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Prisoner of the Japanese Gendarmes

Following his release from a Japanese prison in April 1943, Harry Ching (editor of the South China Morning Post) drafted a 14-page account of his brief imprisonment in the gendarmerie in Happy Valley. The following edited extracts focus on conditions in the cells as he found them, rather than on his arrest.

Through gate into yard of Le Calvaire Convent, eastern gendarmerie headquarters. Down steps to inside passage and on both sides heavy wooden bars four inches wide and one and a half inches apart. Much chattering noise. Terrific smell. Realise people are behind those bars. Hard to see because of their thickness and narrowness of slits. This good, as guards couldn't see in except at right angles. Omar greeted me from Cell 3 and Faure from Cell 1. Then Tubby Arculli in Cell 3 and leaning against door post was Bill Sling.



Le Calvaire Convent in Wong Nei Chong Road. Viewed from the west (left of picture) the building had four levels with the main entrance at the lowest level referred to as the basement. The building was set into the hill slope so that the eastern elevation showed only three levels, the basement being below ground. The cells were located in the northern end of the basement. Cell 4 was on the western side, and cells 1, 2 and 3 were on the eastern side with no natural lighting (image cropped from a photo on David Bellis' Gwulo.com website).

Put in Cell 4 which measured about 32 feet by 8 feet. On floor matting for sleeping. Older inmates collected mattings of prisoners released and none for newcomers. Only half cell habitable because sanitary arrangement half dozen wooden buckets occupy one end.

Cells 3, 2, 1 opposite, then barred verandah for privileged prisoners including Bill and Formosan. At other side of Cell 4 lavatory which only prisoners on verandah allowed use.

Cell 4 inmates included Japanese coxswain of fishing boat in for illegally selling fish. Mrs Tang, well-to-do, wife of brother of General Tang, suspected British agent. Plenty of *lan chai*, ordinary criminals. Woman who helped eat husband, filthy with matted hair. One-eyed man called Darn Ngan Chew, Pak Yeh Paw, two Shantung coolies, two ex-policemen.

Rice brought in kerosene tins. *Lan chai* empty their bowls on beds and add them to pile, so get two or more bowls. But if cook counted he stopped when number filled, and last few have to do without. Two classes chow. Politicals, about eight including me and Japanese and Formosans get good rice with cabbage or turnip or other vegetable. Sometimes bit of fish or bit of pork skin. But second class get gravy and fish bones. Scraps, but tasty.

Sanitary arrangements terrific. Board on bucket. Mount one foot first then change weight then other foot. No water. No paper. Occasionally someone fell over and filth poured over floor. No drainage. No privacy. Place stinking and buckets not emptied every day. At night rats, hair coated with shit, run over face.

Lice in your hair and everywhere. But nights are best. Dark hides ugliness. Cell 4 gets some sunlight. Others artificial light all the time. Trams run by outside. Motor cars honk, children play and someone in building practices piano. What a difference a wall can make.

Exercise turns out to be perfunctory and we run round by ourselves and enjoy the sun.

Prison is burlesque affair. Great to do about guarding us and much care locking doors. But guards very scared of disease. Always keep distance when benjo or someone ill.

Cells 1, 2, 3 each with population 10, verandah 9 and ours 25. Middle of March midday meal is cut out. Only Japanese, Formosan and ex-policemen get lunch. Verandah residents expelled following big shot visit. Formosan in my cell, sleeps next to me. Takes all my nails in wall for hanging his possessions, leaving me one.

Then a wonderful day. Mum sends food. Also underclothes and pyjamas, but they are my undoing. Had fight with Formosan. Pyjamas too much for my nail and fell on his basin. He slapped my leg. I punched his nose and the fight was on. I could hit him but wasn't hurting him. I decide let him hit me and get it over. But he wouldn't stop. In pain bleeding and exhausted. Room made for me near shit buckets. In bad way. Formosan invites me return to other end of cell. Still in pain, I return to old space.

Sat up and took notice when someone said Europeans, Hongkong Bank. Outside Sir Vandeleur Grayburn and Streatfield. Latter to Cell 2 and Grayburn into ours. Call him and make room near me.

Arm troubling me, Sore where hit on ground. Getting septic. Still can't get up easily so Grayburn helps me. He is second class prisoner so gets no *soong*, so share mine with him. Cell population now 33. Someone gave us spoon with all plating off. This we use between us, spooning rice into hand in turn and licking it off.

Van getting food parcels, sharing with me. Mutton chops or tinned meat. Potatoes, tomatoes, eggs, bread and butter, bananas and sometimes oranges. Mighty good. He wants eat everything up. I urge leave some for snacks, so we snacked bread at midnight and orange if any early a.m. He not taking his share of rice. But I manage give him biggest egg or odd one of three of anything.

One night guard thrusts bayonet through bars and whacked Van in face while he lying silently thinking. He got shock. Pessimistic, used to say wouldn't come out alive. Tell him important thing is remain alive then you win.

April arrives. First thing in morning is wash in basin of saved tea with wet hanky. Then breakfast. At noon snack with Van's rice kept from breakfast, then chat until supper.

8th April Faure and Omar out. Omar ill, spitting blood. Was taken out to verandah questioned and beaten. Yelled loudly.

Grayburn and Streatfield taken away, but come back after silly questioning. One breakfast I am bunted on head with rifle butt for backing up for more chow. Sent me reeling back bleeding.

13th April Grayburn and Streatfield taken away in a.m. bound with rope. Despondent. On 17th April hear my name called. Taken to waiting room. Told I must return when called up, mustn't move or leave without permission and must not gossip. I promise. To Nethersole Hospital next day.