

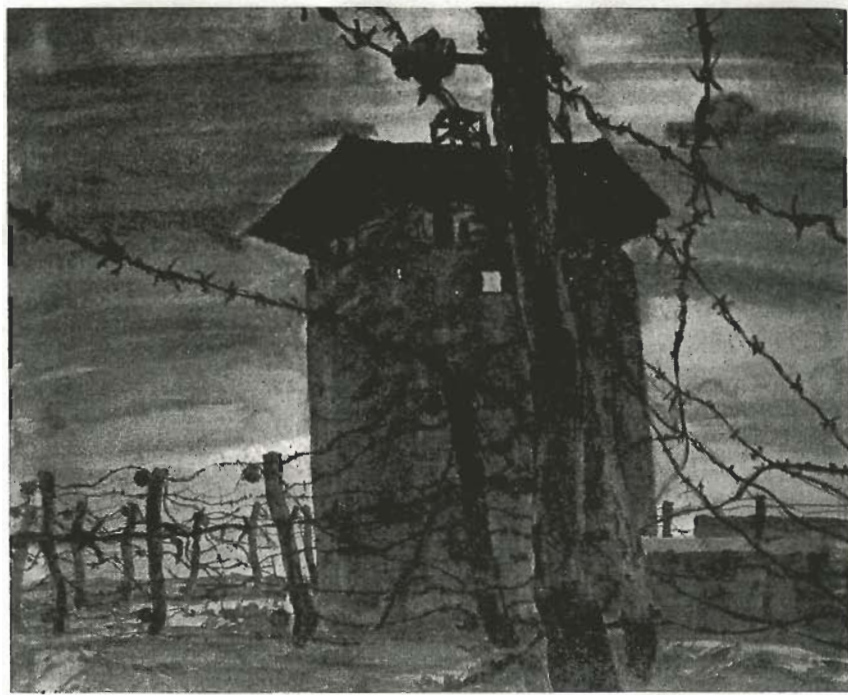
IN WEIHSIEN PRISON CAMP

With

William A. Smith

The former Presbyterian Mission at Weihsien in Shantung Province, China, was converted by the Japanese into a prison for fifteen hundred civilians, who were held there for two and a half years.

On August 17, 1945, a seven-man OSS team commanded by Major Stanley Steiger parachuted from a B-24 flying about four hundred and fifty feet above the internment center. This was one of a number of missions, which included those resulting in the release of General Wainwright at Mukden and the Doolittle fliers who had been held at Peiping. The OSS men landed uncomfortably in a field just outside the electrified barbed-wire entanglement surrounding the compound wall. Taking up defensive positions **until**



During WILLIAM A. SMITH's eight months' service with the OSS in China, a special mission took him to Weihsien prison camp, where he spent a month with the internees. Some of the sketches Mr. Smith made in other parts of China were reproduced in our April issue.

they could judge their reception by the Japanese, they were startled and momentarily confused by an unexpected piece of luck. The internees, overwhelmed and hysterical with joy at seeing the



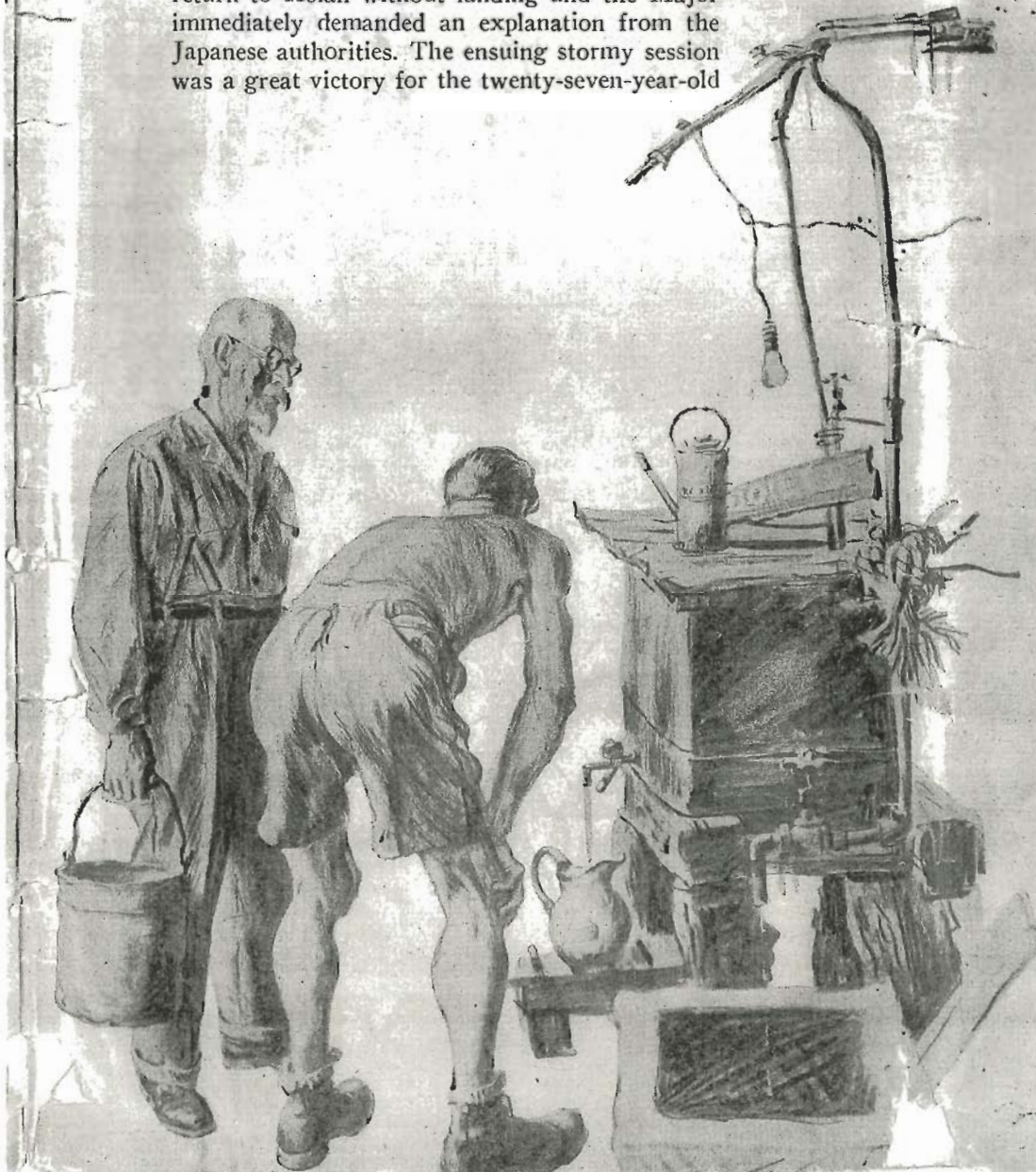
men drop from a plane with the American flag painted on the underside of its wing, defied the armed Japanese sentries and burst through the gates to greet their liberators. The confusion caused by these people, who hadn't been outside the prison walls in two and a half years, so distracted the sentries that no attempt was made to take action against the Americans who had jumped in. All returned within the prison walls, happily bearing the Americans on their shoulders. The psychological advantage thus achieved was a valuable precedent for later positive demands that the Major made upon the Japanese. Inside the gates conferences were held which resulted in the surrender of the camp. One of the conditions of the surrender was that the Japanese should continue to furnish sentries to guard the camp against any possible outside danger.

The next day Major Steiger arrived at the airport to meet a supply plane and found two hundred Jap soldiers in battle positions around the field. The Americans signaled the plane to return to Hsian without landing and the Major immediately demanded an explanation from the Japanese authorities. The ensuing stormy session was a great victory for the twenty-seven-year-old

American Major. After this incident the Japanese became docile and extremely cooperative. Several days later I was flown in on a special mission for Col. Richard Heppner, commander of all OSS operations in China. Shortly after the plane landed at the airfield three miles from the internment center, a dilapidated truck driven by two Japanese soldiers brought representatives from the camp. Most of the reception committee consisted of members of the Chefoo Boy Scout troop. With enthusiasm they quickly unloaded the plane and transferred the supplies to the truck.

The former Mission, which incidentally was the birthplace of Henry R. Luce, the publisher of *Life*, was made up of a large number of solidly constructed brick buildings, surrounded by a high brick wall. The Japanese had built guard towers at strategic locations along this wall, which was topped with electrified barbed wire.

Most of the families lived in long, one-story buildings divided into several rooms approximately nine by twelve feet. Each of these cubicles



The morning water queue

was ordinarily occupied by two or three people, a man and wife and perhaps a child. The blocks of buildings had a shanty-town look. Each dwelling had a tiny back yard equipped with an improvised stove, chairs and a table made from available junk, according to the resourcefulness of the tenant. Stovepipes were constructed by piecing together discarded tin cans. Bricks, stones, crates, bamboo poles and metal containers were quickly put to use by those lucky enough to be able to find them. There were also a number of larger buildings.

One was occupied by bachelor girls, another a men's dormitory. Perhaps the grandest building was the hospital. It was excellently staffed by internees, among whom were some of the best doctors in North China. There was a simple church, more than adequately attended to by the missionaries, who practically overran the camp.

I climbed the wooden ladder in one of the guard towers and when I got to the top I found a somewhat embarrassed Jap sentry. When I greeted him with "*Konnichi-wa*," he snapped to attention, saluted me and handed me his rifle. Naturally I was surprised, but I accepted the

weapon, inspected it and handed it back to him. He again saluted and after returning his salute I descended the ladder, leaving him with mutual "*sayonaras*." I felt that if it was as easy as that, I could certainly get him to pose for a sketch. The next day I made the painting of him in the tower which is reproduced on the third cover. That night I found a bottle of *saki* that he had left in my quarters as an expression of his gratitude.

Most of the prisoners were British. There were also Americans, Belgians, Italians, Eurasians and the various other types that would naturally be found in a group of people gathered under these circumstances from northern Chinese towns such as Tientsin, Peiping, Cheefoo and Tsingtao. They were missionaries, soldiers of fortune, business men, educators, professional people and scholars, such as E. T. C. Werner, author of many books on Chinese life, customs and mythology. There were the powerful and influential leaders of industry known as "taipans." These people were accustomed to having servants and living in the luxury of the Occidental in the Orient. When they were all thrown together and forced to make their new home livable it required





T/4 Roy Hanchulak, a member of the OSS team

considerable readjustment. During the first few days of internment, they had the new experience of having to perform menial tasks before the eyes of Chinese coolies, who reclined under trees and watched their humiliation with great glee.

A committee of nine selected by the internees took care of what self-government was permitted and of all negotiations with the Japanese authorities. They organized schools, set up kitchens, saw that the hospital was staffed, appointed fire tenders and organized games and dances. An orchestra was formed by an American Negro

Prisoners who worked in the kitchens and bakery suffered less than most of the other adults from the inadequate food supply

A former "taipan" named Blackadder

musician, who had come to China to play with a jazz band, a couple of Hawaiians and a few amateurs. They played a conglomeration of early-vintage jazz tunes such as "Sweet Sue," "Honey-suckle Rose," "Red Sails in the Sunset," and, after the liberation, "Happy Days Are Here Again." Every able-bodied person was assigned some duty according to his special abilities. General welfare of the camp was gradually improved, and soon even shower rooms were constructed.

The women, many of whom had never cooked and sewed before, showed considerable skill. The



problem of making clothing last was one of their difficult tasks and they accomplished it amazingly well. One woman was a gifted interior decorator, and she and her husband made their small cubicle one of the wonders of the camp.

The prisoners were not subject to beating, but infants and old people endured needless discomfort. Daily assemblies were enforced, and people made to stand in formations while they were counted. Bad weather and lack of adequate clothing made this a great hardship. Giving babies as well as adults nearing their ninetieth year a poor diet of rice gruel, turnips and bread, but almost entirely lacking in meat, eggs and dairy products, was unnecessarily inhumane. Located in a fertile and rich part of the Shantung peninsula, the camp could easily have been supplied with more and better food. By an "over-the-wall" black market the internees were able to augment their diet. Those who lacked cash to deal with the Chinese outside sold wedding rings and other personal treasures to individual Japanese guards for a fraction of their value. This black market was organized and run by a Catholic priest internee whose membership in the Trappist Order had prevented his speaking a word during the twenty-

five years prior to his imprisonment. His efficiency and volubility were admired by fellow internees.

Some of the people felt it important to buy black market whiskey as well as food. The ever-resourceful Chinese peasants supplied this demand with "bai gar" (white lightning), a horribly potent drink resembling vodka, but made from millet. If no other beverage is available, it might be recommended, but not very highly.

People had to wait in line for the simplest necessities. Soap, tobacco and especially sugar were at a very great premium, and the young children had never tasted candy. All drinking water was boiled, and it was touching to see the morning water queue.

After the arrival of the OSS team, hundreds of tons of food and clothing were parachuted into the camp from planes. There were candy bars, canned soups, canned turkeys, Virginia hams, plenty of sugar, soap, GI rations and medical supplies. The men, women and children were delighted with their GI combat jackets, fatigue caps and Army issue shoes. These were the first new clothes they had had in years. The women were especially fascinated with the new types of food that they had never seen before. Canned butter, lemonade powder and canned stews were strange and wonderful delights. Parachute cloth was made into beautiful new blue, red or yellow dresses and blouses.

After the first few days of internment, only one Chinese was permitted inside the high brick wall. He was a dirty and stupid-acting coolie whose job was to remove the pails of refuse from the latrines. The Japanese would have no part of this job. Actually, he was an OSS agent and his access to the camp made it possible for the prisoners to communicate with the outside. His "contact" inside the internment center was Father Diego, a Catholic priest whose duty it was to clean the latrines. The other internees were most surprised when, after the camp had been taken by the Americans, this same Chinese walked through the gates in a western-type business suit.

In the middle of 1944 an American, Arthur M. Hummel, and a British companion made a dramatic escape over the wall on a dark night. They had sent word through Father Diego and the OSS Chinese agent to a group of central government guerrillas and a rendezvous had been arranged. For the next fourteen months they stayed with the guerrillas and their radio contact with the American army supplied much of the information that aided Major Steiger's capture of the camp. A new Japanese commandant had been established in the camp only shortly before the escape was accomplished. When the two men



A Eurasian boy, one of my special friends



A Japanese-American sergeant watches a backyard cook

were discovered to be missing the Japanese commander assembled the prisoners and with tears streaming down his cheeks begged that no one else try to escape. The incident had put him in a bad light with his superiors and he had lost great "face." He said that if any one else got away it would be necessary for him to commit harakiri. He had a family and did not want to die.

There was much interest in the sketches I had been making around the compound, and I was asked to permit an exhibition. Before the doors were opened there was an incredibly long line of people waiting to get in. Many people, after filing through and examining each picture as long as the crowd behind would permit, returned to the end of the line to await their turn to see the things again. Their enthusiasm made me very humble.

Steiger had promised to secure a projector and some films, but their arrival was maddeningly delayed. When a plane landed at the airstrip the first question asked was, "Did the projector come?" Toward the end of my month's stay, the movie equipment finally arrived. A joyous holiday atmosphere swept the camp. Threats of not being able to see the movie put children on their best behavior. I attended the first showing, but the picture was so bad that I couldn't endure more than the first ten minutes of it. I was outside the theater when the internees came out raving about what a superb picture it had been.

The considerable delay in the evacuation of the camp was due partly to the troubled situation in that area. The Chinese Communists were very

active in the vicinity, and kept the puppet general whose troops were holding the town of Weihsien in a state of extreme nervousness. The ten thousand Japanese troops in the vicinity were still armed, and the central government guerrilla group was busy with its own operations. These four factions created a great deal of confusion, and there was heavy fighting every night. The Japs were trying to keep the railroad, which ran from Weihsien to Tsingtao, open, but the tracks and bridges were constantly being blown out of commission by explosives. We couldn't depend on trains getting through to the coast, and since this was the only means of transportation available we were confronted with a very serious problem. In the interest of getting the prisoners out, an agreement to keep the railroad open for twelve days was finally secured from the warring factions. Since Tsingtao lacked accommodations to absorb all fifteen hundred prisoners, it was decided to take approximately a third of them in the first train load. Hospital cases and people with homes or friends in the Tsingtao area were included in the first group. Bad weather, which made the roads to the railway impassable, caused another delay, but the first group finally reached Tsingtao safely. I went to Tsingtao a few days later and stayed a couple of weeks. On the thirteenth day after the agreement, the railroad had again been blown up in a number of places. At the time I left Tsingtao for Shanghai the remaining internees had not yet been able to get out of Weihsien.

At Hsian, previous to coming to Weihsien, I had gone over to visit and make a sketch of George Barr, one of the Doolittle fliers rescued by our team that had jumped into Peking. Kept in solitary confinement for the duration of the war, suffering from beri-beri and having been horribly beaten by brutal Japanese guards, Barr presented a terrible picture of the atrociousness of war. Greenishly pale, staring vacantly at the broken knuckles of his hands, he was unable to recognize or talk to any one. I was so overwhelmed by the sight that I couldn't draw, but it was so vivid that I could sketch it today from memory. This experience emphasized the comparative good fortune of the civilians who were interned at Weihsien. They were subjected to hardships and indignities, but they were certainly not victims of torture and brutality.

The length of the internment perhaps had a greater effect upon the children than upon the adults. Many of the children knew of no other way of life. One small child, upon reaching the coast and seeing the ocean for the first time, exclaimed, "Oh, mommy, what a large cesspool!"



WILLIAM H. SAFFIN

JAPANESE SENTRY IN GUARD TOWER, CIVILIAN INTERNMENT CENTER NEAR WEINSIEN, SHANTUNG