

HISTORY

‘OPERATION DUCK’ AND THE STUDENT SAVIOR

In mid-1945, a team of US soldiers liberated a Japanese internment camp in East China, freeing more than 2,000 foreign civilians. A young Chinese scholar was also a member of the rescue party, and 70 years later, he’s still feted by those he helped to save. **He Na** reports.



Editor's Note: This is the sixth in a series of special reports about the experiences and influence of foreigners who either lived or served in China between 1937 and 1945.

Wang Chenghan, also known as Eddie Wang, is not man who stands out in a crowd. Short of stature, gray-haired and with wrinkles on his face, the 90-year-old is virtually indistinguishable from the elderly people who can be seen dancing in squares across China as they take their daily exercise.

Appearances can be deceptive, though. In conversation, the retired engineer is an impressive person; he has excellent command of English and is deeply knowledgeable about engineering, but his charisma derives in part from an extraordinary experience he had 70 years ago.

In 1945, at the tender age of 20, Wang was the Chinese interpreter for a group of US soldiers who risked their lives by parachuting from a B-24 bomber to liberate Weih sien civilian internment camp in what is now the city of Weifang in Shandong province.

Change of status

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 immediately changed the status of Westerners in China's coastal regions, and in a matter of days they were transformed from untouchable neutrals into enemy aliens.

“The Japanese invaders established many camps worldwide and also in China to intern Allied Westerners, and Weih sien was the largest,” wrote Mary Previte, an 82-year-old US national who was interned at age 9, in a recent e-mail exchange with China Daily.

In addition to Previte, who later served in the New Jersey General Assembly, about 2,000 people from 30 countries were interned by the Japanese Imperial Army for more than three years.

The detainees included past and future politicians, artists and scientists, such as R. Jaegher, a foreign-born adviser to Chiang Kai-shek, the Reverend W.M. Hayes, president of the former Huabei Theological Seminary, Olympic gold medalist Eric Liddell and Arthur W. Hummel Jr., who later became US ambassador to China.

According to Xia Baoshu, 83, a Weih sien camp researcher and former president of the Weifang People's Hospital, the camp was once the American Presbyterian Compound, but when the Japanese arrived, they placed electrified barbed wire on top of the walls, dug a moat outside the walls, and erected gun towers that were manned around the clock.

Former internees remembered the place with horror.

“Can you imagine it? I remember being trucked into Weih sien like an animal. My memories of the camp are awash with every kind of misery — plagues of rats, flies, bed bugs,” Previte said.

The late Norman Cliff, a Chinese-born British missionary and writer, was 18 when he entered the camp. In his memoir, he wrote that every ounce of energy was spent acquiring fuel, food and clothing.

Angela Louise Cox, a Canadian internee, remembers the terrible conditions in the camp: “Sanitary conditions were very poor. The winters were cruel and there was a lack of medical care. But the overwhelming memory for the detainees was the lack of food.” According to Cox, the internees were given three poor-quality meals a day, including thin millet porridge for breakfast every morning, but “it was ever enough.”

Canadian Edmund Pearson, 79, a retired engineer and businessman who was 6 when he was interned, said that after being ravenously hungry for more than three years, he would eat almost anything.

“It took a long time before I could deal with the Japanese, even though as an adult I went to live in Hong Kong with my family and had to do business with the Japanese. The



Estelle Cliff Horne and another former internee are unable to hold back tears when recalling the years they spent at the Weih sien camp in Shandong province. The pair are pictured during a visit in 2005. JU CHUANJIANG / CHINA DAILY

people are fine, but the government has never acknowledged what they did to us,” he wrote in a 2014 e-mail to China Daily. “My personal encounters with Japanese businessmen happened when I was sent to live in Hong Kong in 1973 to 1975. They all denied being in the war, except for one person,” he added.

Lack of experience

Once the decision had been made to liberate the Japanese camps in China, the US military quickly organized nine missions, all of them named after birds. The mission to liberate the Weishen camp, code-named “Operation Duck”, was led by Major Stanley Staiger.

“Eddie Wang accompanied the team as the Chinese interpreter. The team bound for Weih sien flew from Kunming, Yunnan province, in a B-24 plane,” Previte said.

Wang started learning English at high school in Chengdu, Sichuan province, and was a sophomore at Sichuan University when he joined the military in December 1944, although he had already undergone training in small arms, light machine guns, and the use of the high explosive, TNT.

Wang was recruited into a telecommunications group in Chongqing where he learned Morse code, and was then sent to interpreter training classes, and completed a 25-day course before being assigned to Operation Duck. His job in Weih sien was to translate anything to do with China for the benefit of the US soldiers.

Seven decades have passed, but Wang still has clear memories of almost everything that happened during the mission. The only thing he cannot recall fully is the parachute jump. He had only received basic training on fixed simulation equipment, and had never actually jumped from an airplane until that day in 1945.

“I always worried making about a real jump. Fortunately, the parachutes used on the mission deployed automatically, which saved my life. When I jumped from the plane, the sudden strong flow of air made me dizzy, almost unconscious,” he recalled. Despite his lack of experience, Wang landed safely.

An ecstatic welcome

By early 1945, the Japanese were losing ground in most of China and their defeat was almost assured. The news was withheld from the internees, though, and it wasn't until the arrival of the B-24 on Aug 17, 1945,



Wang Chenghan at age 23 (left) and now at age 90.



“It's enough to know I helped to make a difference.”

Wang Chenghan, Chinese scholar who helped to liberate a Japanese internment camp in 1945

that they knew their long days in hell were over.

“We wept, hugged, danced, and waved at the plane circling overhead. People poured to the gate to welcome the heroes. All the internees were celebrating liberation, and they even cut off pieces of parachutes, and got rescuers' signatures and buttons to cherish,” Previte said.

Wang remembers the warmth of the welcome he and the other members of the group received. “We landed almost a mile away from the camp in the fields of Gaoliang, and were welcomed by the internees. We took over and stayed in what had been the small Japanese headquarters building, not far from the entrance of the camp,” he said.

He said two teenage girls taught him to dance after the camp was liberated. “A Greek girl also gave me a piece of parachute silk embroidered with the rescue scene and autographed by all seven liberators, including myself,” he said.

Despite the welcoming scenes and the smooth takeover of the camp, the soldiers were fully aware that their mission was a dangerous one.

“Japan had surrendered, but it wasn't known whether all the troops had received the order to surrender, especially those in remote places. For the rescuers it was a life-threatening task,” said Wang Hao, director of the Weifang Foreign and Overseas Chinese Affairs Office.

Previte recalled that Ensign James W. Moore, one of the US party, told her of the men's concerns at the time.

“Would the Japanese in these outposts know that Japan had surrendered? Would it be peace, or would it be guns bristling like needles, pointing at the sky?” she said, paraphrasing the young soldier's words.

Moore also told Previte that the officer commanding the team, Major Staiger, decided that the plane would approach at low altitude, reasoning that they would lose fewer men and less equipment if the Japanese had less time and space to shoot at them and their parachutes.

Endgame

Although Wang finds it difficult to recall the parachute jump, many former internees, including Previte, witnessed the scene. None of them ever forgot the excitement they felt when they saw the emblem of the US Air Force emblazoned on the giant plane.

“It was a Friday. In a scorching heat wave, I was withering with diarrhea, confined to a mattress atop three side-by-side steamer trunks in the second-floor hospital dormitory. Inside the barrier walls of the concentration camp, I heard the drone of an airplane far above the camp,” Previte recalled.

Sweating and barefoot, she raced to the dormitory window and watched a plane slowly sweep lower and lower, and then circle again.

“It was instant cure for my diarrhea. I raced for the entry gates and was swept off my feet by the pandemonium. Prisoners ran in circles and pounded the air with their fists,” she recalled.

“I watched in disbelief. A giant plane emblazoned with the American star was circling the camp. Americans were waving from the bomber. Leaflets drifted down from the sky,” she said.

Weih sien went mad. After the war, Wang graduated from Sichuan University and became an engineer. He retired in 1990, and has only revisited the camp once, during a business trip to a nearby city. Almost every memento of the raid has either been lost or misplaced over the years, and the only things he has left are a battered duffel bag and his memories. “Objects aren't important,” he said. “It's enough to know I helped to make a difference.”

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Ju Chuanjiang contributed to this story.

First person

Wang Hao
director of the Weifang Foreign and Overseas Chinese Affairs Office

Weih sien camp is not only a part of Chinese history, but also a part of US history. I was told that by a former internee from the United States when he revisited the camp in 2005.

The camp's unique history provides a connection with the rest of the world.

This year marks the 70th anniversary of the Allied victory in World War II and the end of the Japanese occupation of China.

A series of memorial activities will be organized, both officially and by civil organizations, to remember those unforgettable days and also to call on all nations to cherish peace.

We have sent invitations to former internees, inviting them to visit Weifang in August. We are delighted that a number of survivors — most of them in their 80s or 90s — have said they will attend if their health permits.

Relatives of some former internees who have passed away have expressed great interest in visiting to see what their forebears experienced.

In the long term, we hope to restore some of the buildings and to make the few that still stand into a camp-themed memorial park.

We are currently repairing seven old buildings, including one shaped like a cross, and they will become part of a new memorial museum for the camp. We need a lot of space because former internees and relatives have donated a huge number of photos and other items. We also plan to restore one or two rooms that were occupied by well-known internees.

The camp has attracted a great deal of interest from Chinese movie directors, and a movie will begin production on June 23. A number of books about the history of Weih sien camp will also be published this year.

WANG HAO SPOKE WITH HE NA.

Estelle Cliff Horne, former internee from the United Kingdom

Twenty-five members of my family — three generations — were interned in China. In addition to those at Weih sien camp in Weifang, Shandong province, some were held in camps in Shanghai, such as my uncle's wife and three children who were in the Lunghua camp.

My uncle, Dixon Hoste, was a journalist and editor. He was interned in the notorious Haiphong Road Camp along with other well-known or important prisoners. The Kempeitai (Japanese military police) regularly took them to Bridge House for interrogation and torture.

I was at a demonstration in London on the occasion of the visit of Emperor Akihito. With the permission of the Queen, we turned our backs on the carriage in which the Emperor was seated. Some wore red gloves to indicate the blood the Japanese had shed.

I lived in China as a child, and have also revisited eight times. I have always felt at home because I lived in walled cities and sandy fields in Shanxi and Henan, and in heavenly Hangzhou, before going to school in beautiful Yantai.

Those of us who grew up in China will always love her and wish her well. We pray every day that she will be blessed.

ESTELLE CLIFF HORNE SPOKE WITH HE NA.

Scenes from Weih sien



From top: An exterior view of the Weih sien camp. A scout troop at the camp. Internees wave joyfully as the camp is liberated and they are set free. XINHUA AND PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY