

Our Christmas, 1942 in Palembang Japanese Internment Camps

(From Chapter 8, 'By Eastern Windows', by William McDougall (American journalist, Sumatran internee and later, priest)).



The Women's Camp crowned a low hill on the outskirts of Palembang. Every day our working party of fifty men passed within a few hundred yards of it on the hike from jail to the camp we were building for ourselves.

In pre-war Palembang, what was now the Women's Camp had been a group of fourteen medium-sized houses comprising a compact little residential section of Dutch families. The Japanese had strung barbed wire around the hill and turned the area into an internment camp, packing in women and children forty to a house and ten to a garage. Between the lower houses and the barbed wire fence was a low retaining wall and an open space where women gathered daily to wave and to call to the working party as it hiked past...

The day before Christmas I marched out with the working party. As usual we began to wave and shout when in sight of the Women's Camp. But the women were silent, standing motionless in the open space...Their stillness silenced us. We slowed to a halt and asked each other, in whispers, what was wrong?

The answer came in song. Across the no-man's land which separated us sounded the melody of "Come All Ye Faithful" Our guards were as astonished as we and let us stand there listening. The music softened on the second song, "Silent Night, Holy Night", and grew stronger on the third, a Dutch carol. Leading the singers was a woman in the habit of a nun. Her arm rose and fell, as though waving a baton...

We walked, moving quietly and slowly in order to hear those voices as long as possible...

On the day after Christmas we reciprocated the women's serenade. Father Bakker led his choir out as members of the working party. When within earshot of the Women's Camp, the choir began to sing, first a verse in Dutch then a verse in English, "Come All Ye Faithful". The women were waiting, standing silently in the open space between their houses and the fence...

"Come All Ye Faithful" was followed by "Silent Night, Holy Night". The Women's Camp was no longer in sight when the song ended but the choir swung into another melody, for singers knew the women could hear them still and would be listening even after the last note died.

In the Christmas issue of Camp News, my own thoughts were summarized by saying: "Past Christmases were happier, we admit. But this Christmas need not be sad or gloomy. How lucky we are to be here and not at the bottom of the Bangka Straits (where many were sunk) or in the Indian Ocean or prisoners in certain other concentration camps. For there are worse. We have reason to smile today. We are in good health; we are not starved; we are not cold. We are not being bombed or shelled or machine-gunned. Truly this is a wonderful Christmas because we are not among the maimed or dead. We are alive!"

Seldom have I appreciated Christmas more than that day as a war prisoner in a jail beside Sumatra's Moesi River, two degrees south of the equator. Different as was that Christmas to all of us, there was about it something which brought us closer to the real significance of the day than many of us had ever been. We had Christmas in our hearts, instead of on an electrically lighted tree or in gaudily wrapped packages from a department store.

