

## **Taiwan's darker past: Emerging histories of the World-war II prisoner of war camps.**

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### **Introduction**

Taiwan played a significant part in the system of Japanese prisoner of war camps that extended across South-East Asia between 1942 and 1945 . In part it served as a transit point for prisoners sent on to Japan, but as the Japanese defeat drew closer, with the Americans advancing northwards, it came to receive increasing numbers of prisoners displaced from the Philippines and Indonesia. Although records were assembled, largely through agencies investigating war crimes, the part played by Taiwan has tended to be down-played in relation to some of the more dramatic locations, such as Thailand, and those nearer the hostilities, such as Java and the Philippines.<sup>1</sup>

As the survivors of the Pacific War have grown old, a quite remarkable surge of interest by amateur historians among them has led to the collection and publication of a fund of first-hand oral history, organized through various societies of veterans. The Taiwan Prison Camps Memorial Society founded some ten years ago is particularly active and has done much to reverse the relative neglect of the island's history during the war period, and the efforts of the Japanese to cover up some of the worst crimes that took place there.

The great majority of prisoners held in Taiwan were captured as a result of the surrenders of Hong Kong in December 1941 and Singapore in February 1942 and were principally of British and Australian nationalities, with rather less Americans. Some Dutch arrived from Indonesia later in the war. The numbers involved were of the order of several thousand at peak, fluctuating with further arrivals as the war went on, while others were shipped on to Japan.

The death-rate in the totality of Japanese camps has been estimated as 25% compared to less than 3% German captivity. (At least in Western Europe.) The reasons for this will be evident in the following outline.

### **A network of suffering**

The accommodation of such a large number of prisoners required the construction of an extensive network of camps, dotted around most of the accessible parts of the island. In the general disorganization following the Japanese defeat, and the enthusiasm of the KMT authorities to establish their hold on the island, even the locations of some of the camps were forgotten, except by the locals, and have only recently been established through the research by the survivors' organizations. Here is map of the now established locations.

#### **Map of the Taiwan prison camps**

The camps were far from uniform in size and purpose. The *Karenco* camp near Hualien, for example, was a small one for senior officers; the large Kinkaseki (Chinguashi) camp was primarily to provide slave-labour in the copper mine situated there. The majority of surviving testimonies relate to experiences at Kinkaseki, both in works later published by ex-prisoners, and also the files of the British and American War Crimes Commissions in London and Washington.

### **The Kinkaseki (Chinguashi) copper mine.**

One of the focal points of the Taiwan camp system was at Chinguashi just northwest of Keelung, usually known in the records under the Japanese name *Kinkaseki*. This was the site of the largest copper mine in the Japanese empire and its exploitation was a major factor in the Imperial war effort. On the 14<sup>th</sup> November 1942 about a thousand POWs were landed at Keelung, after three weeks imprisonment on the ship en route from Singapore. Of these about half were separated for work at Chinguashi and force-marched into the hills with frequent beatings and humiliations. They were incorporated into the workforce at the nearly copper-mine as virtual slave-labour, and accommodated in a new camp nearby. The conditions in the mine were

appalling, with temperatures as high as 130deg. F. and continual exposure to sulphurous acid run-off. An idea of their suffering can be gained from the fact that every day sick and starving men were forced to descend 1,186 steps from the camp to the mine-head followed by a further 2000 and more steps to the working level \_\_ and the reverse uphill when totally exhausted in the evening. Work was supervised by so-called ‘hanchos’, the lower grade of whom were Taiwanese, the higher Japanese.

These conditions were shared by a small army of Taiwanese workers, many of them women and children as young as seven or eight years old, as well as Chinese political prisoners, who had been transported from Hong Kong and Shanghai. In contrast to the local work-force, however, the prisoners had to exist under a further appalling regime of beatings, semi-starvation, and the denial of medical facilities. Many were daily forced down the mine when suffering from terminal malnutrition and dysentery and scarcely able to walk. The guards and ‘hanchos’ were unspeakably brutal, both Japanese and some Taiwanese, frequently administering beatings with mining hammers for no particular reason and showing amusement at the injuries inflicted. The local miners, by contrast, were largely sympathetic to the plight of the prisoners, occasionally sharing food and, most importantly, passing on items of news about the progress of the war. There were many deaths as a result both of disease, beatings and through mining accidents, which were inevitable given a criminal neglect of safety measures underground. Safety helmets were of cardboard. As in other slave-labour projects during the Pacific War, the men were in effect regarded as expendable, a condition rightly seen to be worse than that of those sold into slavery in historical time. The Camp Commanders were first a Lieutenant Wakiyama, then from December 1943 a Captain Inamura; the former sadistically brutal, the latter by contrast reasonably humane.

In 1944 the geological conditions in the mine deteriorated to the point where work slowed and eventually had to cease. The ‘honchos’ were conscripted into the army and the prisoners were moved to what was called the ‘jungle camp’, *Kikutsu*, a remote location in the hills behind Hsintien.

While it is not my intention to dwell on the horrors in undue detail, two extracts from the London depositions will give an idea of the general air of pointless sadism which affected prisoners and Taiwanese alike.

‘...Each morning the Jap medical sergeant would appear and start the day’s work by severely beating up the doctor and his orderlies. Sick parade was held by the Jap sergeant and the cure in nearly all cases was to be knocked to the ground with a big stick; as a consequence, men who were really sick did not report so the doctor managed to slip round the huts at the risk of a good beating and attend to the more seriously ill ... In the hospital almost every day the medical sergeant would beat up a few patients; many of them died within a few hours.’<sup>2</sup>

One further extract will be sufficient:

8<sup>th</sup> February 1943. 'the most brutal beating-up as yet. Eight Taiwan soldiers entered the Officers' Billet and made straight for Captain A.Sewell, M.C.R.A. They proceeded, each in turn, to beat him for an hour, and finished up with a sentry with rifle using the butt and hitting him on the head with a bayonet. The officer concerned was in a very bad way when this beating was finished. Immediate protests were submitted and the following day Lt. Colonel Esson and Captain Sewell were sent for and a semi apology was made by the Camp Commander. Subsequently these Taiwan soldiers were paraded and beaten up themselves by the Japanese guards.<sup>3</sup>

When ex-prisoners were de-briefed after the liberation it was found that, while the Japanese were invariably proud to give their name and rank, Taiwanese soldiers and 'hanchos' invariably concealed their names. The prisoners only knew them by the nicknames they gave them. The following were listed as 'guilty of particular bestiality and indirectly responsible for many deaths'. "The Eagle", "The Ghost", "The Frying-pan", "Blackie". None of these were ever called to account after the war, though the prisoners wanted them traced, knowing that they lived nearby the mine.

The only good fortune that the Taiwan prisoners might claim is that, while dysentery, diphtheria and avitaminosis were rife, they were at least spared the ravages of malaria and cholera, which killed so many of their fellows so rapidly in the camps of Thailand and Burma. On the more positive side, it is admitted that at certain times, such as when Captain Inamura, took over in Kinakseki in 1943, there was a degree of understanding and even humanity. Restrictions on medical supplies were eased, sports and relaxation activities were encouraged and the medical staff at last managed to convince the authorities that it was in their interests to raise the health standards of the survivors.

One final tragic irony was to come in the very moments of liberation. When American planes began over-flying the Kukutsu Camp, dropping Red Cross supplies at low altitude, three prisoners were killed and several injured by the falling canisters. Others began furiously signalling to the pilots and managed to avoid a repeat of this and eventually succeeded in having the dropping runs moved away.

### **Taiwanese complicity in war-crimes**

There is ample evidence, beyond the above, that some Taiwanese citizens, like Koreans and other Japanese colonial subjects, were willing participants in war crimes of various degrees of infamy. One should not be unduly surprised, for in any country unfortunate enough to be occupied in war \_\_ and one cannot exclude England as a hypothetical case \_\_ there will be bad elements and common criminals willing to do the bidding of the occupying powers. The case of Taiwan is slightly different, however. By the nineteen-forties young males were to an extent highly nipponized; in fact a proportion in the 1930s are reported to have been actively hoping for a Japanese victory

in China, so that they could find careers as pro-consuls and carpet-baggers in the new Empire. In addition, those conscripted into the Japanese Army are said to have had an understandable fear of being sent to the Philippines to fight the Americans. This led them to take great pains to please the Japanese by volunteering for duties such as prison-guards. In this role both civilians and military personnel were caught up in the general sadism that characterized the day to day working of the camps. As is well known, the culture of beating and corporal punishment was a feature of the Japanese army, with every rank at risk of violence from the rank above, guards and prisoners at the bottom of the pile.

Although numbers of Taiwanese individuals probably qualified as war criminals, and some may still be alive today, none were called to account, not even those who, in extreme cases, admitted to having actually executed prisoners in the Philippines. As for the Japanese officers, several were given prison sentences at the Tokyo tribunal, but the only ones sentenced to death and shot appear to have been those who ordered the execution of the fourteen captured American airmen in Taipei in June 1945.

### **The historical record**

In most of the South-east Asian camps the prisoners maintained a fierce determination to record the detail of their suffering, the statistics of deaths, and as far as possible the names of the worst criminals, in the hope that justice would be done at subsequent War Crimes Tribunals. In this they were extremely ingenious in the way that they hid diaries and records, usually by burying them in places where they could be recovered, with a risk of severe beatings, or worse if they were found out. It is reported that, when camps were liberated, prisoners could be found measuring and digging all over for this hidden information. In 1946 the British War Crimes Commission visited Taiwan with some ex-prisoners, who volunteered to return to assist the investigation, braving considerable psychological problems in doing so. At Kinkaseki the crucial records were (literally) unearthed at this time, having been abandoned in the chaos of liberation. The volunteers that returned in 1946 demonstrated the conditions underground, though the investigators were afraid to enter the deeper tunnels.

In the result, there are extensive records in both London and Washington. These, which I have quoted from here, have not merely the usual status as 'oral history' — they are legally sworn affidavits taken under oath. Incorporated in these are a number of diaries, and copies of communications to the Japanese commandants. A poignant account of the experiences of British prisoners is to be found in the de-briefing documents taken from the survivors by the War Crimes Commission in 1946. [National Archives, London. File No. WO 325/98]

### **The Kaohsiung tragedy**

One of the most tragic events of the whole Pacific war took place in Kaohsiung. This was the bombing of the prison ship *Enoura Maru* in Kaohsiung harbour on January 9<sup>th</sup> 1945. The *Enoura Maru* was one of many so-called 'hell-ships' used to transport prisoners away from the Philippines and Indonesia to escape the advancing Americans. When American planes arrived they were surprised to find the ships moored two by two alongside each other in the centre of the channel, presenting perfect targets. In the course of several bombing runs a large number of prisoners died, many of whom were already near death from days trapped in filthy coal-bunkers without fresh air. This was not the only such incident in the last months of the war. Some of those who died had even survived a previous 'friendly-fire' ship-bombing in the Philippines.

### **The orders for a massacre of the prisoners**

One of the most remarkable and sinister documents that came to light after the war is the orders that were issued to the Japanese Taiwan Command in the increasingly desperate situation of August 1945 \_\_ *after* the surrender, but before Allied troops had arrived in Taiwan. This material consists of two highly incriminating documents. The first authorizes the camp guards to flee, to avoid being recognized as responsible for the ill-treatment of prisoners. The second describes measures for the 'final disposition' of the prisoners<sup>4</sup> The key translations are:

(1) The Time

Although the basic aim is to act under superior orders, individual disposition may be made in the following circumstances:

- (a) When an uprising of large numbers cannot be suppressed without the use of firearms
- (b) When escapees from the camp may turn into a hostile fighting force.

(2) The Methods

- (a) When an uprising of large numbers cannot be suppressed without the use of firearms.
- (b) In any case it is the aim not to allow the escape of a single one, to annihilate (sic) them all, and not to leave any traces.

**The 'orders for massacre' documents**

Those responsible for issuing these orders seem never to have been called to account. According to records, the only Japanese officers to be executed after the war were Col. Seiichi Furukawa and Lt. Col. Naritaka Sugiura, both found guilty of the murder of the American airmen in June 1945. Several others were given life sentences for the same crime.

### **Rediscovery, Commemoration, Reconciliation**

Some ten years ago there came about a remarkable resurgence of interest on the part of surviving ex-prisoners and their families. This was promoted in the form of the *Taiwan PoW Camps Memorial Society*, largely through the initial efforts of Michael Hurst, a Canadian expatriate living in Taipei and Canadian community. The Society has generated a great deal of oral history material much of which can be seen through the web-site <http://www.powtaiwan.org> and links therein. Beyond the collection of historical data, the elderly survivors have been astonishingly enthusiastic in returning to Taiwan, doing research on the ground, and promoting various acts of commemoration. These have included searches to discover the locations of the lesser-known camps, installing memorials, and even meeting with former camp guards. A 'Roll of Honour' of known prisoners is being assembled and has now passed the mark of 4000 names. The objectives of the Society are stated to be:

**To continue to search for survivors of the Taiwan POW Camps from 1942-1945**

**To search for the locations of the former Japanese POW camps on the island of Taiwan**

**To ensure that the survivors of these POW camps know that they and their comrades are not forgotten**

**To participate with the Commonwealth and Allied community each year in a memorial service for the Taiwan POWs at Kinkaseki**

**To educate the people of Taiwan in a little-known part of their history**

**To provide information to scholars, researchers, museums, and POW groups on the Taiwan POWs' story.**

In the present limited format, I shall be content to list some of the more notable events for which the Society has been responsible in recent years.

### Dedication of memorials:

Kukutsu 'jungle' camp (Nr. Hsintien) Memorial dedicated Nov 20, 1999

Kinkaseki Memorial meeting 24 ex-POWs present. Nov. 1999 Ceremonies continue annually.

Discovery of Heito Camp location Sept. 11th 1999. Visit by relatives.

Last remaining POW building identified at Toroku Camp in Central Taiwan, Sep. 2000. (Now destroyed)

Taichu camp (near Tatu river Taichung County) Memorial stone dedicated Nov.20 2000

Memorial tree planting ceremony in National Arboretum . April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2003

Discovery of the Oka Camp location near Taipei July 2004

Memorial Service for 14 American airmen executed in Taipei Prison Jun. 19<sup>th</sup> 2005 (Held at the remains of the wall of old Taipei prison)

Commemoration of the *Enoura Maru* bombing in Kahosiung harbour Jan 9<sup>th</sup> 2005 (Representatives from the Kaohsiung Cultural Affairs Bureau and local historians present with a number of survivors. (Wide press coverage)

Anniversary of evacuation of Taiwan POWs , Keelung harbour Sep. 4<sup>th</sup> 2005

A POW display is inaugurated at the ROC Armed Forces Museum, Taipei Aug. 15<sup>th</sup> 2005

### Other notable events

Issue of commemorative stamps Aug.15<sup>th</sup> 2005 (Ten different NT\$3.50 stamps featuring and scenes of camps and a map.)

Michael Hurst awarded M.B.E. for services to the Memorial Association.

### Concluding remarks

This lecture is only a preliminary account of events that have yet to be fully recognized in the academic world. Perhaps there is a danger that they will fall outside the currently active fields of social history and anthropology. A definitive history of the Taiwan prison camps remains to be completed, but Michael Hurst is at work on one in

Taipei, and this will go some way to fill the gap between official records and personal reminiscences. A whole different area lacking research concerns records and oral history in Japan. As in other areas, time is short, with surviving veterans now mostly in their eighties. While few of the veterans can ever have truly put their wartime experiences behind them, a majority are said to be resigned to their memories, though seldom prepared to forgive their Japanese tormentors. Many remain bitter that Japan has failed to grant compensation on the scale that Germany did, or satisfactorily to apologise (P.M. Junichiro Koizumi's recent 'apology' is taken to be only a 'personal' one.) They also feel that the history of Taiwan prisoners has been obscured by the better-known narratives, particularly the grossly distorted picture in the film 'Bridge on the River Kwai'. But, of all the emotions expressed in their gatherings and otherwise, the strongest is the wish to remember and commemorate their comrades who did not survive to return home.

### Sources and Acknowledgements

National Archives, London. Centre for Research Allied POWs Under the Japanese, Roger Mansell Director, for access to all material. Michael Hurst, Director, the Taiwan Camps Memorial Society, for permission to reproduce Newsletter material.

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- <sup>1</sup> For general background on the whole history of Japanese prisoners in WWII see particularly *Surviving the Sword: Prisoners of the Japanese 1942-45*, MacArthur, B., Abacus, London, 2005. This contains extensive bibliography, but little on Taiwan. For a personal memoir of the Taiwan camps, in particular Kinkaseki, see Edwards, J., (With Walter, J.) *Banzai you Bastards*, Corporate Communications, Hong Kong, 1989.
  - 2 National Archives, London. File WO 325/97 *In the matter of Japanese War Crimes in the Matter of No.1. Prisoner of war camp, Formosa, Situated at Kinkaseki.* Affidavit sworn by James P.M.Cross, Major, R.A. 13th August 1946. p.5 .
  - 3 *Ibid.* Affidavit 'Extracts from Diary' sworn by James T. Cross 24<sup>th</sup> June 1946 File p.29.
  - 4 Exhibit "J" the order authorizing brutal guards and commanders to flee. Source: NARA, War Crimes, Japan, RG 24, Box 2011 . By permission of Centre for Research. Allied POWs Under the Japanese., Los Altos, USA., Director Robert Mansel