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My Father's Canteen

(父親的水壺)

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

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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.

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 western-style housing deserted by GIs. The only presence of minor threat was Filipino guerrillas.

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 its 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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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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