

It happened to me...I was a child Japanese prisoner of war

By CLARE CAMPBELL UPDATED: 00:14 GMT, 16 May 2009

During World War II, several foreign powers, including Japan, governed China, with foreign nationals living in safe zones. In December 1941, eight-year-old Ronald Bridges was living with his family in the British concession of Tianjin when they were captured by the Japanese and later imprisoned. Now 75 and a retired RAF pilot, he has four grown-up children and lives in Sussex with his wife, Sue. Here he tells how he survived two years in a Japanese PoW camp.

Through my dreams, I could hear my mother's calm but urgent voice, saying, 'You must get up now, Ronald. The Japanese are here.' It was the morning of Monday, 8 December 1941. I was eight years old and living with my parents, who ran an oil export and land management company in Tianjin in the eastern Chinese province of Shandong. Although Britain had already been at war with Germany for two years, my father believed it was relatively safe for us to remain in China.



'I saw soldiers outside with machine guns trained at our front door, then they took my father at gunpoint. He never told me if he was tortured. Looking out of the bedroom window as I quickly dressed, I saw a line of Japanese soldiers standing outside, their machine guns trained at our front door. More excited than scared, I asked my parents what was happening.

My father told me that, four hours earlier, Japanese forces had attacked Pearl Harbor. Within hours they had taken over Tianjin. The war in the Pacific had begun – and my family was now in the middle of it. Still not really understanding the seriousness of our situation, I waited to be sent to school, a British-run grammar not far from where we lived. But as the Japanese soldiers now entered the house, it became obvious, even to me, that our life had changed for ever.

had recently given birth to my brother, from room to room, shouting, 'Speedo, speedo' when she didn't move fast enough.

For the first time, I started to feel frightened. Confined to the house for the rest of that day, I longed for everything to return to normal, and for my father to come home safely.

Taking my father at gunpoint from the house, they hustled my mother, who

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He came home two days later, looking exhausted following his long period of questioning. Later, he told me that the Japanese tried to force him to tell them the combination numbers for the safe in the British Army barracks, for which he had responsibility. He never told me whether he was tortured, but I suspect he was because he was never well after that and died young.

For the rest of that month we were allowed to go about our daily routine as normal, apart from being made to wear red armbands and obey a curfew. Our school had been taken over by the Japanese, but, in January 1942, I started at a makeshift school in the home of a wealthy mine-owner.

Six months later, a new curfew was imposed, restricting our movements within the city even more. And then, the following year, in March 1943, everything got dramatically worse. With only a few hours notice, we were ordered to pack a few possessions as we were being sent to the Weih sien Compound, a Japanese-run internment camp, along with other British families, plus Americans and Australians.

After a 12-hour train journey, we reached our destination in the south of the province. As we were forced to walk along the railway tracks to the camp, which was to be our home for the next two years, Chinese workers spat at us.

I can still remember watching my mother, wheeling my baby brother along, his Pedigree pram so loaded with tins of food that he was in danger of falling out at every bump. On arrival at the camp, my family was shepherded into a tiny room in which we all had to sleep.

Our prison, a former mission school was unlike other camps: the ratio of women to men was around ten to one. There were around 1,900 people, nearly half of whom were children, and there was no forced labour.



There were three kitchens in all with a small space for growing vegetables. Our daily ration – mainly soya beans and a tiny amount of meat and bread made from millet – was about 1,500 calories. What milk we had was kept for the youngest children, while water had to be fetched from wells, uncomfortably close to the cesspit. Toilet facilities consisted of planks of wood with holes cut into them perched above running water. Amazingly, very few prisoners became ill from food poisoning.

We were each given a dogtag for identification purposes. Apart from a twice daily register to make sure none of us went missing, we were generally left alone. The few isolated incidents of brutality, usually face-slappings or beatings, were often the result of the guards being drunk.

Us children had an education of a sort, usually an adult using a stick to write in the sand. We had a small football pitch, but my only toys were my precious lead soldiers, which I'd managed to stuff into my pockets before leaving home. One of these was used by a doctor in the camp,

who melted it down to construct a temporary palate for a baby girl who had been born with a defective one.

But as the months went on, with food allowances reduced to a few hundred calories, we all became colder, and hungrier, by the day. Clothes and shoes were recycled and swapped, a battered pair of old football boots saw me through an entire winter.

Occasionally we'd receive Red Cross food parcels – but they were rare treats. However, in spite of the deprivation and the tough conditions, I wasn't unhappy and with the resilience of youth, remained convinced that life would improve.

Finally, on 17 August 1945, the camp was liberated by American forces, who supplied us with the sort of food we had not eaten in years. Sadly for one intern, though, liberation came too late. Eric Liddell, the Olympic athlete who was featured in the film *Chariots Of Fire*, died five months earlier. I was too young to know who he was, but I found out about him years later.

We were repatriated, but returned to China a year later where my father continued with his business. We got caught up in the civil war and had to escape the Communist regime in 1951. Back in England I had a long career in the RAF and then as a commercial pilot, and I received an MBE for my work with ex-internees.

Looking back now, I am full of admiration for my parents and the way in which they handled our situation. I realize that, even though we'd endured intense hardship, my family survived. But I never forget, for a single day, those many other thousands of Japanese PoWs who did not.

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