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BEHIND JAPANESE BARBED WIRE: STANLEY INTERNMENT CAMP, HONG KONG 1942-1945

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On Monday morning, December 8th 1941, a few minutes after 8 a.m. and a few hours after the attack on Pearl Harbor, bombs dropped on Kai Tak airport and the battle of Hong Kong had begun. 17 days later, on Christmas Day 1941, Hong Kong surrendered. At that time there were approximately 3000 non-Chinese civilians of the Allied powers in Hong Kong. Until early January 1942, these people were on the whole left alone, most of them remaining at home because it was very dangerous to go out due to the breakdown of law and order which occurred with the surrender on Christmas Day.

On 4th January 1942, a notice appeared in the *Hongkong News* (the only English-language newspaper published during the occupation) for all enemy nationals to assemble at Murray Parade Grounds (today the site of the Hilton Hotel). Many people, especially those on the Peak and in the University area, did not see this notice, but eventually about 1000 gathered at the Parade Grounds, and after registration they were marched through the centre of Hong Kong and interned in a number of hotel-brothels located on the waterfront (near the present Macau Ferry Pier).

The American journalist Joseph Alsop, who was one of those caught in Hong Kong in 1941, wrote the following in *The Saturday Evening Post*:

> After trudging a mile and a half, we turned abruptly into a narrow alley and were halted before the grilled door of an ancient, dilapidated and very dirty building. Painted on the peeling plaster was an announcement in Chinese that it was the Stag Hotel, offering comfortable rooms at cheap rates. In reality, it was a Chinese brothel of the third class.†

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* Text of a paper read at a meeting of the Society on 13 April 1977. Mr. Emerson, M.Phil. (Hong Kong) is Vice Principal of St. Paul's College, Hong Kong, and President of the Hong Kong History Society.

† The Stag Hotel was situated in Queen's Road Central to the west of the Central Market.

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After 17 days in appallingly overcrowded, filthy conditions with very poor food, those in these hotels were taken by boat from the western waterfront, around past Aberdeen and Repulse Bay, to Stanley.

It is not known exactly why the Japanese chose Stanley as the site, as others were suggested, e.g. the Peak, the University and La Salle College, Kowloon, but probably it was chosen because of its isolation and the buildings for housing which were there. The camp area consisted of the grounds of St. Stephen's College and the grounds of Stanley Prison, excluding the prison itself.

At St. Stephen's College were a number of buildings including classrooms, an assembly hall and bungalows for the teachers. Several hundred internees eventually lived at St. Stephen's, more than twenty occupying bungalows built for one family, and many more in science laboratories living between partitions of sacking and old blankets. In August 1942, a number of nurses who had been allowed to remain at work at St. Theresa's Hospital, Kowloon, were made to move to Stanley. They joined other nurses and VADs (Volunteer Aid Detachment) women in a classroom block. On their way to camp, the buses carrying them stopped in central and they were addressed by a Japanese officer who said:

> You are now going to Stanley Internment Camp. All things there will be good — food will be plentiful, conditions will be pleasant. I hope you appreciate this kindness from the Imperial Japanese Army.

Several hundred internees lived at St. Stephen's, but the majority lived on the prison grounds. Looking at the map, you will see a building marked 'Dutch'. In this building lived the Dutch, Belgian and later Norwegian internees. Next to it was the Prison Officers' Club, used as a canteen, kindergarten, Catholic church and recreation centre during internment.

Looking further at the map, you see two main divisions of quarters—the Warders' Quarters and Indian Quarters. The first, the Warders' Quarters, were for European warders and were large flats of several rooms; designed for one family, an average of thirty internees lived in each during internment. The Indian Quarters had housed Indian prison guards; they consisted of small flats consisting of two 14×10' rooms with a small verandah with a kitchen,

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toilet and small shower. Most of these flats were occupied by six internees. A building which had housed single Indian warders before the war was turned into a hospital by the internees and called Tweed Bay Hospital. On a hill overlooking the prison grounds were two lovely homes, one for the Prison superintendent and one for the Prison Doctor; these were used as Japanese headquarters. Other buildings were used for housing, ration distribution centres, kitchens and other needs.

During the final hours before surrender on Christmas Day, very heavy fighting occurred on Stanley peninsula as the Allies were pushed back towards Stanley Fort. In buildings at St. Stephen's and within the prison grounds, hand-to-hand combat had taken place. Also, at St. Stephen's, Japanese troops had gone on a rampage of killing and raping at a hospital set up there for wounded soldiers. On the site today of that atrocity is the chapel of St. Stephen's College. I had been told by a former internee that a woman who had entered camp from the Peak had brought with her the altar cross from the Peak Church.* The first time I visited St. Stephen's chapel, in 1972, through curiosity I picked up the cross on the altar and discovered it to be the very cross brought into camp in 1942 and used throughout internment.

Two other areas of note in the camp were the cemetery and Tweed Bay Beach. During internment, the cemetery became a very popular place as it was an oasis of peace and quiet in the overcrowded camp. Many internees spent hours sitting there reading, chatting quietly with friends or just thinking. On a radio programme in 1961, one woman recalled:

> When we wanted to get together, we'd always say, 'we'll meet you at the graveyard'. It sounded very funny but to us it was a wonderful spot. It was very peaceful there with the old trees and all the old graves . . . . we could look out at the sea. We used to stare and stare and imagine we used to see ships coming in.

Also in the cemetery, some internees found a private spot for romantic liaisons, and here hundreds of internees gathered to watch the Americans and Canadians go out to the repatriation ships in June 1942 and September 1943.

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* Rural Building Lot No. 23. It was not rebuilt after the war.

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Tweed Bay Beach provided pleasure for many internees. During the summer months they were allowed to swim there, under guard. During the summers of 1944 and particularly 1945, however, many had to forego this pleasure as it required walking down and up a very steep flight of stairs and many simply did not have the energy due to lack of food.

Although the Japanese had meticulously planned their capture of the Colony, apparently they had not formulated plans for dealing with the enemy civilians. Not only was it several weeks after the surrender until the internees were interned in Stanley Camp, but once they had been interned, the Japanese had little to do with them. A few necessities, namely a minimal amount of food, were provided, but the internees were left to run the Camp themselves. They soon began forming committees. The three main national groups — American, British and Dutch — remained independent but did cooperate on such matters as welfare and medicine. At the beginning of internment there were approximately 2400 British internees, 300 Americans and 60 Dutch. Being such a large majority (and after repatriation in June 1942, only about twenty Americans remained), the British really ran the Camp. Five committees were elected and each struggled with the similar problems of food, housing, medical matters, etc. It is of interest to note that very few Government servants were elected to serve on these committees because there was strong anti-Government feeling in the Camp, largely due to the blame most internees put on the Government for the quick surrender of the Colony. An internee wrote:

> The first impulse that ran through camp would, on a larger social stage have been called revolutionary. On every side, by almost every mouth, the former leading men of the colony were bitterly denounced. They were held to blame for what had happened in Hong Kong. Along the camp roadways where people gathered to gossip, one heard the same angry talk of the government servants' complacency, stupidity and shortsightedness.*

The Governor, Sir Mark Young, was not interned in Hong Kong. The next highest Government official in the Colony was the Colonial Secretary, Franklin C. Gimson, who remained in the city for the first few weeks but did go to Camp to attend meetings from time

* See also H. J. Lethbridge's article.

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to time until he moved permanently into Camp in March 1942. During the occupation, his title was 'Representative of Internees'.

An interesting point arose which today we might label "women's liberation". Throughout internment only one woman was ever elected to a Council. An American woman who was repatriated in June 1942, wrote:

> In the minds of the men, women just did not count in camp. As for expecting women to contribute to the work or thought for the camp, nil! In the community elections I was the only woman nominated for the council, and was speedily defeated.

The biggest problem throughout internment concerned food. There simply was never enough, and what there was, was very poor. The rice frequently contained dust, mud, rat and cockroach excreta, cigarette ends and even, on occasion, dead rats. Food was delivered daily to Camp by a ration truck and distributed to the various kitchens in camp. Usually two meals a day were served, at 11.00 a.m. and 5.00 p.m., preceded by rice congee at 8.00 a.m. The meals usually consisted of rice and a stew poured on top, made from whatever meat (usually water-buffalo meat), fish and/or vegetables were provided.

In August 1944, following American air raids on Hong Kong, all electricity stopped, and thus cold storage failed. The internees thereupon received a number of partridges and pheasants from the city. There were only enough for about one bird for seventeen people, but as always a little was better than nothing and imagine eating even one bite of a pheasant after months of the terrible rice and stew diet!

Had the internees been forced to exist for three and a half years on the food provided by the Japanese, almost undoubtedly there would have been many deaths directly attributable to starvation. Luckily there were other sources of food — parcels from friends or relatives in the city, Red Cross parcels, a Canteen, gardens, and the Black Market.

Only a very small percentage of internees, perhaps 10%, ever received parcels from the city. One woman, however, had a rich Swiss friend who sent her duffle bags full of all kinds of tins. She received so much cooking oil that she traded it for "very pretty

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dishes". After a few months she was allowed out of the camp in the care of this Swiss national. She then sent parcels to friends in camp. Among other things she bought bottles of vinegar, emptied out the vinegar, refilled the bottles with gin and sent them to camp!

The Hong Kong News of April 16, 1942 reported that 300 parcels for Stanley were received by the Foreign Affairs Section of the Japanese government in the HK & Shanghai Bank. Still, few internees received parcels from the city, although one man was said to have received so many that he got a hernia carrying them up the hill to his room.

More internees benefited from the Camp Canteen, which first opened in February 1942. Like most things in camp, it took a while to get the canteen running smoothly. At first it was first come, first served; later, a tab system was organised and this resulted in a more equitable chance for the internees. On one occasion in February 1942, the Americans bought the entire stock of the canteen. This was hardly popular with the British or the Dutch. It was, however, explained by the fact that only the Americans had the necessary small notes. Large notes, such as $500 notes, were rapidly depreciating in HK and were refused by the canteen operator.

As for Red Cross parcels, they were delivered to Camp on three occasions: November 1942, September 1944 and March 1945. Containing clothing, tinned food and bulk supplies like sugar and coffee, the distributions of parcels were exciting events, not only for what was received but also for showing that the internees were not forgotten by the outside world. In regard to supplementing the Camp food with vegetables from Camp gardens, a few internees began gardening soon after being interned, but most did not, because they did not expect to be in Camp long enough to justify the work involved. Gardening on a large, communal scale did not begin for nearly two years, in 1944.

The Black Market was an outstanding feature of Stanley Camp — outstanding because of its magnitude. Food, the main item of trade, of course, was brought into Camp by the guards for sale to the internees, and valuables of the internees were sent out for sale in the city. Most transactions were made via internee-traders who acted as go-betweens. One unusual feature of the Black Market in Stanley Camp was that internees could "buy" yen by writing sterling

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cheques to fellow internees who had extra yen. These cheques were payable after the war and were called 'duress cheques' as they had been written under duress. After the war the Hong Kong Government announced that people should not feel obligated to honour them. However, as those who signed the cheques had done so willingly and felt that in many cases they had saved them from starvation, almost all the cheques were honoured. As a result, a few of the internee-traders who held many of these cheques became wealthy.

One man was said to have done this:

1st — he traded 8 lbs. of rice for a tin of golden syrup
2nd — he sold the syrup for HK$500
3rd — he sold the HK$500 for ¥3000
4th — he sold the ¥3000 at ¥10 to £1 for a £300 cheque.

Thus his original 8 lbs. of rice, which before the war was worth about 1 shilling and 4 pence, was eventually turned into 300 pounds sterling!

Food and the Black Market occupied much of Camp "gossip", and another topic frequently talked about was repatriation. For the British, repatriation never occurred, partly because in exchange for them, the Japanese asked for a group of Japanese interned in Australia who had been pearl fishermen there and hence knew the coastline very well. Fearing a possible Japanese invasion of Australia, for which these people would have been invaluable, the British government refused to allow their repatriation. The Americans and Canadians in Stanley Camp were, however, repatriated. On 29th June 1942, the first group, mostly Americans and numbering about 300, left on the *Asama Maru* for Lourenco Marques, Mozambique, where they met the *Gripsholm* bringing Japanese from America. Changing ships, the Americans reached New York on 25th August 1942. The second repatriation took place in September 1943, when approximately 140 internees, mainly Canadians, returned home.

One internee, watching the Americans march down to the jetty in Stanley Bay to board small boats which took them out to a ferry for transference to the *Asama Maru*, wrote:

> We sat on the wall of the cemetery and with deep emotion watched them go. We had dreams of good food for them, of

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fruit and ice cream for the children. In their departure there was promise that our own repatriation would follow.

The writer's own repatriation did not follow until the war ended.

Soon after the second repatriation, the Camp was stunned by the news of the executions of seven internees who had been involved in possessing a radio set. The troubles had begun in April 1943, when the Japanese arrested several internees concerning the radio set and passing messages in and out of Camp on the ration truck.

Military trials were held and the seven internees were sentenced to death. On October 29, 1943, a group of children passing the prison saw a van drive out. As it went by, English voices shouted out, "Goodbye, boys". The van drove down to the jetty in Stanley Bay and internees at Bungalow C, as well as others, saw seven men walk from the van to the hillside. They knelt beside trenches and were shot. Apparently to lessen the impact of the executions, the Japanese announced that about 700 persons would be repatriated 'shortly'. This never took place.

1943 was a particularly bad year. In April, an internee returning from treatment at St. Paul's Hospital in Causeway Bay was found to have a large sum of money hidden under his bandages. At this time a number of British bankers, including Sir Vandeleur Grayburn, the Chief Manager of the Hong Kong & Shanghai Bank, had been kept in the city to work on liquidating non-Axis assets in the bank. Furthermore, the Director of Medical Services, Dr. Selwyn-Clarke, had been allowed to remain in the city to assist with medical matters. Soon after the discovery of the money, both Sir Vandeleur Grayburn and Dr. Selwyn-Clarke were arrested. Mrs. Selwyn-Clarke and Lady Grayburn were sent into Stanley. In August 1943, Sir Vandeleur Grayburn died in Stanley Prison. His body was released to the internment camp and medical examination revealed that he had died of malnutrition. He rests today in Stanley cemetery. Dr. Selwyn-Clarke was kept in the prison until December 1944, when he was transferred to Kowloon. In 1975 he published his memoirs, under the title *Footprints.**

Speaking of Dr. Selwyn-Clarke, this is a good point to talk about medical treatment in camp. The internees were fortunate that

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among them were many connected with the medical profession including 40 doctors, two dentists, one biologist, six pharmacists, 100 nurses and six masseuses, as well as a number of auxiliary nurses. The personnel, however, were far more adequate than the equipment. Very little medical equipment or supplies were provided by the Japanese, but the internees were able to set up a hospital of sorts, called Tweed Bay Hospital. Most illnesses concerned disorders of the alimentary tract, including bacillary dysentary. Other common illnesses included typhoid, tuberculosis, typhus, malaria, beriberi and pellagra. Only one serious case of mental disorder occurred. Surprisingly few died in Camp — approximately 120 — and the majority of these were older people or people suffering from diseases before internment. There were a few accidental deaths, including two who died in falls and a child who drowned. The worst accident during internment was the bombing of Bungalow C at St. Stephen's College on 16th January 1945, by an American aeroplane probably attempting to destroy a Japanese boat in Stanley Bay. The plane flew low over the camp and released its bomb too soon. Fourteen internees were killed.

Likely you may be wondering about escapes from camp. Many if not most internees thought about escaping but few actually tried. The difficulties were great, including getting through Japanese-occupied territory, finding food, and coping with languages (few internees spoke Cantonese, let alone any dialects of the area). In spite of such difficulties, there were three major escapes, two of which were successful in March 1942. One group of eight obtained a small boat and sailed to Macau; the other, two persons, went through the new Territories into China. As a result, the Japanese instituted stricter controls, including a curfew, more guards, additional barbed wire, and two rollcalls each day. In April 1942, four policemen escaped but were caught within a few miles of camp. After several weeks in prison, they were returned to Camp. The fact that attempts to escape were so few, considering there were nearly 3000 internees, might be explained by several factors. The possibility of repatriation was always present, many internees were either too old or were parents with children in Camp, and everyone was aware that retaliatory measures would be taken against those left behind.

One question almost all internees were asked after the war was, "what did you do all day?". Actually, most people kept quite busy.

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The pursuit and preparation of food occupied a lot of time for most, and many had jobs of a sort, working on committees, in kitchens, workshops, etc. In addition, there were diversions such as education and dramatic or musical activities. With more than 200 children in Camp as well as teachers and administrators from the Government's Education Department, the University and a number of primary, middle and other schools, education flourished. There were primary, as well as secondary classes, which although greatly hampered by lack of books and equipment, managed to provide lessons for the children. Matriculation examinations were held in 1943 and 1944, with another planned for 1945, but liberation came first. After the war ended, five Stanley students were admitted directly into English universities: two into London and three into Oxford. For the adults in Camp, there were extensive "adult education" courses, lectures and programmes ranging from the study of foreign languages such as Chinese, Malayan and French, to lectures on photography, yatching, journalism and poultry-keeping.

At St. Stephen's College was a large hall with a stage. This was used for the school and also put to active use by those internees interested in dramatic pursuits — plays, musicals, recitals pantomimes, variety shows, etc. Plays such as "Private Lives" and "Midsummer Night's Dream" were presented. "Cinderella" appeared as a pantomime, and a full-length ballet based on the life of Genghis Khan also provided the internees with moments of pleasant diversion. There were two pianos in Camp which saw a great amount of use, and every Christmas a nativity play and a Christmas concert were presented. In addition, a number of exhibitions were held including art, handicrafts and hobbies.

Throughout the years of internment, there was never a lack of rumours, particularly concerning repatriation and the end of the war. In 1945, rumours multiplied like wildfire, especially following the surrender of Germany in May. News of the Potsdam Proclamation of 26th July, calling for the unconditional surrender of Japan and threatening the destruction of the Japanese homeland, reached the internees through a newspaper stolen from some Chinese workers delivering rations to Camp. Anxious days passed and then on Wednesday, 15th August, the Emperor broadcast his acceptance of the Potsdam Proclamation. The following day, Mr. Gimson

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was summoned to Japanese Headquarters in Camp and informed of the surrender.

The first days after the surrender were tremendously exciting ones as friends and relatives arrived from the city and prisoners-of-war came from the two Kowloon P.O.W. camps. On 23rd August, Mr. Gimson moved into the city and began re-establishing the Government. Nearly two weeks passed after the surrender before the British fleet arrived on 30th August. At 5.00 p.m. that afternoon, the Commander of the Fleet, Rear Admiral Cecil Harcourt, came to Camp and attended a very moving flag-raising ceremony. It was several weeks before the Camp was finally closed. Many ventured into the city to begin picking up the lost threads of their lives but many, particularly those whose health was poor, remained in Camp waiting to board the ships which took them away from Hong Kong.

From this brief account, it may sound as if internment was not a particularly bad experience. Such an impression would be far from the truth. Internment was a dreadful experience. Not only were the physical aspects — lack of food and of clothing, the overcrowding, the insufficient food, etc.— most unpleasant, but the mental aspects were extremely bad also. The humiliation of defeat, the separation from loved ones and the years of waiting for release are impossible to imagine for those of us who have never had such experiences. While the horrors of the German concentration camps fortunately never were experienced in Hong Kong, internment in Stanley Camp was a terrible experience for almost all the internees.

I would like to finish by reading you a few lines from a poem written by Mr. C. J. Norman later Commissioner of Prisons, Hong Kong, in 1954. The poem is entitled "A Farewell to Stanley".

A Farewell to Stanley! It's over.
Of Internees there isn't a sign.
They've left for Newhaven & Dover
For Hull & Newcastle-on-Tyne.

No tales where the rumours once started.
The kitchen's devoid of its queues.
The strategists all have departed
With the lies which they peddled as 'news'.

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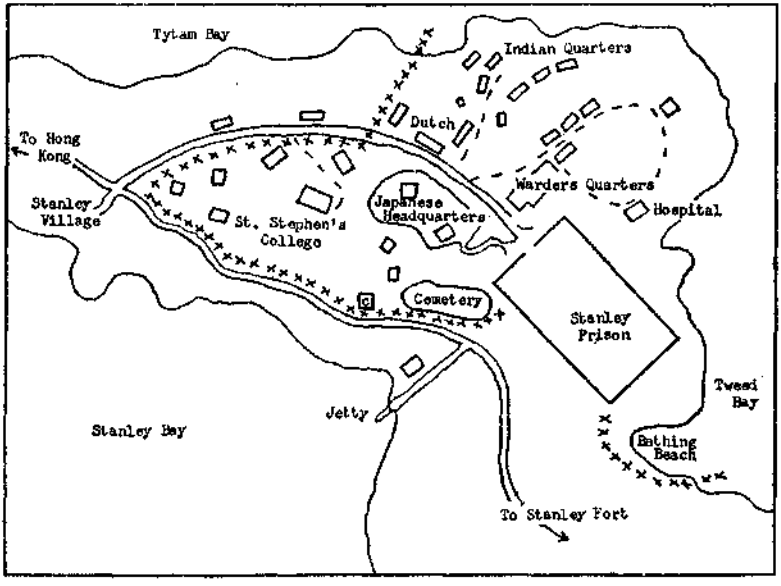
No more of the lectures on Drama
On Beavers & Badgers & Boats,
On 'Backwards through Kent on a Llama',
And 'How to raise pedigree goats'.

No more do we carry sea water
And rations are things of the past.
Farewell to the Indian Quarter
For internment is over at last.

* * * *



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1942	January 5	Assembly at Murray Parade Grounds; internment in waterfront hotels
	21	Move to Stanley
	24	1st meeting of *Temporary Committee*
	February	1st meeting of *British Communal Council*
	June 29	American repatriation on "Asama Maru"
	August	1st meeting of *First British Community Council*
	November	1st Allied air raid on Hong Kong 1st Red Cross parcels, from Britain
1943	February	1st meeting of *Second British Community Council*
	April/May	Arrests of bankers & Dr. Selwyn-Clarke (Director of Medical Services)
	September	1st meeting of *Third-British Community Council* Canadians repatriated on "Teia Maru"
	October	Executions of seven internees
1944	January	Military took control: Civilian Internment Camp, H.K. became military Internment Camp, H.K.
	February	British Community Council dissolved; *District Chairmen* to run Camp
	September	2nd Red Cross parcels, from Canada
1945	January 16	Bombing of Bungalow C — 14 internees killed
	March	3rd Red Cross parcels (part of Nov. 1942 shipment, from Britain)
	May	News of Germany's surrender
	August 15	Emperor's broadcast in Tokyo
	16	Japanese informed Mr. Gimson of surrender
	30	Rear Admiral Harcourt arrived; flag-raising ceremony in Camp