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Oliver Holt pays tribute Beijing hero: Chariots of Fire's Eric Liddell

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But yesterday I found the spirit of the Games burning at its most fierce in a quiet, peaceful place where a concentration camp used to be.

Eric Liddell, one of Britain's finest Olympians, died here in 1945 at the hands of the Japanese army but his memory lives on in this dusty, chaotic town 300 miles south east of Beijing. Liddell, the hero immortalised in the movie *Chariots of Fire*, was a remarkable man whose greatness extended beyond the running track.

Some will always remember this profoundly religious man, a Chinese-born son of Scottish missionaries, for refusing to compete in the 100m at the 1924 Olympics because the contest was held on a Sunday.

Even though Liddell was the hot favourite to win the gold medal in the sprint in Paris, he would not compromise his Christian beliefs by racing on the Sabbath.

So he switched to the 400m and won the gold medal in that instead, setting an Olympic record that was not broken until 1960. In the process, Liddell, whose parents had worked in the Far East as missionaries, became the first man born in China to win Olympic gold, another reason why his memory should loom large as these first Chinese Olympics begin.

But others revere him for what he did after he gave up athletics and became a missionary in China. And particularly for what he did while he was interned in this place then known as Weihsien.

The grounds that weave around the lazy river are tended lovingly now as part of a Chinese initiative to turn them into a memorial to those who lived and died here.

Peach trees and bamboo line the driveway into the park, cicadas tick and chatter, and in a shady corner outside the building where Liddell died, his headstone, hewn from a one ton block of Mull granite erected in 2005, stands alone. "He embodied fraternal values," part of the tribute reads, "and his whole life was spent encouraging young people to make their best contributions to the betterment of mankind."

But when Liddell and more than 1,500 others were brought to the camp early in 1942, soon after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the surroundings were very different.

The prisoners, many of them children, lived in dormitory blocks that looked like stables and were penned in by electrified fences, guarded by soldiers in watchtowers and kept close to starvation.

Liddell's spirit was not quenched, though. He took charge of recreation for the children and organised daily games of rounders, hockey and football in the camp's cramped grounds. Few of the inmates had any idea he was a famous runner because he never mentioned it, but the children soon grew to love him for his kindness and his patience.

One of those children was Mary Previte, now a member of the New Jersey state legislature in the US. She was nine when she was imprisoned. "We children adored him," she told me. "We called him Uncle Eric and it would be fair to say he was the most admired prisoner in the camp. He wasn't a big deal type and he never sought the spotlight.

"He was 5ft 9 inches tall with a dimpled chin and a receding hairline. He wore a shirt made from curtains. You would need a wild imagination to picture him winning an Olympic gold medal. I suppose there were clues now and again. Sometimes, he organised running races around the small open space near the camp gate. He would give everyone a big head start, but he always won.

"We children became his priority. When we had a hockey stick that needed mending, it was Uncle Eric who would truss it up with strips made from his bed sheets and with stinking glue melted down from horses' hooves. It was him who made sure that we did not give up hope.

"He taught us from the Bible, too. He told us to love our enemies. To Uncle Eric, that meant praying for the Japanese who were our captors.

"Here was a man who gave up the chance to become the fastest man in the universe and he was binding up hockey sticks with stinking glue for kids. Nothing was beneath him." The extent of Liddell's quiet heroism in the camp is only just starting to emerge. When a British Olympic Association delegation headed by Sir Clive Woodward and Simon Clegg visited the memorial park recently, they were humbled by the stories of Liddell's selflessness.

To the kids in the camp, Liddell's relentless good humour and concern for others made him seem invincible. Someone they depended on. Larger than life despite his modesty.

But at the beginning of 1945, just a few months before the camp was liberated by US paratroopers, Liddell fell ill. He wrote to his wife, who was safe with their three daughters in Canada, to say he feared he was having a nervous breakdown.

In fact, he had a brain tumour and no access to treatment. As he lay dying in the stern three-storey camp hospital that still stands today, a group of camp inmates improvised a small band and stood under his window, playing his favourite hymns.

He died in February, aged 42. The children were devastated. "It was unbelievable when he died," Mary Previte said.

"A man who was also interned in the camp turned to me and said 'Jesus has been walking among us here and now he is gone'. That was what Eric Liddell was to us... Jesus in running shoes."

Some Olympic records still to be beaten

American long jumper Bob Beamon, right, set a new record of 8.90 metres at the 1968 Mexico Games - and 40 years on it has yet to be beaten.

Portugese Carlos Lopez's marathon record of 2h 9m 21s at the 1984 LA Games has also never been beaten.

American sprinter Florence Griffith Joyner, left, set unbeaten records in both the 100m and 200m at the 1988 Seoul Games.