

## REPORT OF THE ANNUAL FEPOW SERVICE IN WYMONDHAM, NORFOLK 16<sup>th</sup> May 2021 for APA KHABAR by Richard Brown



FEPOW Chaplain Rev Pauline Simpson and Canon Pat Cleary

The annual FEPOW Service of Remembrance for surviving FEPOWS, civilian internees, and their relatives took place at the National Memorial Church of FEPOW, Our Lady & St. Thomas of Canterbury, in Wymondham on Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> May. The 2020 Service had been cancelled due to Covid 19. The ecumenical service was conducted by the two Parish Priests, Canon Pat Cleary and Father Denis Gallagher and the FEPOW Chaplain Pauline Simpson, BEM.

The FEPOW Memorial Church was built by Father Malcolm Cowin, a FEPOW in Thailand who vowed in 1952 to build a permanent memorial to those who suffered as prisoners of war and internees of the Japanese during World War II, and it is the only church of its kind in the world. The church acts as a 'Living Memorial', and a Roman Catholic Parish church. It is unique in being the only church dedicated to the memory of FEPOW and Civilian Internees of all Faiths and nationalities who died in Japanese POW and Internment Camps of WW II.

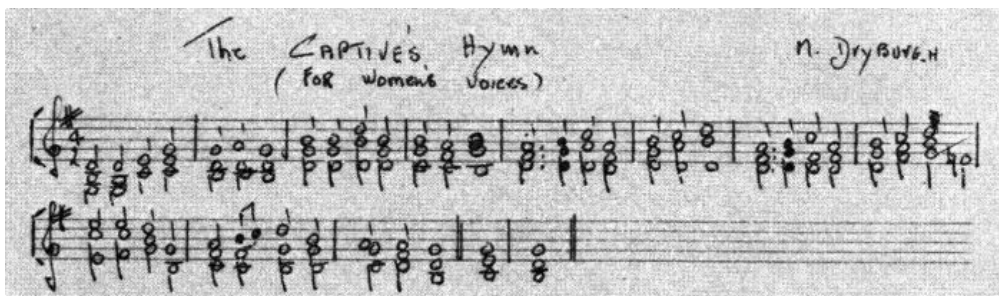
The annual services for FEPOW started in 1992, and on the advice of FEPOW groups, the service date was set at the nearest Sunday to 14<sup>th</sup> May, the date of the Relief of Rangoon in Burma in 1945. Not only did this avoid clashes with other remembrances services, but it was also appropriate to commemorate the 18<sup>th</sup> Division, Territorial Army Battalions of mainly East Anglian Regiments who fought so bravely to prevent the Japanese advance into India at Imphal and Kohima.

Due to Covid regulations, numbers of attendees were restricted for this year's Service and social distancing, mask wearing and other conditions applied. This meant that there could be no communal singing but the traditional hymns – *All People That on Earth Do Dwell* and *I Vow to Thee My Country* were sung beautifully by soloist Wendy Weal accompanied on piano by Roger Noble, on Cello by Ann Reid, and on violin by herself.



This year, in recognition of the sometimes somewhat forgotten Civilian Internees, *The Captives' Hymn* composed by Margaret Dryborough for her *Singing to Survive* vocal orchestra of internees in Palambang Camp in Sumatra, in 1942, was also sung. This was first sung by Margaret herself, Shelagh Brown and Dorothy MacLeod at a Sunday service. Thereafter the hymn was sung by the women every Sunday even throughout their later years in captivity when they encountered suffering and death all around them. When, in 1943, some internees were repatriated from Palembang to Singapore, the hymn was taken with them and, as a result, it found fame in camps there too.

Soloist Wendy Weal's daughter correctly notated the Captives Hymn so that it could be played. I first heard this beautiful hymn for the first time at the *Singing to Survive* concert, sponsored by the MVG, at Chichester in 2013 and since then it has been sung every year at the annual MVG VJ Day service at the National Memorial Arboretum. It was sung by Nicola Roberts at the BBC's *VJ75: The Nation's Tribute* concert in Horse Guard's Parade in 15th August 2020.



Father in captivity  
 We would lift our prayers to Thee,  
 Keep us ever in Thy Love.  
 Grant that daily we may prove  
 Those who place their trust in Thee  
 More than conquerors may be

Give us patience to endure  
 Keep our hearts serene and pure,  
 Grant us courage, charity,  
 Greater faith, humility,  
 Readiness to own Thy Will,  
 Be we free or captive still

*For our country we would pray  
In this hour be Thou her stay.  
Pride and selfishness forgive,  
Teach her, by Thy Laws, to live,  
By Thy Grace may all men see,  
That true greatness comes from Thee.*

*For our loved ones we would pray  
Be their guardians, night and day,  
From all dangers, keep them free,  
Banish all anxiety.  
May they trust us to Thy care,  
Know that Thou our pains dost share.*

*May the day of freedom dawn  
Peace and justice be reborn,  
Grant that nations loving Thee  
O'er the world may brothers be,  
Cleansed by suffering, know rebirth,  
See Thy Kingdom come on earth.*

The Rt.Rev.Dr. Michael Ipgrave, OBE, the Anglican Bishop of Lichfield, had intended to attend in person to give the Address. His father, Geoffrey Ipgrave of Royal Army Ordnance Corps (RAOC), was a FEPOW in Singapore and slaved on the Thai-Burma Death Railway. His name is in the Wymondham Books of Remembrance. Unfortunately Covid regulations prevented the Bishop attending so he sent a copy which was read by Canon Cleary. The address was a very personal account about his father and himself. Those of us listening found it very moving and thought provoking. The Bishop has kindly given his permission for his address to be published:

*"I am very grateful to Canon Patrick Cleary for inviting me to share a few reflections at your annual memorial service, and I salute the commitment of the Catholic Parish of Our Lady & St Thomas of Canterbury, and of the Far East Prisoners of War Committee, in keeping before us every year the memory of those brave men and women, military and civilian, who experienced such suffering in the Far East.*

*It is as the child of a former Far East Prisoner of War that I offer these reflections, which are very personal. My sisters and I are grateful to Peter Wiseman for ensuring that the name of our father, Geoff Ipgrave, is now inscribed in the book at the FEPOW church; we feel truly honoured by that.*

*My dad's story can be simply told. Captured at Singapore, and put to hard labour on the railway, he experienced terrible conditions of deprivation, overwork and brutality there; he was fortunate to survive, but his health was permanently damaged, and I believe that what he went through deeply scarred him – how could it not? He did not talk to us often or at length about his years as a POW, but we do have, as one of our family's most treasured possessions, a sweat-stained battered little volume, stamped with the seal of the Kempeitai, the Japanese military police. It is my dad's copy of A E Housman's cycle of poetry A Shropshire Lad; unlike the few other books he had (including, I regret to say, his Bible!) he kept this one from being turned into roll-ups for cigarettes, because it meant so much to him.*

*If you know Housman's poetry, you might be surprised by the idea of it comforting anybody – it is unrelentingly bleak and gloomy, with streaks of black humour. But I think there were two things in it which sustained my dad's spirit in those dark days. One was precisely its unflinching honesty and realism, which mirrored the terrible situation in which he and his mates found themselves. He was not looking for false comfort; and certainly he would not find that in Housman. And the other thing A Shropshire Lad offered was the beauty of its language, evoking the dreamy pleasures of the English countryside; I think that fed dad inwardly with the vision and memory of places that he loved – and so it gave him a kind of hope, as he longed to go back to visit familiar scenes.*

*Somehow or other, then, he survived his years as a FEPOW; he returned to England, met my mum, married and started a family, and lived out an admirable life as a much loved village headteacher. But what he had seen and known was lodged deep within him, too deep for him to speak of it freely for most of his life. There were two occasions, though, when he opened up about his experiences.*

*One was when my nephew, one of his nine grandchildren, was doing a school project about the Second World War, and interviewed his grandfather to ask him about his memories. While he found it very difficult to talk to his children, my dad opened up much more freely to his grandchildren, to the next generation. I think that in that conversation he could have more confidence, because there was a security in knowing that life went on: 'May you see your children's children' is one of the blessings spoken in the Bible.*

*The other time my dad really opened up about his experiences was a bit more unusual. When he was 65, my family and I went to live and work for a few years in Japan. During this time, my mum died, and after the funeral dad returned with me to spend a few weeks in Japan. It was a remarkable act of courage and imagination on the part of a recently bereaved man, to come to a country which in the past had caused such damage to him and his friends.*

*Dad had never, as far as I know, harboured any particular resentment against Japanese people, but nor had he any notably warm feelings towards them, and it must have been with a certain amount of anxiety that he came out to stay with us, and to meet the members of the small Japanese Anglican church with whom I was working then.*

*The welcome and the hospitality that community of Japanese Christians extended to him was truly remarkable, and it brought about a deep shift in his way of seeing things. He met with people of his own generation who had experienced in their own country the brutality of the Kempeitai which he had encountered as a PoW – Anglicans in wartime Japan had been regarded with great suspicion as fifth columnists for the Allies, and the church and its priests had been persecuted as a result. He heard of the hardship and devastation which ordinary families had undergone in the fire bombing of Tokyo. He was deeply moved by a visit to Hiroshima – and deeply conflicted, for, as he said to me, has it not been for that terrible nuclear bomb, he might not have been liberated, and I might never have existed. Time and time again, with heartfelt sincerity, his hosts apologised for all that he had experienced during his wartime years.*

*Over the few weeks that he was with us in Japan, it felt to me almost as though I could see the mental furniture being shifted around in my father's mind, as a new way of thinking began in him. He would never forget what he and his mates had been through, but he was committed to reconciliation*

*with Japan and Japanese people, and the tangible proof of that was the many new friendships he had formed and which he sustained in the last years of his life.*

*Of course, what happened to my father was personal to him, and other Far East Prisoners of War would have different stories to tell; the effect it had on us as a family is personal to us, and other Children of FEPOWs will have different stories to share too. All I can say is that I and my sisters are proud of our father, not only because of his bravery and endurance during the war years, but also because of the way that he found a voice to tell his story to a new generation, and to turn it into a force for good. And that is a choice which we can all make in life, whatever our experiences and however hurt we are. By God's grace, we can choose to follow the path of forgiveness, peace and hope, costly as that may be.*

*That is the costly but life-giving way which Jesus Christ opened up to us through his death on the cross and through his resurrection: as the Letter to the Ephesians says, 'He is our peace; in his flesh he has made both into one and has broken down the hostility between us'. I thank you from my heart for remembering all who suffered so terribly as Prisoners in the War in the Far East, my father among them; and with you I pray that we who succeed them in our generation may honour them through working for peace in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen."*

The Psalm *The Lord Is My Shepherd* was said in responsorial fashion, so that the congregation had a part to play.

As Covid prevented Rosemary Fell, Liz Moggie and Olga Henderson from attending the Service, Susan and I were there and I had the honour of laying a wreath on behalf of the MVG.

Other wreaths were laid by representatives of Wymondham Parish, Royal British Legion Wymondham Branch, Catholic Women's League (CWL) Services Committee, National FEPOW Fellowship Welfare Remembrance Association (NFFWRA), The Java FEPOW 1942 Club, Taiwan Memorial Association, Children & Relatives of Far East Prisoners of War (COFEPOW) and Birmingham Association of FEPOWS (BAFEPOW).

The wreath laying had a voiceover accompanied by a special arrangement, by Wendy Weal's daughter, for trio of the introduction of Karl Jenkins' *Benedictus* from *The Armed Man*. The final wreath was laid by Peter Wiseman. The Service organiser, in the form of a Poppy anchor on behalf of those who died on the Hell Ships the Royal Navy and the Merchant Navy.



Richard Brown with the MVG wreath





The reading of the FEPOW Prayer was followed by a bugle rendition of The Last Post, before two minutes' silence and Reveille – The Rouse, and the reading of the Kohima Epitaph. The FEPOW Chaplain, Pauline Simpson, sprinkled poppy petals on the “sea” in front of the wreaths.

Before the Final blessing and dismissal, Peter Wiseman delivered an Epilogue based on the post war poem *Epitaph*.

### **Epitaph by George Cocker**

Remember us; not by a day  
Extolling war's horror and blight.  
No prayers will restore us from clay;  
No anthems will shorten death's night.

In the dust, we are brothers in dust,  
Death treats us the same, friend and foe.  
Our weapons are soon turned to rust,  
On our graves, the same grasses grow.

Remember our youth at the dawn;  
At twilight, remember our pain.  
Plead not that we fought the good fight,  
For we are all brothers of Cain.

Let the word prevail o'er the sword  
And the lowly and meek have their say.  
The future is yours - we are dead.  
Remember us; not by a day.

“Although not a POW himself, George Cocker’s post-war poem resonates easily with FEPOW as it implores us to remember the war dead. Today, we don’t have the same urgency to forget acts of inhumanity to loved ones lost in captivity; but we do need to Remember them, as well as those who survived and died in freedom. The suggestions of ‘dawn’ and ‘twilight’ as ‘memory’ times lets us address these needs on our own terms. We can recall how fortitude bred resilience, inspired courage to endure their sufferings and gave them hope to sustain a vision of beauty in the future. Two minutes silence, once a year, is still hardly enough, but all the time we can spare. Its importance is as a token of OUR time which is all too short.

Through this Memorial service we have heeded the Unknown Warrior’s plea to “... Give memory to others...”, and fulfilled the Kohima Epitaph’s demand to “Tell them of us and say, For your tomorrow we gave our today....” Their memory has been brought to mind and kept the flame of Remembrance burning brightly in this hallowed space. Here are “... those things they never knew in their last days: peace, quiet, and cleanliness amidst the cool soft air of prayer, in the presence of Him whose suffering was greatest of all....”

Remember too, that this church is a ‘Living Memorial’ to ALL WWII FEPOW and Civilian Internees of ALL faiths and none. It was built and paid for by those who loved and cherished their memory. Every service is a tacit action of remembrance.

It is our generation’s debt of honour to respect this: so GO! “The future is yours: we are dead! REMEMBER US; not by a day.”

After many long months of restrictions due to Covid, the simplicity, by necessity, of the Service, with the beautiful voice of soloist Wendy Weal, with excellent musical accompaniment, together with those conducting this ecumenical Service, made it even more meaningful, memorable and thought provoking to those of us fortunate to be present and no doubt to those watching the live stream or the recording on YouTube.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=48CypSL\\_Dvw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=48CypSL_Dvw)

Thanks must go to Canon Pat Cleary, Father Denis Gallagher, Peter Wiseman, the musicians and the ladies and gentlemen of the Church who organised and ran this service in difficult circumstances. Thanks also go to FEPOW Chaplain Pauline Simpson for taking part in the Service and to the Bishop of Lichfield for his Address.

## **Book of Remembrance**

A FEPOW requested in his will to be re-united with his comrades, by adding his name to theirs in a Book of Remembrance there. He knew the torch of remembrance needed to be shared; he did not want it to be borne by relatives alone. The bequest he left gave an opportunity to create a new Book of Remembrance for all FEPOW & Civilian Internees who died in the Far East in World War 11, and to those who survived to return home.

The original Books of Remembrance on display at Wymondham have over twenty four thousand names in them. These names were lovingly hand written by members of the congregation and are now kept in a glass cabinet in the FEPOW Chapel at the side of the Church. They can be viewed by appointment.

For details of how to add a name of a FEPOW or Civilian Internee, or of how to view the books, please email [fepow@wymondhamrcchurch.org.uk](mailto:fepow@wymondhamrcchurch.org.uk) or telephone 01953 604144.

## **2022 FEPOW Service**

This will be held on Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> May 2022