

Haddonfield woman finds the last of her seven daring heroes

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Former New Jersey Assemblywoman Mary Previte of Haddonfield was just a child, the daughter of missionaries, when she spent nearly four years in a Japanese prison camp. She says finding her seventh rescuer, a Chinese translator, was a twist of fate. (ALEJANDRO A. ALVAREZ / Staff Photographer)



GALLERY: Haddonfield woman finds the last of her seven daring heroes

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Nearly 70 years ago, Mary Previte was liberated from a Japanese prison camp in China during World War II by a daring group of seven rescuers she called her heroes.

Over the years, she managed to find them all, one by one, until there was only one name remaining on her must-find list.

It took 18 years for Previte to locate the last man - Wang Cheng-Han, who was the Chinese interpreter for the liberation team. They were reunited last month when they spoke by telephone.

She called the twist of fate a miracle - with a little help from the Internet and Wang's doting grandson, who connected Previte to cherished family-history stories told by his grandfather growing up in China.


"It's miraculous when you think about it," Previte, 82, of Haddonfield, said in an interview. "I never dreamed it would happen."

Previte and her rescuer, whom she knew as Eddie Wang, chatted for about an hour through an interpreter. She had lots of questions about that fateful day, but mainly wanted to express her gratitude.



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"I thanked God for letting me live long enough to find him and say thank you," she said. "It is such an astonishment."

Previte would like to meet with Wang in person, possibly at the camp's 70th anniversary international reunion this summer in Weifang, in the central Shandong province. He has been invited by the Chinese government.

Finding Wang was especially bittersweet because he is the only surviving member of the liberation group. She made contact with four others in the late 1990s, and found the widows of two others.

Wang, now 90, retired, and living in China, was surprised to hear from Previte, said his grandson, Daniel Wang, who lives in Lexington, S.C.

"He takes his story as an important part of my family history," the grandson said. "He wants me to know and to remember it."

Wang Chen-Han and six other paratroopers, whom Previte described as "seven heroes dropping from the sky," liberated the Weihsien Civilian Assembly Center on Aug. 17, 1945.

The men rescued Previte, who was 12, her grandfather, her three siblings, and about 1,400 others who had been imprisoned at the camp. Her family spent nearly four years there in captivity.

Previte's missionary parents had left her and her siblings at a boarding school in China in 1940. Her grandfather, Herbert Hudson Taylor, a retired missionary living on the grounds, was also interned. The parents resumed their work until the end of the war.

The Japanese army captured the school shortly after the Dec. 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor. About 200 students and teachers, mostly Europeans, were sent to the prison camp.

The detainees endured horrible living and working conditions - cramped quarters, extreme temperatures, poor sanitary conditions, and unappetizing food. They were also forced to work.

Previte said the captives were sustained by their strong faith. They sang hymns and recited Scripture, especially Psalm 27, which begins "Wait on the Lord."

"We were anchored with these words of faith," she said.

When the U.S. rescue planes arrived, the captives had no idea that the Japanese had surrendered and that the war was over. It was the first time that Eddie Wang, then 20, parachuted from a B-24, his grandson said.

"He was quite worried about jumping from the plane," said Daniel Wang, 32. "He risked his life."

The men had met days before the assignment, which was commissioned by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the forerunner to the CIA.

Because Japanese guards were standing at the camp with guns loaded, the men landed in a nearby cornfield to carry out the "Duck Mission" to liberate the camp. The jubilant prisoners pushed past guards and a Salvation Army band played "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Leopold Pander, of Belgium, was 4 when the camp was




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liberated. He recalls very little about his imprisonment, but vividly remembers the rescue.

"Everybody running all over the place that very day the Americans came to liberate us from the claws of our captors," he wrote by e-mail. "That special day was printed in my subconscious."

After the liberation, the former captives were reunited with loved ones and settled around the world. Many have died.

Wang married, became an engineer, and had three sons. He lives in Guizhou province in China with his only remaining son.

Previte eventually became an English teacher, raised a daughter, ran the Camden County Youth Center in Blackwood, and served eight years in the state Assembly.

In 1997, she began trying to track down the rescuers. She found them easily, except Wang. She located Stanley Staiger, the mission's commanding officer, in Reno; Tad Nagaki in Alliance, Neb.; James Moore in Dallas; and James Hannon in Yucca Valley, Calif. She found the widow of Raymond Hanchulak in Bear Creek, Pa., and Peter Orlich's widow in Queens, N.Y.

Previte had almost given up any hope of finding Wang until she was recently contacted by his grandson. Daniel Wang found Previte's name on a Weihsien camp website started by Pander.

"Last hero found," her daughter, Alice, told her.

Daniel Wang had promised to help his grandfather track down the American soldiers. Eddie Wang kept the names of the men in a notebook and recorded details about the mission, his grandson said.

"It's an amazing story. He was just a normal person doing an honorable thing," said Daniel Wang. "I'm very proud of him."

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