Ronald Bridge on the flight deck in the 1970s

OBITUARY

Ronald Bridge obituary

RAF officer, commercial pilot and campaigner for civilian internees in the Far East who was held captive as a boy by the Japanese

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When Ronald Bridge started campaigning for compensation for British civilians interned by the Japanese during the Second World War, he was driven by memories of a “lost” childhood and the suffering he had seen as a boy. Living in the port of Tianjin in northeast China, where his father ran an import-export business, Bridge had witnessed the arrival of the

Japanese soldiers. It was December 8, 1941, 24 hours after the attack on Pearl Harbor in Hawaii.

Bridge hid beneath his bed while his mother, Margot, looked after his two-month-old brother, Roger. His father, known as Leo, was taken for questioning. The family was put under house arrest. Later, they wore red armbands along with other British citizens when out in the city and lived under curfew. Ronald, then aged eight, was not considered a threat by the new occupiers and could go around without a police escort. “A chapter of my young life was over,” he wrote years later, “and I had been propelled a long way, and fast, into early adulthood.”

On March 30, 1943, the family gathered their belongings and were marched to the station. After many hours, travelling first by train, then truck, they stopped by a 16ft wall, topped with barbed wire and broken glass. As they moved towards a huge wooden gate, they saw a sign in Chinese. It read: “Courtyard of the Happy Way.”

The Bridges had arrived at the Japanese camp at Weihsien in Shandong province, along with about 2,000 western civilians, mainly British and American, most of them women and children. Addressing the new arrivals, Captain Tsukiyama, the commandant, referred to the camp as a civilian assembly centre. “You do as I say and no trouble,” he said.

In testimony to British MPs many years later, Bridge said that references to an “assembly centre” were euphemistic; Weihsien was a “concentration camp”. He was incarcerated there for two and a half years. In the beginning, internees were given adequate food; they lived in spartan rooms, but were allowed to wear their own clothes. He even managed to hang on to his toy soldiers. Occasionally, Red Cross parcels with extra rations reached the camp.

The children were organised in groups for schooling. His first teacher was a nun who drew algebra equations in the sandy ground. When the commandant saw that the children were under some control, he gave orders for paper and pencils to be made available.

As Japan's military fortunes waned, however, conditions grew worse; life became a struggle for survival. Regulations became harsher, food more scarce and sanitation deteriorated. Disease spread.

Bridge in 1938, five years before he and his family were taken prisoner by Japanese forces

One victim was the missionary Eric Liddell, the winner of the 400m gold medal at the Paris Olympics in 1924 whose story is told in the film *Chariots of Fire*. Liddell was one of the leaders of the internees and was a friend of the Bridges. He sometimes played football with Ronald. Malnourished and overworked, Liddell developed a brain tumour and died in February 1945. In winter the inmates froze and in summer they struggled in the heat. There were other sources of anxiety, too. On one occasion, Bridge heard his grandparents discussing their fate.

His grandfather said: "I heard from someone who speaks Japanese that they [their captors] have received orders that if the Allies set foot on Honshu or Kyushu, their home islands, we are all to be eliminated and the guards will then have to fall on their swords."

His grandmother retorted: “Bert, not in front of Ronald, please.” Then, turning to the boy, she said: “Don’t worry, nothing like that will happen. When we win the war we will go back safe to home.”

Ronald was not sure whom to believe. In the end, his grandmother was right. The camp was liberated by American paratroopers on August 17, 1945.

Fifty years later Bridge was elected to the committee of the Association of British Civilian Internees Far East Region, which was fighting for compensation for civilians who had suffered in the camps. He gave the organisation new momentum.

Bridge found documents at the National Archives in Kew that showed that the Foreign Office “had not done its best for British subjects in the 1950s”. He also concluded that it was possible to reopen the Peace Treaty under Article 26 “because Japan had granted better reparations to other countries”.

Japan had paid some “British” internees £48.10s in 1955 (about £1,200 today), but there were considerable caveats about who was British. Bridge proved that the government could have claimed up to £2,000 (£60,000) for each internee.

Jubilation on the day of Weihsien camp's liberation by US paratroopers on August 17, 1945

Although films such as *A Town Like Alice*, the TV series *Tenko* and books such as JG Ballard's *Empire of the Sun* highlighted the plight of internees in the Far East, Bridge had to fight hard for support. He identified former internees, wrote policy papers, lobbied ministers and briefed MPs.

The Blair administration was apparently reluctant to confront the Japanese government, but in 2000 it decided to grant ex gratia payments of £10,000 to each surviving prisoner of war, and to "British civilians who were interned by the Japanese", or their widows or widowers, apparently without caveat. Tony Blair called it "a debt of honour".

More than 25,000 people applied for payments, but some were excluded because of the lack of a so-called blood link. "I was appalled," said Bridge, "when the Ministry of Defence decided . . . that British passport-holders who were interned by Japan were not British if they were born Jewish, were coloured, were born in Ireland or were women who had obtained British nationality by marriage prior to 1941".

As chairman of the Far East association, Bridge continued to challenge the defence ministry.

Amid accusations of inconsistency and racism, the MoD broadened the scheme after a succession of legal rulings, parliamentary hearings and interventions by the ombudsman. By 2007 the ministry had spent more than £250 million.

Bridge was appointed MBE. “If you were British enough to be interned by the Japanese,” he said, “then you should be British enough for compensation.”

Ronald William Bridge, known as Ron in adult life, was born in the British enclave in Tianjin in 1934, the son of Albert Lionel Bridge and his wife, Margot. The couple, who had been married in the city in 1932 with a guard of honour made up of British Boy Scouts, came from families of Welsh missionaries who had settled in China in the 19th century.

He had a carefree early childhood and, in January 1940, was sent to Tianjin Grammar School. He was picked up by a rickshaw “boy” outside the Court Hotel on Victoria Road in the mornings and taken home at tea-time. The family followed the war in Europe on the BBC, and then the Japanese arrived.

After their liberation, the family returned to Tianjin, where they tried to recover their property, which included an upright Chappell piano. They later embarked on a ship for Britain, with further interruptions to Ronald’s schooling. His grandfather taught him physics and maths.

Bridge gave the Association of British Civilian Internees Far East Region new momentum when he was elected to its committee

They arrived in Liverpool and spent several months in England before taking a boat back to Tianjin. Ronald's disrupted education continued at St Louis College in the French enclave. He survived a bout of sepsis, caused by a knee infection, and then the shelling started as fighting intensified between the Chinese communists and the nationalists defending the city.

The family remained in the city as Mao Zedong's communist forces took control. Ronald finished school and returned to England, where he was granted his school matriculation at the University of London in 1951. Shortly afterwards, he started work at ICI's lime division in Buxton, Derbyshire.

A year later, aged 18, he joined the RAF, was commissioned as a navigator and started flying training. He served in Egypt with No 216 Squadron, then the South Pacific, visiting Christmas Island, where the H-bombs had been tested, and was then posted to Singapore.

There he met Susan Newman, a signals officer who later wrote historical fiction. The couple had three sons and a daughter. After his own patchwork schooling, Bridge was determined that his children would all have a first-class education. Their daughter, Carey, read history at the University of London and became a teacher; Adrian joined the army, won the Sword of Honour at Sandhurst and is managing director of Taylor's Port in Portugal; Guy read economic history at the University of Exeter and is chief executive officer of the financial technology company Finpoint; and Peter went to Oxford, rowed for Britain at the 1996 Olympics and is a managing director at Barclays Bank. Their father kept a scrapbook covering the lives of each of his children, which they discovered only after his death.

In the mid-Sixties, Bridge undertook a three-year posting with the Royal Canadian Air Force and won the Air Force Cross, awarded for "acts of exemplary gallantry". He left the RAF in 1972 and flew as a commercial pilot, before becoming a director of British Airways. He also became a Fellow of the Royal Institute of Navigation and the Royal Aeronautical Society and Master of the Honourable Company of Air Pilots.

Bridge was passionate about "fixing things". When he retired, he and his wife bought a run-down farmhouse in northern France, which they spent five years renovating. Their neighbours spoke no English, and Bridge spoke no French, but they passed hours happily

together drinking a potent, home-brewed Calvados.

He was also persuaded by his children to tell people about his life. “Dad, you must talk,” they said. “You are history!” Encouraged by Sue, he put pen to paper. His book, *No Soap, Less School,* was published last year.

Ronald Bridge, MBE, AFC, RAF officer, commercial pilot and campaigner for civilian internees in the Far East, was born on March 3, 1934. He died of heart failure on September 27, 2020, aged 86

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