

Reverend Sam Davies

What made people confess to crimes they had not committed in Korea?

Difficult one, that. I think people at times felt that if they didn't make sort of pretence at giving some sort of – something – they might even be killed or treated very, very severely indeed. People varied tremendously in the way they reacted to that pressure. Some were totally heroic and wouldn't say a single word - and faced very unpleasant experiences; others gave way a little, hoping that the people at home would understand that they were under pressure. I couldn't give the exact numbers but I think a number of the American prisoners gave way compared with - I think hardly any of the British prisoners - perhaps one or two. But there it is.

Was this the result of just plain brutality or was it something more?

I think the threat of very unpleasant, cramped imprisonment in cages: we had a young Northumberland fusilier, Kinne, who would never yield to any Chinese pressure, and he spent some time in a sort of cage with hardly room to lie down in. He wrote a book about it.

So it was just brutality?

Yes. I think the conviction in people's minds was so strong that they were doing the utterly wrong and disgraceful thing to join in the Communist propaganda at this time. It was so strong that they would not, and could not, give way. We were – people varied tremendously about it but I think – also the threat of prolonged punishment and confinement in appalling conditions, often very cramped, was a threat some people couldn't really live up to. Others could, and did.

In my camp we had to attend these absolutely boring lectures on Marxism-Leninism from the instructors day after day, and we were often told 'Now, tonight you will get a pencil and paper. You must write down your appreciation of what you've learned'. Well, of course, we all had to do that in the officers' camp. And we wrote a lot of verbal tripe really, which confused the Chinese. They were rather naïve and were trying to take it really seriously. We were not. We wrote a lot of verbal stuff so that nobody could really understand what was going on at all. But we had to write something and that's how we managed to - you'd be taken down to Chinese HQ with Ding, the very able interpreter, he'd tell you what the Chinese commandant was saying and you had to account for what you had written. It was up to you to play it as coolly and stupidly as you could. And it often succeeded.

Did the Chinese/Korean interrogators deliberately target the officers? Colonel Carne for example?

[Carne] was the senior officer and the Chinese realised as far as he was concerned that he had tremendous influence. Sadly the officers and senior NCOs' camp was isolated from the other ranks. I begged the Chinese to allow me, as the only surviving padre,

to visit the other ranks. I begged them but they wouldn't hear of it. Because they thought it was all bound up with sort of anti-communist propaganda. I was never allowed to visit them.

On Christmas day [they would present us] with special food 'and in return we want you to sign this greetings card to our commander at the front.' Well, of course, we all said 'no'. Nobody in the camp was prepared to sign the greetings card.

It seems that the Chinese were being pretty sensible, separating the officers from the men?

Absolutely. The Chinese sensed that it was his [Carne's] example and his steadfast adherence to what was the right thing to do in the face of this. They knew that his example and his leadership were immensely strong. So they wisely, from their point of view, thought to take him away completely. We never saw him again, until 19 months later.

Was there a particular trait that helped some to resist when others confessed and signed false confessions?

I think there were only one or two British prisoners who agreed to do that and they were other ranks. No single officer did – though I don't think that's true about the Americans. There was just something in our backgrounds. We were British and I suppose we were very proud of that. We would rather die in prison, or face death, than take part in any seditious propaganda.

The Chinese seem to have started out by prying out small admissions/concessions, then using these to work up to bigger ones? But the British didn't fall for it?

Yes, I think you're right there. For several months in my camp we had to write our impression of what the lecture had been about today and how we agreed with it and so on and we wrote that in some sort of mixed-up language: it would have taken a miracle to read it! But there we are. The British record, with the exception of just one or two other ranks people, one of whom remained with the Chinese

This would be Marine Condron?

That's the chap. He was rather carefully watched all the time, and there was one other chap, I forget his name, who was a friend of Condron's but those were the only two.

Do you think there was a difference between British military training and US training that enabled Brits to stand up better to the Chinese treatment?

That's something one can ponder. I mean, some Americans were extremely brave and resolute, absolutely. When I was in prison in solitary next to Tony Farrar-Hockley the prisoner on the other side was an American airman who had absolutely refused to say that they had dropped disease-carrying bombs in North Korea. He was a very brave young man. So some Americans were just as resolute as the British.

At the time did you have any concern that perhaps the Americans HAD used biological weapons?

There was a feeling - my camp was a mixed camp of American and mixed officers. There was some increasing feeling, some doubt, among the Americans whether it had happened at all. And the Chinese propaganda was very strong. But the majority of us never believed it for a moment in spite of propaganda.

Ever hear about Cyril Cunningham and the War Office's investigations into brainwashing in Korea?

I heard about the book

Cunningham says that American morale collapsed almost straight away and that there was anger at their troops' behaviour...

That may be so. In my camp it was a mixture of American and British officers. But I do remember being for a short time (in my long march north) being held in an American camp and conditions there were appalling because they somehow hadn't got themselves organised. Now, just next door to that camp was another one, occupied by British sergeants and NCOs, people I'd known. And in the few days I was there I was able to sneak through the wire into their side, and there they took my underclothes and things and gave them a thorough wash, which they needed after many months of wearing. Their morale was terrific. And of course not only was their morale better, their latrines were cleaner. Their general morale and looking after their miserable camp, was infinitely superior, if I may say this, to what I'd seen on the American side.

Do you think a sense of humour played a role in resistance to Chinese techniques?

Oh yes, very much so. The British are blessed with that sense of humour, I think: there was that sense of humour which in spite of everything came out. Yes.

Were you aware at the time of what the press were saying about your conditions?

Not really, no. We realised that one or two journalists from England who had strong communist sympathies had been out to Korea but we never saw them in our camp. Never.

The Dean of Canterbury had come out at one point...

Our prison camp was a long single-storey building which when the Japanese had been in charge of Korea had been a schoolhouse in that village. The biggest room in that camp was a lecture room and around the wall were enormous pictures of communist leaders, you know, Stalin, Ho Chi Minh, the Red Dean of Canterbury looking down on us. Staggering to realise that. We had heard about the Dean of Canterbury - he was very well known, The Red Dean, who had strong sympathies with the Soviet Union. A

very well known man. However, when I was being interrogated by the Chinese about this germ warfare business, the interpreter said to me 'One of your great Christian leaders knows that it's happened'. And I knew that he was talking about the Red Dean of Canterbury. He had, I gathered held some great service in Canterbury cathedral, and he had raised this point. And I gather that there were many American soldiers there, they were based nearby and at their commanding officer's request, they all rose and walked out of the cathedral while he was in the pulpit.

So this wasn't a visit by the Church of England? It was unofficial?

Absolutely. There was no official visit to Korea by the Church of England. A number of well known male and female journalists – communists - came out and visited at the invitation of the Chinese. They visited the other camps. They never came near our camp. The Red Dean never came out of course but he was quoted by the Chinese, and there was this big picture of him in our lecture room, alongside the pictures of the Communist leaders.

Did you ever come across Frank Schwable?

I never actually met him but the name is familiar. I suppose he tried to make his confession – I never heard it or read it - but I suppose he tried to make it as innocent and mixed-up as possible. He's the only well-known high ranking name among the Americans that I know of. We had another high ranking American officer who was almost a kind of junior Colonel Carne, in a way.

Did you know Marine Condron?

I never met him. I heard him speak. I was separated from the main body of our people for some months and went through my own sort of strange experience as a chaplain, and eventually when I marched to our prison camp at the head of the Yalu River, I was mostly marching with a large group of Americans. But on one occasion, when I was in that camp divided between our NCOs and the Americans, I heard, to my surprise, I was sitting there and I heard Andrew Condron speaking. He was talking to people in England. I thought 'My goodness!' He was saying 'Don't worry, everything's OK and they're treating us very well' and all this nonsense. I was sitting there for about five minutes because I was being interviewed by a Chinese commissar – and I heard him but I didn't see him.

He must have been widely reviled at the time?

I suppose so but it may have been that the Chinese gave him a separate apartment so he wouldn't be troubled by them. I'm not sure about where he actually was or whether he was actually given separate accommodation...

...I do know that I think there were one or two people that tended to be associated with Condron, when they came back on the troop ship, they were very carefully watched and given some special separate accommodation because other troops had threatened to throw them overboard, from the troop ship...

Were you aware of the term 'brainwash' at the time?

I can't remember. I don't think I was utterly familiar with the term before I was taken prisoner. The memory goes. I'm 86 now and the memory fails me a bit.

But in your camp there was no sense that something strange was going on?

Difficult to judge what we felt. The vast majority of the other ranks had to sit through this indoctrination and they had to listen to it with total disbelief and on the quiet making fun of it.

But you must have been aware of show trials etc – did you make this link?

Yes, I did make that link. I think most of us did. We felt that this was a form of indoctrination – and these forced confessions, too, these forced confessions after indoctrination. Yes, we did realise it was all part of what was then called the Russian and the General Communist Situation throughout the Communist World.

Was there something sinister about it?

Yes. I think it's true to say that the Japanese treatment of prisoners was often more blatantly cruel than the Chinese treatment. The Chinese could impose wretched conditions upon people as a punishment but I had the feeling that the Chinese treatment was not as blatantly cruel as some of the Japanese treatment of their prisoners. Some of us felt that the Chinese felt they had to be aware of the impression they were making in the wider world and they didn't want that impression to be too awful. Perhaps something to do with the Chinese character, trying to be less cruel than the Japanese.

Were you debriefed on your experiences when you got back to England?

Yes. Most of us were summoned to a sort of talk at the War Office. I went up and had the best part of an hour talking about it there. Somebody from the War Office came down to see me in retirement and spent an hour or so talking about it all to me.

That was much later, or as soon as you got back?

Later on. Probably during one's first year at home. We got back in late October 1953, so we were then given a long extended period of leave and most of us went into hospital for something or other. All that happened in the first really six or eight months after return. Certainly in the first year.

They didn't lump you all together for a group rehab session?

No, nothing like that. Certainly not.

The experiences of the Glosters in Korea later turned into a kind of blueprint for resisting interrogation, didn't it?

It did, I'd forgotten that. I did on a couple of occasions give a talk on these things. I think it was on two occasions in the next few years. I spoke at the famous staff college at Camberley, I spoke to a great audience of officer cadets from the army. Yes. On two occasions.

And what was the story with the War Office?

Some young officer came down to see me and sit with me and talk about one's experiences. We talked for about an hour or so.

An Army officer?

He must have been, I suppose. Someone employed by the intelligence part of the army. Just a pleasant talk with him about it all. That must have been during 1954

Was it perhaps Cyril Cunningham?

That rings a bell with me but I'm not sure. Mind you, the lectures at the staff college were given as late the late 1950s. I was flown back from Germany to give lectures on what it was like and what the indoctrination was like.