



Hong Kong Volunteer and Ex-PoW Association of NSW



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Letter from POW Camp

The following is a condensed version of a letter written by Captain Harry Penn to his wife, Rene, in August, 1945 immediately after the end of the war. It has been made available to us by John Penn, their son and a senior member of our Association.

Following Hong Kong's surrender in December, 1941 Captain Penn was first imprisoned in the North Point Camp. In early 1942 he was transferred to Sham Shui Po Camp and towards the end of the first half of 1942 was moved to Argyle Street Camp together with the majority of officers. In the second quarter of 1944 the officers were moved back to Sham Shui Po, but were placed in a segregated section known as Camp N. Japan surrendered unconditionally on 15th August, 1945 but there was no Allied force immediately available to resume control of Hong Kong. The British Pacific Fleet eventually entered the harbour on 30th August. The intervening fortnight was a time of anguish for people in Hong Kong, with the Japanese still in control. Captain Penn's letter was written during that time.

Dearest,

At last! Now I have the opportunity of telling you all those things I have wanted to write about for the last 3½ years. I really don't know where to begin.

What has it been like? The answer to that is "pretty bloody", but I think it possible that reports you have received have been exaggerated. I am positive that we have been miles better off in Hong Kong than a lot of the unfortunates who were taken in Burma, Malaya, Philippines and elsewhere. The snag all through is that wherever you are, you are in the power of uncivilised, inhuman, devils incarnate. We have all witnessed things which turn your blood cold, but they are nothing compared with the more artistic tortures which have been practised on our less fortunate friends who have been "free" in town during their reign of terror.

For ourselves in the prison camps the trials have been many in number. We were marched into our first camp and found the huts, built originally for destitute Chinese, had been used by the Nips as stables and had not been cleaned. We made our first acquaintance with bugs, a friendship which has been close and persistent to this day.

Food has gone through many vicissitudes of improvement and deterioration, but at its best was bad, and that "best" period was due to no effort of the Nips but to the one shipment of Red Cross stores we got and which tided us over some six months and undoubtedly saved many lives.

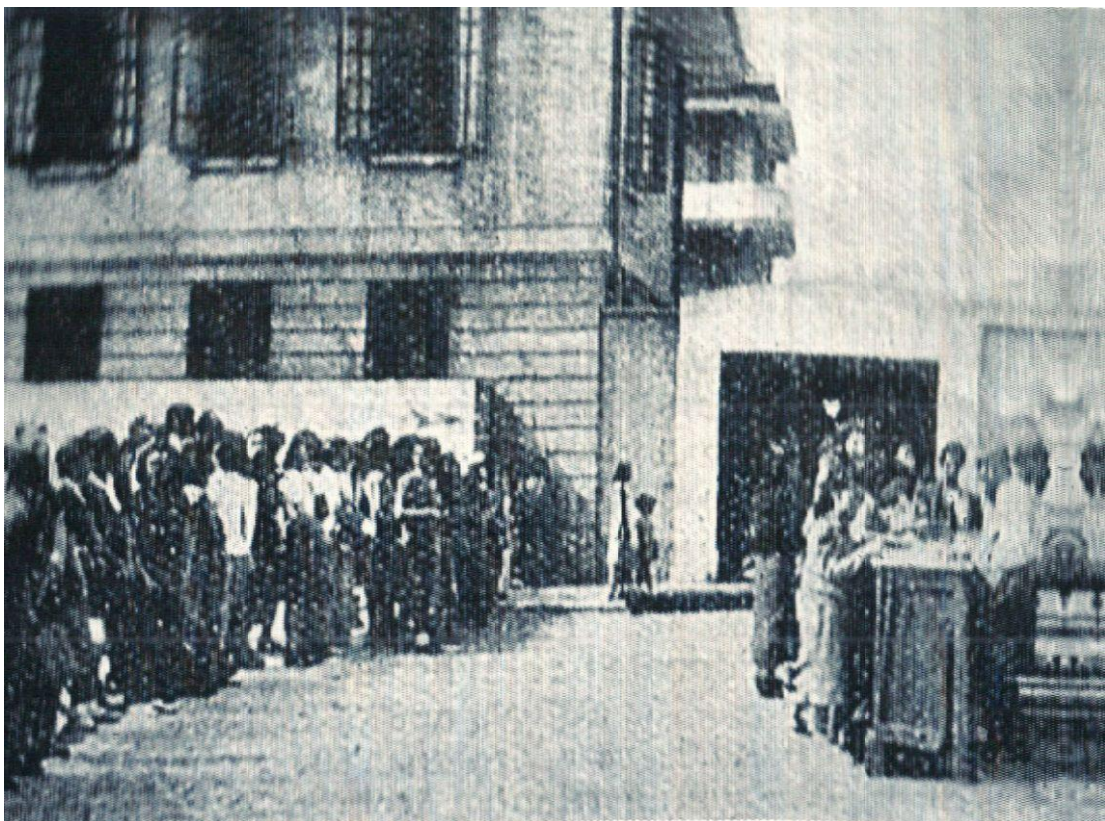
There was a terrible period for a couple of months to start, followed by a period of improvement when we got flour and made bread, had meat or fish, which lasted a year or so.

Then the rot set in with a gradual deterioration to a period of rice and veg for over a year, with a gradually dwindling rice ration from its best at 18 ounces a head a day to long periods of 14 ounces – not much on days when you got nothing else, not even veg.

I was luckier than a lot in getting and sharing in parcels of little extras sent in by local friends, yet I dropped from 175 lbs to 124 lbs. Cigarettes and food occupied the main part of our thoughts, and rumours of all sorts of arrivals or expected arrivals were traced and checked with Sherlock Holmes keenness!

The common one was the imminent arrival of Red Cross parcels, but many as the times were that these proved false, the next one was checked up just as eagerly. In actual fact, we got 1¼ parcels each in December, 1942, four (Canadian Red Cross) in August, 1944 and two in May last. It was one of the worst scandals of the whole show as we know many many more than we got were retained by the Nips. In December, 1942 the camp did get a fair supply of bulk Red Cross stores - bully, tea, flour and ghee – which by the most parsimonious use we spun out for six months, but tons of this were also pinched and sold by the Nips in town.

We had the weekly – later fortnightly – excitement of seeing friends going to the camp headquarters with parcels for us – if lucky. But conditions got so bad and things so expensive that these dwindled to practically nothing. Though they passed within 50 yards of our wire any sign of recognition was forbidden, and many unfortunate mother or wife who could not resist smiling at their relative was slapped by sentries in our helpless sight.



*Food parcels being delivered by families and friends to Sham Shui Po Camp, from V.S.Ebbage **The Hard Way.***

No medicines were supplied – we were dependent on stuff sent in by friends or occasionally brought in through bribed sentries, but always an acute shortage. Requests for supplies met with refusals, and on occasion with the reply “What do you expect – you are prisoners and if I had my way you would be taken out and shot.”

The mildly affected by beri-beri and pellagra (which we have all had) merely suffered from puffy faces, swollen ankles and legs and tiredness; worse cases had scurvy sores and cuts and abrasions gone septic. The worst cases had “electric feet” – an agonising condition of “pins and needles” in the feet which made rest and sleep impossible. There were other cases where the lack of vitamins affected the eyes and a few were – temporarily, thank God – almost totally blind. Dysentery was bad in our camp and involved all sorts of discomfort.

There were long periods of waiting on parade daily for our lords and masters to come and count us. Frequent searches or the threat of searches hanging over you all the time – the most innocent article or piece of writing found might well lead to unpleasant forms of interrogation. The sudden disappearance of people for these interrogations, and their return a month or more later bearded, filthy and lousy with unbelievable tales of torture and suffering. On a few occasions they did not come back at all.

For all the major inhumanities and minor pinpricks which these swine imposed upon us, I really think their deliberate and callous withholding of our mail from wives and relatives hit us more than anything. There must be literally thousands of letters somewhere which they have never delivered, unless they just destroyed them.

But there was another side to it all, and the latent sense of humour – a bit bitter sometimes – and a firm conviction even in the blackest days that we would win the war in the end, enabled the vast majority to bear these discomforts reasonably equably and make the best of a bad job. There was plenty of work to do – gardening, wood chopping and similar camp chores, and I did a fair share of these, which passed the time and incidentally those who worked hard have been much moré fit than those who spent their days on their beds.

We had all expected to see ships or at least planes arriving shortly after the news of the surrender, and here it is days later and nothing has happened except the arrival of a few planes which flew high overhead and dropped a few uninteresting pamphlets telling us to “stay put” till the relief force arrives. After 3½ years I suppose we can wait a few extra weeks, though the time now does drag much more slowly than before the good news.

We had expected someone here within four or five days of the surrender, but it is an awful anti-climax waiting this last 13 days since the Nips packed up, for something to happen!! It is also comic to still be virtual prisoners confined to the camp except for a few who go in and out on official jobs. Visitors to the camp have been bringing us food delicacies we have not had for years – fresh meat, eggs, milk, butter, bread and we have been gourmandizing!! All these things are terribly scarce and must have cost these good people a fortune. I have put on 10 lbs in seven days so at that rate I won’t get much sympathy from you as a starved prisoner when we meet.

I am crazy to see you and the kids and everyone again, and to get Hong Kong out of the system for a few weeks and relax a bit. I do hope I will soon have some word of you all. All my love dearest and God bless you all.

Signed “Harry”



*The light cruiser HMS Swiftsure,, carrying the flag of Rear-Admiral C.H.J. Harcourt, entering the harbour on 30th August, 1945 with North Point in the background. Photo copied from Robin Hutcheon's **SCMP The First Eighty Years**.*