

Sermon for Far East British Internees, Sunday 24th May 2009

A warm welcome to representatives of Far East British Internees – those who were imprisoned by the Japanese during the Second World War. This morning we shall bless and dedicate a Book of Remembrance for them. And in this book appear the names of more than 19,000 British civilians, over 15,000 from the Commonwealth and thirty-two colonials.

It is hard for those of us who have enjoyed our liberty all our lives to understand, or even imagine, what this experience of internment must have been like. But it was a shock, no doubt: one day to be occupied in one's career and family life and the day after to find oneself herded with countless others into an internment camp with the future, and even life itself, all unknown and threatening. I have managed to find out a little of what life must have been like then.

Prisoners were often transferred from one prison to another and from one territory to another, usually to cater for the labour requirement of their captors. Many POWs were sent to Thailand and Burma to build the infamous railway. Others went to the Moluccan Islands to build airfields; to Sumatra to build another railway; to Japan to work in the mines, factories and shipyards. There was cruelty and deprivation but there were less unpleasant occasions – for some. Many of these prisoners were allowed to receive mail and send cards, (and in some cases letters,) albeit in very limited quantities. But there was a perpetual shadow. As one internee wrote in his diary: *You were always afraid of somebody or something.*

We have many evocative personal stories and reminiscences. Some very moving, poetic. As one wrote: *Darkness came suddenly. There were only candles. The air hung thick. Our shadows dragged along the walls. For hundreds and hundreds of nights, this is how it would be.*

Children were interned too. And some of them wrote revealingly, with a childlike directness about their time in the camp. One said:

We experienced a wonderful sense of freedom with loads of time to idle away. This sounds rather odd as we were all prisoners. I enjoyed school there. I think it was the informality of it. We had lots of fun with the teachers. Nuns can be a bit scary though.

Of course the lives of the children and especially their play was contaminated by the experiences of war which, in their childish fashion, they imitated. One little boy wrote:

We would spend a week making mud bombs and, come the day, we declared war on each other. We would go up the hill and throw these mud bombs at one another.

There was plenty of the unconquered spirit, of the determined and often blackly amusing attempt to make the best of it. Another diarist wrote:

Internment was a new world. Although alien and often very unpleasant, this new world paradoxically offered to children broader horizons, new experiences, challenges, knowledge and understanding. The multifunctional room with limited amenities; the sudden poverty; sickness; hard physical labour; responsibility, unchaperoned outdoor life – all enabled the young people to mature in ways not offered by the traditional colonial; childhood. How that new world was experienced depended very much on where and with whom you were interned.

In astonishing ways there was even fun. In one camp in 1943, there were 1800 inmates and more than half of them were missionaries of various sorts - including 250 Roman Catholic priests. The black market for food was in the capable hands of Fr Scanlan, a Trappist monk. He insisted that the guards had no right to interfere with his religious observances. He told them in no uncertain terms that he needed to say his daily office and the only suitable place was along the inside of the perimeter wall. He said his office there with a basket concealed under his cassock, containing jewellery and money which he surreptitiously tossed over the wall and received eggs and other bits of food from the other side. Inevitably, he was found out and sentenced to fourteen days solitary. But the jail happened to be next to the camp commandant's house and after enduring three days of Fr Scanlan reading his office at the top of his voice and singing Compline in Latin, they let him out.

Ingenuity abounded. 1200 internees at Pootung, using only their bare hands, made themselves a football pitch and a vegetable garden. Others made a stained glass window for their chapel which included the Royal Arms – except that they made the lion's face that of Winston Churchill, complete with cigar. Apparently the Ritz of all the camps was in Bangkok where the guards were the Thai army. The camp commandant was a Sandhurst graduate and he provided the internees food from the Thai state railway's first class kitchen.

After liberation, a party was put on for 220 children in HMS Belfast. Sixty years later this party was repeated for the same number and with the same menu.

I wonder what we can learn from the experiences of those internees? Surely one thing we discover is that it is not our triumphs which mature and deepen our character, but how we react to adversity. Inspiringly, these very adversities led often to the triumph of the spirit in the face of the most appalling privations, even in fear for life itself.

One internee survived to tell of a most moving occasion:

Once, and against explicit rules forbidding large gatherings, some of us organised a symphony concert. The Japanese guards approached shouting and screaming and waving their bayonets. Our conductor ignored them and raised his baton for the start of the Largo from Dvorak's New World Symphony. The guards fell silent and stood still. In all that gathering of guards and internees alike, many wept. None of us expected such astonishing and defiant beauty amid the hunger, the bedbugs, rats, filth and sporadic cruelty.

Let us thank God for what the internees endured and transformed. Their courage and undefeatedness is a strength to us all.