Soon, Eric Liddell was due for his second furlough, whereby he planned to bring his family to Canada and later to Scotland for a break. By then, World War Two had broken out. To avoid unnecessary risks to his wife and 2 children, Eric left them in Canada while he went to England alone to answer a call of duty from the London Missionary Society (LMS). He tried to enlist in the Royal Air Force as a crew member but was rejected because, at the age of 37, he was considered too old for service. They offered him “a job behind a desk” but Eric felt that his time would be better spent serving God in China. So in 1940, the family set sail for China again from Canada. Although the voyage was fraught with danger, they managed to arrive safely in Tientsin by God’s grace. Eric returned to Siaochang soon thereafter.

The Siaochang that Eric left behind had changed drastically. The Japanese had built a wall around the entire village. Men were forced into hard labour, such as road construction. The situation in Siaochang became so bad that in mid-February 1941, the missionaries had to leave for Tientsin. Soon Florence realised that she was expecting her third child (due in September). When they later learnt that Siaochang was destroyed in the war, both Eric and Florence knew that it would be too dangerous for her to give
birth in China at a time when there was violence and bloodshed everywhere. They discussed at length and prayed over the matter. The best option would be for Florence to go back to Canada with the children, while Eric remained in Tientsin to continue his service among the Chinese whom he had come to regard as “my people”. Would the day of reunion ever come? They hoped it would be soon, in God’s time. On the day of parting, Florence, almost 6 months pregnant, was in tears but Eric tried his best to remain cheerful and spoke to his eldest daughter Patricia lovingly, “I want you to look after your mother ... (and) new baby.” After the goodbyes, without a single glance behind him, Eric walked away quickly lest his sadness overcame him. Florence could only weep softly.

Seven months later, Eric received news that Florence had given birth to their third daughter, whom they named Maureen. Eric was simply delighted. However, it was getting harder and harder to serve in Tientsin as the Japanese made it very difficult for Eric to travel to the distant farms to minister to the Chinese people. He was frequently delayed by much questioning and checking of documents. The Japanese were also everywhere, taking many valuables from the missionaries. Besides, Eric was not allowed to teach or preach. Like other missionaries, he could neither communicate with his family nor leave Tientsin because of the ongoing war within and without China. Thus Florence was left to manage the 3 girls in Canada, while Eric tried his best to keep himself busy so that he would not feel too much of the painful separation from his family.
In the meantime, the Japanese did not allow the missionaries to roam outside the city area where they were kept in. They were also forbidden to assemble in groups of more than 10. To get round the problem, the missionaries tried to have their wives organise tea sessions, during which a short service would be held. Eric was often the one who wrote these sermons. He made use of his time during this war period to study God’s Word. His aim was to increase his knowledge of theology and memorise Scripture. In addition, he also compiled “an anthology of prayer” and a book entitled “Discipleship”, which was later renamed “The Disciplines of the Christian Life”. Eric had truly shown by his life that a Christian who grows in devotion to God will love and serve Him faithfully.

Unexpectedly, in mid-March 1943, Eric learnt that the missionaries would be sent to the “Civil Assembly Centre” at Weihsien in Shandong province. They were called “civil internees” and not officially prisoners of war. The campsite was actually a war-torn American Presbyterian mission station. Upon arrival, what the internees saw were broken furniture, damaged windows and dirty walls. The floor was strewn with debris and the stench of rotting garbage was unbearable. Once a spotless centre of mission work, this place was now left in ruins. It was going to be a very trying time for 1800 internees who had to stay in a filthy and cramped environment. There was also no way anyone could escape because the entire camp was surrounded by a grey 8-foot high wall and electrified bands of barbed wire. Japanese soldiers with rifles and bayonets stood guard round the clock. Despite the gloomy situation, Eric was thankful that his things were intact upon arrival at Weihsien, compared to a number of internees who had their possessions stolen by the Japanese. Florence was duly informed by the LMS of Eric’s imprisonment. On his part, Eric was careful not to let Florence know the suffering he was going through so as not to cause her any undue worry or fear. In the meantime, they could only keep in touch through letters. (All internees were allowed to send one Red Cross message, written in a maximum of 25 words,
every month). In all his letters to Florence, Eric was always hopeful and cheerful.

Life in the camp at Weihsien was really difficult. The internees were not issued any new clothes by the Japanese and many had to resort to making clothes from any available materials, such as curtains, pillowcases and blankets, to replace their worn-out ones. Oftentimes, they were also hungry as the Japanese provided very little food, mainly grains (commonly given as animal food), semi-rotten meat from dead horses and donkeys, thin soup from some stringy vegetables, sour-tasting bread, etc. With so many people from different walks of life (some were cooks, musicians, teachers, doctors, businessmen, etc.) and nationalities (mostly Americans and British) living together under one roof, clashes over space and food were common. Quite often, Eric had to help to settle quarrels
and fights among the internees as he was regarded as an honest and fair judge. Nonetheless, the internees had no choice but to call this their temporary “home”.

Eric was duly appointed the official Mathematics and Science teacher, but he was actually involved in almost everything in the camp, from arranging worship service, conducting Sunday Bible class to organising games for all the internees. No matter how busy he was, he would try his very best to reach out to those without Christ. When it came to daily chores in the camp, Eric was never idle; he was frequently sweeping the floor, chopping wood, clearing the garbage, carrying sacks of food supplies and helping out in the kitchen. If there was anything that needed repairing, Eric was the man to see to it. Always kind and helpful, Eric made every effort to spend time with internees who were lonely or troubled. He would listen patiently and encourage them with comforting words. However, not once did Eric share with any of them his own pain of being separated from his beloved wife, Florence, and their 3 daughters. Often, he would hold their photograph in his hands and gaze intently at their faces. He had yet to see his baby daughter...
Maureen, since the day she was born. Oh, how he longed to cradle her in his arms! By God’s grace, Eric continued to devote much of his spare time to counselling youths, conducting Bible studies and organising meaningful sports activities. To the youths, he was “Uncle Eric”; to the adults, he was both a wonderful brother and friend. There were also orphans who had no one to turn to but Eric, who cared for them with much love and tenderness. In some ways, he also felt like an orphan without his family.

As the months flew by, the poor living conditions and lack of food started to take their toll on Eric. Gone were the pink cheeks and sparkly eyes as well as the “swing in his walk” and the “spring to his steps”; Eric was no longer the healthy and energetic athlete he used to be. Now, with his sunken eyes and cheeks, and bony limbs, he looked much older than his years. Gradually, his health deteriorated to the point that he could neither walk nor work. Unknown to him, he had developed a brain tumour which resulted in frequent headaches and loss of balance in his movements. His body became so weak that he had to be confined to the bed at the camp hospital. At the age of 43, after months of struggle with his sickness, Eric entered into the everlasting presence of the Almighty God – freed at last from all pains and sufferings. His last words were: “It’s complete surrender.” How true this was for Eric who had completely given himself to the Lord, whether in life or in the face of death. Many mourned his passing and testified to his wonderful testimony as a Christian missionary in China.

Dear children, Eric Liddell might have run an excellent race at the Olympic Games, but far greater was the “race” he had run in his Christian life. He was fully devoted to God in his life and service – giving up fame and glory as an Olympic gold medallist, and enduring patiently the absence of family and loss of freedom. Like Eric Liddell, let us “Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, whereunto thou art also called, and hast professed a good profession before many witnesses” (1 Timothy 6:12).
Gethsemane B-P Church
Building Project

“Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver.”
2 Corinthians 9:7

Your prayers and generous support are most needful and greatly appreciated.

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