15. The Hell Camp of Kinkaseki (entire chapter)

A little over an hour's drive from Taipei around Taiwan's northeast coast takes you to Jiufen, a historic mining settlement which clings to steep denuded hills overlooking the Pacific. After gold was discovered the town boomed and by the mid-1930s it was known as "Little Shanghai;" a place of bright lights, windfalls, whoring, and desperate toil. A decade later the gold was gone and so were the lights and people. The place lay forgotten until 1989 when it was featured in *City of Sadness*, a groundbreaking film about Taiwan's 2.28 incident. Today Jiufen is a tourist town full of arts and crafts shops and traditional teashops catering to Taipei day-trippers. A few minutes further along the coast, at the bottom of steep hills strewn with abandoned mining buildings and gravestones, lies the sleepy village of Chinguashi. During the Second World War, when it was known by the Japanese name of Kinkaseki, it was the most notorious PoW labour camp on the island and the final resting place for hundreds of British prisoners.

The ordeals of the "hell-camp" of Kinkaseki have been chronicled in *Banzai you Bastards*, a suitably defiant title from its author -- a tough Welsh sergeant called Jack Edwards. He refused to be beaten into submission when he was imprisoned, and he continues to fight for recognition and compensation from the Japanese government.

While one out of every twenty British prisoners in the PoW camps of Nazi Europe died, in Japanese camps that figure was one out of every three (and that doesn't include those that died soon after from ill health). The difference in the rates was a result of tropical diseases and harsher treatment that stemmed from the Japanese despising their prisoners. According to the warrior code of the samurai they should have died in battle or committed suicide instead of surrendering, although it's interesting to note that, contrary to popular belief, relatively few Japanese actually lived up to this ideal themselves.

The Kinkaseki PoW's story began in Malaysia. A Japanese task force first landed on the north-east coast on December 8, 1941, which brings up a little known point. Japan's entry into the Second World War did not start with the attack on Pearl Harbour -- it was indeed the seventh of December but the time difference meant they actually hit Malaysia an hour and ten minutes earlier.

The Japanese air force was equipped with faster, more maneuverable planes flown by better trained pilots, and the army boasted hardened troops who had been trained for jungle warfare. Britain was tied up fighting the Nazis in Europe and North Africa, and the 87,000 allied troops in Malaya were inexperienced and ill-prepared. The British air force was a shambles and the absolute necessity for air support in modern warfare was dramatically shown two days after the invasion when the battleships *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse*, operating without air cover, were sunk.

The allied troops fought a running retreat all the way down to "the impregnable fortress" of Singapore which was surrendered to the Japanese on Chinese New Year's Day, February 15, 1942. It was their most important victory and a fatal blow to the colonial empires in the east as it shattered forever the assumed superiority and invincibility of the white man. Winston Churchill, the British Prime Minister, called the fall of Singapore "the worst disaster and largest capitulation in British history."

Summary executions of the local population began in earnest; all male Chinese between eighteen and fifty were ordered to assemble, tens of thousands of whom were taken away, tortured, and killed. Thousands of civilians, women and children as well as men, were roped together, taken out to sea, and pushed overboard. Those that didn't drown were shot. After the surrender Jack Edwards was in a work party assigned to drag dead bodies from the beaches to mass graves -- a grisly job made worse by the fact that the corpses were often entangled in barbed wire and decomposing under the equatorial sun. The killings and burials went on for three weeks.

Towards the end of 1942 Edwards and his comrades were herded into a rusty old transport ship, taken to Keelung, then marched to a camp at Chinguashi and put to work in copper mines. Carbide lamps provided feeble lighting as they descended down steps, level after level, bent over in the tiny shafts, until they were nearly two hundred feet below sea level. It became hotter the lower they descended, and on that first day down the mines Edwards felt as if he was "descending into hell."

The guards, who soon earned themselves nicknames like "the Beast" and "the Madman," took every opportunity to beat prisoners. Whenever prisoners saw or went past camp personnel, even the lowest-ranking Taiwanese guards, they had to stand to attention and bow. Failure to do this quickly enough, or to the guards' satisfaction, resulted in a beating, which could be anything from a slap or punch to being beaten unconscious with a rifle butt. The more sadistic guards took pleasure in catching out the PoWs by rushing into huts so they wouldn't have enough time to come to attention and bow. Beatings were lashed out for offences as trivial as lying down in bed before the official nine o'clock "lights out." Even in sleep there was no rest from beatings thanks to an order that blankets couldn't be pulled over heads, and prisoners were often rudely awoken from their dreams on cold winter nights with a rifle butt. They would be slapped around and forced to stand for an hour as punishment.

High rank and illness were no protection -- hospital patients and officers also came in for vicious beatings. In a secret diary, written at great personal risk by Major Crossley, the highest ranking prisoner at Kinkaseki, he recorded some of the worse beatings. Here are extracts for February 1943 taken from *Banzai you Bastards*.

2nd February
A Taiwan soldier known as "The Nasty Carpenter" went into the officers' billet and there was a terrific beating-up. Many officers were knocked out completely.

8th February
Eight Taiwan soldiers (the "Runabouts") entered the officers' billet and made straight for Captain A. Sewell, MC, RA. They proceeded, each in turn, to beat him for an hour, and finished up with a sentry with rifle, holding the butt end, hitting him on the head with the bayonet. The officer concerned was in a very bad way when this brutal, savage beating was finished.

18th February
Inspection of the whole camp. All Taiwan soldiers appeared with sticks, and beat up all the sick men left in the camp after the mine workers had left.

20th February
The Camp Commander walked into the prisoners' cook-house and ordered four of the cooks to beat each other with fists for half an hour. The Japanese NCO of the guard ("Mussolini") had a terrific day, beating up all and sundry.

Despite the hard physical labour the prisoners were on starvation rations and it took an iron will not to talk or think about food. Some men tormented themselves with imaginary menus and meals, a sign they were on their way out. Edwards proudly recalls that "the vast majority looked after their mates" and that "knowing that someone cared, the love of one individual for another, is what enabled us to survive." For him the key to survival was "courage, self-respect, and mutual respect between the men."

One of the biggest morale-boosters was news from the outside world and the prisoners took considerable risks to scrounge a few scraps. To facilitate the running of the camp and mines the guards had beaten a handful of Japanese numbers and commands into the prisoners. Edwards didn't need any prompting and took advantage of every chance he had to pick up the language, which he put to use in gathering news. He befriended a Taiwanese coolie who he had overheard singing "Onward Christian Soldiers" in Taiwanese. The man had been to a Christian school and hated the Japanese. In a mix of Japanese and English the worker gave Edwards the latest news, and a little while later smuggled in a two-sheet Japanese newspaper which reported that the Allies had landed in France. That was the first of many news sheets either stolen or brought in by sympathetic civilians. Prisoners were always searched going to and from the mine by Taiwanese, but the resourceful Edwards never got caught. Back in the camp he would hand the papers over to a couple of the officers who could read enough Japanese to translate the newspapers.

The news about the fighting in Europe was reasonably accurate but that in the Pacific was pure propaganda and there was even a story about Japanese airmen who had brought down two enemy planes by throwing rice balls at them. Still, reading between the lines and noting how the glorious Japanese victories kept getting nearer and nearer to Taiwan confirmed that Japan was losing the war.

Edwards was befriended by an American-born Japanese mine policeman who had come to Taiwan in 1940 and been stuck there against his will. The Allied sympathizer said he would try to get news of the prison camp off the island through friends in Keelung. Edwards never saw him again, but heard later that a spy had been caught and executed near Keelung -- presumably the same man. No news of the hell-camp ever got off the island.

The first definite sign that the war had turned was the first sighting of American fighter-bombers in October, 1944. It was a massive morale-raiser: "To know that at last someone was hitting back for us gave us our best feeling since we had been taken prisoner. We felt that every bomb dropped was a blow in retaliation for our persecution."

A few weeks later there was a much bigger raid on Keelung -- a night Edwards would never forget. As the prisoners lay in their beds listening to the bombs explode they gave vent to their anger, and cursed the guards who were hiding in shelters. When the guards came back and asked Edwards who had shouted, he pleaded ignorance, and was punched, knocked to the ground and kicked. He was taken away for a bashing with a bamboo fencing stick, then forced to kneel on stony ground, and if he moved -- even made the slightest adjustment to bring relief to aching legs -- he was hit with a stick or fist. Edwards felt his life drifting away as the guards stepped up the torture. When he came to he found himself lying half-dead in a hut. Now weakened, he felt his "turn" was close at hand.

The following month brought some good news. A tunnel had been dug through the mountain which the camp commandant explained was a "short cut" dug "out of concern" for their health. Indeed the tunnel saved the tiring climb up and down the hill, which was often in rain and took an hour either way. Later the officers found out from some sympathetic Taiwanese that there were official orders to kill all the prisoners in the advent of the Americans landing on the island. Only Edwards and five others knew this, and lived with the knowledge of this axe hanging over their heads, afraid to tell the other men lest it break their will to live. A closer inspection of the short-cut tunnel revealed heavy metal doors at either end that made it suitable for holding all the prisoners. Edwards had to go to work and back with the knowledge that the "short cut" would most likely become his tomb.

Days dragged on through the wet winter, and the death rate worsened as years of slave labour, beatings, disease, and starvation took their toll. One day Edwards collapsed in the mine and woke up in a small sick ward known as the "Death Hut" because so few returned from it. He managed to recover and left the living nightmare of broken men raving and sobbing away their final days of life.

Trying to escape from the camp would have been fruitless but one small break-out occurred in another camp at Taichung. The two escaping soldiers were quickly caught, tortured, made to dig their own graves, and beheaded. Their foolhardy attempt brought harsher treatment for that camp and others throughout the island.

In March 1945, work stopped in the mine, rations were cut, and the following month the prisoners were moved to a jungle camp south of Taipei where they spent the last four months of the war. On their journey they saw extensive bombing damage and preparations for an invasion. The final leg was a seventeen-kilometre uphill trek from Hsintien that was so grueling that even some of the guards collapsed. The PoW's job was to build a camp from scratch on a disused and overgrown tea plantation, and they were set to work collecting materials from the jungle, planting, or building. Other parties worked as porters carrying massive loads up from Hsintien. Working to an impossible deadline made for endless beatings and despite the work being safer than in the mines they were "never hungrier, worked harder, or beaten more." Their only solace was seeing daily flights of American bombers passing overhead to bomb Taipei.

Edwards later wrote that, "Those of us who survived those four weeks are convinced we were walking on the narrow edge between man and animal. All of us looked ghastly, eyes sunken, mere skeletons, covered with rashes, sores, or cuts which would not heal. Others too far gone to save were blown-up with beri-beri, legs and testicles like balloons."

On August 16 normal work duties were suspended amid rumours the war had ended, and on the eighteenth the Camp Commander informed them that peace talks were underway. They left the camp the following week -- sick men carrying those sicker yet on foot down the mountain -- and travelled by truck to Taipei. The Japanese surrendered meekly to the arriving Americans and the British PoWs were evacuated by the American navy.

Although Edwards returned to the camp in 1946 as part of a war-crimes investigation team, and later made two other trips back to Chinguashi, it took him over forty years to write *Banzai You Bastards* because he was "too traumatized by the experience," and would become overwhelmed with emotions whenever he attempted to put it down on paper. A trip back to Taiwan to make a documentary film helped banish some of the ghosts and hardened his resolve to write his book. It was published in 1991, followed by a Japanese version two years later.

The publication of the Japanese book was marred by the suspicious death of the Japanese translator, journalist Shinji Nagino. When he was a third through the book Nagino "died violently in Montreal, in unexplained circumstances. The police file on the death remains open."

I tracked down another former PoW from Kinkaseki, Jack Butterworth, a retired printer from Manchester, and talked with him over the phone. Despite his age, 83, he was as sharp as a tack, comfortable discussing his experiences, and could recall details in an instant. I asked without trying to sound too condescending how he had kept his mental facilities so intact.

"Music. I play the clarinet and when you're a musician you can't miss a single note." He also played the saxophone, oboe, and flute, and had been a bandsman in the army.

I felt bad making the old gentleman talk because he had trouble breathing and would draw in raspy breaths between sentences.

"What happened after you surrendered at Singapore?" I asked of his unit.

"WE didn't surrender! The Generals did!" he answered with a fierceness that shocked me -- 58 years obviously hadn't erased the anger of not being given the chance to fight. "We were disgusted when the order came through. It was a terrible mess. There wasn't a single plane in the sky!"

After being taken prisoner at Singapore Butterworth was taken to southern Taiwan, and spent his first year in a camp picking up rocks and carting them away in canvas stretchers.

"Oh, it wasn't that hard really compared to Kinkaseki. The only thing was that I picked up malaria which they didn't have up in the north. I spent nearly two years at Kinkaseki, then I was put on what they called a 'thin man party,' those that were too sick to work were moved on to easier camps."

"And what work did you do at Kinkaseki?"

"Down in the copper mines. It was extremely dangerous because we dug up rather than in, and as the roof went up we had to raise the floor with rubble. Debris often came crashing down, and many men were injured. You had to bring out 24 bogeys of good cooper ore per day for a four-man team. If you didn't get that you were lined up and beaten."

"Beaten with what?"

"Six or eight strokes with a stick, a hammer shaft, and it was called 'getting the hammer.' You'd look at the rock at the beginning of the day, decide whether to go for the 24 or not. Sometimes it was better to get the beating."

"And were the Taiwanese guards less harsh than the Japanese?"

"Just as cruel. They emulated their masters very well. The guards would strike you for the most trivial things. You had to stand to attention while they hit your head with their fist. If you didn't, trying to dodge it, then you'd end up with a rifle butt on your head, on the ground ... " he was stopped by painful wheezing fit, "Sorry, I suffer from asthma," he explained then continued, "on the ground getting kicked. I saw them murder a man, hit on the head with a sword scabbard -- he died that night from the wounds."

"Do you still hate the Japanese?" I asked.

"Not now. Of course, at first everything Jap was bad, but you can't live with hate in your heart. I lost many close friends so I still feel hatred towards the camp guards but not the Japanese people. Some men still do though, mostly those who lost brothers in the camps."

"And how was the morale and camaraderie?"

"It was marvellous really. If you lost the will to live, two or three days and you were gone. I never ever thought I was going to die."

"Your will power saved you?" I asked while Mr. Butterworth drew a couple of wheezy breaths.

"No. It was the atomic bomb what saved us. The Japanese had plans for disposal of all the prisoners, with discretion given to the camp commander whether to bury, drown or shoot them. It was planned for the eighteenth of August 1945, but news of the surrender came through on the sixteenth, two days short of being disposed of. I have copies of those documents if you'd like to see them."

The Japanese present themselves as victims of the Second World War, in particular as the only country to have ever been on the receiving end of nuclear weapons (although more lives were lost on some of the conventional carpet bombing raids). Anniversaries of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are used by anti-nuclear protesters to remind the world of the evil of atomic weapons. The fact that the bombs shortened the war and thereby saved hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of lives is overlooked, as is the fact that the Japanese had kicked off their own nuclear-weapons program in early 1941.

War-crime trials were held in Japan but the majority of war criminals escaped justice, and since then, in sharp contrast to the continual prosecution and retribution sought for Nazi crimes, there has been little or no investigation. The Japanese got off very lightly after the war because attention quickly turned to halting the communist threat. Chiang Kai-shek actually recruited some Japanese officers and soldiers into the KMT army, including the Commander-in-Chief of the Japanese invasion army, Okamura, the man who had come up with the idea of the "comfort women" program. Historians estimate there were more than 330,000 women forced to work as prostitutes, but Tokyo continues to deny official involvement. Okamura was appointed as a secret military advisory, and helped form a group of Japanese military advisors that trained tens of thousands of soldiers in Taiwan from 1949 to 1968.

The only compensation the PoWs have received was a meagre seventy-six pounds from the British government at the end of the war. Jack Edwards and others continue to press the Japanese government for compensation but Japan has stubbornly refused to admit guilt, and it seems to be simply waiting for all the old men to die off. Indeed, Jack Butterworth passed away just six weeks after speaking to me (and several months short of his planned trip to return to Kinkaseki).