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The Women of Stanley: 
internment in Hong Kong, 1942-45

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ABSTRACT The Stanley internment camp, located on Hong Kong island, was one of the largest unsegregated internment facilities in South-East Asia during the Second World War. Approximately 2800 men, women and children, mainly British, were transported there by the victorious Japanese in early January 1942. Little scholarly work exists on the conditions and privations experienced by the internees, but even less attention has been paid to the women who constituted a substantial number of those interned in Stanley. This essay, which is part of a more extensive study, redresses this imbalance. Using a wide variety of archival and oral testimony, the piece not only examines the experiences of some of the women in Stanley, but, more importantly, it also analyses the roles and contributions to camp life made by these women. Moreover, it provides avenues for further research. Although Stanley was administered along the existing colonial structures and social hierarchies which remained intact during the war, there is evidence to suggest that the women’s shared experiences of an enforced communal lifestyle imposed by internment initiated a shift in preconceived social and gender attitudes. Therefore, wartime circumstances allowed the women of Stanley the opportunity to loosen some of these pre-war social and gender constraints. Indeed, long-term imprisonment actually promoted self-assurance, individual freedoms, and a variety of cohesive female group identities which might never have occurred in pre-war colonial Hong Kong.

You are now going to Stanley Internment Camp. All things there will be good – food will be plentiful, conditions will be pleasant. I hope you appreciate this kindness from the Imperial Japanese Army. As you know, the soldiers of Nippon are always kind to women.

Japanese officer to a British nurse en-route to Stanley [1]
The British colony of Hong Kong surrendered to Japanese forces on Christmas Day 1941. On 5 January 1942, all British, Dutch and American civilians were assembled on the Murray Parade ground preparatory to their internment. After an appalling interlude spent in former brothels and squalid tenements along the western waterfront, approximately 2800 men, women and children were transported to the relatively isolated Stanley peninsula on the south-east side of Hong Kong island.[2] For the next 44 months this picturesque location would be the home for most of the internees; for some, it would be their final resting place.

Little scholarly work exists on the conditions and privations experienced by the internees in Stanley, one of the largest unsegregated internment camps in South-East Asia. In fact, apart from Joseph Kennedy's welcome examination of British civilians in Japanese-occupied Malaya and Singapore, historians have paid scant attention to the civilian experiences of British and other foreign nationals caught-up in the Far Eastern conflict of 1941-45.[3] Interest in Hong Kong has either concentrated on the military and diplomatic manoeuvres surrounding its surrender, and the subsequent restoration of British imperial rule after August 1945; or, it has focused upon the treatment and hardships endured by British, Canadian and Indian prisoners of war imprisoned in Kowloon at Shamshuipo and Argyle Street.[4] The Stanley internees, with several noteworthy exceptions, have either been mentioned in passing or discussed as the civilian adjunct to the prisoner of war experience. Indeed, even less attention has been paid to the British women and children who made up almost half the total number of those interned at Stanley. As a result, their experiences have largely been ignored or overlooked.[5]

The purpose of this article is to redress this imbalance. First, it will seek to establish why so many women and children remained in Hong Kong despite the Hong Kong Government’s attempts to enforce compulsory evacuation in June 1940. This was a contentious issue which, for the women and children who stayed behind and were subsequently interned, fostered a great deal of resentment towards them during the early stages of captivity from male internees who had obeyed the Government and evacuated their families. Secondly, what tasks were performed by the women during their internment? Undoubtedly, many women fulfilled the roles traditionally associated with their position in Western societies such as wife, mother, teacher and nurse. However, a large proportion of the women in Stanley were members of the colonial élite – wives of businessmen, government officials and military personnel – for which servants provided a release from the monotony of housework and child care. Therefore, what impact, if any, did internment have on these women now that their domestic circumstances had drastically changed? With no servants in the camp to perform menial work, how quickly did they adapt to the pressures of their new environment? What of the women who now had to cope without their
husbands; men who had been killed in action or were experiencing abominable conditions as prisoners of war? Did these various pressures and circumstances, as Margaret Brooks argues, necessarily lead to the development amongst these women of a sense of their own group identity?[6] Indeed, what hidden talents and skills were developed or awakened during the battle for survival? Evidence suggests that most women endured the vicissitudes of internment better than their male counterparts. If so, why? Furthermore, did the extraordinary conditions of internment allow, or even force, some women to become more assertive in a male-orientated world previously governed by the constraints of colonial society? Conversely, was it the rigours imposed upon them by their captors which provided the women of Stanley the opportunity to adapt themselves much more quickly to their new environment?[7]

Through the use of a wide variety of sources this study seeks to examine the contributions to camp life made by women in Stanley. It analyses how they coped with the daily struggle to survive and reveals their concerns and anxieties on such diverse issues as child care, feminine hygiene and sexual harassment. Of particular value were the interviews and correspondence from 15 former female internees, all of British extraction, most of whom had been contacted before.[8]

Compulsory Evacuation and its Problems, 1939-41

In June 1939 the British authorities had prepared contingency plans for the evacuation of non-combatants from Hong Kong in the event of war breaking out. The proposed evacuation involved 5000 British women and children and 750 other European nationals who would be sent to destinations in India, the Philippines and Australia.[9] Despite these preliminary plans, and the appointment on 4 September 1939 of a Director of Evacuation, the Hong Kong Government failed to prepare the necessary evacuation measures.

Such an oversight had serious repercussions when the diplomatic climate in the Far East worsened the following year. Concern was voiced regarding Britain’s vulnerable position in southern China, especially Hong Kong. In a secret memorandum submitted to the War Office by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff it was emphasised that in the event of war with Japan, “Hong Kong would be isolated and the garrison would have very little hope of being relieved”. The colony therefore should not be reinforced, it being recognised “that in the event of war it would almost inevitably fall”. [10] But what about the safety of the estimated 7000 European women and children who resided in the colony? What was going to be done with them in the event of an attack?

When the General-Officer-Commanding (GOC) Hong Kong received War Office instructions to undertake precautionary measures in the colony on 19
June 1940, he recommended that for defensive purposes the maximum number of women and children be evacuated to the Philippines or Australia. The Chiefs of Staff concurred, arguing that an evacuation might not be possible in the event of a surprise attack by the Japanese. In addition, the presence of large numbers of British women and children in Hong Kong would be a “serious embarrassment” to the Government. If thousands of British civilians were allowed to remain and were interned not only would untold and unnecessary suffering occur, but the Japanese would also be handed an immense propaganda windfall. No action was to be taken, however, until the Foreign Office was consulted. In the meantime, the Governor of Hong Kong agreed that all necessary preparations short of evacuation would be made.

On 1 July the Hong Kong authorities were informed by London to proceed with the evacuation order. By 3 August all the service families had been withdrawn to the Philippines as well as the remainder of the registered non-service British women and children, making a total of 3474 evacuees. On the surface it appeared that the Hong Kong Government had responded effectively and efficiently to the evacuation order. But the hurried preparations and the imposition of compulsory registration for evacuation angered many evacuees, their husbands and employers who felt it was premature and unnecessary. The Chinese community was equally vociferous in its condemnation for it charged that the evacuation order was a blatant example of racial discrimination because non-whites were not included in the original scheme.

Opposition to the evacuation order remained resolute. It was the Evacuation Representation Committee, established in November 1940, which conducted the most determined campaign against the British Government’s evacuation policy; a partially successful campaign, which persisted up to the Japanese attack. In August 1940 the number of European women granted exemption was 950, of whom 500 were deemed essential wartime personnel. As pressure on the Government mounted, official resolve began to weaken slightly. Worried about the legality of the original order, Governor Northcote terminated compulsory evacuation on 6 November 1940. Approximately 200 evacuation orders were cancelled and the individuals concerned were allowed to stay provided they volunteered for duty in one of the auxiliary services. Nevertheless, this concession did not mean that evacuation was now a dead issue. Convinced that a contingency plan should remain in place, the colonial Government announced a voluntary evacuation scheme in early December, which it hoped its European citizens would heed. Colonial authorities were adamant, however, that restrictions on the re-entry of women and children would continue. The decision to evacuate was a “prudent wartime measure”. The War Office would reconsider only if there was some “radical change in the political atmosphere of the Far East”.

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The Japanese attack on Hong Kong on 7 December 1941 confirmed that there was not.

British Women and Japanese Brutality

Within days of the colony’s surrender, stories of Japanese misconduct began to filter back to London via J. P. Reeves, British Consul in the nearby Portuguese colony of Macao. Hardly surprising, were reports of large-scale and systematic looting. More disturbing were the gruesome details concerning the bayoneting, beheading and torture inflicted upon captured Allied prisoners and Chinese civilians.[15] However, some of the most distressing reports involved the rape and murder of a number of European, Eurasian and Chinese women. Ramon Lavalle, a young Argentinean consular representative in Hong Kong, recounted an incident which occurred at the Kowloon Hospital on 12-13 December 1941. Small groups of Japanese troops had wandered around the hospital premises breaking into wards demanding women. Two nurses had been chased and one Chinese servant girl was carried away. When Lavalle reported the incident to the Japanese military authorities on behalf of the British hospital staff, his request that they be protected from further incursions was flatly refused. The officer, Colonel Nishiyama, replied that he could not spare the soldiers to “protect the enemy, and that, moreover, it was but logical to appreciate the needs of the soldiers, and [that] the ‘soldiers were soldiers ... not angels’”.[16]

Two of the worst cases occurred at the emergency hospitals established near the racecourse at the Jockey Club in Happy Valley, and at St Stephen’s College, Stanley. British forces abandoned the racecourse on 24 December. When the Japanese occupied the area, the Chinese nursing staff were locked in one room by their captors. Four nurses were then ‘selected’, taken out and raped.[17] Lavalle, however, provides additional testimony on the tragic episode which unfolded at Happy Valley. According to his sources, which included a Eurasian auxiliary nurse and Mrs Maria Johnson, a Norwegian woman also working as an auxiliary, there were more than four rape victims, including some European staff. They testified that six British auxiliary nurses were “raped and brutally maltreated”. In addition, one “Chinese girl, who tried to defend one of the British nurses, was thrown down the steps from the first floor”. Some Portuguese staff were also ill-treated but, according to his Portuguese source, they were not raped. Lavalle stated that more female staff could have been the victims of rape, but admitted that many of the nurses seemed to have promised amongst themselves not to say anything, feeling that it was “improper to talk about it”.[18]

On Christmas morning a more hideous and unwarranted event unfolded at St Stephen’s College, when approximately 56 British and Canadian wounded were bayonetted in their beds. Two doctors, Colonel
C. D. R. Black and Captain T. N. Whitney, intervened to protect the nurses and patients, but were killed. In addition, four Chinese and three British auxiliary nurses were raped and murdered, and “next day the survivors were made to burn the bodies and blood-soaked mattresses”. One Canadian army nurse recalled that Captain Hickey of the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps, was also killed when he, in spite of his wounds, tried to protect the nurses.

For Colour Sergeant S. D. Begg of the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps, the day’s events would never be forgotten. Begg had been wounded in fighting nearby and was recovering at St Stephen’s. At the time of the surrender, his wife was nursing there. After the surrender, “she and some [of the] other nurses were in an adjoining room and he was able to speak to his wife. They consoled one another with the fact that although they had lost everything they still had each other”. The following morning Begg’s wife and two of her colleagues were found murdered. Lavalle, once again, confirmed the incident to authorities in London. He reported that on the day of the surrender Mrs Begg, Mrs W. J. Smith, and a third unnamed women (later identified as Mrs H. T. Buxton) were chased by Japanese soldiers in the hospital at Stanley. “They tried to escape, and at that moment Dr Black ... came [to] their rescue. Dr Black, already an elderly gentleman, was instantly killed with a bayonet. This incident gave time to the ladies to try to run for safety, with all their clothing in pieces. They were shot from behind with automatic weapons.”

Most, if not all rape inflicted upon the British women was confined to the brief period during and immediately after the battle for Hong Kong; a chaotic time when all women were vulnerable to the vagaries of an occupying force. For example, during the fighting, it was reported that enemy soldiers broke into houses and asked “for girls with permanent waves”. However, some women successfully evaded the attention of marauding soldiers by dressing themselves as “poor beggar-maids or dirty servant girls to escape notice. [Others] cut their hair and wore men’s clothing”. Yet, despite the large numbers of British women who had remained in Hong Kong, the number of documented cases of rape was indeed low. One must be careful, however, to treat these statistics with caution. There were, as Lavalle indicated, many more which were probably never reported. It must not be forgotten that for thousands of Chinese women this suffering at the hands of the Japanese soldiers continued throughout the occupation. As one intelligence operative reported in August 1942, it was not unusual for Chinese residents to be “knocked up at night by soldiers demanding women”.
Internment

It was not until 20-21 January 1942 that the Japanese, after consultation with Dr P. S. Selwyn-Clarke, Director of Medical Services, and F. C. Gimson, the Colonial Secretary (who was the most senior British government representative and the ‘official’ spokesman of the British contingent), transported the civilian internees from their temporary billets to the Stanley peninsula. Except for the removal of unburied corpses, the internees found that very little had been done to prepare the camp for their arrival. “There were no cooking facilities, no furniture, little crockery or cutlery, toilet facilities were filthy, shamefully inadequate, and without water”.[24] Living space was cramped and grossly inadequate. C. C. Roberts, the camp’s billeting officer, remembered vividly those first chaotic scenes. All the rooms were overcrowded and in many cases contained “a mixed collection of men, women and children, whether related or not, in the same room ... [A]ll possible odd spaces, holes under staircases, corners in passages, kitchens and pantries and servants’ quarters came to be occupied [with] no thought [being] given to hygiene or public health”.[25]

The British were the largest contingent of Allied nationals imprisoned at Stanley. Estimates vary, but of the 2800 internees, between 2325 and 2514 were British subjects. Using Colonial Office figures, a more detailed breakdown reveals that there were 286 children aged 16 years or younger, 99 of whom were below the age of 4. In addition, the adult population comprised 858 females and 1370 males above the age of 16. The number of women and children in the camp was almost half the total number of British internees. Included in the overall figure was a small contingent of Chinese and Eurasian women and children who claimed British nationality. This surprised the Japanese (and some white Anglo-Saxons) as they assumed that the term British national meant European.[26]

The presence of women and children contributed to a sense of normality in Stanley; that is, in regard to social, family and conventional gender relations. However, their presence was not appreciated by some male internees and was greeted with ambivalence, if not derision, by others. One female interviewee recalled that “we were unpopular, as [the] male internees thought there would have been more food and less anxiety if there [had been] no women and kids”. On the other hand, the same woman believed that the children served as a form of protection from the camp guards. Moreover, the children’s “behaviour tended to keep us less selfish”. It forced the adults in the camp to think about the welfare of the children rather than brood too much about their own individual interests and needs. Furthermore, the men in the camp, although they may not have appreciated it, were better off because of the presence of large numbers of women and children. “[T]he atmosphere was more normal. At least women are useful
when men are ill". Gimson was inclined to agree, but there was a caveat. “Possibly morale may have been enhanced by [a] feminine presence though morals were inclined to suffer”. [28]

With the dark shadow of the atrocities still hanging over all the internees, some women, not unnaturally, felt considerable apprehension about their safety during internment. The threat came not from the male internees but from the guards: initially Japanese soldiers and guards recruited from the local Indian and Chinese populations, and later from Formosans drafted to the colony. The Japanese were so “quiet with their rubber shoes”, recounted one women. “They just suddenly appeared behind you, it was very un-nerving.”[29] Another recalled that:

one just turned up in our room one night offering us cigarettes. Thank goodness there were a few of us there. He stayed for a while and then left. We complained the next day to the B[ritish] C[ommunity] C[ouncil] and presumably they told the Japs. However, we put something against the door every night after that.[30]

Canadian internees confirmed that these incidents were not isolated but commonplace during the early stages of internment. “There was a good deal of drunkenness among the guards, who prowled about the camp at night, peering into windows and frightening women”. Only after the strongest protests by Gimson did this nocturnal activity cease.[31]

Nevertheless, according to Gimson, the Japanese guards did not present much of a threat to the women in the camp, appointed in March 1942 by the British Communal Council to protect the women in the camp, was never mobilised for an emergency. [32] Apart from the incidents reported during the battle for Hong Kong, their captors, for the most part, were well behaved and disciplined towards women; and Gimson had nothing but the highest praise for Mr Meijima (an official of the Foreign Affairs Department who served as Camp Commandant from September 1943 to July 1944). He maintained “strict control over the guards and no assault on any internee took place”. On the contrary, continued Gimson, there were women in the camp who had been “only too ready to receive the attentions” of the guards.[33]

Circumstances changed, however, when the Japanese military took direct control of the camp from the Japanese Foreign Affairs Department in August 1944. The numbers of ‘assaults’ on internees, including women, increased. Intimidation took a number of forms: face slapping, jostling, kicking or beating internees with bamboo rods. With the advent of direct military control there was a tendency to use greater degrees of physical violence more often. Matters came to a head during a labour dispute between the Japanese authorities and the internees. The new regime granted a concession by which additional rations were issued for work performed on behalf of the camp. Trouble arose when the internees were accused by their captors that both the supply of labour and the tasks performed were
insufficient. Such criticism was not welcomed by the internees and attempts to coerce them by means of intimidation and physical violence stiffened their resolve. Part of the problem stemmed from ill-discipline and poor supervision of the guards by their officers. Despite Gimson’s protests, especially those concerning the ill-treatment of women, the Japanese replied that they made no distinction on the grounds of sex when punishing internees.[34]

Personal safety aside, the real challenge for all women was day-to-day survival. “We just got on with it”, said one former female internee. All that could be done was to make the “best of a bad thing”. It was the men, according to one interviewee, who had the most trouble adapting. Some “just sat around. They didn’t even keep themselves clean. We sometimes had to de-louse them [and] mending their filthy trousers was awful”. Some men supported the claim that women withstood the harsh conditions better than their male counterparts. The Reverend Joseph Sandbach, a Methodist missionary, gave the women of Stanley “full marks” for their ability to cope better than the men with the conditions during internment. Gimson agreed. Women, he wrote, “endured privation better than men possibly because domestic duties eliminated to some extent the opportunity for morbid introspection and criticism of [the] existing [camp] administration”. [36]

So what roles did women fulfil during their internment in Stanley? And did the performance of these tasks, as Gimson suggested, make women more adaptable to the rigours of internment as opposed to their male counterparts? Once the immediate need to acquire food and accommodation had been fulfilled, the most pressing concern for mothers was their children’s welfare, which remained a priority throughout their incarceration. In addition to these family and maternal responsibilities, the need for teachers, nurses and secretaries emerged. Some women were former colonial government employees such as interpreters, stenographers or secretaries; women who had been exempted from the evacuation order of 1940. There were also a number of women who had been employed in the private sector, but who had similarly been exempted after pressure from banks and other commercial institutions. As a result, women from this pool of experienced secretarial staff volunteered to provide essential administrative support for the British Community Council (BCC) established by the internees in August 1942.

Another vital function was nursing, especially in the hospital and clinics established and administered by the interned medical staff. Apart from the fully qualified military nurses, there were a large number of auxiliary nurses from the Volunteer Nursing Detachment and the Auxiliary Nursing Service who were interned at Stanley. Many of the auxiliaries were wives of businessmen, government officials and regular service personnel who, motivated by compassion or patriotism, offered their services to the war effort. But there is another and simpler explanation. Under the
evacuation order, career and auxiliary nurses were exempt. Therefore, some females no doubt volunteered their services in order to escape the evacuation order and remain close to their husbands. Their subsequent internment, however tragic, was also a blessing in disguise. When one considers the appalling conditions and desperate circumstances in Stanley, it was perhaps fortunate that there were so many nurses amongst the internees who provided professional care and much needed comfort.

But what about those women who did not have a vocation or professional qualification? In the beginning, many found it quite a shock. The sudden change in circumstances meant learning, or perhaps relearning, these domestic skills as quickly as possible. “We were given this pile of soya beans and did not know what to do with them” stated one female survivor. “We cooked them for hours ...We soon learned though, it was a matter of having to.”[37] Yet, for others, the transition was perhaps not as difficult or as awkward. Replicating their earlier experience of committee, church and charity work in peacetime Hong Kong, their organisational experience proved invaluable in the welfare work conducted in Stanley.

There were clear lines of demarcation between men and women in the camp’s administration. Most of the BCC representatives were company executives, doctors, solicitors and clergy. Few male government officials were elected at first, and women were either not interested or encouraged to participate. Later, however, one or two women did stand for election, but only one woman was ever elected to the BCC.[38] It was decided by the women themselves (and endorsed by the BCC) that their skills would be better utilised monitoring the health and welfare of the women and children in the camp. This took a number of forms. In February 1942, for example, an International Welfare Committee was established under the chairmanship of The Lady Almoner, Miss Margaret Watson, to coordinate the welfare efforts of all the national groups in Stanley. Responsibilities included investigating the specific needs of individual internees, the equitable distribution of relief supplies and the maintenance of children’s records. In April, a British Women’s Group was formed to assist the International Welfare Committee and to liaise with the newly formed International Women’s Committee created about the same time. A working party was quickly established which analysed a number of health and welfare related issues. These included the making and mending of clothes, the establishment of diet kitchens, supplying women workers for communal labour including the camp’s kitchens and the introduction of a district nursing system. Volunteers were enlisted for nursing duties and running créches in the residential blocks. “Above all our object [was] to be ready to undertake any work which [was] within our scope”. [39]

The shortage of clothes, in particular shoes, was a serious problem. But the internees learned to improvise, and it was in this capacity – the manufacture of clothes – that the women of Stanley excelled. Although the
men manufactured the majority of the sandals and clogs, which were made from old tyres and scraps of wood, the shorts and tops, which were made from tea towels and disused rice and flour sacks, were produced by the women. Absolutely nothing was wasted or discarded. Sewing cotton was obtained by unpicking old garments or even unravelling stockings. As children grew older their sweaters were unstitched and reknitted into a larger size. Sometimes this meant combining the material from several garments, or adapting one piece of clothing to make another. One internee, Barbara Anslow, recorded in her diary that she “went swimming in [a] new yellow costume made from [a] welfare jumper ...” Another woman used tiny samples of material to make a child’s dress which was fitted with a large hem so it would last longer.[40]

Additional clothing was purchased on the black market, smuggled through the wire by Chinese friends and servants during the early stages of internment when security was lax, or donated by the welfare group established by neutral European friends who had remained in Hong Kong. One consignment which arrived from the latter was especially noted by Barbara Anslow: “Khaki shorts, reputedly made for Africans were a peculiar shape”. [41] When there was a death in the camp, the deceased’s clothing was redistributed. “Mum’s old Jantzen swimming costume is in camp. Mrs Fisher has it. [She] got it from Mrs Greenburg who died.”[42] The repatriation of the American internees in July 1942 and the Canadian civilians in December 1943 also provided a welcome number of cast-offs. One interviewee related that when the Canadian priest, Father C. B. Murphy, was repatriated he “left us some of his underwear which I altered. However my daughter always referred to them as Father Murphy’s pants because of the hole in the front.”[43] As clothes became threadbare another internee expressed his feelings through poetry:

There is a lady dressed in gray
who wanders round the camp each day
I often wonder if she knows
that one can see right through her clothes.

I’d dearly like to tell her so
but don’t – because that would be low
but one day when she’s quite alone
I’ll show her where she is unsewn
and if I do I trust that she
will one day do the same for me.[44]

The resourcefulness of the women’s group knew no bounds. A handicraft display was organised to which “the ladies in the camp contributed in no small measure”. Needle cases and slippers, made from odd bits of material left over from army jerkins, were proudly exhibited beside samples of buttons manufactured from bamboo. Even more enterprising was the camp
fashion show, which demonstrated what could be made out of scraps of material and old army tunics. The women’s group even offered a tailoring and repair service to those internees who could not sew. Their operation was greatly facilitated by the possession of two sewing machines which, on one occasion, produced 90 pairs of shorts in just 12 days for the 250-strong police contingent interned in Stanley. Nevertheless, there were always one or two internees who complained about the standard and quality of the work.

Medical facilities were woefully inadequate. But, as one historian comments, it was to the “credit of some forty doctors, two dentists, six pharmacists and 100 trained nurses that no major epidemic occurred”.[47] Malaria, malnutrition and its associated diseases, beriberi and pellagra, were the most common ailments. Nevertheless, as one American internee cheerfully remarked, the obvious weight loss induced by a poor diet did have its positive side: the “simple diet has cured all cases of gout and indigestion”. [48] Writing to a friend in South Africa, another internee, Mrs C. W. Jeffries admitted that she had a “fine slim figure”, but jokingly complained that unfortunately it was “slim in the wrong places”. [49] Others were able to add “inches in the right places” by careful pleating or draping of bits of material. There were few, if any, beauty aids in camp. Undeterred, “there were many who worked hard to keep themselves glamorous and I’m sure that helped morale a lot”. [50] For instance, odd bits of telephone wire made useful curlers. One woman fondly remembered the excitement of being able to shave her underarms. “Mrs G. borrowed a razor [and] we all shaved under our arms. [It was] wonderful after all this time.”[51] The sense of exhilaration at being able to accomplish these feminine ‘rituals’ in such demoralising conditions not only provided a much-needed psychological boost for the women concerned, but, according to John Stericker, Gimson’s secretary during internment, it had an equally civilising effect on the men in camp, who without a female presence would surely have abandoned their own personal grooming habits.[52]

The many constraints posed by the shortage of medicines, dressings and equipment were a tremendous challenge to the professional and voluntary staff alike. The lack of soap and disinfectant was particularly troublesome. Upon internment, clinics were soon established throughout the camp including a diet kitchen for the sick and young infants. One woman recalled that “[w]e had no soap and had to scrub the floor with wood ash every day because we were dealing with food”. [53] One female volunteer who worked at the camp hospital had a similar story. “We had very little soap, icy water in winter and scrubbing brushes worn down to the wood. The sheets at times would be beyond description, and the mosquito nets were full of bugs”. [54]

Apart from the practical contributions made by the British Women’s Group, this formal structure provided an important social function for the
women of Stanley. It allowed many to meet on a regular basis and acted as a channel through which others could obtain information, advice and mutual support. In addition, these meetings and welfare activities were a release from the confines of their overcrowded billets and domestic responsibilities. Indeed, it was the women’s quiet but steady determination to get on with the business at hand which quickly silenced the initial criticisms levied at them by many male internees. As one member of the British Women’s Group poignantly remarked: “marking time was the wrong attitude to take in view of the fact that there was a great deal to be done in the camp”.[55]

This brings us back to Gimson’s earlier comment that ‘marking time’ was precisely what too many male internees had been guilty of. It is true that BCC activities provided some men with an outlet for pent up energies (or frustrations). However, camp politics at this level were often intense, sometimes acrimonious, and divided along clear ‘party’ lines long established before the Japanese occupation. The intense infighting which took place between the interned government officials and the business community was simply a continuation of pre-war colonial political rivalries. Besides, the political arena had always been a male preserve in Hong Kong. Therefore it is not surprising that women were not encouraged to participate in the BCC, or that they acquiesced in this decision. According to the women interviewed for this study, most female internees were not particularly interested in camp politics anyway. They were more concerned in getting on with the task at hand and willingly fulfilled a subordinate but supportive role in the daily work pattern, which was vital for keeping body and soul together in Stanley. This in turn contributed to the development of various cohesive group identities, which protected them, to some extent, from the rigours of confinement. The need to be flexible – an important component in their pre-war domestic setting – may perhaps explain why these women adapted more quickly to internment as opposed to their male counterparts.[56]

The camp was a particularly distressing experience for mothers with babies and young children. Obviously, the most serious problem was maintaining adequate levels of nutrition. Every effort was made to give babies and young children milk, mostly made from soya beans. Any other little extras, including the mothers’ own meagre rations, were used to supplement the children’s food intake:

Feeding Annette drove me mad with worry. I was so uptight I used to burst into tears. She refused to swallow her rice and would keep it in her mouth for up to two hours, or she would spit it down the toilet when I was not looking, or make mud pies with rice and dirt. She weighed 28lbs when we left the camp, she was nearly 5 years old.[57]

Feeding may have been a problem, but as one mother recounts, babies and young children became targets for more sinister deeds. “I once overheard two middle aged men discussing which of the little ones they would start on if the Japanese stopped sending rations in to us. Horrible but true”. [58]
camp was rife with rumours of cannibalism amongst the Chinese population. As rations were reduced throughout 1944, and conditions in Stanley steadily deteriorated, the possibility that some internees privately contemplated acts of cannibalism cannot be dismissed.

For the children too it was a completely different life. It was an adventure for some; and for the infants and young children growing up in Stanley it was the only life they knew:

We arrived at Stanley and it was really just a battleground. My mother tried to protect us but my brother and I soon joined the other children, and went round counting the dead bodies. We just became street urchins. It is amazing how adaptable children are. We used to watch, from a distance, the beatings up the hill. It became a way of life.[59]

By all accounts the Japanese were kind to the children. They gave them sweets and there were no reported cases of ill-treatment. It was the European adults that the older children disliked and had problems with. “My daughter still remembers the ‘old witch’ down the corridor who used to wave a stick at [her].”[60] There were complaints about children being noisy during the designated quiet period in the afternoon. Even children’s birthday celebrations – one of the few releases from the drudgery of camp life – were censured by some adults. Constance Murray revealed one such incident: “Timothy Peter White’s birthday – 4. Coming up before the beak for a rioting [sic] in ‘Oranges and Lemons’ on the Village Green in the Silent Hour ...” She confided to her diary that the young boy’s mother was later “severely reprimanded on account of Timothy’s birthday rioting”.[61] Christmas celebrations were equally problematical. “Stanley parents were faced with the problem of acting Santa Claus to their sceptical offspring who did not have to examine their toys very closely in order to realise that Father Christmas too must [have been] an internee”. Nonetheless, the observance of this Western cultural tradition was important for overall morale and individual peace of mind.[62]

Inevitably, opinions vary amongst those interviewed concerning the wisdom of leaving or staying behind in Hong Kong. “I have never forgiven myself for not going to Australia when pregnant. As a result my baby starved for 3 yrs 8 months”.[63] On the other hand another women was thankful. “I never regret not leaving Hong Kong. If I had, my husband would never had had that one year with his daughter. He was killed during the fighting. After mum died, if the baby had not been there I would have just given up.”[64]

Internment also presented problems for the maintenance of proper feminine hygiene. The ‘lucky’ women stopped menstruation either immediately or soon after entering Stanley; a response to the initial shock of internment, an inadequate diet or a combination thereof. Others experienced occasional or sporadic cycles. For some, the recurrence was associated after the delivery of a Red Cross parcel. Yet others never missed a cycle
throughout their captivity. A major inconvenience was the lack of sanitary towels. One interviewee recalled that when the nurses were transferred from the University hospital to Stanley the “matron ... let us take as many Kotex as we could carry unobtrusively”.[65] But the stock of sanitary towels ran out very quickly. Rags or bits of towel were used and re-used, being washed and hung out to dry; a particularly trying task during a water shortage. “It was horrible but everyone got used to it after a while”.[66]

Undaunted, nature still took its course. With space and privacy at such a premium, couples were forced to resort to some unusual, if not macabre, locations when carrying out their love-making. One of the children born in the camp claims that she was conceived in a newly dug grave![67] All those women interviewed confirmed that they knew of couples who used the cemetery for those intimate moments. In fact, the Stanley Journal printed a cartoon illustrating that such activity in the cemetery was common knowledge. Reverend Sandbach also confirms this but in much more discreet language. There “were lovely trees there, there was privacy there and that’s where people used to go and find little corners for themselves, and that’s how they got the privacy they needed”.[68] John Stericker was more forthright in his analysis of the conduct of sexual relations in Stanley: “In a camp where there was little or no privacy and which lasted for years society can hardly condemn friendship between man and woman and at the same time recognise the course of ‘nature’”.[69]

Records show that 51 babies were born in Stanley; 22 in 1942 (of which approximately 20 were conceived prior to the Japanese attack), 10 in 1943, 13 in 1944 and 6 up to August 1945. Statistically, this was a low birth rate indeed, bearing in mind the poor diet, ill-health and lack of privacy in the camp. But as Dr N. C. MacLeod, the Camp Health Officer sardonically put it, “by the nature of our circumstances it should have been lower”.[70]

The number of births worried both the British and Japanese. It meant more mouths to feed and put additional pressure on accommodation. In October 1943 the Japanese threatened to segregate the sexes if any more babies were born in camp. They did not mind intimate relations between men and women, but the Japanese authorities did not want to promote promiscuity.[71] Officials were especially concerned about those women who had delivered newborn children but whose husbands were apparently not in Stanley. The Japanese stated that if a woman did not declare the name of the child’s father, she would be classified a prostitute. By November 1944 the British doctors became increasingly worried about the number of newborn children in the camp. Their gravest concern was the physical effect a pregnancy would have on the health of prospective mothers. Already weakened by malnutrition, most women suffered from iron deficiency, which increased the chance of complications during and after pregnancy. Furthermore, there was a lack of drugs in case of complications. Besides, there was the added stress and risk of raising a newborn child in appalling
conditions. The camp doctors therefore advised Gimson that no more babies should be born in the compound, and that an order to that effect be issued.[72]

Abortion was another issue which raised important practical and moral questions, and gave rise to a long debate between the medical staff and interned members of the clergy. Several abortions were carried out in the camp hospital during internment. The clergy became concerned about the moral aspects of both abortion, and whether by performing abortions, the doctors were encouraging promiscuity. The doctors argued that the abortions had been carried out for sound medical reasons. But it did add weight to the doctors’ argument that no more children should be born in Stanley. In the end, the doctors adopted the same criterion for the consideration of an abortion as they would under normal medical practices. That is, an abortion would only be carried out if the life of the mother was in danger.[73]

Despite the conditions, the death toll in Stanley was surprisingly low. Records indicate that 121 people died during captivity. Of these, 28 were women ranging in age from 28 to 82. Half were over 50.[74] For example, there is the tragic case of Doris Groves, the 28 year-old who died of a haemorrhage after giving birth to a premature baby in February 1944.[75] Another woman died on the operating table due to a lack of oxygen (or anaesthetic). And yet another reputedly died of a broken heart one year almost to the day after her husband had been executed by the Japanese. Others, like a Mrs Ross, had reached breaking point and “just gave up trying to live”. Even more surprising was the exceedingly low fatality rate amongst the children. In all, five died, including Doris Groves’s baby and Brian Gill aged 3 who drowned in a fresh water pool while playing on the beach.[76] When compared to the horrendous numbers of Allied servicemen who perished in Japanese prisoner of war camps and the brutality inflicted on untold numbers of Chinese, the relatively small numbers of internees who died at Stanley is truly remarkable.[77]

Conclusion

On 16 August 1945 the Japanese surrendered. The war was over in the Far East. For most of the internees freedom meant returning to families and loved ones in Australia and the United Kingdom. A small cadre of survivors remained in Hong Kong, returned to work and helped rebuild the shattered colony. But the memories of Stanley would remain etched in the minds of all former internees, and no one would deny that they had been changed by the experience.

It is very difficult not to castigate the Hong Kong Government for allowing so many women and children to remain in Hong Kong in the first place. By permitting them to do so, argues one historian, the colonial
Government’s “treatment of the excess [European] civilian population ... erred on the side of generosity”.[78] Perhaps. But this statement does not take into account the intense pressure being exerted on the colonial Government from the European community, which succeeded in getting the compulsory evacuation order rescinded in November 1940 and having it replaced with a voluntary scheme. Quite simply, whatever the colonial Government’s wishes, many couples did not want to part company. This was particularly true for those within the business community who had the government contacts and political acumen, and could orchestrate a determined campaign against government policy. Besides, for those European civilians who remained in Hong Kong, it was important to them to stay at their posts; and for those with families, remain together and damn the consequences and the Government, whatever its good intentions. Once interned, one had to abide by the decision to stay, adapt to new circumstances and get on with living.

For the women contacted or interviewed for this study there was no exception: internment had changed them. However, in the absence of any documented post-interment counselling or debriefing, the short- and long-term psychological effects are difficult to judge.[79] Nevertheless, all those interviewed claimed to have become more tolerant. Sharing rooms and toilets with strangers, male and female, broke down many inhibitions. Internment made many women more self-sufficient. Once again, all interviewees admitted to a greater sense of personal identity and independence. Afterwards, the impact which this transformation had on husbands and parents who were not in the camp was, in many cases, marked. “My father still saw me as a young girl rather than a woman with a mind of her own”. [80] Another ex-internee spoke for many when she said that her “husband had a lot of trouble adjusting to the ‘new me’. It did cause a lot of problems which took time to iron out.”[81]

Similarly, a variety of cohesive groups and identities developed amongst the women of Stanley, in part, engendered by their common experiences and participation in camp activities. Once the shock of surrender had dissipated, it was realised (and appreciated) by most internees how important the women were to the overall morale and welfare of the camp. They performed vital tasks in the day-to-day struggle to survive, and provided essential support in all facets of camp life. With quiet determination they worked unceasingly in the hospital and classroom, and their willingness to contribute in whatever practical way possible went a long way to ease the miseries of confinement for all those interned. More importantly, these accomplishments silenced those male critics who deeply resented a female presence during the initial period of captivity.

As mentioned earlier, most women were not interested or encouraged to participate in the upper echelons of camp administration. Rather, it was assumed that they would contribute to camp life in the traditional roles of
wife, mother, nurse, secretary and teacher; roles clearly defined in the pre-war colonial system. However, it can be argued that internment and its inherent pressures allowed women the opportunity to loosen some of these pre-war constraints. For example, the various welfare activities organised under the auspices of the British Women’s Group allowed women the opportunity to share, develop and acquire skills which may not have been possible before captivity. As a result, a greater degree of personal freedom and independence was fostered during their imprisonment. In other words, although many women actively participated within the strictures of the existing colonial system during internment, the circumstances imposed upon them by internment loosened these constraints, enabling them to become more self-assured and confident in their own abilities. Internment actually promoted individual freedom and group solidarity amongst these women which might never have occurred in pre-war colonial Hong Kong. Therefore, although Stanley was administered along the existing colonial structures and social hierarchies of the time, there is evidence to suggest that these shared experiences of an enforced communal lifestyle imposed by internment initiated a shift in pre-conceived gender and class attitudes.

Undoubtedly, the presence of women and children in Stanley, although tragic and unnecessary in one respect, was important in creating a sense of normality during internment. Not only did the large numbers of women and children contribute to the development of a familial atmosphere, an essential psychological lifeline for most of those interned; but the attention to the seemingly impractical social niceties organised by the women, such as birthday and Christmas celebrations, were equally important in preserving a ‘normal’, Western lifestyle. It is a testament to their strength of character, courage and humour in the face of adversity that most of the women survived their ordeal at Stanley and made such an important contribution to the quality of life there. However, the accomplishments made by the women must not be overstated. For those who survived Stanley, it was the result of a successful partnership between men, women and children. As Phyllis Ayrton, a former internee stated, “I can only look back with pride on the courage and ingenuity shown by the internees during those three-and-a-half years of imprisonment”.[82]

Notes
This essay is a synthesis of a larger, more detailed study which will appear in R. John Pritchard (Ed.) The British War Crimes Trials in the Far East, 1946-1948 (forthcoming).

There were seven national groups interned in Hong Kong during World War II. In addition to the British, Americans and Dutch, there were approximately 40 Norwegians and several each from Poland, Greece and Belgium. The Canadians and Australians were categorised as British. Imperial War Museum, Sound Archives (hereafter IWM), transcript of interview with the Reverend Joseph Sandbach, Accession 004784/08, p. 27 and p. 44. The authors would like to thank the Sound Archives for permission to quote this material.

Furthermore, even less work has appeared on the wartime experiences of the Indian, Malay and Chinese civilian populations which suffered ignominiously at the hands of the Japanese throughout occupied Asia. For an examination of the impact of Japanese rule on the indigenous population of Hong Kong see Henry J. Lethbridge (1969) Hong Kong under Japanese occupation: changes in social structure, in I. C. Jarvie & J. Agassi (Eds) Hong Kong: a society in transition, pp. 77-127 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul).


[6] Brooks, ‘Passive in war?’, p. 166. Space does not allow an examination of the role played by the women of Stanley as teachers. Similarly, the roles and experiences of the children had to be omitted. See Bernice Archer, The plight of women and children interned in Hong Kong, 1942-45 in Pritchard (Ed.) British War Crimes Trials in the Far East, forthcoming.

[7] The authors do not wish to get into a long and involved debate about the role of European women in colonial society, for it is beyond the scope of this essay. However, we would like to suggest that there are a number of avenues which other academics might pursue in greater detail involving European women in colonial Hong Kong. For insights into what is becoming a fascinating field of study see, for example, Helen Callaway (1987) Gender, Culture and Empire: European women in colonial Nigeria (London: Macmillan); Claudia Knapman

[8] During the interviews it was revealed that upon internment six of the 15 women were married. Only one of the married women was interned with her husband and only three were accompanied by one child each. The remaining nine women were single. All the women were from middle-class backgrounds and under the age of 40. Several of the single women were secretaries for international banking and legal firms. The married women in our sample were wives of businessmen and military personnel. Therefore all those contacted were in some way part of the white colonial establishment. The authors would like to express their heartfelt thanks for permission to use the material volunteered to us by the interviewees in Hong Kong and the United Kingdom and the two correspondents in Australia. Only one interviewee has been cited in the footnotes, the majority wishing to remain anonymous. However, the authors would like to thank Mrs Barbara Anslow for use of her diary, and to the late Naomi Price, neighbour and friend of Bernice Archer, without whom this project would never have come to light.

[9] Australian Archives, Canberra, CRS A1608, item B39/1/3, part 1, Geoffrey Whiskard, British High Commissioner to Australia, to Prime Minister R. G. Menzies of Australia, 16 June 1939; Menzies to Whiskard, 22 June 1939.


[12] On 1 July, of the 1833 service wives and their offspring, 1640 were sent to Manila. Four days later a further 1779 non-service British women and children, out of the 2129 who registered on 2 July, also embarked for Manila. PRO, WO 193/866, GOC Hong Kong to War Office, 24 June 1940; Endacott, Eclipse, p. 14.

[13] Endacott, Eclipse, pp. 16-17; Special Memo No. 50 of 1940 – Government Evacuation Scheme, 4 December 1940, Copy given to Bernice Archer by Mr Jack Shepherd of Sydney, Australia.


[18] PRO, CO 980/48, Lavalle statement, 11 March 1943. For additional material see IWM, personal account of Mrs M. W. Redwood entitled, ‘Incident at Jockey Club, Happy Valley, Hong Kong, December 1941’, pp. 36-39. The authors would like to thank the Department of Documents and the Trustees of the IWM for permission to cite material from this collection.


[20] PRO, Foreign Office Papers (hereafter FO), FO 916/1082, report by Miss Kathleen G. Christie, nurse with the Canadian Forces at Hong Kong as given on board the SS Gripsholm, November 1943.

[21] PRO, WO 141/101, copy of cypher sent by General Headquarters, India, to War Office, 18 August 1942, on atrocities committed by the Japanese in Hong Kong.


[23] PRO, WO 141/101, undated chronology flagged 9B; WO 208/740, information from intelligence contact in Hong Kong, 29 August 1942.

[24] Endacott, Eclipse, p. 198. For example, St Stephen’s College, which normally accommodated 180 boys, was initially used to house 501 male internees.

[25] Company archive of John Swire & Sons Ltd (London), C. C. Roberts Papers, postwar report submitted by Roberts to Gimson, 23 October 1945. The authors would like to thank the company archivist Charlotte Havilland for her invaluable assistance.

[26] Endacott, Eclipse, p. 199; PRO, CO 980/94, Lieutenant-Colonel S. J. Cole, head of the Prisoners of War and Civilian Internees Department (Colonial Office), to the Earl of Iddesleigh, 1 October 1943. The discrepancy in the total number of British internees appears to be confined to the number of adult males as the numbers of women and children are identical in both sets of figures cited by Endacott and the Colonial Office.

[27] Correspondence with Bernice Archer, February 1992.

[28] Rhodes House Library, Oxford (hereafter RHL), MSS. Ind. Ocn. s222, Sir Franklin Charles Gimson, Diary of Internment in Hong Kong 1942-45 (hereafter Gimson diary), foreword at beginning of diary, p. 4. Gimson was a long-serving member of the Colonial Civil Service. His first appointment was in Ceylon where he served between 1914 and 1941. In mid-1941 he was transferred to Hong Kong where he was appointed as Colonial Secretary, one of the most important and senior positions within the colonial government. Interned in Stanley for the duration of the war, he was the most senior British
government representative in the camp, performing the vital functions of chief liaison with the Japanese authorities, and by mid-1942 as chairman of the British Community Council. As a reward for his wartime services in Hong Kong, he was appointed Governor and Commander-in-Chief of Singapore in 1946 until his retirement in 1952. His extensive diary makes fascinating reading, especially its commentary on the politics within the camp itself. The authors are indebted to his daughter, Mrs J. A. Snowdon, for permission to quote from her father’s diary.

[31] PRO, CO 980/120, report on internment conditions in the Far East compiled from questionnaires answered by Canadian nationals repatriated in December 1943.
[32] Only 3 days after internment began, a temporary camp committee was elected. On 18 February 1942 it was replaced by the British Communal Council, which in turn was replaced in August by the British Community Council. Endacott, Eclipse, pp. 207-209. Although each nationality had its own representative body, by far the most important was the BCC. It comprised of elected representatives from the various blocks of buildings, who in turn elected a chairman from among themselves. Appointments were then made by the BCC for members to take charge of various camp activities such as accommodation, health and food. Gimson was asked to cooperate with the BCC and act as a “partner” to the chairman. This “ill-defined position”, recorded Gimson, proved awkward and eventually, at the request of a large majority of the internees, Gimson was appointed chairman. According to the Colonial Secretary, it was he who reorganised the BCC. While he maintained its elected basis, he also appointed senior and “generally acceptable internees”, some of whom were members of the Colonial Service who took charge of various camp services. This restructuring, while designed to make the camp run more efficiently, also established Gimson as the single most powerful individual in the camp. As the most senior British government official, as chief liaison between the various nationalities in Stanley and as the conduit between the BCC and the Japanese, such concentration of authority did not sit well with some disgruntled factions amongst the British internees. RHL, Gimson diary, pp. 8-10.

[34] PRO, CO 980/192, Gimson report, October 1945, pp. 4-5.
[36] IWM, Sandbach transcript, p. 76; RHL, Gimson diary, forward, p. 5.
[37] Interview by Bernice Archer, 9 October 1991.
[38] Hong Kong Public Records Office (hereafter HKPRO), Phyllis Ayrton Papers (hereafter Ayrton Papers), HKMS no. 72, minutes of the British Women’s Group, 7 and 12 August 1942, and 7 February 1943; Emerson, ‘Stanley internment camp’, p. 46. Apparently, Gimson believed that it would be helpful
to have women represented on the BCC. He may simply have been paying lip-service; or, he could have been looking for political allies to counter the businessmen on the BCC who were scathing of the Hong Kong Government and its pre-occupation policies.


[40] IWM, Sandbach transcript, p. 46 and p. 64; correspondence with Bernice Archer, 6 February 1992.

[41] Barbara Anslow diary, 3 June 1942. Copy in possession of Bernice Archer but there is also a copy held at the Imperial War Museum. The authors would like to express their thanks to Barbara Anslow for permission to quote from her diary. For additional confirmation of the recycling of the African shorts see IWM, Sandbach transcript, p. 66.

[42] Anslow diary, 8 August 1942.

[43] Correspondence with Bernice Archer, 6 February 1992. After the war, another woman was astonished to find out that her underwear, which had been made from flour sacks, had been taken to Australia and displayed to a women’s meeting. Interview by Bernice Archer, 17 February 1992.

[44] A collection of verse composed by P. Cressall who died in Stanley. The poem *Honi Soit Qui Stanley Pense* was one of many published as a memorial in the camp newspaper, the *Stanley Journal*, summer number, 1943, p. 6.


[47] Endacott, *Eclipse*, p. 205. Reverend Sandbach noted that of the 40 doctors three were female, which was particularly fortunate with such a large number of women and children. IWM, Sandbach transcript, p. 67. Not all the nurses were interned at Stanley immediately. In August 1942 a large number were transferred to Stanley from the Bowen Road Military Hospital.

[48] PRO, CO 980/133, circular by the American businessman J. H. Marsman. Reverend Sandbach recalled that during the first weeks of internment many internees became restless and discontented owing to the complete lack of alcohol and tobacco in camp. There “were those among us who were bottle a day men. And there were smokers among us who of course were terrific smokers. To be cut off in one chop from all that had repercussions that we never realised could happen”. IWM, Sandbach transcript, p. 32.

[49] PRO, CO 980/161, extracts of censored mail from the Far East including Stanley internees intercepted by the South African censor, 29 September 1944.

[51] Interview by Bernice Archer, 18 February 1992; Anslow diary, 1 June 1942.

[52] John Stericker, Captive colony – the story of Stanley internment camp, Hong Kong, ch. 7, p. 17, unpublished manuscript held in the University of Hong Kong Library (hereafter Stericker Papers). The authors would like to thank Colin Gimson for sending them copied extracts of these papers.

[53] Interview by Bernice Archer, 18 February 1992.

[54] Correspondence with Bernice Archer, 6 February 1992.

[55] HKPRO, Ayrton Papers, minutes of the British Women’s Group, 4 February 1943.

[56] This did not prevent one outgoing chairwoman of the British Women’s Group to speculate that because of the important contributions made by women in Stanley, a greater voice would be given to them in postwar colonial politics. “In the past women had not figured very prominently in the administration of Hong Kong and this period in the camp could well be utilised in preparation for wider activities”. HKPRO, Ayrton Papers, minutes of British Women’s Group, 4 February 1943. The subject of group cohesion and identity among women internees is fascinating but beyond the scope of this piece. However, please note one thought-provoking essay by Judith Tydor Baumel (1995) Social interaction among Jewish women in crisis during the Holocaust: a case study, Gender and History, 7, pp. 64-84.

[57] Correspondence with Bernice Archer, 6 February 1992.

[58] Ibid.


[61] RHL, MSS. Ind. Ocn. s185, Constance B. Murray diary, Kowloon, Victoria and Stanley civilian camp, 1941-45, 24 and 29 January 1945. Noisy children was a topic continually being dealt with by the British Women’s Group. For example see HKPRO, Ayrton Papers, minutes of the British Women’s Group, 12 March 1943.

[62] History Workshop, Department of History, University of Hong Kong, G. C. Emerson Papers, extracts from unpublished manuscript by M. W. Redwood entitled ‘This was our life’, p. 2. The authors wish to thank Colin Emerson for access to these papers. Also see HKPRO, Ayrton Papers, minutes of the British Women’s Group, 2, 10, 18 and 27 December 1942.


[64] Correspondence with Bernice Archer, 6 February 1992.


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[68] IWM, Sandbach transcript, p. 33.

[69] Stericker Papers, ch. 7, p. 3. Moreover, some internees claimed that there was a brothel of sorts situated in the Indian Quarters of the Stanley Gaol which was used to accommodate the interned policemen. Emerson, ‘Stanley internment camp’, pp. 171-174.

[70] Quotation cited in Endacott, Eclipse, p. 200. There is some dispute over the number of births. Statistics compiled by Selwyn-Clarke state 51. Dr P. S. Selwyn-Clarke (1946) Report on Medical and Health Conditions in Hong Kong, appendix 1, p. 19 (London: HMSO). But Emerson cites 46 and this is supported by Reverend Sandbach. Emerson, ‘Stanley internment camp’, p. 177; IWM, Sandbach transcript, p. 70. In addition, 22 marriages were conducted during internment, of which offspring were produced during confinement. Emerson, ‘Stanley internment camp’, p. 177.

[71] RHL, Gimson diary, 6 October 1943.

[72] Ibid., 11 November 1944; HKPRO, HKRS 163/DS1/80, discussions between Gimson and Dr Valentine, Camp Medical Officer, 15 November 1944.

[73] RHL, Gimson diary, 11 November 1944; HKPRO, HKRS 163/DS1/80, Surgical Board meeting between camp doctors, clergy and Gimson, 24 March 1945.

[74] HKPRO, HKRS 170/DS1/563, lists of births and deaths.

[75] PRO, CO 980/119, Colonial Office lists of internees in the Far East.

[76] Anslow diary, 30 July 1942. For her entries on the deaths of Oriana Barrow and Brian Gill see entries for 9 July 1942 and 9 May 1944; Emerson, ‘Stanley internment camp’, pp. 165-169.

[77] There were 27,596 POW deaths in the Far East of a total Allied population of 95,134. Roland, ‘Allied POWs’, p. 97. There were an estimated 20,000 British civilian internees in the Far East. Brooks, ‘Passive in war?’, p. 177.


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