

Internee Margo Tonkin Shiels

Excerpts from her 1999 book, **Bends in the Road**, by Margo Shiels

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Margo's father was a British businessman in Shanghai, China. He was evacuating his family by ship when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.

Evacuation

Towards the end of 1941 the Japanese tightened their control of occupied China and my father's business came to a standstill. The British government began to repatriate their citizens from China after emptying Hong Kong of all but essential Britons to service the colony.

My father felt it was time for us to make the break and applied for repatriation to Australia. We were given a choice of country and Dad thought a new country far from the war zone of Europe would be a good start. During this time I had commenced my Senior Cambridge examination. This test was classed as the matriculation exam for every pupil living in any part of the British Empire or in any British school. It commenced at the same time whether we sat in Shanghai, India or Cyprus. I had just completed my French Oral when we were advised that our berths were on the "Anhui" arriving in Shanghai from Tiensin in two days.

The "Ahhui", a British owned coastal steamer, was commissioned by the British government for evacuation of its nationals. The Captain and officers were British or European and the crew Chinese or Indian. The flurry of packing and disposal of excess household effects and treasures was quite traumatic. "What am I allowed to take?" I was sorry to leave my library of books, years of presents from various aunts and my collection of sewing boxes from lacquered ones to basketry. Fortunately my parents were able to locate a buyer to take over our apartment lease and furniture.

We boarded the "Anhui" off the Bund with my friend Peggie Clements waving us goodbye. We made contact after the war through the Red Cross but we did not meet for a happy reunion in London until 1972. Only British subjects could board the "Anhui". There were many women with children boarding as well as a contingent of Sikhs with their flowing beards and turbans. They were part of the International Settlement Police force. The vessel's destination was Calcutta, India. We were to be off-loaded at Singapore to continue our journey to Australia.

We arrived in Hong Kong December 6th, my parent's wedding anniversary, so we celebrated lunching at the Hong Kong hotel. We had to embark by 4 pm as all ships had to clear the harbor by 6 pm. That night outside of Hong Kong waters we were intercepted by a Japanese cruiser whose Captain checked our identity and destination. To reach Singapore our Captain was directed to travel via the Palawan Islands in the southern Philippines. The Japanese army stationed in south China was poised to enter Indochina and our Captain was advised to give that coast a wide berth.

Early the next day we were alerted by the Captain's voice over the loudspeaker:

“Attention, attention! We just been informed that Pearl Harbor was attacked by Japanese fighters and bombers at dawn this morning. The United States has declared war on Japan. This means I shall make for the nearest port, which is Manila. In the meantime I am organizing all the men on board for lookout duties. A roster will be posted on the notice board in the main saloon. I also urge all passengers to keep their life jackets with them at all times. I shall advise you of any further developments. Meanwhile please keep calm. Thank you.”

The rest of the day saw everyone, apprehensive men, women and children, scanning the empty horizon, well aware of the Japanese cruiser somewhere in the distance. We were very edgy and talked in whispers as if the enemy might hear us. A total blackout of the ship was instigated and all were loath to leave the deck and return to their cabins.

As we entered Manila Bay we heard a loud explosion behind us and saw a wisp of smoke on the horizon. Did the Japanese cruiser claim an unfortunate victim? We hoped not. Suddenly there was a flurry of activity and fear. To the north a wave of Japanese fighter planes came flying low over the bay followed by a second formation of planes strafing and bombing all the shipping in the harbor.

A ship to our right, the “Sagoland”, sustained a direct hit on the bridge, killing the Captain. It burned all night. The “Marshal Joffre” caught on fire. With a feeling of jittery trepidation, we watched the individual planes roar over us. Plumes of water rose of both sides of our ship where dropped bombs missed us. There was no panic because everything happened too quickly.

With each flight we pressed closer to the cold hard steel side of the deck to keep out of sight in case of strafing. Fortunately we were spared. However we had our excitement. One of the Chinese stewards panicked and jumped overboard and at the height of the attack the crew were trying to “fish” him up. Another steward ran around the main deck offering everyone a tot of brandy to anyone who caught his eye-----in between dosing himself.

Once the raid was over, and the last plane made its way north, it was with nervous anticipation I looked forward to the next stage of our experience. A feeling of adventure, an exciting thrust into the unknown gripped me. Having had a comfortable and relatively safe childhood, danger was something I could not foresee. I looked forward to the change in the direction that my life was to take.

The Captain must have felt anxious to escape the responsibility for passenger safety. He asked us to pack a change of clothing in an overnight bag and on December 10th, 1941, we were put ashore at the first available empty pier. He assured us we would return to the ship as soon as he received his company orders to sail.

We were led to believe it was only for one night. But the Captain had received orders to leave immediately for Australia. He did just that, taking the rest of our luggage with him. It would not be until 1945 that we finally caught up to our belongings. The Captain had been unable to transfer the Sikh Passengers ashore at Manila so they were fortunate in being aboard to sail with the ship to Australia.

After our landing in Manila, British snobbery came into play. The British born evacuees insisted on separating themselves from the acquired British nationals and colonials. Many of the women with children were European or Asian wives of British businessmen. I was sent with the British-born to the Caloocan Golf course. My father and Bill, unwilling to be separated from my mother, were dispatched with the rest to the Holy Ghost convent in Manila.

The Japanese landed at Lingayen and all the American troops were deployed north. The systematic bombing of northern Luzon began. My parents insisted I join them at the convent and all the Holy Ghost group were transferred to Sulphur Springs, a spring resort on the outskirts of Quezon City, an outer suburb of Manila.

Santo Tomas Internment camp

The war reached Manila. Daily the wail of the air-raid sirens and the chatter of anti-aircraft guns could be heard as Japanese planes flew overhead. Most days a heavy pall of smoke covered parts of the city as fuel tanks and abandoned ships in the harbor were set alight to prevent them falling into Japanese hands. On December 26th General MacArthur declared Manila, a city that would not be defended by the retreating American soldiers. He hoped in this way to prevent its destruction. He and his staff fled to Corregidor where his famous statement "I shall return" was promised before he escaped on a PT boat.

While we were waiting for the arrival of the main Japanese army, there was no one to keep law and order. A certain amount of looting by the local Filipinos went on. To protect the young women in our group in case of attack and rape, we were each armed with the top of a broken beer bottle. The jagged end was to be used as a weapon. The Japanese entered Manila on January 1, 1942 and we were officially interned on the 3rd. It was Bill's eleventh birthday and I had turned seventeen. All the local American and British citizens had to report to Santo Tomas University, a huge stone edifice built by the Spanish in 1608.



Santo Tomas University was converted to an internment camp by the Japanese. Note the dozens of shanties around the main building.

We were allowed to remain in Sulphur Springs under certain restrictions. After the fear and tension of the previous month it was quite pleasant with sufficient food and space.

Japanese Army trucks arrived on February 21, 1942 to take us to Santo Tomas, now the main internment camp. There we were registered and separated, men in one dormitory and women in another.

Santo Tomas, a university located within the city, consisted of the large Main building where my mother and I were housed, the Education Building, where my father and Bill had their beds and two annexes within a 20-hectare block.

Women with children under ten were assigned to one annex and the other was converted into a hospital wing. Two areas of the grounds were set aside for internees, as we were called, who had sufficient means to build a wooden shanty to house themselves during the day. The rest of the land was used for a football or hockey field and several basketball courts.

There were 38 women in Room 52-A, mostly women from Sulphur Springs, although there were a few women who had lived in Manila. We grouped and chose beds closest to our particular friends. The women ranged in age from 16 to 60 years. I was seventeen. It was an education for me to meet people from all walks of life. Living at such close quarters we had to learn to overlook people's personal traits and habits.

Most women kept their bedding and meagre personal belongings tidy. Yet others were quite disgusting in their habits. One lady in particular had a tin she used for an ashtray when she could purchase cigarettes. She spat in it and left bits of food in it that sometimes bred maggots. Warnings did not deter her.

A particular roommate was Elfrida Medina. Part Portugese and part British; an attractive and lively girl of 23 years. Frida became the unofficial leader of our set of younger members in the room. A kind person, she was always full of homely advice. She taught us a theme song that we whistled or hummed in passing or when working with each other:

Remember, love and near in mind
That constant love is hard to find.
And when you meet one kind and true
Never change the old one for the new.

Frances Costain, a Canadian, was married to a merchant ship Captain stationed in north China. She was returning home to Vancouver when her ship was bombed in Manila Bay. An interesting person, she had many stories about her forbears and their dealings with the local Red Indian tribes.

Ansie Lee had joined us at Sulphur Springs, She had been the private secretary to George Donald. The famous Donald came to China as an Australian journalist and became a special advisor to Chiang Kai-shek on foreign Affairs. A personal friend of the Kai-sheks, he was invited to write Madame Kai-sheks' biography. Donald and Ansie Lee were returning to China from his home in New Zealand with the partly completed manuscript. Unfortunately their ship was caught in Manila.

Having been very anti-Japanese in sentiment and in his dealings with them, the Japanese had a price on his head. He stayed in anonymity with our group of internees until we were rescued from Los Baños by the Americans. By personal request of Chiang Kai-shek he was flown out and hospitalized in Honolulu where he died soon after. A gentle quiet girl, Ansie spent her spare time caring for the needs of her employer.

Helen Hinkler, an American missionary teacher, was among the few people in Room 52A who had lived in the Philippines before the Japanese invasion. She taught elementary school classes for the

duration of her time in Santo Tomas.

We were each allocated a bed made from floorboards and a thin fibre mattress. Mosquito nets strung over ropes on each side of the room worked well enough to keep the flying mossies and beetles out. But the bedbugs used the netting as highways from one bed to another. Our first exercise each morning was to squash bedbugs hiding in the grooves of the boards. Each of us was allotted twelve square metres, which gave us knee space between beds.

Our sanitary facilities were totally inadequate. One shower for fifty women and no water half the time. Every time we showered we shared with as many as could stand under it. But just as we soaped ourselves with our weekly ration of a three centimetre square of soap the water would go off! We had five wash basins for the 350 women on that floor. Toilets were a main concern with an average of 31 people per unit. Woe if someone contracted diarrhea or Santo Tomas stomach and the line was long! Men were organized to clean the bathroom fixtures twice daily, at which time the place would be emptied. One day a woman did not rush her toiletries and some of the men became impatient. "Hurry up, we have other bathrooms to do."

Finally she emerged and with a coy smile said "You should have come in. You know, we women have been here so long we've lost our sense of shame."

"Well" explained the cleaner." We men have been here so long we've lost our sense of curiosity."

Food was adequate at the beginning as the Philippine Red Cross had been feeding the camp of 4,000. In the early stages outside Filipino vendors were permitted to bring their wares to sell at the fence to those with money. As time progressed, supplies and American money dwindled so this venue of extra food petered out. In July the Japanese took over the financing of the camp and limited the cost of feeding to forty centavos per person per day. We were rationed to two meals per day, one at 9 am and one at 5 pm.

Rice and beans were the main staples. I had never realized the variety of beans that could be eaten... haricot, kidney, black-eyed Susie, lima. You name another and we had it. Meat was scarce, mostly carabao (water buffalo) introduced in stews. Fish was served but the last straw was baskets of fish the size of sardines that the kitchen detail could do nothing but boil and serve them up as stewed fish. We just spat out the bones.

The only sugar we saw was unrefined sugar syrup poured into moulds and let harden. Everything from straw to cockroaches fell into it. We broke off pieces, as we required it. That too did not last. Sugar went off the menu at the end of the first year.

During 1942, the first year of operation, Santo Tomas University camp was supervised by Japanese civilians. But they made it clear that no dissension or disruption among the internees would be tolerated. If it occurred the Japanese military would take command. An executive committee of internees was elected by the internees in a democratic ballot to operate the camp and the needs of the population as internees from outlying communities were brought in.

A series of rules were designed to keep a semblance of law and order. These rules were passed onto a monitor for each floor level in every building. They in turn were responsible to deliver them to each room monitor. Annually every internee voted for a new monitor and committee.

Pilfering or refusing to help with assigned work details, such as cleaning toilets, picking out weevils from the daily rice rations or weeding the camp vegetable gardens became a punishable offence. Able-bodied adults who refused to work were told to choose between work, or starving. My father was on a "cleaning the floor" roster but later worked in the camp gardens. My mother worked in the dining sheds at the back of the main building cleaning our rice and bean supplies.

Because of our ages, Bill and I found it easier to adjust to daily life in the stultifying atmosphere of the camp. I did not realize how hard it was for my parents. They had already lived through the last months in Shanghai, Manila Harbor bombing, capture by the Japanese and now internment camp with its lack of facilities, food and privacy. We were always hungry and my mother, as like most parents, kept part of her rations to share with Bill and me. Her health deteriorated rapidly.

The hardest blow to our pride was the requirement to bow to every Japanese soldier who happened to cross our path. Often we would try to retreat before making eye contact. If caught, an aggressive shove by the guard and we were forced to bend facing the ground and our back stiff.

A nightly curfew was rigidly kept with people punished if they were found outside the buildings. At first it was 7 pm to 6 am and it was restrictive to be confined inside while still daylight outside. However after a few months of petitions by the executive committee, the curfew was reduced from 10 pm to 6 am. That was better and allowed husbands housed in different buildings to spend evenings with their wives. By this time the younger internees had matched up with boy and girl friends and it was a happy time to sit and listen to the music broadcast over the public address system loudspeaker. "Day is Done" was the signal to return to our respective buildings.

Soon after our arrival I met Roger Schade, a warm-hearted friendly young American. He accompanied Warren Rosier when Warren visited Frida Medina, one of my roommates. Our birthdays were a week apart, we were interested in the same things and became close friends. Living and working in Manila before the war, Roger's parents were also interned. Listening to the evening music in the front quadrangle became a regular occurrence and soon we were classed as a pair. We had our individual jobs so our days were always busy. I worked in the hospital serving patients their meals. Roger was an orderly (mop swinger) in the infirmary. Later he was assigned to Miss MacMillan, a Rockefeller Foundation therapist, to help with the heavier physical treatment of her patients.

Apart from the menial daily tasks in the camp, the executive committee arranged, with Japanese approval, a series of educational classes from elementary to college level. There were many missionary teachers among the internees so regular school classes were organized. Bill attended secondary and I nominated for a few subjects in the college group. The University library was made available to the students but there was always a shortage of paper and pencils. During the day classes were held in all sorts of convenient places away from the people. Most of the teachers were from universities in the Philippines. After the war their accreditation was recognized by the universities on mainland United States.

In between my work duties I attended English, American History, Economics and Shorthand classes. Roger had college classes, which left only the evenings free for us to spend together. The college group that Roger and I were part of called themselves the Class of '47. We hoped to graduate in 1947 either at Santo Tomas or the United States.

Over my growing years I had often suffered from infected tonsils. It seemed my father delighted in

“painting” them with a home remedy of glycerin and iodine. The first month in Santo Tomas saw me at the clinic, again with infected tonsils. Bill had the same infection. The Japanese were still lenient with the internees and medical supplies still available. We were both sent to St. Luke’s Hospital in Manila to have them removed. A few months later my mother became ill. I was allowed to accompany her to that hospital where I stayed for a week under strict orders to never leave the grounds. My father later was given permission to join her and I was returned to Santo Tomas.

My mother needed a long recuperative period and we were unsure where our parents had been taken. Later we were told, under pressure from the Philippine Red Cross, Sulphur Springs was opened for long term patients. It was allowed to operate for one year when all patients, including my mother and father, were returned to Santo Tomas.

While my parents were away, Bill was transferred to Mr. Leake’s room in the Education building for single, parentless boys. The structure still retained his pre-war name. Mr. Bertram Godfrey Leake was an American Boy Scout commissioner and was appointed by the Camp Executive to devote special attention to problems of interned youngsters. Bill fell out of a tree and broke his arm shortly after our parents’ departure. The camp doctor bandaged it with a bamboo splint. Plaster of Paris was not available in camp.

The arm finally healed but Bill has a raised bone above the wrist to this day. After the war my parents consulted a specialist to correct it. He advised them not to weaken the arm further by resetting it. Frida Medina kept a watchful eye on all my doings while my parents were away. Roger also was a wonderful support as I discussed all my worries and fears in a loving atmosphere.

Sports were organized and I joined a softball and basketball team. I loved playing softball. Being an American game I had not before had the opportunity to play this sport and I found I had an aptitude for it. I was also asked to form a college basketball team that we named the “Giants”. I was Captain and played centre. I preferred this game to the netball we knew in Shanghai. It was a lot faster and not as disciplined. I played hockey during the short winter months---- left inner was my favourite position. The games were fun while we were still fit enough. But as more and more of us suffered from malnutrition, we could no longer participate.

The first Christmas came and 800 comfort kit parcels arrived from South Africa to be divided among the 4,000 of us. A numeral value was placed on every tin. One tin of corned beef equaled two tins of vegetables. Unfortunately the cigarette packets had a V-for Victory sign. It was a good excuse for the Japanese to confiscate them for their own use. Two more consignments of comfort kits were received and divided among the internees over the next two years, one a small delivery from Canada and a large one from the United States. The latter included seersucker nighties for the women and “jodhpur” shorts for the men. They looked like that with extra wide sides. A pair of brown lace-up shoes for each person, which fell apart soon after. We found the soles were compressed cardboard painted over! Men were recruited from Santo Tomas, the Baguio Camp and Bataan POW camps to unload the kits from the Red Cross ship. They were instructed not to talk to any other prisoners under the penalty of death. One man spotted a stranger on the wharf and tried to attract his attention to ask him how his camp was faring. After a lot of maneuvering, he dodged a couple of Japanese guards and finally cornered the fellow:

“ How are they treating you?”

“ Not too bad at this stage----- could do with more food.”

“ Yes, we are having the same trouble.”

“ By the way, which camp are you from?”

“ Santo Tomas.”

“ That’s funny. So am I!”

Plays and shows were allowed on special occasions on the permanent stage built on the quadrangle in front of the main building. A skit with carols was arranged for the first Christmas. I teased my American friends when Bill, myself and another English girl were asked by Reverend Nolting to be part of a Christmas play about a typical American family. Most of the entertainment was first class as professional actors and night club entertainers were interned with us. The college group was involved in skits several times which was fun. A member of the committee previewed each show to make sure that the Japanese staff, sitting in the front row, would not be offended.

At the beginning of our internment the chief means of communication among the internees was the camp newspaper, it was staffed by professional journalists detained by the war. It was issued weekly to each room with the latest orders and directives from the Japanese and the Executive Committee. As supplies of paper and ink diminished we had to rely on the public address system and our room monitor.

The public address system loud speaker was good. Each morning the Andrews sisters would sing us awake with “good morning, good morning, we’ve danced the whole night through.” Then their voices would be cut off with an abrupt series of orders issued in Japanese to the camp guards. Throughout the day any specific order or summons for the camp or guards would be announced over the system.

At 8 pm every Friday the sanitation and health committee gave a short broadcast encouraging internees to take part in camp cleanliness such as “clean mosquito net week” and “air the bedding week.” One week a junior “Swat-the-Fly Club” was organized. Prizes were offered for the three children who destroyed the greatest number of flies. This helped with the awareness of the fly menace. My brother Bill remembered being part of that club,

Rumours ran rife the first few months at Santo Tomas. A little war news filtered through with any outside contacts permitted to enter the camp, such as a Philippines Red Cross official. By the time these “bulletins” reached the widening audience of hopeful listeners, the distorted stories had a victorious United States on our doorsteps. As with other internment and POW camps there were prohibited makeshift radios among the internees. But I did not come in contact with any owners.

Clothes were a major problem as we were allowed only one change of clothing on leaving the “Anhui”. The British Red Cross in Manila supplied us with second-hand clothing and various lengths of material which we transformed into wearable apparel. Slacks developed into chic shorts or pedal pushers while the cut-off pieces became patches. The odd shaped scraps and patches appliquéd on shirts, skirts or shorts covered a multitude of tears and holes. Sewing thread was hard to obtain so my father’s cotton socks were unraveled and used as thread. Joining patches together was the next logical step and we added an extra skirt or shirt to our wardrobe. With the tropical sun bleaching our clothes, the rage was to embroider friends’ signatures on our shirts.

Kimonos and housecoats were very limited and in Room 52A six of us shared the same one any time

any of us needed to leave the room at night. The most adaptable fashions in camp came off cones of grocers' string donated by the Philippine Red Cross. Knitting needles and crochet hooks worked from these cones producing socks, sweaters, turbans and even bras. Our undies were mostly G-strings.

Male internees whittled, and then polished, coconut or bamboo to produce buttons, buckles, clips and even earrings. Roger kept me supplied with a variety of polished coconut shell buttons. Shoes eventually wore out and were replaced by wooden "bakias." Platform styled, some with intricate carving to lighten them, with leather scraps or woven hemp forming the straps across the toes. My brother Bill made me a plaited rope sole shoe with a canvas top.

The Philippines was and still is a religious country. Many missionaries worked their various fields of religion. The Philippines had been conquered by the Spanish in the 1600s so Roman Catholicism predominated. However Protestant groups too were busy, The Catholic internee community was given a small chapel on the grounds. A quiet enclosure at the side of the Main building, which became known as "The Fathers' Garden" was to be shared by all the Protestant ministers for their services. The enclosure was also a good place for anyone needing a quiet sanctuary. It was Bill's and my lunch spot where we shared our beans or bread roll. This was the only daily time we spent together while our parents were not in the camp with us. We all had our favorite preacher whether he was Lutheran, Presbyterian, Baptist, Episcopalian, or whatever. It was an eye-opener for me to see so many religions and sects represented.

There was dear Mrs, Warner, sent by some southern state of the US to "convert the heathens." As we lined up for our meals, she would stand near the server and preach a sermon on all the "hell and damnation" punishments in store for non-believers and then nimbly jump into the line at the end of the serving to collect her rations. I noticed one religion in particular, called Christian Science. The loving members closely followed the teachings of Jesus Christ. I was very interested and it made a lasting impression.

Towards the beginning of 1943 the Japanese were suffering a few setbacks. They had lost the Battle of the Coral Sea the previous year and their army was bogged down in New Guinea on their drive to Australia. True to Admiral Tojo's message "A victorious army can afford to be magnanimous" the opposite now applied. Conditions were tightened and the military administration prepared to take over the running of the camp. They planned to build a new camp at Los Baños with the intention of transferring Allied internees away from Manila.

Los Baños was an agricultural college, adjunct to the University of the Philippines, about 160 kilometers south of Manila on the shores of a lake. It had the grounds and a water supply. Eight hundred young men were conscripted to leave in May 1943 to help build the camp. There was great consternation because the men did not want to leave their families at Santo Tomas. The names of single and young married men were dumped into a barrel, names drawn and the men conscripted.

Roger was in this lot, as were most of our college group of boys. We were devastated. By now we were very much in love with each other. The only consolation was that my parents, Bill and I would eventually be relocated to Los Baños. Departure day, May 14th, 1943 finally came and we were awakened to the "Tiger Rag Bugle Call" at 5 am. Japanese army trucks arrived to convey the boys to the new location. Later we were told that the three-and-a-half hour ride in closed metal box cars in 45 degree Celsius (113 degrees Fahrenheit) heat with no drinking water or toilet facilities nearly spelt their demise.

Life in Santo Tomas continued with more restrictions by the military especially with the food. By June 1943 my parents were returned to our camp and it was a happy reunion. They had been away a whole year. The transport driver, carrying supplies between Santo Tomas and Los Baños managed to conceal and deliver little love notes between Roger and myself as well as many other couples. That helped lighten the waiting time.

A typhoon hit Manila in November 1943. Luckily it arrived during the day although it continued to blow all night. The shanties and dining sheds at Santo Tomas collapsed, trees and branches snapped and the rain pelted down. Water from the Pasig River flooded the grounds and buildings. Internees on the ground floor and all their salvageable belongings moved up the building to whatever space was available.

I was working at the hospital kitchen and had to wade through waist deep waters to report for duty. Sewage, worms, empty tin cans and other rubbish floated by. Life was chaotic for a few days- no electricity or clean water. Bucket brigades were formed to flush the toilets and water had to be boiled for drinking. The kitchen staff struggled to feed the 4,000 internees. We were very thankful when the sun finally shone through the clouds. Clothes, mattresses and pillows were spread outside the buildings in the sunlight to dry and air.

The number of internees at Santo Tomas did not diminish with the transfer to Los Baños. Small groups of Allied people captured in the outlying islands such as Iloilo, Cebu and Mindanao were brought in to Santo Tomas.

The third relief supplies from the American Red Cross arrived in time for the second Christmas. They were needed as the daily cereal ration was cut to 400 grams per person per day. Cracked wheat was substituted when rice was unavailable. The cereals were so full of grit, weevils and worms that special work details were organized to sort and remove the "fresh meat." Malnutrition affected all internees. There were cases of beriberi, dysentery and deficiency disorders. By January 1944, after two years of internment, nearly 200 people had died.

Los Baños Internment Camp

The second transfer of 200 Santo Tomas internees to Los Baños took place December 10, 1943. It included single women and wives of the original conscripted men but no families. Frida Medina and many of the single women from 52A volunteered to go.

Enough barracks at Los Baños were completed by April 1944 to house another 500 internees so families with children over 10 were asked to volunteer to transfer to Los Baños. My parents decided we should go. There were more chances for families to live together. It did not take us long to pack our meager possessions plus one plate, mug, fork and knife per person. Eight hundred and fifty of us were bundled into closed Japanese army trucks and driven to our destination three and a half hours away.

Rows of sawali and bamboo barracks greeted us on our arrival. Sawali is bamboo split thinly and then woven for mats, walls and siding. A few completed barracks had concrete or raised bamboo floors but the rest of the barracks floors were packed dirt. Each barrack housed about 98 people and was divided into cubicles. Our cubicle was large enough for four bunks. Roger was waiting to greet us and help make us comfortable. He hinged and folded up two bunks, so my parents, Bill and I had more space during the day.

We had more space but in some ways the new quarters were worse. Santo Tomas buildings were constructed of stone and concrete and the water supply was ample. The Los Baños nipa thatched roofs leaked and the sawali walls rotted with the first prolonged rain. Of course the insects, especially the mosquitoes and bed-bugs were always present. The barracks were built in pairs, about 12 metres wide and 45 metres long. Each pair was joined by a combination washhouse and toilets. Each wash house, one for women and the adjoining one for men, contained 6 showers and a wash trough with 6 taps

The toilet facilities consisted of a long flat board with 6 holes covered with lids. Below the plank was a metal-lined concrete trough with a 5-degree incline to a septic tank to the rear of the barrack. At regular intervals water from a tank at the high end of the trough would flush the trough. The pressure of the sudden water release would send it gushing upwards when it hit a "dam" creating a very unpleasant sensation for anyone using the toilet at that time. So whenever the water would flush as many as 6 bottoms would rise as one in a personal salute to the camp. There was no such thing as privacy. "If you want privacy, shut your eyes" was the watchword for any Los Baños activity.

A bamboo fence was built in July separating a small area of the camp. It segregated our main camp from an influx of 500 internees brought in over a period of several months. They were Protestant clergy and families, Roman Catholic priests, nuns and other missionaries. The Japanese had allowed them to remain free under restrictive conditions but now they were ordered to join their nationals in the internment camp. The newcomers were isolated so they could not pass outside news to us. We called their section "The Holy City (editor's note: or the Vatican) and then they named our camp "Hell's Hole". We were pleased to see the "Walls of Jericho"---- the bamboo fence---- eventually come down and we could mingle freely.

The fourth and last transfer of 150 internees from Santo Tomas to Los Baños occurred December 5th 1944. The Japanese ran out of time to complete their program of transferring all Allied prisoners away from Manila.

For me the first three months in Los Baños were the best of times. Roger and I spent all our free time together. Being in the country there was a little more food available. Major Tanaka, the commandant, allowed us more freedom. We still had our work details, our daily roll calls where we had to "bow" in unison and two meals a day. However the Class of '47 managed to stage public debates for the entertainment of the whole camp. I was on one debating team when the topic was "Resolved: that as a whole the members of the Class of '47 have benefited more from the experience of internment than if there had been no war in the Pacific." Arguing in the affirmative were Barbara Coleman (Captain), Juanita Fernandez and Sally Nichols. On the negative side was myself (Captain), Helen Johns and Patricia Brambles. Interesting to note that all three of us on the negative side were British. We lost by a narrow margin.

A dance organized for the Class of '47 was a highlight on the tennis court behind the gym. I managed to borrow an evening gown that had been stored all this time. Most of the girls had improvised ballroom gowns from odd scraps of curtain material and old dresses. We set our hair in rag curlers. All the boys looked smart in their begged or borrowed slacks and jackets. Music was provided over the loudspeaker from the few records still available. It was a lovely memorable night finishing off with Artie Shaw's "Stardust" just before the night curfew.

A banquet for the 35 of us was held June 17th, 1944. The food had been saved over two weeks and the kitchen crew kindly cooked for us --- fried rice, corned beef, sweet potato, ground corn cake and "coffee" made from burned peanuts. Frank Mortlock, the class adviser, presented each member of the

class a memento, a small coconut-shell with '47 neatly engraved on it. Unfortunately I lost mine in the camp evacuation.

Another surprise announcement by Mr. Mortlock was that a scholarship fund had been promised by him, Mr. Calhoun, the chairman of the executive committee and a number of other people.

There would be three university scholarships of \$2,500. One for a British student and two for Americans, reflecting the proportion of each group in the college class. A very generous offer, that was implemented after the war.

The last function for the closing of the first year of the Class of '47 was a derivation of the word "freshman". An improvised stage of about 6 metres wide by 3 metres deep had been constructed on a framework of a few lengths of irrigation pipe borrowed from the camp gardens. A large white sheet was draped across the back of the stage with the sign "FROSH FROLICS CLASS OF '47". We all had a part in the show and, even if I say so, the performances were very professional.

That was the end of the better times. Major Tanaka, the commandant, was replaced by Major Iwanaki. Warrant Officer Konishi took over as supply officer. Konishi was in charge of purchasing food, maintaining accounts for supplies and money and distributing the food from the commissariat to the internee kitchens. He hated Americans with a consuming passion and vowed "they would be eating dirt before he was through with them." He felt they were getting too much to eat and he told them repeatedly that food supplies were not available and the ration should be reduced. His first official action at Los Baños was to cut the ration by a fifth. In September 1944 the ration was 400 grams per day. By January 1945 the ration was 150 grams of unhusked rice per day.

Now we experienced the saddest episode of our camp life---- Burt Fonger's funeral. People were dying around us but it had never been one of our age group. Burt, aged 20, was Roger's closest friend. They had attended school together and were in the same pre-war Boy Scout troop. In camp Burt was always in the forefront of every college activity and one of the main stars in the "Frosh Frolics". Always cheerful, he would often be lending a helping hand to someone.

His job was to start and stoke the kitchen fires at 3 am in readiness for cooking the camp breakfasts. Mosquitoes were thick after dark as the camp was near swamps of the Laguna de Bay area. Malaria was a hazard of the tropics and we were all aware of the danger of mosquito bites. Poor Burt contracted a virulent form of malaria and did not recover. A guard of honour was formed by his stunned and saddened friends. He was buried to the strains of "Ave Maria" by Grace Nash on her violin.

As the months wore on, food and survival became our preoccupation. We traded any jewelry we had to the Japanese guards for food, the food they were supposed to provide us as part of our ration. The last three months we were eating what we called "The Three Gravies." The daily edible meat ration had declined to five grams per person. The meat stew consisted of about ten kilograms of water buffalo meat and water to feed the 2,000+ of us. Enough water was added to the rice (4/5ths water to 1/5th rice) and boiled into a whitish paste. The natives called it "lugao."

Greens as vegetable contained anything edible such as tomato leaves, sweet potato vines and edible weeds boiled to a pulp. All this time Konishi was thinking up different ways to harass the internees. He took food grown in the camp garden by the internees and gave it to the guards. Then he confiscated a new shipment of seeds so no more vegetables could be grown. One day he turned back the miserable

meat ration at the gate because it had arrived late. Another day Konishi dumped a truckload of fruit and vegetables on the roadway in the hot sun. He invited us to help ourselves late that afternoon to pick over, by then a fly-blown putrid pile of garbage. But the hardest deprivation during that last year was the confiscation of salt, especially in the tropics.

My arms and legs became ulcerated with open sores. They were wrapped in clean rags (there no bandages) to keep the flies off and kept moist with boric acid and water. To keep the bed dry, cellophane was found and wrapped around my limbs. I made a crackling noise every time I moved. Bill tried to crack open a coconut and a piece of shell scratched his eyeball. It developed into a large ulcer and he was blind for a month. So we both landed in the camp hospital. No work equaled no food so other internees shared their rations with us.

In early October 1944 a misfortune of a more personal nature struck Roger and me. Three people were to be transferred back to Santo Tomas and Roger was given the job to escort them. So it was with a sad heart that we bid each other farewell. The four left in the company of an armed Japanese soldier. We could hear explosions and heavy firing in the background. To our delight Roger and his companions returned that evening. Apparently American planes had bombed a railway junction nearby and the trains were cancelled. However early the next morning another sad farewell, the party was gone and we did not meet again for fifty years.

Rumours, rumours and we had our share of them over the three years. When there is hope, there is always some optimistic story to boost the morale of the teller. By now Americans planes were flying overhead daily. The perimeter of our camp was shortened and guards on duty increased. On Sunday January 7, 1945, the morning began as usual. We were all making our way to the front of the barrack for our morning rollcall. There we were told that the Japanese soldiers had withdrawn during the night.

It was announced that at 11:50 pm, the previous night, Mr. Gray, one of the executive committee, was awakened by Corporal Ono with the request that every shovel in camp, both private and camp-owned, be turned over to the Japanese army before 1 am. Forty-seven shovels were accumulated and delivered to the Commandant's office. At 3 am the Commandant asked the whole executive committee appear at his office. The Japanese were busy packing their belongings. The Commandant stated he would release the internees from his charge at 5 am. They would leave provisions, which in his estimate should last two months, measured by the starvation ration the internees were receiving.

By 6 am the Japanese staff and guards were gone. We were later told all Japanese army personnel were recalled to block the American advance into Manila. The shovels, no doubt, would have been used to dig trenches and fortifications to halt the advancing US forces.

Great jubilation was felt by us all, laughing, crying and hugging each other. The chairman then addressed us as follows:

"Ladies and gentlemen. As of 3:45 am this morning this camp was officially released to your administration committee. As of 5 o'clock this morning your committee declared you free. Under this most unusual release and until official control of the area and camp is taken over by representatives of the American Army, we warn you that:

1st --- We have no news of actual landings on Luzon although it is known that we have landed in Marinduque.

2nd --- While the Japanese have actually left the camp, we have no knowledge that they have abandoned the surrounding area, Consequently we continue to be in the war zone and subject to all the dangers and risk of actual warfare.

3rd --- We now inform you that we have in operation facilities for getting in contact with our forces' radio. Any instructions received, or anything definite, will be relayed to the camp immediately.

4th --- It is your committee's plea that you remain calm and maintain your organization and same sense of discipline and responsibility so the camp can continue to exist as a unit and function properly for the benefit and protection of all concerned.

To this end an emergency patrol unit has been established and is responsible for order within the camp. This is potentially the most difficult and dangerous period of internment and the fullest co-operation of everyone is earnestly requested. We caution you that Japanese sentries are still at the camp gate and attached to a unit which is still in this area. It will therefore be unwise for any one to leave the camp in the meantime.

5th --- Breakfast is at 8:30 am, lunch at 12:30 pm and dinner at 5 pm with full rations for all.

6th --- A further announcement will be made at 10:30 am giving the essential details of our new set-up for the camp which is hereby designated as Camp Freedom.

7th --- At sunrise this morning there will be a simple flag-raising ceremony in front of barrack 15. Immediately the flags will be lowered as we do not wish to incur the risk of any enemy retaliation on this, the third anniversary of our incarceration. Bishop Binstead will now offer a short prayer of thanksgiving.

Bishop Binstead offered three short prayers. The first was the Lord's Prayer, the second a prayer for those who had died in the struggle now going on and the third a prayer of thanks for our deliverance. When he finished speaking and Reveille was sounded, American and British flags were raised to the top of the flagstaff which was erected at barrack 15. The American and British anthems were played over the loudspeaker system, after which the flags were lowered.

Food had always been the primary concern so the rations were doubled immediately. Within eight hours of Major Iwanaka's departure, a bull, which he had confiscated from a neighbouring village, was slaughtered along with two carabao (water buffalo) donated by the Los Baños villagers and 20 pigs from the guards' piggery. Instead of the ten kilograms of meat that was the normal "stew" for 2,150 people, there were 800 kilograms for our first meal. Fresh vegetables, fruit and eggs bought from the villagers supplemented our diet. Each family was issued 5 kilograms of rice from the storehouse to be saved for future emergencies. Unfortunately in their hasty departure the Japanese had left behind personal effects and there was some looting of the Japanese barracks by internees.

That night the entire camp could listen to a radio broadcast direct from San Francisco. On January 9th news came that General MacArthur had led 68,000 soldiers of the US Sixth Army in a landing at Lingayen Gulf, 160 kilometres northwest of Manila. The battle for Luzon had begun.

The health of the internees picked up even though most of us had our moments. Shrunken stomachs rebelled against the entry of plentiful food and between cramps lines to the toilets were long, Unfortunately, this all came to an abrupt end six days later. At 3 am on January 13th Konishi and

his guards were back. Camp Freedom was no more! A 2 pm roll call was announced and we were all ordered to stand in front of our barracks. Each group of 98 prisoners was faced by half a dozen armed guards. Mr. Masaki, the interpreter, delivered the commandant's message. "The commandant is displeased by the looting of the Japanese quarters. A search of the barracks will now be conducted by the guards". We waited outside in the sun while they turned upside down all of our belongings.

The Japanese killed their first American at Los Baños on January 17th, four days after their return. Because of the taste of freedom leaving the camp and bartering for extra fruit and vegetables, some men sneaked out to supplement their now depleted diets. Pat Hell, who was in charge of the camp vegetable gardens, was shot four times in the chest and died as he came back through the fence. Beside him was a bag full of coconuts and bananas. A dead chicken was clutched in his right hand. Although most managed to return without being caught, that was the end of going foraging.

We soon found out that we had to pay for our "feast" of food as the next month dragged slowly on. The guards were very jumpy and the slightest infringement was punishable. Our 10 pm to 7 am curfew was extended from 7pm to 7am. We were warned that anyone caught away from his barrack during curfew would be shot on sight.

We could hear the battles to the north and the rumblings of gunfire. Very little rice was forthcoming and by February 20th the supply was exhausted. Konishi, the supply officer, said he had several dozen sacks of un-husked rice, which the internees could have. The rice would have to be husked first as each kernel was encased by a tough husk with razor-sharp edges. The internees might as well eat ground-glass as un-husked rice would slice through the walls of intestines. So we were issued 150 grams each and before cooking would rub it between two rocks and blow away the husk. (Editor's note: it has been stated that more energy was required to manually husk rice than provided by the nutritional value of that rice.) By that time the only "extras" to our meals were weeds. Vines and the pulpy stem and root of a banana palm we had near our barrack---fibrous but a bit of bulk.

Again rumours, the most crazy rumours, were flying about day and night. How long would it take the American army to get here after Manila fell? Could they reach us before all the food was gone? Towards the middle of February the Japanese work detail dug a huge trench near a corner of the camp. What was the reason? Was it to be our burial site? On February 22nd several flights of American planes roared over the mountain west of the camp. They dive-bombed, strafed, almost within walking distance of our barracks. But the day passed on and we were still not freed.

Rescue

As dawn broke on February 23, 1945, we all filed into line in front of our bamboo and sawali barrack for the daily roll call. There had been a constant rumble of motors for a while and I saw planes coming across the lake from the north. I paid little attention to them because American planes had been flying over the camp for a few days and a Japanese battery near us had been strafed the previous day. I saw little white objects dropping out of them as the planes approached the camp at a very low altitude. To my astonishment the objects opened up into parachutes with men attached.

Suddenly all hell broke loose. There was a fusillade of small arms fire, punctuated by single shots and bursts of hand grenades from all sides of the camp. I was caught in a section of crisscross firing. I threw myself on the ground, crawled and half ran back into my barrack. I realized we were being rescued only when an American P-38 flew low with a "RESCUE" sign on its side.

Before roll call time my father had put a little pannikin of rice on a clay pot stove to cook lugao for our breakfast. He had no intention of losing our meal and tried to reach the pot. But another burst of tracer bullets made him dive to the floor. Shots were fired through the barrack and I could see American soldiers and Filipino guerillas running past. Later we were told that 100 guerillas supported the American forces.

After what seemed like an eternity and the last shots were fired, two American paratroopers, followed by three guerillas, burst through the door shouting "Mabuhay! Get ready to move out! Take only what you can carry and start moving." It was hard to know what to grab even though most of our possessions were junk, But after three years of internment it was all we had. I went to the ballpark where we had been told to congregate and noticed our barracks were torched. The paratroopers did that to stop people from returning for more of their possessions and as a precaution for looters. There were many people too weak or sick to walk. They had to be assisted so we all helped.

Loud rumbles proclaimed the arrival of a company of 54 amphibious tractors (Amtracs). I was bundled unceremoniously into one. The number was not enough to evacuate all the internees in one trip. The remainder, about 500 internees, the 120 paratroopers and Recon men started to walk the three miles to the beach. As I had eaten nothing since the previous afternoon, the bar of chocolate one shy Amtrac boy offered me was accepted gratefully.

The Amtracs rolled out through the camp gates they had smashed earlier and down the dusty palm-tree lined road towards Laguna de Bay. I kept my head down as an occasional rattle of bullets bounced off the steel sides of the Amtrac. Upon reaching the beach the Amtracs formed a column of three, slid into the water and began the 75-minute trip across the lake to Mamatid beach and freedom. The soldiers loaded the machine guns on the Amtrac, told us to stay down and swung their guns towards the shoreline. All this time we were being escorted by our Lightning fighter planes.

Japanese shore batteries were firing at us. A volley of bullets splattered the water and hit the Amtrac when we were under way. Machine guns returned the fire and the Amtrac began weaving unpredictably to pull out of enemy range. I felt a sharp burning sensation on my neck and right shoulder. "I'm hit!" I reached up but found no blood. My "wound" was a slight burn from hot spent shells ejected by the gun. A P-38 fighter plane went into action and the firing was done.

On reaching the other side I was loaded into an army truck and driven to a hospital at Muntinlupa. It had been recently captured by the 511th paratroopers. After registration a meal of pea soup greeted all the internees and I was issued an iron bunk and two blankets. Muntinlupa, the site of the New Bilibid Prison, would be our home for several weeks until we were strong enough to travel to our homelands. The privation and suffering of war was over for us.

We were jubilant at our liberation but could not know about the terrible retaliation the Japanese would take on our friends of Los Baños. The Japanese tied whole Filipino families to the posts beneath their homes, which they then set afire. About 70 women, children and priests sought safety in the chapel near our camp. A Japanese party bayoneted anyone trying to escape and then set fire to the building. Hundreds were reportedly killed.

The XIV Corps, under the command of General Griswold, took over the care and feeding of us at the New Bilibid prison. The mess personnel set up a kitchen and dining room in the Catholic chapel. Food was dropped by parachute for the first week. A Sixth army field hospital provided medical care for the internees.

The Corps Special Services officer set up a movie tent in the middle of the recreation field. That was where my friends Margie Whitaker, Gene DeVries and I had the most fun. Larry Lawrence, a GI from Lawrence, Kansas, allowed us the use of the open tent where he housed his movie equipment. He also gave us the privilege of picking the movie for night's entertainment. Often other GIs joined us for a chin wag. We were invited for dates to watch the movies but as there was safety in numbers we made sure it was a threesome date!



After their rescue the internees were loaded onto trucks destined for the New Bilibid Prison. Margo is standing at the upper right.

We visited sick and wounded paratroopers in the Army tents some days. We wrote letters home for boys who could not do so themselves. The Fernandez sisters, Carmen, Juanita and Marita, would sing to the patients. One night we were sitting on the ground watching a movie when shots were heard close by. All lights were doused and we were warned to lie on the ground. A surprise Japanese raiding group had penetrated the outer camp perimeter of the prison complex. More shots and then all was quiet. It made us realize we were still at the forefront of the war. We later were told that all the Japanese "banzai" fighters were killed with a very small loss by the Americans.

John Wilson, the son of a Los Baños internee and a friend of Roger's, offered to drive me to Santo Tomas for a visit. He was an army lieutenant and had the use of a jeep. I was delighted to see some old friends. The Santo Tomas internees had been liberated three weeks earlier than we were. The American government had already shipped out many people fit to travel. Roger and his parents left for the States the day that we at Los Baños were freed. It would be 50 years before I met Roger again.

Most of the visit to Santo Tomas was safe but Japanese were still cornered in Intramuros, the old walled city of Manila and were randomly firing out. It was good to talk to friends who were still waiting for transport home. I talked to Helen Foley and her mother. One postscript from the Japanese was a parting shell that hit a corner of the Main building. It killed the Reverend Foley and blew off Mrs. Foley's arm. They were packing to leave at the time.

It was nearly a month before we were shipped to Leyte. We were in better shape to travel by that time. My father was still suffering from beriberi but the rest of us had gained a bit of weight. We had all been processed and given our choices of destination. Most of the American internees had departed but Margie and Gene were still with me at Muntinlupa as their parents had homes and commitments in Manila and Davao. Finally a convoy was arranged for New Guinea and Australia. On March 26th all internees heading for Australia were flown from Nichols Field in large transport planes to a transit camp in Leyte.

What a desolate picture met our eyes as we rode in army trucks to our segregated tent camp. Razed villages. Gaping holes in the highway. Topless coconut palms and big chunks of wood missing from trees. It appeared that the battle for Leyte had been hard. Women and children were off-loaded in one tent camp while the men had theirs a few miles down the road. We saw our first Australian soldier----- slouch hat and all---- come in to call on any Australian internees.

On March 26th we were taken out in Amtracs to our ship, the "David C. Shanks". We would be part of a convoy destined for Hollandia, New Guinea with soldiers and supplies. There were about 200 internees and the same number of GIs headed for furlough in Australia. The women and young children were given officers' quarters and ate in the officer's mess. My mother and I shared a cabin with another lady and her daughter. The mess was simply luxury to us.



Internees pose with an unknown soldier after their rescue. From the left are Gean De Vries, Margaret (Whitaker) Squires, and Margo (Tonkin) Shiels.

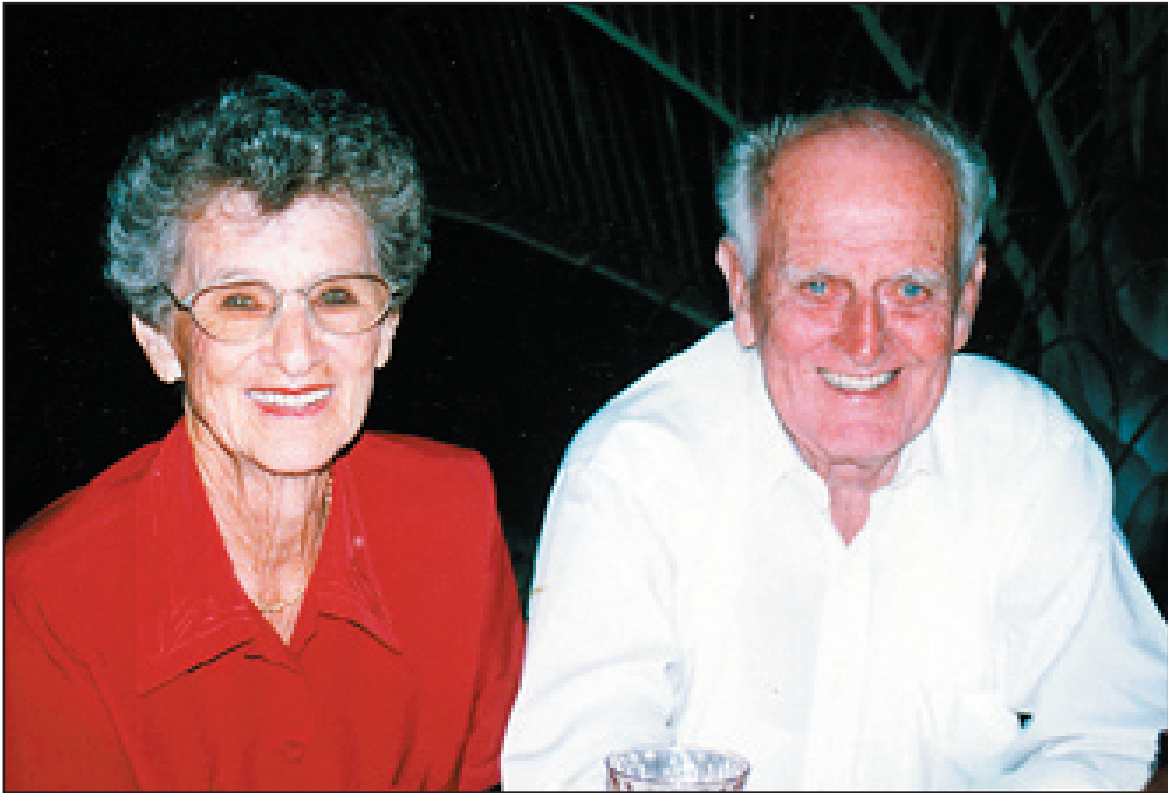
It reminded me of the Bible parable of the marriage feast of the king's son where all the tables were filled with beggars. (Matt: 22) There we were dressed in our rags being served by stewards in their immaculate white uniforms. The convoy of many ships zigzagged at the pace of the slowest ship. Two destroyers escorted us, one at the front and the other at the rear, protecting us. It was tedious. We wore life jackets most of the time with blackouts at night and continuous boat drills. The convoy broke up when we reached Hollandia and our ship continued south at an increased speed. We reached Townsville, Australia on April 5th, 1945.

Postscript: *After a few months Margo's father recovered from beriberi. He commenced an export business with Uncle Charlie, his brother in Shanghai. This business thrived until the Communists took over China in 1949 and Uncle Charley died of dropsy. The Tonkin family settled in Katoomba.*

Margo met a handsome farmer from Bowen. George Shiels had spent 6 years in the war (1939-1945). He served with the 2nd Independent Co. and 2/2 Commando Squadron mostly in New Guinea and New Britain.

Recon Platoon. They called themselves the “lookee look” surveying the enemy, stirring them at times to count numbers etc., and reporting back to headquarters.

Margo and George became parents to four daughters.



Margo and George Shiels at their home in Bowen, Queensland, Australia in 2005.