

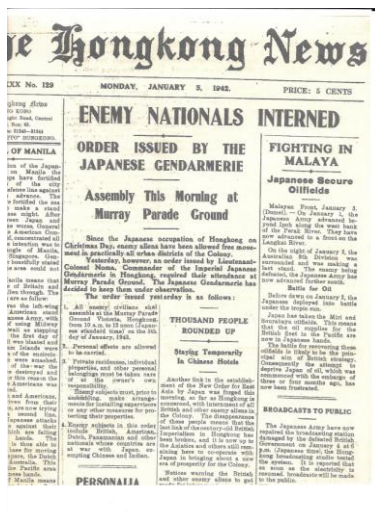


# Hong Kong Volunteer and Ex-PoW Association of NSW



## OCCASIONAL PAPER NUMBER 36

### Non-European Internees



The Japanese ordered the internment of enemy civilians on 4th January, 1942; the order appeared in The Hongkong News the following day. It read:

1. All enemy civilians shall assemble at the Murray Parade Ground Victoria, Hongkong, from 10 a.m. to 12 noon (Japanese standard time) on the 5th day of January, 1942.
2. Personal effects are allowed to be carried.
3. Private residences, individual properties, and other personal belongings must be taken care of at the owner's own responsibility. Enemy subjects must, prior to assembling, make arrangements for installing supervisors or any other measures for protecting their properties.
4. Enemy subjects in this order include British, American, Dutch, Panamanian and other nationals whose countries are at war with Japan, exempting Chinese and Indian.

It is often assumed that those interned were all European, but in fact a not insignificant number were not. There were not only Chinese and Eurasians, but also part Japanese and others. There was, for example, the large Hardoon family comprising parents Isaac Silas and Lily (who were Indian and Iraqi respectively) with three sons and four daughters, listed by Greg Leck in his **Captives of Empire** (Shandy Press, 2006).

In Occasional Paper No.21, **The Internment of Civilians by the Japanese in Hong Kong**, reference was made to Chinese and Eurasians who responded to the ambiguously worded internment order. The order specified that enemy subjects were "nationals whose countries are at war with Japan", but it exempted "Chinese and Indians", which terms suggested a basis of ethnicity rather than nationality. Most Eurasians, although British subjects, after much deliberation decided not to respond to the order. A minority reported at the appointed time and place. These were generally Eurasians with European surnames, and many were residents of Kowloon who had vacated their homes during the battle and who found that they no longer had a home due to battle damage and looting. The Eurasians interned included Jean Gittins (daughter of Sir Robert Ho Tung, wife of W.M.Gittins, a POW); Iris Prew and son (widow of A.G.F.Prew, killed in action with the Volunteers); the two Ablong sisters from Australia, Beatrice Rose with husband A.J.Kew, and Alice Maud with husband J.S.Gibson (Gibson died in Stanley in 1945); Marie Fincher and daughter (wife of E.C.Fincher, a POW); Mabel Hall and three children (wife of G.A.V.Hall, a POW); Florence Mary Hopwar from Australia with husband J.P.Robinson and daughter Winifred Agnes (wife of R.A.Penny, Middlesex Regt, died in the Lisbon Maru sinking); to name just a few.

Some early changed their minds and sought release, largely because of the unwelcoming attitude of their European fellow internees, particularly in the crowded conditions of the Chinese hotels in which they were initially accommodated. The Japanese authorities obliged, having no wish to house and feed more than was necessary. These included the Eurasian Kent and Millar families who were, for a short time, interned in the Tung Fong Hotel. The Kent family comprised parents and five children; the Millar family mother and two daughters.

Surprisingly, a number of Japanese or part Japanese were interned. These were married to expatriate British subjects - the Japanese authorities did not recognise as British subjects non-whites who acquired this status by birth in Hong Kong, but persisted in regarding as British subjects those who acquired this status by marriage or by naturalisation. Mrs Emily Wood's father was German and her mother Japanese; she married a Briton. She was interned with her daughter Leilah. Interned also was her married daughter Edith and son-in-law Eurasian Arthur Hamson and their two children - but Arthur's sister, Connie Hamson, remained "free".

An unwelcoming attitude continued to be adopted by some European internees towards non-Europeans for whom life in Stanley Internment Camp could not have been easy. Eurasian Jean Gittins tells the story of one critic who complained that their presence meant less food for the European internees. Gittins' apt response was that the total amount of food made available was calculated on the numbers to be fed, and the removal of the non-European internees would merely have reduced this amount and would not have resulted in any increase for those remaining. But of course the calculation was not an exact science, and the reduction of, say, a hundred non-European internees out of the total of over 3,000 internees would not have resulted either in any significant reduction in the total amount of food made available, or in any significant increase in the rations issued to any one individual.

Typically, the Chinese internees were women who were married to expatriate Britons, many of whom were Police officers. A notable exception was Louise Mary (Billie) Gill whose husband was a soldier. Her son, Ian Gill, a Manila resident who recently joined our Association, has confirmed that his mother was ethnically Chinese. She was adopted, as a baby, in 1916 by E.F.S. Newman and his Chinese wife. Newman, at the time, was Acting Postal Commissioner at Changsha. He had joined the Chinese Maritime Customs Service in 1892 at 19 and later transferred to the Imperial Postal Service where he worked in many places before retiring in 1927.

Growing up in Shanghai, Billie excelled in British schools and, on leaving school, joined Reuter's news agency, followed by work with a Chinese literary magazine "T'ien Hsia" (Everything Under Heaven), which was a prestigious historical, cultural and periodical journal published in Shanghai. She was seconded to the Mayor of Shanghai during the Sino-Japanese war of 1937 and became a Chinese government radio broadcaster. When Shanghai fell to the Japanese she and her colleagues, fearing they were on a Japanese black list, fled to Hong Kong where they set up a Chinese Government Information Office.



*Louise Mary (Billie) Gill, MBE  
(courtesy of Ian Gill)*

In Hong Kong she married A.R.H.(Paddy) Gill, a Warrant Officer in the Royal Army Ordnance Corps. In 1940, however, he was posted back to England, to join the British Expeditionary Force. He left behind in Hong Kong his wife and infant son, Brian, both of whom were interned following Hong Kong's surrender to the Japanese in December, 1941. On being interned, she had the presence of mind to say she worked for Nederlandsche Ind Handelsbank (as recorded in Greg Leck's **Captives of Empire**) rather than the Chinese government.

Billie's strength of character stood her in good stead in Stanley Internment Camp, and she often said that she learned from her experience that what truly mattered in life was an appreciation of decency, integrity and a sense of humour. Tragically, her young son Brian was drowned while playing in a fresh water pool at Tweed Bay Beach in May, 1944. He is buried in Stanley Military Cemetery.

After the war, Billie spent about a year in England before returning to China to work as a feature writer for the Chinese Government in Nanking. Hyper-inflation made life extremely difficult and she was fortunate to join the United Nations Information Centre in Shanghai in 1948. As the Communists were coming to power in 1949 she was transferred to the UN Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE) in Bangkok. There she remained until resigning in 1953 to begin a new life in England and send her second son, Ian, to school. She rejoined the UN in Geneva in 1958, remaining in that city until her death in 2006. A year after her retirement in 1976, Billie Gill was made a Member of the Order of the British Empire for her long and distinguished service to the United Nation.

(Ian Gill gave invaluable assistance in the drafting of this Occasional Paper but all errors and misrepresentations are the writer's)