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HENRY COUNTY, Ala. (WDHN)– When the United States entered World War II following the attacks on Pearl Harbor, Audrey Horton was just eight years-old. As the children of missionaries, her and her older brother and sister were living at a protestant Christian boarding school in Chefoo, China (now called Yantai) known as Protestant Collegiate School, [...]

REMARKABLE WOMEN

Remarkable Women: Henry Co. WWII POW's story of resilience, heroism, and grace

by Jessica Grantham
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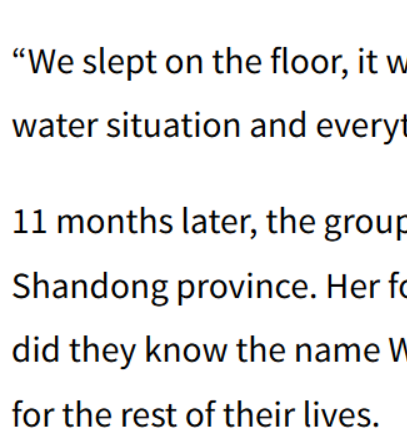
HENRY COUNTY, Ala. (WDHN)– When the United States entered World War II following the attacks on Pearl Harbor, Audrey Horton was just eight years-old.

As the children of missionaries, her and her older brother and sister were living at a protestant Christian boarding school in Chefoo, China (now called Yantai) known as Protestant Collegiate School, or China Inland Mission School; founded in 1881 to educate the children of British and American missionaries. Chefoo was a picturesque, seaside city in northeast China, tucked between the hills of Shantung Province and the Yellow Sea.

In 1941, the Japanese imperial army marched into the school in full uniform and announced all occupants were now prisoners of war and all belongings in the school were now theirs.

“Our teachers were having breakfast and they marched in and they said everything is ours,” Audrey says.

Living conditions as a prisoner of war



She was given a prisoner of war number she was to wear every waking hour. This piece of embroidered cloth indicated she was block three for roll call and prisoner number 33. The bottom displays her maiden name, Nordmo. The insignia in the top right shows that she's Norwegian, and the writing says “I promise to obey.”

Audrey Horton was amongst 450 prisoners living in six houses at the school, each meant for a single family. There were 72 people living in her house, and 100 living in her older sister's house. Her sister was 12 at the time and her brother was 15, she was allowed visiting time with them once a week.

“We slept on the floor, it was crowded, it was uncomfortable, I mean but you get used to it, the water situation and everything, it was very hard,” Audrey says.

11 months later, the group was transferred to a larger camp near the city of Weifang in China's Shandong province. Her former school buildings became Japanese Military Headquarters. Little did they know the name Weih sien Civilian Assembly Center would be branded in their memories for the rest of their lives.

Audrey recalls the dreadful journey there on a boat with 200 people. The windows had to be covered so they wouldn't be seen and torpedoed. They were allied prisoners but traveling on a Japanese cargo boat not fit for travel, so there were no bathrooms. Her teachers carried chamber pots along with them.

“It was a filthy boat, we were crowded down in the hold for two nights and the cockroaches and the rats were crawling over us,” she says.

Her new home at Weih sien consisted of high walls, electric barbed wires, and six watch towers with armored sentries. The camp compound was formerly a Presbyterian Bible training compound for Chinese Christians called Courtyard of Happy Way. Magazine magnate [Henry Luce](#), who founded Time, Life, Fortune, and Sports Illustrated magazines had lived there, he also attended her former boarding school, Chefoo School, years before.

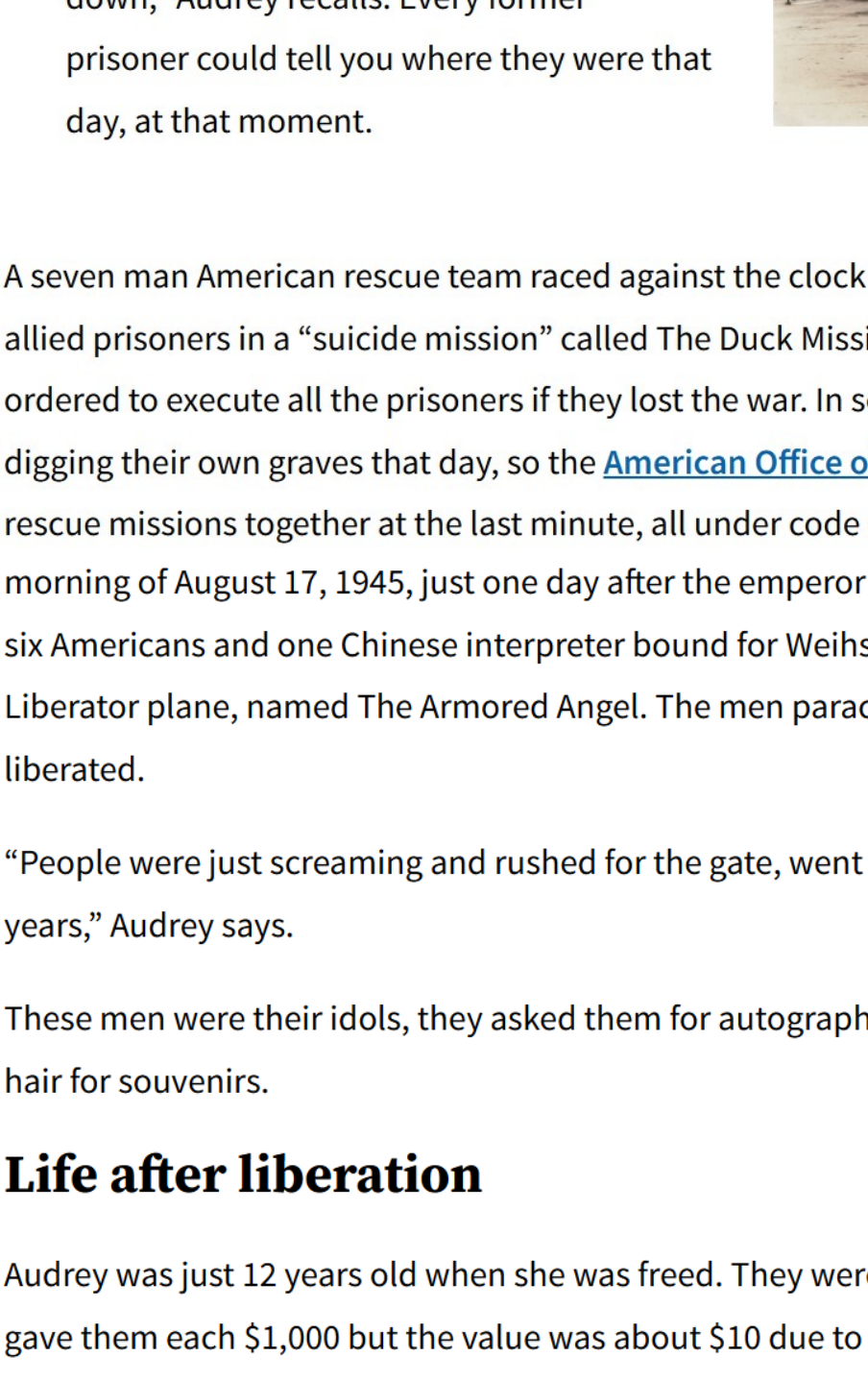
“We went through the gates and they closed behind us for two years,” she says.

The camp hosted unimaginable living conditions, plagued with rats, flies and bed bugs. Her new home was filthy, open cesspools which hold human waste from in-ground toilets that didn't flush contributed to an endless supply of flies. There was one building with six toilets for women which were set almost flat in the ground with no seats, and water buckets were used for flushing; about 800 people had to wait their turn. Bedbugs inhabited the mattresses and rooms, while mosquitos were spreading malaria. Audrey recounts one of her classmates having the patience to count 500 bed bugs on his bed in the morning. The children had competitions who could kill the most flies and rats.

They were given food, but much less than normal.

“The food was not good, one time they had peeled potatoes and the next morning, they were boiling it, and they realized they had been boiling rats along with the potatoes,” she says.

Food supply was dwindling so they foraged for weeds to eat. Audrey recalls one instance a dead horse was brought to the camp and they weren't allowed to eat it until it was moldy and putrid with maggots.



There were 1500 prisoners of all different backgrounds in the camp in a 150×200 yard space; 400 of them were children.

Audrey says they saw their real selves emerging. Many faced questions like, is God real? What is life all about? What was their purpose in life? All facades such as former livelihood, homes, and financial income had been taken from them.

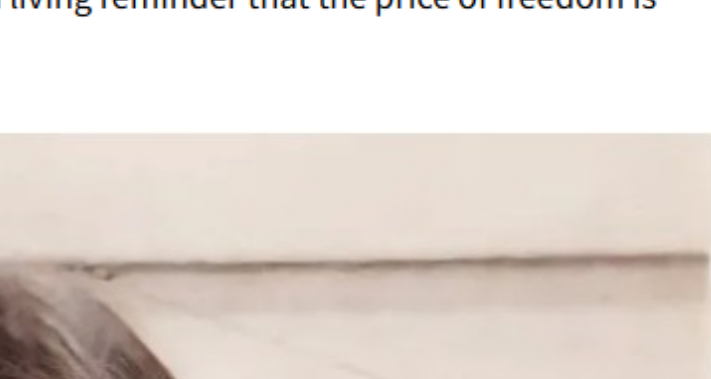
“It didn't matter, we were all on the same level, it didn't matter that you had been rich, and had many cars in the driveway back where you were because it was gone,” Audrey says.

Her teachers were allowed to keep teaching and made sure they had structure, chores, schedule, school, good manners, kindness, and helpfulness. They kept teaching about loving God, kept their fears to themselves, and tried to make life as normal as possible. They were allowed to write letters with 100 words including addresses to their parents once a month, but the Japanese had to read them first and most never got sent.

Liberation

After enduring the life of imprisonment for almost four long years, the day she didn't know would ever come was finally here.

“People went out and they saw this plane, and it was kind of circling around, everybody got excited, we looked up at the plane and it said Armored Angel. It had the American flag on it, and then the bottom opened up and 7 men who looked like toys, we'd never seen parachutes, came floating down,” Audrey recalls. Every former prisoner could tell you where they were that day, at that moment.



A seven man American rescue team raced against the clock to prevent the last minute massacre of allied prisoners in a “suicide mission” called The Duck Mission. The Japanese soldiers were ordered to execute all the prisoners if they lost the war. In some camps, prisoners were already digging their own graves that day, so the [American Office of Strategic Services](#) (O.S.S.) threw nine rescue missions together at the last minute, all under code names of birds. On the sweltering hot morning of August 17, 1945, just one day after the emperor had announced Japan's surrender, the six Americans and one Chinese interpreter bound for Weih sien flew from Kunming in a B-24 Liberator plane, named The Armored Angel. The men parachuted down and Weih sien was liberated.

“People were just screaming and rushed for the gate, went out of the gate for the first time in two years,” Audrey says.

These men were their idols, they asked them for autographs and some even cut off pieces of their hair for souvenirs.

Life after liberation

Audrey was just 12 years old when she was freed. They were greeted in Tsingtao where the mayor gave them each \$1,000 but the value was about \$10 due to inflation. It was a long road back to finding her parents as it was just her and her siblings. They were just children, alone with no passports, identification, money, any belongings to their name, and no way of contacting their family. After eventually reuniting with her parents in 1946 with some assistance from [The Red Cross](#) after seven years apart, Audrey spent her life planting churches around the world and making a family of her own. She met her now-husband of almost 70 years, Mahlon, in church and together they have seven children, 28 grandchildren, and 41 great-grandchildren with 3 more on the way this month. Audrey and Mahlon spent 40 years planting churches in Canada before moving to Newville, Alabama to be closer to one of their sons.

Correspondence with her heroes

Decades after settling into her new life of freedom, Audrey found a few of the seven men who risked their lives to save her. Audrey met the grandson of [Eddie Cheng-Han Wang](#) in South Carolina who reunited them. Eddie was a Chinese student who volunteered to help the Americans as an interpreter on the mission. He was punished for three years for helping the Americans during the cultural revolution. Eddie recently celebrated his 100th birthday in China, and Audrey wrote him a “thank you” card last summer that his grandson personally took to him.

Audrey also found another rescuer, Nisei interpreter, [Sgt. Tad Nagaki](#), a Japanese-American farm boy who didn't speak English until he went to school in a small, Nebraska town. Audrey visited him in Alliance, Nebraska and hugged him and thanked him. Audrey describes him as, “a very humble man who worked quietly and diligently, and advanced in the military against the odds of being Japanese descent.” Someone had cut a piece of Tad's hair for a souvenir when he liberated them. Tad died at age 93 on April 22, 2013 in Colorado where his grandchildren were taking care of him.

Today

Audrey Horton is 92 years old now, and embodies human resilience and grace. As a child who endured incomprehensible conflicts originated by grown-ups, she emanates a message of peace, patience, and faith. Audrey continues to share her remarkable story detailing what it's like to have your fundamental rights stripped away, and acts as a living reminder that the price of freedom is not free.

