used to living sparingly, were the least affected.

The church building was divided up by matting to house at least twenty people of all ages. Smaller rooms were divided up the same way for smaller families. My parents and I shared a baggage room with twenty-seven others separated by six feet high matting; at least we had privacy to undress. Regular snoring by some and gossiping by others successfully broke the monotony for a growing schoolboy!



Figure 8. Residential block for about 200 prison inmates.

1. Roll calls took place every morning; internees had to number in Japanese. Escapees would be shot.
2. We heard no news from home for most of the war. As my sisters were left behind in Britain my parents were understandably desperate.
3. World news was heavily censored by Japan. It was reassuring that the American forces were repeatedly “annihilated” on groups of islands progressively nearer to Japan, while the British navy was said to be sunk all over the globe so we

called it the “Rubber Navy”. Between ages of seven to ten I had learned to “read between the lines”.

4. Able-bodied POWs were allocated jobs varying from teaching, making bread, cooking in the camp kitchens, digging wells or working in the make-shift hospital. Teachers from business types and missionaries turned out to make good colleagues despite the shortage of materials.
5. Morale was much improved in sports activities especially for the 200 children. A Sports Day in April called “Childrens’ Day” was cancelled by our captors when they discovered it coincided with Princess Elizabeth’s birthday.
6. We found among the internees an amazing amount of musical and thespian talent which raised morale enormously in concerts and plays for the duration.
7. Sadly a small number of internees metaphorically turned their faces to the wall the whole time. Apart from attending meals they refused to work and simply counted the days.

Sport.

The Japanese guards liked to attend Camp boxing matches, especially when blood was spilt. Each victor got a loaf of bread as prize which was discreetly cut in half for both contestants out of sight. The camp had both British and American prisoners, so every child learned to play cricket, baseball, Rugby and Soccer during those two and a half years.

Education.

The triumph in Education was probably the greatest boost for morale in our camp. After the first summer in 1943, the teachers realised that as the war was going to end one day; children needed to be discharged with some paper qualification. Blank paper sheets did not exist, so pleas were made to save every label surrounding parcelled tins because of their white inner surfaces. These were saved for writing during exams. These labels were saved for School Certificate and Higher School Certificate exams under exam conditions in the summers of 1944 and 1945. The results were posted on the notice board outside the communal dining hall and the “exam papers” preserved and sent to Cambridge as soon as the war was over. To everyone’s delight Cambridge confirmed that both the standard of questions and the marking were satisfactory. Therefore successful School Certificate candidates could go on to sixth form or equivalent and the Higher Certificate candidates became eligible for College or University. This was a huge triumph.

Enemy attitudes.

The first Commandant called Yamashita was unpleasant; he despised all of us for not fighting to the death for king or president. His entourage included thirty officers and guards all wearing revolvers and short sheathed bayonets suspended at the belt. The lowest ranks, many of them Korean, were child-friendly because they were missing their own. We were allowed to play with their swords out of sight of the Commandant, but regrettably not with their revolvers!

Part of the psychological stress took the form of roll-calls every morning. We had to number in Japanese as few guards knew any European language. Few enjoyed shouting “25” (Ni-Ju-Go, which sounded like “Need you go”) but all coveted the number “95” (Ku-Ju-Go, which sounded like “Could you go”). Not infrequently, when the war was going badly for Japan, spiteful roll-calls were occasionally demanded at night.

Family separation.

This was hard for everyone. Some teenagers found themselves separated from parents as a result of bureaucratic bungling. We received only two twenty-five worded telegrams from my sisters the whole time.

Morale was maintained in many ways. Theatrical productions with humorous slights at the enemy were a great boost. The one dining hall was a place for religious practice; the same building functioned as a Catholic Church, Protestant Church, Synagogue and Quaker meeting house; in addition it was also used as a school and for lectures on all sorts of subjects provided by gifted POWs. The author remembers the camp barber who described in detail the famous but tragic 1924 Everest expedition with the loss of Mallory and Irvine.

Wartime progress.

We had occasional access to the heavily-censored Shanghai Times, but reassurance was provided by seeing huge Flying Fortresses called B29s flying unmolested in the skies. Progress from gossip by the local Chinese “Mordung Amahs” who cleaned out the toilet buckets was more accurate but the

women were savagely beaten if caught.

A comical guide to the progress of the war was provided by a guard called Yammamoto. He announced that if the Allies were winning he would get drunk on Saturday nights; otherwise he would remain sober. Sure enough he appeared progressively hung-over during roll-call on Sunday mornings towards the end.

END OF WORLD WAR II.

The unconditional surrender took place on August 14th, but for us the celebrations for V-J Day actually took place on September 2nd 1945.



Figure 9.

Japanese surrender signatories arrive aboard the USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay for the ceremony September 2nd 1945.

(www.google.co.uk/search?q=Japanese+surrender+USS+Missouri&rlz)

We internees did not learn about the surrender for three whole weeks until a Chinese newspaper was thrown over the wall. Representative George Grant immediately asked the commandant for an explanation which produced two following excuses:

1. Fear the whole camp would rise up and attempt to kill all Japanese personnel.
2. No instructions from Tokyo.

Grant explained the prisoners not only wanted to go home but without violence. Plans were immediately put in place with Allied forces in Shanghai for the camp to be closed. A British Commando Captain Martin soon arrived; he organised trains, barges, fitness walks outside the camp and transport. Despite the possession or display of any Allied flag would have previously meant death, national flags of all shapes and sizes were miraculously found and raised at an improvised Thanksgiving ceremony (figure 10).



Figure 10. V-J Day thanksgiving ceremony August 1945

A curious event occurred towards the very end of the war. We noticed a previously dilapidated building had been repaired and reconstructed with five horizontal windows overlooking our parade ground (figure 11). There was a rumour that the Emperor had issued a general order to all overseas prison commandants that they should execute all their prisoners of war to enable Japanese troops to return quickly to defend the Fatherland. No written document of this has been found.

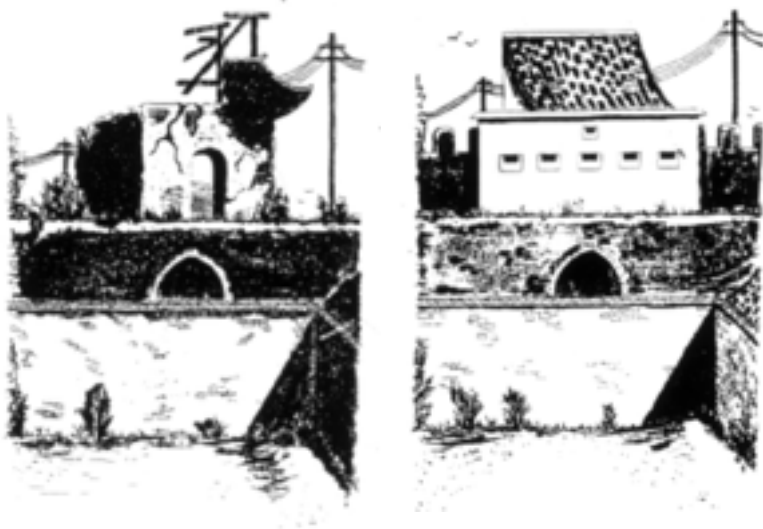


Figure 11. Possible housing for Machine gunners shown on the right.
(Drawing by Camp artist Gilbert Manley)

This edict was not obeyed because I am alive to tell the tale!
I suppose those windows could have been used by machine gunners for our despatch, but that would be conjecture.

EPILOGUE.

Like all children I understood wars in the abstract like “Cowboys and Indians”, or the battle of Hastings; we were too young to understand the threats of this particular war. None of us will forget the loss of privacy and the perpetual hunger made worse over the last months.

Many years later I appreciated the indignity of being a captive. We in the free world take freedom for granted, but even today many others are not so fortunate.

In 1888 Anton Chekhov said:

“.....the most absolute freedom is freedom from violence and lying, whatever forms they may take”.

I do not recommend being a POW but having survived it, life has been richer for me. Some of my peers remained bitter against the Japan but I still remember the friendliness of the ordinary guards who were homesick and missing their families especially the Koreans. Over the years I have met some delightful Japanese who have turned out to be perfectly normal, intelligent and civilised human beings.

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