

Eddie Fung

Part 2 - Prisoner of War 1941-1942

By Philip Chin

In November 1941, 2nd Battalion of the 131st Field Artillery, 36th Infantry Division (Texas National Guard) shipped out from Texas. Nobody on board the train knew where their final destination would be, possibly Luzon or Manila in the Philippines they speculated. All they knew was that they were heading westwards. Eddie found out from a conductor in Flagstaff, Arizona that they were heading towards his hometown of San Francisco and would be going through Bakersfield, California where Jess, one of his older sisters lived. He called his sister and she met him with a suitcase full of baked cookies which she gave him during the fifteen minute stop. Eddie was happy to share the cookies with the men but wasn't told until then that he wasn't supposed to divulge troop movements.

The train arrived in San Francisco and all the troops were then taken by ferry to Angel Island in San Francisco Bay. This was the site of the former immigration station which had just closed in 1940 where Asian immigrants had been held. Because of the anti-Asian immigration restrictions under federal law these immigrants and often American citizens by birth were held anywhere from days to months while their cases were being investigated and they were interrogated. Ironically the former immigration buildings would soon be used as prisoner of war barracks for German and Italian soldiers.

Eddie got a pass on the second day and went home to see his mother. She asked him if he would be back to celebrate Thanksgiving and he said he didn't know because he didn't know how long his unit would be in town. As he left she said, "Take care of yourself." Eddie later wrote that his determination to be a good soldier and stay at his post cost him dearly, "That was the last time I would see her, because she died while I was overseas. In retrospect, I wished I had gone home for Thanksgiving dinner. There I was, right across the bay, with a shuttle boat that ran on a regular basis. I could have even gotten off the island without a pass - there were ways of doing it."

The unit shipped out the day after Thanksgiving arriving in Honolulu, Hawaii on the last day of November and shipped out again on December 1st. They joined a convoy of other ships escorted by the US Navy that had about 8,000 men and were informed that they were headed to the Philippines. On December 7th, when the ship was already in the South Pacific, it was announced over the speakers that Pearl Harbor in Hawaii had been bombed and that the United States was now at war. Shortly afterwards it was announced that the Philippines had been bombed and that the convoy was being redirected. They eventually arrived in Brisbane, Australia. On December 28th, the 2nd Battalion was shipped out along with fifty pilots and airmen and the 26th Artillery Brigade on a Dutch freighter escorted by the USS Houston and other US Navy ships to help defend the Dutch colony on the island of Java in the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia.) Just what sense there was in sending artillery units without infantry backup

to fight against the Japanese nobody really understood. Eddie's battery commander, Lieutenant Ilo Hard, said it was just like baseball and a sacrifice at bat. Their sacrifice would give the Allies time to prepare for war. Eddie commented, "I never did care for baseball, and that just made me dislike it more."

The unit was deployed to help defend the East Javan airfield of what remained of the 19th Bombardment Group which had lost most of their B17 bombers on December 8th when the Japanese had attacked Clark Field in the Philippines before the remaining unit was dispersed to other airfields throughout the Southwestern Pacific. Eddie's first experience of combat was when the airfield was bombed on February 3rd. Eddie dove into a concrete culvert at the start of the attack and froze there. Felepe Rios, a pure Native American from Mexico, was blazing away at the Japanese planes with his bolt-action rifle next to him and finally asked Eddie to help with his BAR. Eddie realized he had a job to do and shot away with his heavy weapon, only realizing afterwards that the culvert really didn't offer any real protection from air attack as ricochets off the concrete walls would have killed him.

By the next air raid on February 9th, the Japanese had changed tactics and begun concentrating on the camp area instead of the airfield to suppress anti-aircraft defenses. The American defenders had mounted .50 caliber machine guns from destroyed bombers on jeeps. Most had chosen to drive the jeeps into holes dug into the ground to offer concealment and protection but Eddie chose to put the jeep he was assigned out in a cornfield where the tall corn would conceal him. Eddie jumped into a foxhole at the start of the raid and Sergeant Brody coaxed him out by saying, "Look, Eddie, don't worry about getting killed or even getting hurt. You can't do your job if you're thinking about that. Maybe you'll get hurt, and maybe you won't. The important thing is that you've got to do your job."

Eddie jumped out of the foxhole, got onto his jeep, and began shooting at the Japanese fighter that came after him as well as the attacking bombers. After the raid was over he noticed large chunks of shrapnel scattered all over the field and touched a piece not realizing it was still red hot. It was only after that painful experience that he thought about all the sharp edges of the shrapnel and realized how dangerous it all was, "Holy smokes, that thing could cut your head right off!" Day after day Eddie was again at his post in the cornfield shooting at and being shot at by Japanese planes. A fellow soldier, Willie Hoover, claimed not a single stalk of corn was still intact in the field by the time the American bomber unit was withdrawn from the airfield to Australia and the artillerymen were reassigned. Such was the fury of the Japanese in attempting to kill the pesky machine-gunner in the cornfield, but Eddie said that claim was exaggerated.

Eddie's unit was then directed to coordinate with the Dutch and Australians in facing the imminent Japanese invasion of Java. They were to defend the Leuwiliang River line at all costs to prevent the Japanese from crossing and seizing the capital at Batavia (now Jakarta.) Badly outnumbered, outgunned, and uncoordinated since they'd never worked together before, the Allied troops were forced to retreat by Japanese forces crossing the river and by an amphibious landing behind their lines after just two days of fighting. Without sea and air control and unable to see any advantage in destroying the

colony by further fighting, the Dutch troops surrendered on March 8th. British, Australian, and American troops surrendered on March 12th. The 2nd Battalion, which had lost only 4 men killed in the fighting, still had around 500 men. They all had to wait for three weeks for the Japanese to show up to take them prisoner.

Eddie, who'd been reading about Japanese atrocities against the Chinese like the Nanking Massacre for years, could only wonder what he would face next. "I knew what the Japanese were capable of, and that was what bothered me the most. But all I could do was wait and see." He was not the only one in fear. Members of the Chinese Indonesian community offered to hide Eddie. Eddie turned them down because he knew with his terrible Chinese language skills and non-existent Malay and Dutch that he'd never fit in and would have jeopardized the lives of any family that helped him. Eddie was not the only man in the unit thought to be in danger because of his Asian heritage. Eddie worried about Sergeant Frank "Foo" Fujita, a member of "E" Battery, who was half-Japanese from his father's side and half-white from his mother's but looked entirely Japanese.¹

It was during their time waiting for the Japanese to arrive that the unit saw an Indonesian lady, about 60 years old, carrying two enormous baskets with a carrying pole. Sergeant Brody and other Americans tried carrying the load and found that even the strongest and biggest white Americans in the unit couldn't pick up the pole and baskets and could barely lift and carry one basket. The Indonesian lady picked up the pole and baskets, and quickly walked away, giggling the entire while, all 4'8 and 80 pounds of her. That set Eddie to thinking about how such a feat could be accomplished.

The Japanese finally arrived and moved the Americans to the outskirts of Batavia to a camp with troops held from all across the British Empire, some even from Nepal. It was here that they were first forced to work for the Japanese. The men were directed to move oil drums and 220 pound bags of sugar and rice, war loot that was bound for Japan. They were shocked to discover that while it required four men to lift the bags up the Japanese expected one man to carry each bag. Eddie barely staggered to the warehouse with his first bag then noticed that the Indonesian stevedores working alongside them were not much bigger than he was. They were easily handling the bags on their backs. Thinking back on the lesson of the old Indonesian lady and her carrying pole he realized the stevedores were using a basic trick of physics, using the shifting momentum and balance of a load to avoid putting the full force of the load on the person carrying it. You had to keep moving to avoid having the full force drive you into the ground. It was an important lesson that he showed to the other POW's.

All of this loading work was done directly in support of the Japanese war effort. Lieutenant Hard protested that this was against the Geneva Convention, which the Japanese government had signed in 1929 but hadn't ratified. The Japanese did however

¹ Frank Fujita was notable as being the only Japanese-American captured by Imperial Japan during World War II. He was singled out for beatings and other ill-treatment and forced to make radio propaganda broadcasts for Japan. Surprisingly his captors only discovered his Japanese heritage only after he arrived in Japan along with other Allied prisoners sent to work at the Nagasaki shipyards. His autobiography is entitled: Foo: A Japanese-American Prisoner of the Rising Sun, by Frank Frank, Stanley L. Falk, Robert Wear, University of North Texas Press (1993) ISBN-13: 978-0929398464

come under the Hague Convention of 1907 whose Chapter II, Article 6 stated, "The State may utilize the labor of prisoners of war according to their rank and aptitude. Their tasks shall not be excessive, and shall have nothing to do with the military operations." The Japanese officer in charge, who spoke English, replied that prisoner labor was all he'd been given to accomplish his orders and if they didn't want to do the work then they were useless to him. He then directed that two machine-guns be setup pointed at the prisoners and let them know they had five minutes to decide their fate. Lieutenant Hard decided that the hundred men in his detail shouldn't be shot for standing up for international law.

Eddie showed the British cooks the proper way to prepare the rice they were given by the Japanese, which they had been burning and undercooking in open kettles instead of steaming in closed kettles. None of the Americans or Europeans were used to cooking rice as the Asians did since such food, along with little meat and a mainly vegetarian diet, was associated with Asian coolies. Some white prisoners absolutely refused to eat any such a diet while they still had money and access to canned goods from the local Indonesian vendors. Eddie had no such trouble adjusting since it was the diet he'd been used to in Chinatown. He also remembered his mother's lessons about frugality and took pains to insure that food wasn't wasted. Badly prepared and uncured cheese that nobody else wanted and even the burned rice at the bottom of the kettles found their way into this diet. "Even at that point, I realized that food was going to be the most important thing in my life."

Everyone was later marched a long distance to another camp, with many discarding extra clothes and equipment along the way to lighten their load. Ever prudent, Eddie picked up as much discarded equipment as he could and psyched himself to keep walking by saying to himself he only had another 100 yards to go, or 50, or even 10 when he got really tired. At the new camp they were fed well, preparation for when they'd be sent to Japan or other parts of Asia as slave laborers. It was here that Eddie began to develop his reputation as an exemplary scrounger. He developed a radar for what he could get away taking during work details and from around the camp beneath the noses of the guards, items like copper wire and oftentimes food. Sometimes he'd get request for specific items like vinegar. Whatever wasn't nailed down was fair game.

On July 4, 1942, all the prisoners, Dutch, Australians, British, and Americans, were assembled and signed an oath of allegiance to the Imperial Japanese Army. Weeks before all the Allied officers had been assembled and told to sign the oath but had refused. Brigadier Arthur Blackburn of Australia, the senior officer in charge, was then told that the officers would be shot one each day until they signed. Knowing that once shooting started that honor would require all the Allied officers to die and the Japanese to carry out each shooting for fear of each side losing face, Blackburn decided that the officers would sign but only if the enlisted men signed first. He said that he would assume responsibility for any repercussions after the war.² This curious bit of legal

² Arthur Blackburn won the Victoria Cross, the highest British medal for combat bravery in France during WW I. He was awarded the title of Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) for his WWII leadership and heroism in 1946.

maneuvering probably was a Japanese attempt to escape the provisions of the Hague Convention. In addition to escaping the Article 6 prisoner of war labor restrictions they would also evade the relevant Chapter II, Article 7 which stated, "The Government into whose hands prisoners of war have fallen is bound to maintain them. Failing a special agreement between the belligerents, prisoners of war shall be treated as regards food, quarters, and clothing, on the same footing as the troops of the Government which has captured them." Nobody really cares how you treat your own troops under international law because everyone assumes any military power in their right mind would do their best to care for them. Such protections given to your own troops were supposed to extend to prisoners of war too under international law.

The "Bicycle Camp" as they came to call it had once been the base for a Dutch military bicycle unit. It was where they were united with the survivors of their former escort ship, the heavy cruiser USS Houston, which had been torpedoed and sunk off Java with only 368 survivors out of the crew of 1,061. Many of the sailors and Marines were naked or nearly so since they'd been forced to abandon ship. Without a word the Texans and other soldiers distributed their own extra clothing to the survivors. Eddie helped out three sailors this way that were about his size, two of them Chinese stewards.

There were five Chinese stewards in total and all of them spoke Mandarin while Eddie only spoke Cantonese poorly. The stewards took over cooking from the British with immensely improved results. Eddie, already noted as a chowhound, was often in their company. A Japanese soldier at the camp spoke Mandarin to Eddie while he was with the stewards one day and when Eddie didn't respond slapped him repeatedly all the while angrily berating him for the perceived disrespect. Eddie couldn't understand a word being yelled at him. The soldier finally walked out leaving Eddie bruised and so humiliated and upset that he refused to eat dinner that night, a very unusual occurrence. Eddie's didn't realize it then but this was his first introduction to the routine treatment inflicted on soldiers in the Imperial Japanese Army, a brutality that was in turn inflicted on prisoners of war and citizens of occupied territories by Japanese soldiers.

Despite his fears Eddie wasn't usually picked on because he was Chinese. Standing at just 5'4 and looking so innocuous, he wasn't usually noticed in the ranks. When guards noticed him it was usually in the smaller work details where he stood out from the white soldiers. Some treated him with the disdain or indifference they treated all other Allied prisoners, some reacted with curiosity asking who he was and where he was from. Once Eddie was beaten out of nowhere. It turned out that two of the Japanese guards in the work detail had fought in China and one had come out of the experience with a hatred of the Chinese that the other one didn't share.

In truth, more of the guards seemed to take more pleasure out of mistreating and beating the white prisoners than they had in picking on Eddie. The reversal of the treatment meted out under white colonialism appealed to a lot of Asians in those early days. That appeal quickly faded though when the Japanese turned out to be far more brutal and cruel towards the Asians they'd conquered than the former European and American colonialists had ever been. Eddie observed during his camp experiences that it was often the Korean guards that proved to be far more cruel towards the Allied

prisoners in their day to day interactions than the Japanese. The Koreans had been treated as inferior colonial subjects by Japan since early in the 20th Century and many Koreans had a lifetime of resentment to work out. Another time Eddie was struck by surprise he lost partial hearing in one ear for the rest of his life. That nasty blow for no apparent reason was struck by a Korean guard.

In early October 1942, the men were put aboard an overcrowded ship with the name of King Kong Maru and told that they were being sent to Changi in Singapore. After they arrived in Singapore they then embarked to Rangoon, Burma (now Yangon, Myanmar) on the Mayebassi Maru. This ship had last been used to transport horses and still contained the putrid evidence of it in the hold where the prisoners were kept. The ships that were used by the Japanese to transport prisoners of war often earned the name of "hellships" because the Japanese were solely concerned with cramming as many prisoners on board as possible without worrying about temperatures, food, water, or health. The Mayebassi stayed completely unmoving for a whole three days baking in the tropical sun with 200 men crammed in the hold because of Japanese bureaucracy. It was just too much paperwork and bother to unload the prisoners and reload them later when the ship was finally cleared to depart. With some prisoners already suffering from dysentery and adding their own messy contributions to the ones the horses had left added to the heat and humidity inside the hold soaring day after day, the conditions and suffering of the dehydrated men aboard can only be imagined.³

Once they reached Rangoon they were moved further into Burma to another camp and were finally told that they'd been assembled to build a railroad. Stretching 262 miles through the jungle from Burma through Thailand the railroad would eliminate the 1,300 mile long sea journey Japanese supply ships had to take around the Malay Peninsula to Rangoon that made them vulnerable to Allied submarine and air attacks and was slowing down their war effort in Southeast Asia. 61,000 Allied prisoners of war and 250,000 civilian slave laborers drafted from Malaya, Thailand, Indonesia, and Burma were expected to build the railroad in 12 months through jungle, solid rock, and across soaring gorges and canyons. The railroad finally took 16 months to build and would cost the lives of 12,500 POW's and 70,000 Asian civilians.

For more information please read:

The Adventures of Eddie Fung: Chinatown Kid, Texas Cowboy, Prisoner of War, edited by Judy Yung, University of Washington Press, (2007) ISBN: 978-0-295-98754-5

³ Eddie's group was lucky. Prisoner transport ships used by the Japanese were not marked as such as required under international law so they were often torpedoed and sunk by Allied submarines and aircraft. The surviving prisoners swimming for their lives were then often machine-gunned by their guards. Delays in overcrowded and stifling heat could also last for weeks instead of just days. With starving and critically weakened prisoners already afflicted with infections, vitamin deficiencies, and tropical diseases, especially later in the war, this treatment was oftentimes a death sentence. An estimated 20,000 Allied POW's died on board these ships or at the hands of their own compatriots.

Hague Convention of 1907 http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hague04.asp