

My Father's Canteen (父親的水壼)

An untold story about Taiwanese soldiers forced to fight for Japanese causes

Last summer I spent sometime with my 88-year-old father in Taiwan. We were cleaning out some of his old stuffs when I found a canteen. The canteen is still in good shape except there is no wrapping canvas. On the base of the canteen, there is an engraving "US Viollatti '43 " that aroused my curiosity. It was the canteen he used during World War II. All he remembered was that it was given to him when his troop first arrived in Manila. I think it could be from the leftover stuff when American GIs (美國大兵) retreated from Philippines. This conversation brought alive a story about his days at the jungles in southeast Asia from 1943 to early 1946.

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My father was drafted to serve as an Japanese army doctor when he was still in medical residency at Taiwan University hospital. This was after the midpoint of the war when Japan started to show weakness. Several of his friends drafted about the same time died literally hours after leaving Port Keelung when their ships were sunk by US submarines. It's amazing how he arrived in Manila! He said the three-month stay in Manila was the best time they had during those years. There were no battles, plenty of supplies available including tobacco and rice liquor, comfortable living in the westernstyle housing deserted by GIs. The only presence of minor threat was Filipino guerrillas.

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After three months, they moved further south to "Halmahilas", an island located between New Guinea (新幾內亞) and Borneo (婆羅洲). People called it "small K island" because of it's geometrical shape. (You can see a K-shape island in the map, which is a "big K island". Small K island is not that visible on the map). Life was not very strenuous there but certainly was not as good as that in Manila. In his job, the most commonly encountered patients were those with diarrhea, malaria, injury from fist fight and

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the fall guys (men that had fallen from coconut trees).

There was never any threat of ground battle until one day they saw a large gathering of US battle ships on the sea. Prior to this, there were frequent aerial dogfights which they could see from the shelter (Farn-kong-don / 防空洞). They knew that General MacArthur's (麥克阿 瑟將軍) army was coming back and that invasion might be imminent. One night, a servant soldier, a Taiwanese, came to inform my father that he has seen many Japanese officers secretly packing their stuffs while the servant soldier was cleaning their living quarters. He overheard their conversation and it appeared that they were planning to escape into the jungles. Frankly, this troop was not battle ready and certainly was no match for the GIs because they were a supporting battalion. Facing the dilemma of going into the jungle with the Japanese or surrender to GIs, they had an agonizingly long night.

One thing I found amazing was that even back then, many knew that Americans treat POWs fairly and surrender was not such a bad thing for Taiwanese, except for the fear of Japanese retaliate bullets. As hours passed by, and in fact days went by, the invasion never came. Few weeks later, they received news that Philippine main island had been invaded by GIs. From then on, they knew they were safe and each had high hope of returning home alive. They narrowly escaped the invasion because of Mac's "island hopping strategy". Later, they were told that Mac's troop had intended to invade their island but decided against it in the eleventh hour for fear of heavy resistance. Incorrect US intelligence led to such conclusion. If the allied had invaded, it would have been an piece of cake for them.

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During the final months, before the atomic-bomb was dropped, there was an interesting episode. There was a Taiwanese servant soldier, not the one I mentioned earlier, who was good at fortune telling. In fact, he used what Taiwanese called Dang-Khee (扶乩)" trick to tell the fortune. "Dang-Ghee"(乩童) is a person hypnotized in a semi-unconscious state who is purportedly able to connect with his God and can convey God's message to the people. One night, many Japanese soldiers encouraged this servant soldier to do 'Dang-Ghee" and asked him if their families were safe. That night, he made several startling predictions, all of which eventually came true, including "fire storm in Japan and many "yakitori people walking around" and "emperor' s crying." and even "President Roosevelt" s death" !! The "fire storm and yakitori people" were references to atomic bomb. (Note: "Yakitori " means charcoaled bird.)



Some thought that he must have lost his mind in making such predictions. Sure enough, several days later he was arrested by higher officers for spreading rumors. My father said even the officers who arrested him were visibly shaken by his predictions because Okinawa was under severe attack by then.(Of course, nobody believed in his prediction of Roosevelt' s death). My father is not the kind of guy who can easily believe this sort of things but he did witness the predictions.

After the war, Dutch army took over the island. Japanese and Taiwanese were separated into two groups. There were no Taiwanese combat soldiers because they were not allowed to participate, even if they wanted to. All of Taiwanese were supporting personnel, including one doctor, three sanitary soldiers and quite a few servant soldiers. They stayed in the island eight more months after the war ended. During those months, they were self sufficient, waiting to return home. The servant soldier, the one who informed my father of the imminent Japanese escape, did not make it home. That broke my father's heart. He couldn' t save the soldier from an injury received in a fall from the coconut tree. An unexpected bee sting at the tree top caused the servant's fall.

During the eight months after the war, there was no news and no letters from my father. My family assumed that they had lost him until one evening he suddenly showed up on our street.

The canteen now sits in my family room, along with some of the war memoriors I collected over the years.

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