

Eddie Fung

Part 4 - Liberation and the Return Home 1944 to the Present

By Philip Chin

Allied bombing raids picked up in Thailand in 1944 as more bombers became available and their bases drew closer to the Japanese home islands as the Allied armies advanced. Since the POW camps weren't marked visibly from the air, in contravention of international laws of war, the US Army Air Forces often bombed them in the mistaken belief that they were Japanese encampments and supply depots. This led to several dozen POW deaths and to intensified harshness against the POW's by the Japanese as retaliation for their own losses. The prisoners were also forced to repair damages to railroad bridges, tracks, and other installations as well as moving cargo from one train to another across damaged sections. Meanwhile the Allied bombers kept up their attacks against the transportation system. Like the other POW's, Eddie quickly developed a lifetime need to know exactly where any plane he heard was in the sky, regardless of the situation or the nationality of the plane. The only response to the mortal danger any plane noise represented was to run away to the nearest jungle, find any cover available, and then pray a bomb didn't fall on you.

To add to the pressure there was the fear that the Japanese would leave no Allied prisoners of war alive as an Allied victory seemed increasingly imminent. The prisoners were ordered to dig an enormous moat around their camp, nine feet wide at the top tapering down to four and a half feet at the bottom. It wasn't hard to imagine that with four machine guns at each corner of the moat the entire population of the prisoner camp could be quickly disposed of. This wasn't an example of overactive imaginations among the prisoners. After the war it was revealed that just such orders to kill all the prisoners of war had come from Tokyo. In some known cases these orders were carried out by Japanese forces so it was no idle threat. The prisoners decided that if it appeared they were about to be massacred that they'd rise up and attempt to take on the guards and stage a mass escape regardless of the cost. In the end Eddie credits the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki with saving his life and the lives of the other prisoners as the Japanese surrendered on August 15, 1945 soon after the bombs were dropped.

On August 19, 1945, all three thousand prisoners at the camp were assembled by British bugle call. After several days of being called out to work parties and then being dismissed they had the suspicion that something big had happened. Since all the officers had by this time been separated from the enlisted men it was up to a warrant officer to make the announcement, "Gentlemen, this is the happiest moment of my life. The Japanese commandant has asked me to inform you that the war has ended." At first there was disbelief and silence then raucous cheering. Then there was a race to put up the first national flag, then a race to place that flag on the highest flagpole. With 48 stars to make and sew on for each state the Americans came last in the flag race but managed to put up the highest pole. Eddie Fung commented on the flag scene, "Holy smoke, here we go again -

same old rat-race." Then he finally felt relief that the war was finally over, "Okay, you're still here, you've made it through."

The experience as a prisoner of war had changed Eddie Fung, a fact that he'd come to recognize in the years since 1943 when he'd reached his lowest point with starvation, malaria, and dysentery and contemplated just letting go to die but decided to keep living anyway. He no longer felt the need to run away from Chinatown and being Chinese to become a cowboy or anything else. He wanted to tell his mother, "Okay, Mom. I understand what you and Pop have been trying to get through to me - about what it means to be Chinese - and I'm going to try to live up to it." He summed up his thoughts on the matter this way, "There are two ways I can put it: If there is an afterlife, then wherever they are, my parents will know that I'm trying to live the life they've taught me to live. If there isn't an afterlife, I will know that I'm trying to live the way they taught me to live. So either way it will all work out."

Allied radio broadcasts had ordered the prisoners to stay in their camps until they were liberated but each nationality reacted in a different way to the end of the war. The Australians immediately climbed over the walls and sought out alcohol from the natives for an epic party. The Americans concentrated on domestic tasks, shaking out their bamboo bed frames over fires to kill bedbugs and straightening out their living quarters. The Japanese guards remained at their posts, ostensibly to protect the prisoners from the natives. The Korean guards, who'd so terrified the prisoners just days before, had been immediately dismissed from Japanese service and were now pathetically wandering the streets wondering how to get home. There was no talk of retaliation or action against either the Japanese or the Koreans by the prisoners. Probably the shock of the war ending after so many years of death and destruction had most everyone clinging to routines and habits simply to stave off the terror of thinking about what would happen next.

Trucks arrived a week later and the freed prisoners were taken to Bangkok, carrying everything they had just as if they were being transferred to another camp along the railways. American planes were sent to fly them away which the British officers tried to commandeer. The American flight crews simply told them, "Our orders are to take the Americans first, and your rank doesn't mean beans to us." They were flown to Rangoon, Burma (now called Yangon, Myanmar) where they were greeted by English ladies handing out sandwiches. They were the first civilian and white women that many of the men had seen in over four years and it proved to be an incredibly awkward experience. Used to sprinkling their speech with liberal helpings of swear words for so many years, the men took a sandwich, stepped back a careful six feet, and just stood there silently, too terrified to say anything or even thank the ladies. They suddenly realized they'd have to adjust to civil society again. It was a relief to be flown to an army hospital in Calcutta, India. The female nurses there were all officers and there were established army protocols as to how to act with officers that the men could fall back on.

Adjustments came slowly. The nurses were horrified to discover the men sleeping on the floor huddled together in their bedsheets and not in their army hospital cots. After sleeping on hard ground or on bamboo for so many years it was impossible for them to deal with soft mattresses even though they appreciated the clean sheets. They were ordered to straighten out their beds and remain in them or be placed on report but ignored those orders. Eventually, upon the advice of the doctors, what happened after lights out was ignored by

the nurses as long as the beds were properly made up in the morning. The men also found they couldn't manage to eat much even though they felt ravenous with all the food suddenly available to them. A doctor explained that their stomachs had shrunk to the size of a small fist or even smaller during their captivity and it would take time to get used to filling them again. They were told to avoid eating too much and foods with a lot of fat in it to avoid the runs. The men ignored the advice and consumed Coca-Cola and milkshakes until they were sick. Eddie took the first opportunity he had to go into Calcutta to seek out the nearest Chinese restaurant and have a curried chow mein because he was homesick for Chinese food.

After three weeks of this fattening up process, during which time Eddie went from sixty pounds to a more normal one hundred pounds, the men were flown to Walter Reed Hospital in Washington DC and arrived there in September 1945 after stops in Karachi, Tripoli, Casablanca, the Azores, and Newfoundland. There were no "freedom bird" flights directly from the war zone to the United States as there would be by the Vietnam War twenty years later. The limited range and slow speed of World War II transport aircraft meant that they had to frequently land to be refueled and the air crews had to rest. It took several days of flying to get from India to the United States. Most returning World War II servicemen took a very slow boat home that could take a month or more depending on assignment, good luck, and weather, but returning prisoners of war had higher priority and were flown back, many of them still needing urgent medical treatment for the diseases and parasites they still had. But they weren't prepared for all the problems the men came home with.

Military hospitals that treated active military personnel and the Veteran's Administration that treated discharged veterans didn't recognize the mental problems and symptoms that a lot of the men would exhibit after World War II. We now recognize these afflictions as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Some of the men resorted to alcohol or drugs to deal with their mental pain and some even committed suicide. Those who suffered from the World War II generation generally did it in silence because to admit to having mental problems or feeling stressed in those days was seen as a moral weakness that "respectable people" and especially men never admitted to.

Eddie finally called his home in San Francisco from Walter Reed and spoke to a cousin that only spoke Chinese. He asked to speak to his mother and was told that she'd "gou hau" or passed away. Eddie, with his uncertain ear for Chinese, thought the cousin had said "gou fow" meaning gone to town. Eddie then asked when she was expected to return. At this point the cousin handed the phone to one of Eddie's former female classmates who it turned out had married Eddie's brother, Bill, while he'd been away. This was news to Eddie since he'd hardly gotten any mail from home during his prison camp years and led the conversation off track. It wasn't until he'd come back to San Francisco a week later that he found out the truth that his mother had passed away in May 1945 and wasn't returning. His family meanwhile must have assumed that all those years as a prisoner of war had driven him crazy.

Eddie considered becoming a plumber and talked to a man named Rosenbaum who ran a plumbing shop in Chinatown. Rosenbaum told him, "I can teach you everything I know, but you'll never become a journeyman because you will never be admitted into the union. And unless you're in the union, you will never be able to open your own shop." Eddie asked him why that was and was told it was because he was Chinese. "Why do you want to become a

plumber?" Rosenbaum asked. Eddie said, "I notice there aren't any Chinese plumbers." "Now you know why," Rosenbaum said. It was the first time Eddie had directly encountered the racism in the job market that limited opportunities for Chinese Americans in those years.

He had no strong desire to remain in San Francisco now that his mother gone and no desire to return to Texas to resume being a cowboy. He reasoned, "It was okay when you were a snotty-nosed kid, but I don't think you want to do that for the rest of your life." Until he came up with a better plan he decided to reenlist in the army. For his next adventure he decided to transfer from the artillery to the US Army Air Forces. The army sent him to Sheppard Field, a training air base in Wichita Falls, Texas for reassignment.

Eddie arrived on a Friday and was immediately placed in charge of quarters since he'd been promoted to corporal. Basically he was the senior enlisted man in the barracks who'd been designated to watch over the new draftees assigned there, probably because everyone else higher in rank with any sense had already taken the weekend off. One of the recruits told him, "Corporal, there's a big parade downtown, and there's a bunch of geezers with stripes just like yours." The man meant the overseas service stripes on Eddie's sleeve, seven in total, each representing six months of overseas service. The newspaper showed that this was a parade by veterans of Eddie's old unit, the Texas National Guard's 36th Infantry Division. Eddie showed up at the hotel where the newspaper said the veterans would be staying at and was greeted with howls of derision and cries of "Traitor!" when they saw the Army Air Forces unit patch on his uniform. But the men then immediately pounded him on the back in enthusiastic greeting. He'd more than earned the respect and admiration of every man there in the years of prison camp life they'd shared together.

Eddie was eventually assigned to Lowry Field near Denver, Colorado to be trained as a clerk-typist. This was a task which he proved to be lousy at because he just wasn't a good typist. It was during this time Eddie began a series of eating binges. In the military the mess hall rule that was posted said, "Take all you want, but eat all you take." One day the mess was serving pork chops, each an inch thick slice, that most of the men generally took two of. Eddie ate his two, then got four more, then asked for another four. The bewildered enlisted man serving the mess called over the mess sergeant and asked what he should do. After finding out Eddie had cleaned his plate of the previous six pork chops the sergeant said to give him what he wanted. Eddie then asked for six more pork chops instead of just four. The sergeant sat by Eddie as he ate and said, "I understand why you're stuffing yourself, but I don't know where you're putting it!" Eddie admitted, "I don't know either, but I'm going to be full when I'm finished." "Do you do this all the time?" the sergeant asked. Eddie answered, "No, just once in a while. If something looks appealing or appetizing, it just triggers something in me." By the time he was discharged after six months service he weighed one hundred twenty five pounds, just over double the weight he'd fallen to as a prisoner of war.

The military was too much of a safe cocoon for Eddie so he decided to go back to the adventure of civilian life in 1947. San Francisco still provided no compelling reason to stay so he got a job as a meat cutter in Bakersfield, California. This was the same type of job he'd left when he was 14 years old just before running away to Texas to become a cowboy. At night he took high school level courses to make up for those he'd missed after dropping out as a junior, eventually taking the GED test to earn his high school diploma. With the

accumulated back pay he'd earned during his captivity and the war bonds that his mother had bought in his name during the war he decided to go to junior college to study chemistry full time on his savings and save his GI Bill college funds for a higher college education which he eventually used for his studies at Stanford University.

It was during this time in junior college that Eddie was encouraged to go out on dates by his family who suggested that he join a Chinese church to meet eligible ladies. He admits frankly that his libido overrode his common sense at a time when he was single-mindedly devoting so much time to his education. He earned a place on the honor roll lists two years in a row much to the surprise of his family. His first wife suffered a nervous breakdown and a divorce followed in 1951 for which Eddie took full responsibility. As punishment on himself he never applied for the degree in chemistry that he earned the credits for from Stanford.

In his senior year in 1953, Eddie got a job as a lab technician at Western Gear in Belmont, California, just a few miles north of the university. The company worked with metals in what is now called the field of "material science." Eddie got involved in every aspect of the company, even outside the areas assigned to him because of his curiosity. His working hours grew longer and longer as he was entrusted with more tasks. During a year that he suffered from insomnia he just went to work whenever he couldn't sleep. He was once summoned by the company bookkeeper and was informed that there must be some mistake in his time card since it showed he'd entered the factory on a Monday and never left until Friday. Eddie had worked the entire period, ordering meals to be delivered, and said the journeymen would back up his story that he'd been around the entire week. Eddie said, "You'd better stand by for more because I'm unpredictable." It wasn't a matter of pay, Eddie was paid exactly the same no matter how many hours he worked. He just found the work interesting and it was something to do while he couldn't sleep.

Eddie's PTSD had started manifesting itself soon after his discharge. He started feeling nearly uncontrollable rages over the slightest things, people complaining about postwar shortages and the like. How dare they complain when so many men he'd served with had suffered and died while undergoing such unbelievable hardships were the thoughts that instantly struck Eddie when he heard such things. Insomnia was also one of the manifestations of this affliction. When the VA hospital only offered pills for treatment instead of being able to explain the cause, Eddie refused the pills and instead became more of a loner because he was afraid of suddenly lashing out at people. Another manifestation was that Eddie hoarded coffee, twenty pounds of it at a time, and at one point was drinking up to thirty cups a day. Other former prisoners hoarded food by the freezer load or refused to eat anything colored orange, because it reminded them of the yams and pumpkins they'd eaten as POW's. Eddie had nightmares and would flail in bed. These night terrors were a common affliction among many World War II veterans, some of whom couldn't even sleep unless they kept a loaded gun under their pillow, and also sometimes a very real threat to their wives as they fought phantom Japanese and German soldiers and tried to strangle them. One of his fellow prisoners committed suicide by drinking lye. After all they'd gone through during the war for the man to return home and kill himself was incomprehensible to Eddie.

Many of the survivors also felt guilty for surviving when so many men that they felt were better than them hadn't. Eddie said about this feeling, "You know there is no point to

beating yourself over the head because you survived and someone else didn't, but you can't help wondering why. I don't think you'll ever find an answer to questions like that. For me, I was working at a new job, so that usually took my mind off of anything that bothered me. As long as I kept busy, that was my solution to almost everything."

It was only in the aftermath of the Vietnam War that the VA system established the first PTSD treatment centers and Eddie came to understand what he and other World War II veterans were going through. Former POW's were among the first veterans to be offered treatment at these centers and Eddie was one of them. Eddie credits the Vietnam veterans with raising the issue and finally getting the government to work on the problem. He attributed this to a difference in generational attitudes. As one VA nurse explained to him, she could always tell the World War II veterans from the Vietnam War veterans. The World War II veterans would sit there stoically waiting for their turn to be called while the Vietnam veterans would be getting up every ten minutes to demand to know when they'd be called.

Eddie had withdrawn so much from having any social life that his family became worried about him. One of his sisters took the initiative of signing him up for dancing classes but not telling him that a shy friend of a friend that she knew had also signed up for the same classes. Eddie figured since his sister had gone through the trouble of signing him up for classes already that he might as well attend and learn how to dance. As the only two Chinese in the class, Lois Yee and Eddie naturally talked with each other. She was a microbiologist for the Water Sanitation Department in Berkeley. Eddie had taken the test for a chemistry position there but hadn't taken the job. They discovered a mutual love of Chinese cooking over time among other things and got married in 1956. She introduced him to Chinese traditions and practices that he'd never learned before. She said, "The fact that you don't speak Chinese should not preclude you from being Chinese." His siblings laughed about the fact that the boy who had run away from Chinatown now followed Chinese traditions and practices even more devoutly than they ever had.

Eddie quit Western Gear in 1962. The company made metal parts for tanks to military specifications and had never failed a quality certification or audit. A supervisor told Eddie to start signing off on parts as quality tested that hadn't been to save on costs. Eddie refused to do so and resigned on his fortieth birthday. Because of the strong reputation he'd developed he soon found a job at Lawrence Livermore Labs at UC Berkeley. However, because he'd passed up taking a chemistry degree from Stanford, he couldn't be hired formally as a metallurgist, the job he'd been doing for nearly a decade. Instead he was hired as a technologist working on research projects, many of them classified government and military projects dealing with nuclear weapons and energy.

Eddie started attending reunions of the Texas Lost Battalion in 1964. He hadn't heard about the annual reunion of the survivors of his unit and the USS Houston, who'd shared their captivity together, until then. Even though nearly twenty years had passed old habits hadn't changed. When Eddie admired the cowboy boots of one of his old comrades, the man they'd nicknamed Pinky immediately started taking off his boots to give them to Eddie and Eddie had to point out the boots probably wouldn't fit among other things to get him to stop. Lois asked, "Are they all like that because you've been prisoners?" Eddie answered, "Well, the basic nature of a Texan is to be hospitable, but with Pinky, it's not a gesture - he means it. He will literally give me the boots off his feet. So I have to be careful about what I say because they'll take me literally." When Eddie was inquiring about renting a car the

next day another comrade offered to send one of his kids home to bring back one of his cars to give to Eddie. Eddie politely turned down the offer. Eddie explained it to Lois this way, "Family, you can't avoid because you're born into it. With us, we want to stay in touch, so we're closer than family. There's no blood involved except the blood and tears that we have suffered together."

When Lois passed away in 1999, the Lost Battalion Association remembered her as part of the service they held for those members and their spouses that had passed away. They sent a rose from the memorial service to Eddie who wasn't present that year. Eddie said, "It's a nice feeling to know that I have friends like that - who care about me, and who will do anything for me. And it works the other way, too. Until the day I die, if any of the guys need my help, they know I'll be around to help them."

Eddie retired from Lawrence Livermore at the age of fifty five in 1977. Until that time he'd kept up a daily regimen of running to keep fit, about seventy miles a week totaling the 11 1/2 miles from his house to the Golden Gate Bridge and back each day for fifteen years. He said, "I feel a certain responsibility for keeping my body in as good condition as I can, because when I came out of the camps after the war, I realized what a marvelous machine the body is. I figured that if it could take that much abuse and still work, it should last forever if I took good care of it. So it doesn't matter how long I live, I just want to be in good health as long as I'm around." Realizing though that his knees might give out if he continued running he took up tai chi upon retirement as well as backpacking. Over thirty years into his retirement and Eddie Fung was still very much physically active.

In 1999 he was featured in the documentary, "We Served With Pride: The Chinese American Experience in World War II." At the film premier Eddie got to meet and shake hands with President Bill Clinton. In 2003, he married historian and professor Judy Yung. The couple had met as Yung interviewed Chinese Americans about their World War II experiences for a book she was writing and several mentioned Eddie as someone she should interview. A favorite story that she tells is that she didn't realize Eddie had made a pass at her until she was transcribing the tape recordings she'd made of their interviews later that evening.

Eddie Fung has been extremely open to telling his story and sharing his experiences with those he meets, speaking in public both as a former prisoner of war and as a PTSD survivor. One story he tells with relish is about a neighbor whose child was anxious about their upcoming turn through the US Air Force Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape program. This program was designed to give aircrews and other at-risk Air Force personnel some idea and training in what being taken as a prisoner of war might be like including torture and brutal interrogations. Knowing of Eddie's history the neighbor asked Eddie to speak to the young man. Eddie assured him, "Remember, no matter what happens they can't kill you." Upon returning from training the young man said that idea had been of great comfort to him and had helped him get through the training. Eddie always concludes that story with his usual impish grin by relating that he then told the young man, "Now remember, if you ever end up in the real thing, they CAN kill you."

"People who come to know me often ask how I was able to survive the prison camps. I tell them that it's only when you are personally put to a test that you will find out what you are made of. It basically takes guts, the will to live, and lots of luck. What we learned early on is

not to project too far ahead. When we were first taken on March 8, people were talking about getting out by July 4. Then it was by Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's. Then we realized it might be a matter of months and years. So, gradually, we learned to live day by day. Then we learned to roll with the punches, take the beatings and humiliation without striking back. The point is, you can give up your pride, but you don't have to give up your dignity."

"Taking my life as a whole, I've had many more good days than I've had bad ones. But even the bad days serve a purpose. They remind me of how good I have it now, in the sense that if you have never known hunger, you will not appreciate food; if you have never been enslaved, you will not appreciate what it means to be free. When people ask if I've had a good day, and I know them fairly well, I'll say I've never had a bad day since August 19, 1945, because nothing can be as bad as those camp days. The one little glitch was when Lois passed on, but I can accept that because I know that sooner or later, all of us pass on. The one big glitch was when I interfered with my first wife's life and inadvertently caused her mental breakdown. But I've learned that regrets don't change anything. What goes around comes around, eventually everything will work out. Besides, one regret in sixty years since the camps is not bad, so I'll settle for that. In hindsight I've actually benefitted from the camp days, because that's been my reference point. whenever I start feeling sorry for myself, I can always say, 'No, no, Ed, you've got a short memory, you've forgotten the lessons that you have undergone.' One lesson I've learned well is that every moment that you're alive, you'd better take advantage of the fact and enjoy it."

For more information please read:

The Adventures of Eddie Fung: Chinatown Kid, Texas Cowboy, Prisoner of War, edited by Judy Yung, University of Washington Press, (2007) ISBN: 978-0-295-98754-5