

# Prison Camp Life

Daily life in camp was hard. The Japanese taught their people that Japanese were the superior race and all others were barely worth the food it took to keep them alive. The Japanese Imperial Army took that view to extremes. They especially hated Americans who they were taught had started the war. Some of the guards had been wounded earlier in the war and lost their chance for glory, obviously the fault of Americans. Yanks and Brits were reviled because they had allowed themselves to be surrendered instead of killing themselves as a good Japanese soldier would have. Westerners were physically larger than the Japanese and the guards took great delight in humiliating the POWs to prove their superiority.

Books have been written about how these men, who otherwise would probably have been fine sons and fathers, were turned into such evil people. Several of the men have related stories of watching the Japanese guards line up and beat or slap each other at the command of their leaders, so physical abuse was the norm. They also say that if someone higher up got a beating, the receiver of that beating would then beat someone under him in rank and so on down the line until the guards beat the POWs to relieve their frustration and revive their self image.

There were camp rules, but the rules often changed on the whim of the guards. Punishments started with slapping or kicking or beating with fists, large chunks of wood or rifle butts. The beatings were severe enough that men lost consciousness, teeth, hearing, and had other symptoms of brain damage. Some bones were broken, but the object was more to humiliate and cause pain than to totally incapacitate. The camp commander received money from Japanese companies where the men worked, and he wanted the POWs "healthy" enough to work. One former POW was awarded the Purple Heart in 2009 because his skull still bears a dent from a beating he received while a POW at Mukden.

POWs in all Japanese camps were required to bow to any Japanese regardless of the rank of either man. Being forced to bow Japanese style was humiliating and if the men didn't bow fast enough or low enough to suit the approaching Japanese, it was grounds for a beating. One guard was noted for hiding from the men then jumping out and beating them for not bowing fast or low enough.

Men were also forced to stay in cages too small to stand or lie down and spend days in solitary with one thin blanket in winter and food or water every second or third day. If the warmly dressed commander of the day was in a bad mood, they were forced to stand outside for "Tenko" (roll call) for hours wearing inadequate clothing. Winter temperatures routinely fell to 20-30 degrees below zero Fahrenheit, and occasionally to 50 below. Wind blew in off the Gobi Desert and crawled into their clothes. Frostbite was not uncommon. Winter clothing was issued late in the year and collected early. Some men were without shoes or boots and fashioned shoes from wood or cardboard.

One man tells the story of everyone in the camp being forced to strip in freezing weather and run through the ice and snow to a far distant tree and back. Some realized they would have to do it no matter what and just did it as fast as they could and so they could get dressed again. Others resisted and got colder and colder and thus ran slower when they finally ran. Many got sick or sicker.

Reducing the food and water ration was a frequent punishment. The men at Mukden were lucky in that they were able to get soybeans, which the Japanese considered animal food. However, most meals, the enlisted men were lucky to get 6-7 soybeans in their "soup". Soup was boiled water with sweet potato vines, (the pigs got the sweet potatoes) or some other vegetable part with a few soybeans or some sorghum or rice, which was full of weevils. 1-5 small buns were given the men per day depending on supplies, the mood of the guards, what work they were doing, etc. On rare occasions there was a little meat. Stray dogs were fair game but soon that population was decimated. It is alleged that the American officers were skimming a few meat scraps and soy beans from the enlisted men's soup.

Heat was not allowed in the camp until very late in the year and then was limited to one bucket of low-grade coal per alcove of 32 men. The fuel was hard to light and keep going, but some of the men were able to make balls from the ashes that would burn. Another POW figured out how to make the stoves burn a little better and was “invited” to adapt the stoves in Japanese quarters. Wood from various buildings ended up in some of the stoves until the punishments for that became too severe.

Clothing and medicine, in boxes from the Red Cross and home, were looted by the Japanese guards. What they didn’t take was stored in a warehouse, with some items occasionally doled out as a way to control and reward. The rest was given to them at liberation. Had the basic meds in the Red Cross packages been given to the hospital, many lives could have been saved, especially soon after their arrival when the men were suffering from the tropical diseases they brought from the Philippines.

Fleas and lice were plentiful, and on nice days, when the men were allowed a rare day off, they boiled their clothes, hung them in the sun, and then picked critters from the seams of their clothes to try to get a little relief.

Men were rarely allowed to write a post card home, and their mail was withheld. Guards often told them that they had been abandoned by America and by their families. Their belongings were searched often and personal items stolen or destroyed.

Despite the near constant attempts to control and humiliate the POWs, they were allowed some small pleasures.

For those who smoked, there was conversation over the ashtrays. Cigarettes were the currency inside the camp and out. Packs of cards could be had and ducking the guards while gambling was great sport.

Occasionally a ball or mitt would appear, and there was room in the drill field for a game of baseball.

On holidays, the cooks were usually able to create a feast from things they had saved over time or were allowed to purchase.

On occasion some were allowed to put on a show for the others. One officer made a bass fiddle and other instruments appeared. A few had books they had been able to keep hidden, and Bibles were well worn. When possible, some taught classes in their areas of expertise, many learned a little Japanese, and at least one man taught himself to read it.

The men became very clever at hiding things they wanted to keep and the guards were not particularly clever at finding things. Their reaction to “problems” was brute force, and if that didn’t work, they had few other ideas.

What the Japanese guards never understood was that while they were taught to mindlessly obey any rule or die, the Allied troops were able to and did think for themselves. Rules not to have paper or not to play cards just meant hiding it from the guards.

Not all guards were brainwashed to be evil. Some would slip food to POWs with whom they had made friends, overlook “infractions”, chat with POWs, and show as much kindness as they could without getting into trouble themselves.

However, these men were not willing to be beaten down. Humor, youth, prayer, creativity, memories of loved ones, and sabotage got most men through tough times.

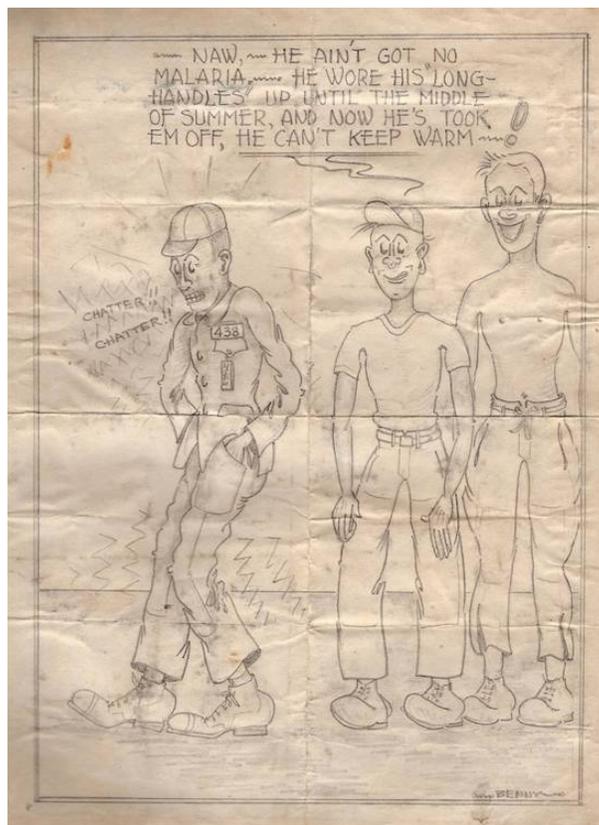
Many POWs made friends with fellow Chinese workers, which was mutually beneficial. Cigarettes, or filched items from the factory were given to Chinese friends and they in turn sold the item on the black

market and got what the POW wanted, with an agreed upon cut, of course. Chinese were considered barely human by the Japanese and were essentially “owned” by the Japanese. Thus, they were treated worse than the POWs. The money earned by this barter system kept their families alive, and the eggs, or produce they purchased for the POWs kept them alive. This “free trade” was a dangerous venture as either partner was subject to discovery and punishment, often quite severe. Chinese were more often killed for punishment since they could be more easily replaced and had no government that might retaliate if word got out about their treatment.

Despite the rules of no paper, men did get their hands on it. “Benny” Pinson and Bill Wuttke, who were there from the beginning, made drawings to entertain their friends. Both men worked in the drafting department at MKK. Malcolm Fortier, an officer who came in at the very end drew scenes from each of the camps he where he had been held.

Following are a few of their drawings which give a small picture of the lighter side of camp.

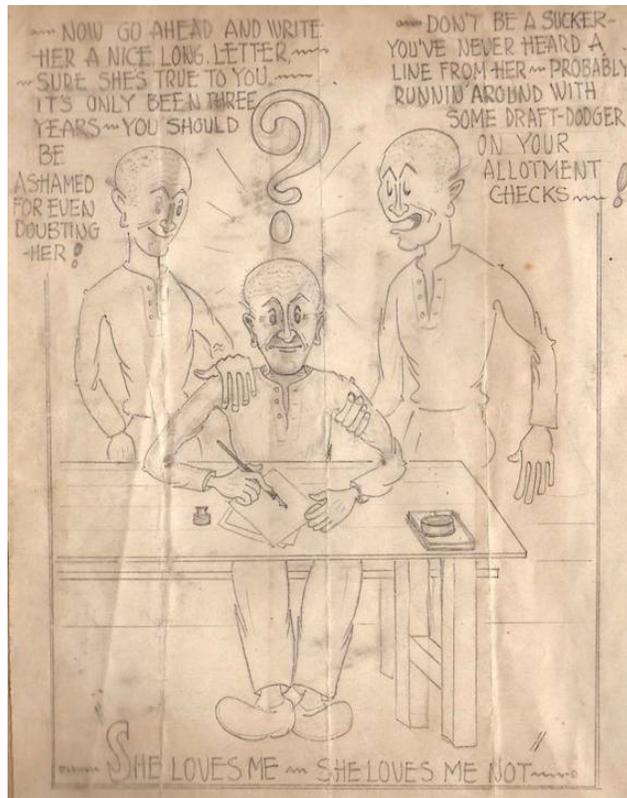
Life in Camp as drawn by  
Benny Pinson



Clothing



The Old Man's Warehouse



"She loves me ~ she loves me not"



And if we don't get Free....



Neville Leo Grow POW #2



Honey Dipping – Cleaning out the Latrines

Life in Camp as drawn by  
Bill Wuttke



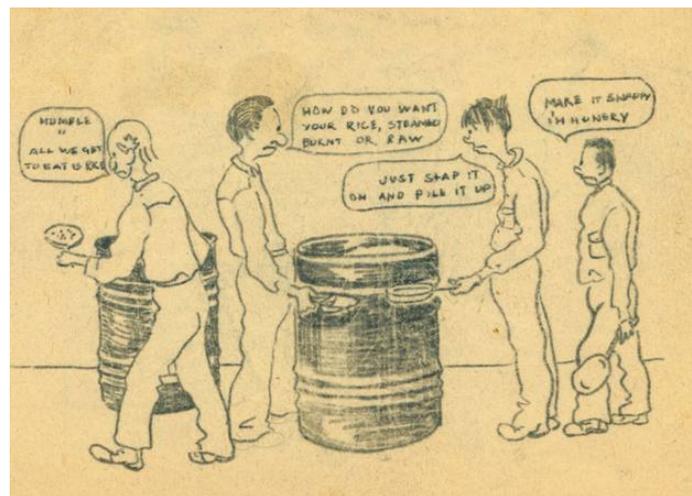
Training Fleas



Sneaking Booze



Winter Wood Pile (from Fentien Camp)



Dinner