Whitting's war

BAT man's North China internment and final liberation

British-American Tobacco Company Limited is among the first batch of firms that introduced cigarettes to China. Its factory in the Pudong district of Shanghai by 1919 was producing more than 243 million cigarettes per week.[Photo/tobaccochina.com]

Percy Whitting first joined BAT (= British AmericanTobacco Co.) at Ashton Gate Bristol, back in 1912. When he came back after army service in World War 1, he was first with Leaf Department in London before being posted to China in 1921. BAT NEWS published the diary of his sea voyage out, under the heading: 'Slow boat to China', in the issue of Spring 1983.

Most of his service was in North China at the Leaf station at Ershihlipu or at Tsingtao. It was at Tsingtao that he was staying at a guest house (Mrs Whitting like many BAT wives, had left China for less uncertain shores) in December 1941. On December 7th the Japanese bombers struck at the US fleet at Pearl Harbour.

Percy Whitting spent the greater part of the next five years interned by the Japanese in North China, being eventually liberated by the Americans. On February 17th 1946 he wrote a long letter to his family, recounting what had happened over those five Years. Here we give extracts from the letter, covering his initial internment, the move to a new camp, and the heady days of liberation.

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War is declared

On the morning of December 8th 1941 ... I was a little late getting out of bed, and so missed the early morning news broadcast. This was rather disappointing as we were naturally all full of speculation regarding the negotiations going on in Washington, and hoping that war would be avoided. Whilst having my bath the 'boy' came in and excitedly asked if the radio was working. I told him I had not tried that morning as it was late. He came back a few minutes later with a chit from downstairs in the guest house, asking "was it true war had been declared?" I switched on the radio, but couldn't get any news until the second Shanghai broadcast - a reading of Japanese proclamations saying that war had been declared, and that all enemy nationals must remain at their homes. No one came to pick me up for the office that day, so I remained in the house with my ears to the radio. Throughout the day I was able to pick up from various broadcasts - Far Eastern, European and American - the thread of events. Everything remained quiet in the town; though there were Japanese troops all over


Honolulu Star-Bulletin 1st EXTRA

WAR!

SAN FRANCISCO, Dec. 7.– President Roosevelt announced this morning that Japanese planes had attacked Manila and Pearl Harbor.

OAHU BOMBED BY JAPANESE PLANES

SIX KNOWN DEAD, 21 INJURED, AT EMERGENCY HOSPITAL

Attack Made On Island's Defense Areas

Hundreds See City Bombed

https://www.historyonthenet.com/pearl-harbor-ultimate-guide-dec-7-1941-attacks/

the place as there had been for months. It was not until 10 am on the morning of December 9th that they came for us.

'... a good movie'

Their arrival would have made a good movie ... two trucks and two private cars. There was one truck and a car each for the Army and Navy. We didn't know it at the time, but the two services had been allocated certain enemy nationals to round up: e.g. the Army to take in the British, the Navy the Americans, etc. They made a grand rush into the garden, taking up positions with fixed bayonets. The officers and interpreters then came in, and everyone was told to assemble in one room. As we were all British the Navy party withdrew with a lot of bowing and scraping. We then had to give details of names, employment and so on. Radios were confiscated and telephones disconnected. When they left we were told to remain indoors, and two sentries were left. Just after they had gone I was called to the gate, and there found our Chinese No.1 with a car, and a pass for me to go to the office. At the office were all the other employees. The factory was in the hands of the Japanese military and gendarmerie. We met the Japanese colonel in charge: not a bad old fellow. He told us to carry on with our duties. Later on two Japanese officials arrived from the north with a letter from our BAT No.1 in North China saying that the bearers had come to take over the factory, and we were to be guided by what they decided. Clearly we were to continue to operate, but under Japanese control.

'Under Japanese control' meant that at first things continued without too much interference, though gradually they took over, and it was clear that the BAT people would ultimately be 'squeezed out'. After 10 or 11 months they were told to pack their clothes and food for three days. It turned out that they were now bound for an internment camp. The BAT factory at Tsingtao continued to be operated by the Japanese throughout the war. Working under Japanese military control had brought some advantages. The BAT people there had a little money and limited freedom of movement. Percy Whitting describes this period:

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Free from interference

I remained at the guest house for several months, when we were notified at the office that we must all live in one area - so those in town had to move to Iltis Huk. I took a small house on my own, situated between Faulkner and Overton on one side, and Webb on the other. I was fairly comfortable, and managed to live reasonably well considering how little cash we had. The “boys” and other Chinese helped us out by not pressing for payment on the nail. One advantage of the move was that we were freer from interference by the Japanese. In town the houses were inspected at least twice a day by soldiers: some of them were all right, but others were unpleasantly arrogant, with threatening attitudes. But I did not hear of any definite cases of manhandling except for occasional face-slapping. Sometimes the servants were knocked about, but nothing serious. Any serious man-handling was of course done at headquarters, as the Chinese and some foreigners know to their sorrow.

This pattern of life came to an end with the move to the internment camp, which Percy Whitting describes:

A new destination

The order was given at 11 am and we had to be ready to leave by 1 pm. We had no idea of our destination. After a while a truck came to collect me and my hand baggage, and it turned out that we were only bound for the Iltis Hydro, no distance away. We were received there

without much trouble. Eventually the camp was to number 146 people of all “enemy” nationalities. Having been previously occupied by troops, the Hydro was in a very dirty state. Only a very rough clean-up could be managed that first evening, but later we got the place gradually more habitable. It was obvious we were to stay there for an indefinite period.

We were under the Japanese Army, with a small detachment of soldiers and two gendarmes. The highest rank was probably Sergeant. Here too we had considerable freedom to contact outside people, and our servants and neutral nationals were able to come to the gate at specified times for short conversations. Any Axis friends (i.e. Germans or Italians) used discretion, and kept away to avoid being picked up for conversing with the enemy. This contact was very convenient, and enabled us to order or buy the things we needed, as well as to get items such as beds or bedding from our homes. At first we had most of our food sent in from outside, but later a Japanese contractor took over, though some of us continued to rely on outside sources. Later, when the Consul and Consular police took over, there was a little tightening up at the gate, drink was definitely out, but other arrangements stood.

Medical needs were for outside attention except for minor matters which interned doctors would handle. At first a dentist was permitted to come to camp, but later a Japanese dentist from the Donkai Hospital was the only one allowed. Generally our health was good. We had one appendicitis and one birth, needing outside attention.

Conditions in the camp were comparatively easy when compared with the military POW and some of the civilian internment camps elsewhere in the Far East. There was little work to do — just looking after the boilers, cleaning, waiting at tables and the like. The cooking was done by the contractor's staff. So the internees had plenty of spare time on their hands. As time went by there were rumours of another move.

To Weihsien

Rumours of leaving the camp were rife long before we left, but we actually had about two weeks' official notice before-hand, and this gave us ample time to prepare for our journey to Weihsien, which is about midway between Tsingtao and Tsinanfu. Permission was obtained by many to return to their homes to collect personal effects. I was fortunate in this respect, and was able to pack a considerable amount of stuff which I had left behind for safe keeping. Better, than the numerous cases which I had stored at the factory. When we had finished working there, we were told that all personal effects stored in the godowns would be looked after and kept safely. We have since learned that, during October 1944, all the stuff stored by the Company members at the factory was dragged out into the street and sold by public auction. This means we have lost about 20 cases of our belongings, besides furniture, electrics and so on. The loss is considerable, perhaps sentimentally rather than in terms of money...

Our heavy baggage was shipped from Tsingtao to Weihsien a few days before we left. Beds and bedding went a few hours before we did and we carried our light hand baggage. This meant that we had everything in Weihsien when we arrived. Just before leaving Tsingtao I was elected with two others to represent the British group.

The Tsingtao group was the first to arrive at Weihsien, and to them fell the task of getting the camp ready for the others who would follow from other parts of North China. They were to be there for two and a half years. Food was not scarce, but there was little variety. They were kept going on bread. Extras could be obtained — but at a price. Eggs for example. A Chinese dollar pre-war could have bought 100 or 120 eggs. Now they cost $60 each! So bread was the staple, baked by the internees. Even so food became scarcer, with

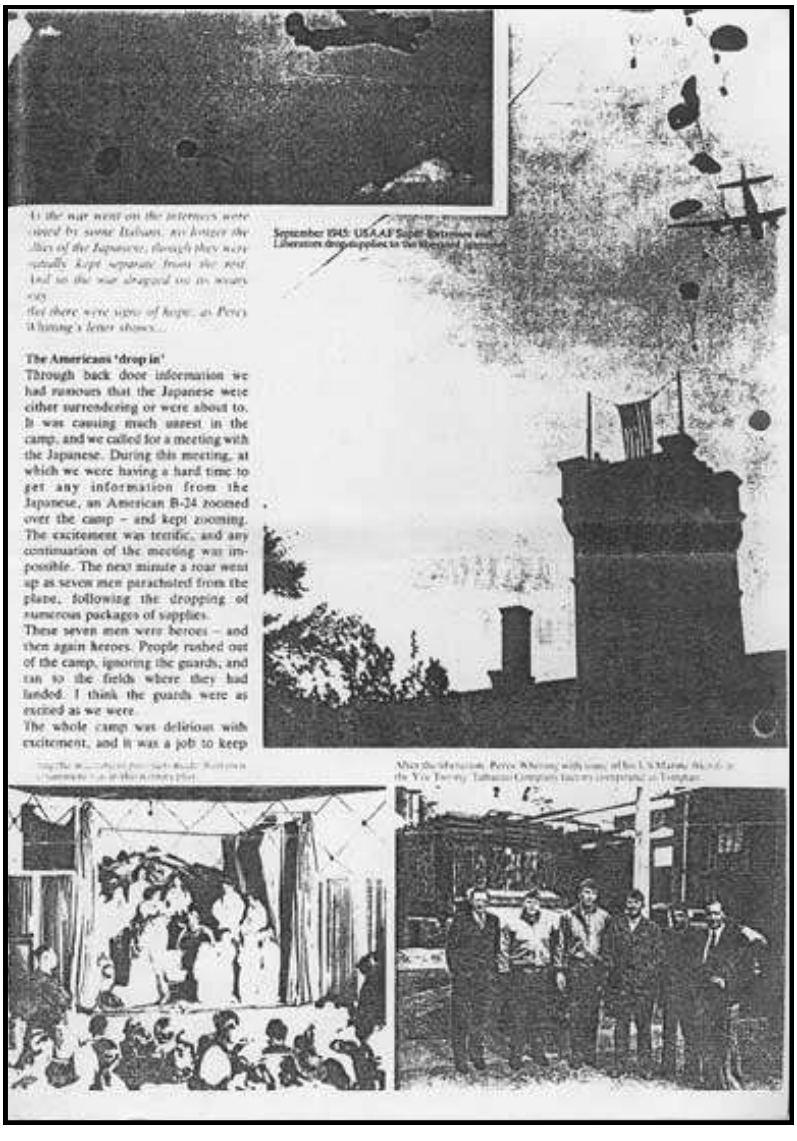
many items being withdrawn, and rations frequently being cut. The arrival of American Red Cross parcels towards the end was a godsend. Fortunately there was a hospital building within the camp, which was run entirely by the internees, with drugs and other necessaries supplied by the Swiss Red Cross. There were hundreds of surgical operations carried out during the 2 years, some of them serious ones. There were about 30 births, and a similar number of deaths during that time. It was fortunate that the ranks of the internees included some first-rate doctors. Generally speaking they all kept fairly healthy, despite the unbalanced diet, though Percy Whitting lost 30 to 40 pounds in weight. Mental and nervous disorders increased considerably as the war continued - a natural result of continuing confinement and an unknown future, let alone separation, in many cases, from families. But life went on. There were marriages in the camp. There was sporting recreation on the parade ground. And there were dramatic and music productions to entertain the internees each week. The late Percy Gleed of BAT was prominent in these shows.

As the war went on the internees were joined by some Italians, no longer the allies of the Japanese, though they were initially kept separate from the rest. And so the war dragged on its weary way.

But there were signs of hope, as Perct Whitting's letter shows ....

The Americans "drop in"

Through back door information we had rumours that the Japanese were either surrendering or were about to. It was causing much unrest in the camp, and we called for a meeting with the Japanese. During this meeting, at which we were having a hard time to get any information from the Japanese, an American B-24 zoomed over the camp - and kept zooming. The excitement was terrific, and any continuation of the meeting was impossible. The next minute a roar went up as seven men parachuted from the plane, following the



dropping of numerous packages of supplies. These seven men were heroes - and then again heroes. People rushed out of the camp, ignoring the guards, and ran to the fields where they had landed. I think the guards were as excited as we were.

The whole camp was delirious with excitement, and it was a job to keep the people away from the sky visitors. After reporting to the Japanese Chief of Police we all met - that is, the committee and airmen with the Japanese. The Japanese had nothing to say: they apparently had no definite information, but accepted all the Americans had to say without comment.

A different face

From then on the camp took on a different face, but none of us will ever forget the day those seven men dropped from the sky. Without exception they were a very fine bunch - doubtless hand picked for the mission. It was a pleasure to work with such a good crowd, and the camp took them to heart from the very beginning. Later we had other air visitors, and finally a larger force under a Colonel arrived to complete arrangements for leaving the camp. But it was, and remains, the first group which we took to our hearts.

Following their arrival contacts were made with outside authorities and organisations, and the camp had streams of visitors. Gradually restrictions were removed. But at the time of writing we are still not sure when or where we shall go. As well as the supplies brought in by the US Mission attached to the camp, we have been literally showered with food, clothes and other necessities, dropped by Super-fortresses from Okinawa and the Marianas... An airfield has been constructed near the camp - towards Ershihlipu - but the very heavy aircraft could not land there due to the soft surface of the runway. Hence the parachuted supplies... We certainly lived in fine style from then on, for the US authorities also put pressure on the Japanese to increase the supply of fresh foodstuffs - and they did not hesitate, believe me.

On September 25th 1945 the first lot of internees got away by special train to Tsingtao, but Percy Whitting was asked by the US Colonel if he would stay on until the camp had been cleared. It took longer than originally anticipated.

While the Nationalist and Communist forces of China had united to fight the Japanese, their rivalries now re-emerged. The Communist armies frequently cut the railway, delaying the evacuation for some weeks. When he left the camp, Percy Whitting did so in style - aboard a US plane. They circled over Tsingtao, seeking out familiar landmarks and generally having a fine time. A few days after arrival he moved into the BAT house in Tsingtao 's Chi-tung Road. The town was occupied by about 20,000 US Marines, leaving little room for the returned residents, who were nonetheless delighted to see them there. A few BAT men arrived from the United States to get things organised, and Percy Whitting's life began to assume some kind of normality once again as he looked forward to home leave.

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