



# Hong Kong Volunteer and Ex-PoW Association of NSW



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### The Internment of Civilians by the Japanese in Hong Kong



*The photo shows that part of Stanley Internment Camp which occupied the staff quarters of Stanley Gaol. The gaol, off the picture on the right, remained a separate penal institution, although within the camp's precincts. At the extreme left is a corner of Block 17 which was occupied by the Police. The three buildings at the top on the left were the American quarters before their repatriation in mid-1942. The range of buildings at the top on the right were the British married quarters, together with the building at the bottom which also housed a canteen and assembly hall (from the Imperial War Museum, taken in 1943).*

The Japanese on 4<sup>th</sup> January, 1942 ordered all enemy civilians to assemble for internment, specifying that “enemy subjects in this order include British, American, Dutch, Panamanian and other nationals whose countries are at war with Japan, exempting Chinese and Indians”. Initially the internees were crammed into Chinese hotels or boarding houses in the western district. Commentators like to refer to them as brothels, but in fact they were hotels providing cheap accommodation for visiting seamen and for labourers awaiting ships to overseas contracts. If extra services were available at a price, this would seem not unlike facilities in some of to-day's more up-market hotels

Shortly after, the internees were moved to the Stanley peninsula, perhaps the ideal location for a holiday camp. Many internees after the war identified their main complaint as being the lack of privacy, for the nearly 3,000 people placed into the camp undoubtedly put a strain on the limited accommodation available. Fortunately, births in the camp during the three and a half years of the occupation were few and far between, and did not add to the problem of overcrowding.

To the Japanese the British national who was their enemy was a white man, and they were unable to recognize as British the many Asians and Eurasians who were British Subjects. It came as a surprise to them that a number of these responded to their internment order. While the majority of Eurasians did not seek internment, a handful did amongst those who typically had European surnames. Some of them soon changed their minds, partly because of the unwelcome attitude of their western fellow internees. The Japanese were happy to accede to their request for release, having no wish to house and feed more than was necessary. Amongst the Eurasians early released were the Kent family (with five children) and the Millar family (with two daughters). But the list of those who eventually entered Stanley Internment Camp shows many surnames well-known in the Eurasian community, such as Fincher, Gittins, Hall, Hamson, Jex and Prew. There were many others.

Amongst those interned was Betty Chin Yu Williams, a member of our Association for some years. She was then about 16 years old, and was interned (under her mother's maiden surname of Fitzgerald) with her younger brother, her mother Lilian and step-father John McGowan. But she had Canadian papers through her Chinese Canadian father, and was repatriated with her brother in mid-1942 in a Canadian/Japanese prisoner exchange.

Surprisingly, several internees were partially Japanese, and some had other than European roots such as the large Hardoun family. Some Chinese ladies were interned with their European husbands. Japanese logic dictated that while non-white British Subjects by birth were not enemy nationals, those who acquired British nationality by naturalization or by marriage were. But logic went thus far and no further. The Chinese wives of European civilians could be, and some were, interned with their husbands; but the Chinese wives of regular soldiers were not enemy enough to be interned. It is not possible to say exactly how many of those in Stanley Internment Camp could be described as "voluntary internees", but it should come as no surprise if the number were placed at over 10%. By "voluntary internees" is meant those who could have stayed on the outside of the wire without objection from the Japanese authorities had they chosen not to respond to the internment order. Many sought internment because they had lost their homes in the battle or to looting. Some realised that they no longer had paid employment and so internment was necessary for survival.

Many Europeans with nationalities such as German, Italian, Norwegian (initially), French, Russian, Swiss and Irish were of course not interned. Some were classified as "third nationals", which classification also conveniently accommodated Eurasians, Indians and local Portuguese. The Japanese were also agreeable to the release from Stanley of internees who were sponsored by friends outside. And as early as February, 1942 they had released some 25 elderly internees from the camp and transferred them to the French Hospital in Causeway Bay.

By mid-1944 some Eurasians had abandoned their third national status and claimed British nationality, in some cases perhaps prompted by rumours that an exchange of internees was being arranged, as had already taken place with the Americans and Canadians in Stanley. They were then interned in Ma Tau Wai Internment Camp, with a number of ex-Stanley internees who were recalled after being released under the sponsorship scheme, and a number of South Americans whose countries had joined the list of enemies of Japan. A partial list of Ma Tau Wai internees includes, from the Eurasian community, the Guest family (with four children), William Cecil Low and wife Ethel (with one child), and the Ferguson family (with three children).

Some commentators refer to Rosary Hill as an internment camp. This was in fact a home of refuge established in mid-1943 by the International Red Cross representative in Hong Kong for destitute third nationals. It had nothing to do with the Japanese, and there were no guards and no fences. There were, of course, rules regulating the behaviour of residents, as there are in any residential institution. The sanction for unsocial behaviour was expulsion – hardly applicable in internment camps. Rosary Hill was established when the International Red Cross representative decided that his limited resources could be made to go further by providing actual board and lodging for those requiring aid, rather than continuing with cash hand-outs. With just a few exceptions, those refusing to enter Rosary Hill were denied further aid. Many of the residents were families of Volunteers, largely local Portuguese, and there was a small group of Chinese wives of regular British soldiers (referred to somewhat derisively by their fellow inmates as Wanchai Marys). As the food supply situation deteriorated in Hong Kong and rations were cut in early 1945, many of the residents of Rosary Hill left for Macau where conditions were a little easier and limited help was available from the British Consul.



Third national pass issued to Henry Ching aged 10 (photo taken in better times).