



Celia's Story

Celia was born on 12 September 1938 in Meiktila, Burma. Her father worked for the British Government as 'Inspector of Post and Telegraphs'. Their family house was situated close to a British army camp so they felt secure, until the morning her father discovered the camp deserted. Celia, her parents and ten month old brother were in an air raid shelter when their house was bombed in April 1942, leaving them with nothing but the clothes they wore. As they tried to leave Burma via Myitkyina aerodrome the Japanese bombed the airfield causing massive casualties. Those of Celia's relatives who tried to escape by trekking through the jungle to India did not survive the journey (very few people did).

When they were captured, Celia's father was transferred to the former Military Police camp while she, her mother and brother were interned in what had been the Brother's School. This was where her baby brother died of dysentery.

The family were moved to Maymyo, via Sagaing and Mandalay. The women and children were interned in the British army barracks, and the men were put to work on the roads. During the day the women washed Japanese uniforms and bandages in a nearby river while Celia and the other children were looked after by the older women.

Several traumatic events remain seared in Celia's memory - most particularly the rape and brutal beatings the women were regularly subjected to, and the discovery of the body of her mother's friend after she had committed suicide. The shame of becoming pregnant after being used to 'entertain' Japanese officers had proved too much for her. Subsequently Celia's father rejoined the family, very weak and covered in bayonet wounds. The family were befriended by an English-speaking Japanese soldier who smuggled small quantities of food to them, and before leaving Maymyo to go to the fighting front, he gave Celia a white scarf which had been a gift to him from the women of his own family before he left Tokyo. The scarf was covered in red stitches and each stitch represented a blessing. He told Celia that the scarf would protect her. In June 1943 Celia's brother Winston was born, a defiant choice of name but a dangerous one, and he was known for the duration of the war as Vincent.

Celia credits the survival of the family to a shrewd decision of her father to volunteer for cooking duties for the Japanese officers. The rest of the family went with him and the children benefited from the spare scraps of food.

The British relieved the camp in March 1945. Celia's mother warned her not to speak of their terrible experiences for fear it would destroy any chance of a normal family life, also because she herself was tortured with shame at what had happened to her and could not bear to be reminded. For that reason Celia's story and that of her family remained untold until May 2000.



Celia as a young girl with her mother and her brother, Winston, taken on 6 October 1945



From Celia's Memoirs:

"I have written this because I feel it should be told, I owe it to my grandparents, my uncle, and my brother who all died at the hands of the Japs. I owe it to my father, who died some years after the war, broken in health and spirit, and who never recovered from the cruelties and privations meted out to him by our captors. I owe it to my mother, who nursed him continuously and tirelessly for the remainder of his life and who still has nightmares, waking at night, weeping and afraid. I owe it to the countless numbers who died in the camps, or afterwards, as a direct result of the way they were treated. I owe it to myself, for the childhood and innocence stolen from me. I owe it to future generations who deserve to know exactly what happened before the warped apologists and modish 'revisionists' change history to suit their own politics. Most of all I owe it to those wonderful men who risked and even sacrificed their lives to save mine."



Celia with her brother, Winston, in Mayamy, Burma, next to an Army lorry, 1946

"My very first clear memory is of being rushed into the shelter which was packed with people: my parents, my little brother (then ten months old), myself, all the servants and their families, and of course, two large Airedales. Of frighteningly loud bangs. Of the shelter collapsing. Of being pushed out into the fresh air, my brother thrust into my arms, and being told to hold him tightly while those who were still buried (including my father) were rescued. I sat, clutching Denny, both of us screaming in terror, and watching our house blaze. It had been bombed. That memory is etched on my brain. The date, according to my father's notes, was 12.4.42. . .

The next memory is of arriving at Myitkyina aerodrome on 26.4.42. It teemed with panicking humanity, children crying; couples clinging together; people pushing each other out of the way to get on the planes which were on the ground; someone shouting, 'Women and children only'; women pleading for their menfolk to be allowed on; belligerent men forcing their way on; planes taking off and landing; my father thrusting us towards the plane, my mother saying she wouldn't go without him. Then the Japanese bombers arrived, wave upon wave of them. They screamed low over us, machine gunning. Planes that had just taken off exploded in the sky, planes on the ground burst into flames. They strafed the screaming, running people. Utter, utter carnage. We ran towards some shrubs on the edge of the airfield. My father lay on top of me, my mother lay on top of my brother. Of all absurdities - my father had acquired one of those huge, multi-coloured golf umbrellas from heaven knows where - and opened it over us, presumably to protect us from bullets! We must have been such sitting ducks - I wonder why we survived?"



Inventory of the Donation

- Letter
- Recipe book from the 'Home Front' series, 'The Preservation of Fruit and Vegetables'
- Photographs
- Manuscript memoirs
- Tape recorded



The scarf covered in red stitches - each stitch representing a blessing - given to Celia by a friendly English-speaking Japanese soldier

From Celia's Memoirs:

"My father. . . kept a record of events, stitched securely in the covers of his Bible. He was permitted to keep it because, as a lay preacher, he was authorised to perform funeral services. Unfortunately these notes only cover the basic dates of events, the illnesses and deaths. He was very careful not to mention the ill treatment, the starvation, the despair, the degradation, the humiliation, this would have been a death sentence had it been discovered."

From Celia's Memoirs:

"My mother and the other women were marched several miles every day, with an escort, to a river (these memories still haunt my mother and reduce her to tears at the age of 85), there they stood waist-deep in the rushing water to wash filthy bandages, medical dressings and Japanese uniforms caked in blood. She remembers women being washed away during the monsoon floods, and the Japanese guards doing nothing to help them. She remembers bored guards watching the women, then selecting one and shouting, 'You!', and raping her. She remembers once passing a group of men pow's, my father among them, mending the road, and the screaming guards flailing around with their bayonets to prevent them speaking to each other."

"It was just after we came to this camp that the first of two particularly traumatic events occurred. A Jap soldier stamped into the big barracks room in which we were all crammed, pointed to my mother, shouted 'You!', and raped her right there, in front of us all. Afterwards he beat her about the head, then kicked her repeatedly when she fell, knocking her senseless. Her crime? She did not bow low enough when she thanked her 'master'. . . It was some time after Christmas that the other ugly event occurred. Visiting the benjo (the Japanese word for latrine), I found the body of my mother's close friend, Georgina, hanging from the rafter. She, along with other young women, had been taken away to 'entertain' the Japanese officers and returned to the camp when she became pregnant. The shame of her situation was too much for her and she had taken her own life. I rushed out shouting that 'Auntie Georgie was swinging in the benjo'. I watched as her body was brought out and laid on the ground. She was buried later that day by the other women in the camp. I was terrified of going to the latrine on my own after that."



From Celia's Memoirs:

"My father rejoined us. He had been badly ill-treated, was weak and ill and his body covered in bayonet wounds. He was also suffering from malaria and violent stomach pains. The reason for his ill-treatment was that he had some tattoos on his arms that the Japs objected to. One was of patriotic nature, the other was in Greek. Although he explained what it meant, they did not believe him and were convinced it was some kind of code. In fact it was my mother's name with the words 'True till death'. We were watched carefully. Suddenly and unexpectedly a group of soldiers would burst in on us hoping to catch my father at whatever they suspected him of. It was on one of these forays that Kato San came. He was most embarrassed to find my mother in labour. 'You've got clothes for the baby?' he asked in good English. 'Where would I get anything like that?' she replied. Later the same day he returned



Celia as a young girl just after the war

alone and pulled out a roll of new flannelette material from under his jacket. He returned many times and became a good friend, often bringing foodstuffs for us. He told us about his job as a teacher, and about his wife and children: his daughter was the same age as I, and his son had been born just before he left his home in Tokyo. He showed us photographs of them and wept ... He gave me a white scarf covered in hundreds of red stitches. Each stitch, he told me, was a blessing, made by his wife, his mother, his sister and other members of his family. He told me to keep it and remember him and remember that he wasn't a bad Nipponese. Some are not bad, he said, but had to fight for the Emperor."

Transcript of Audio Clip

Celia describes conditions in the camp and the tragic death of her baby brother:

We were put in The Brothers School and we didn't know where my father had been taken but we were all put outside in the yard and this was when the Japanese came along and they were taking everything away from people, wrenching the rings off their fingers and you know just taking everything that was of any value and I remember seeing my mother swallow her engagement ring. Wondering what on earth she was doing it for but she, she kept that and used it after the war to herself. That was when I think . . . probably the worst things happened because it was a bit frightening for a child to see all this happening - people being beaten because they didn't bow low enough and just being knocked around for their valuables and while we were at this place my little brother took ill, we were there I think for about 4 or 5 months. My little brother took ill with dysentery and he and my mother and I were taken to a hospital but there was no room. So we were sent back again and there was no medication. Well, we were given something but there wasn't much medication. So he literally just



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got worse and died but we were lucky in that somebody got a message to my father. A Dr Stewart. I know the name because it was in my father's Bible. A Dr Stewart fetched my father and he was with us when my brother died. He was 13 months old and I remember particularly that it was a little green box they buried him in and I don't know why that sticks in my mind and he was buried under a tree. My mother has said many times since that she would love to go back simply to find the place where he was buried but I suppose that is really quite unlikely that she would find the place after all this time.