

Apex Camps

The Apex Camps were the three separate camps the civilian and military POWs were held at in the year immediately following their participation in the Tiger Death March. These camps were the farthest north of all the POW camps and held only the Tiger Death March prisoners. They are called the Apex Camps because of their location on a large point, or apex, of North Korean geography. The third camp of the three, An-dong, is also referred to as Camp 7. (located at 41-44-33N 126-52-32E)

They were held at Chunggang-jin from 9 to 16 November 1950. Next was Hanjang-ni from 17 November 1950 through 27 March 1951. Finally they were held at An-dong from 27 March to 10 October 1951.

Chunggang-ni

The group arrived at the village of Chunggang-ni on 8 November after barely surviving the movement from Man-po on foot (Tiger Death March). During their week-long stay there the prisoners were housed in a schoolhouse. The civilians were given straw to sleep on, the military POWs slept on the bare floor. The civilians had one stove in the doorway separating the men from the women. The run-down condition of the building meant you had to be near the stove for any heat. The POWs had only body heat to keep them warm.

The group was told their poor health was their own fault – they were not taking proper care of themselves. As a remedy they were forced to perform calisthenics for at least a few mornings after their arrival. The only medical care was that provided by a Korean nurse and “doctor”. They had almost no medical supplies and limited medical knowledge. The two doctors among the prisoners were not allowed to work as doctors, only to carry a small medical bag for the nurse. The military POWs had only the clothing they were captured in. Most of them were wearing summer uniforms. Some had no shoes and some no jackets. Lice were a serious health problem. Keeping them under control required about two hours a day of stripping down piece by piece and killing all the lice found in the seams.

Food was the equivalent of one standard water glass full of millet per day, divided into two meals. Until the prisoners were allowed to prepare their own meals the food was poorly cooked. Even when they were allowed to prepare their own meals they had to improvise a kitchen and learn how to properly cook the grain. Improperly cooking of millet causes diarrhea. One of the civilians recalls seeing POWs steal frozen cabbage leaves to add to their diet. Since the well in the schoolyard was dry water had to be brought from the Yalu on carts pulled by POWs. They would be soaked from the splashing of the water from the barrel in the cart.

Chinese troops were constantly moving through the area and attracted US aircraft. The village was strafed and bombed during the week the prisoners were held there. Four civilians and twenty four of the military POWs died at Chunggang-ni.

Hanjang-ni

On 16 November the group was marched northeast to Hanjang-ni, some still in bare feet. The fifty-one civilians were put into one Korean house. The military POWs were put in other Korean houses and the schoolhouse. The Korean homes had heated floors

provided the prisoners had enough wood to burn and were allowed to have a fire for heat. The schoolhouse had little or no heat. In all cases the prisoners slept on the floor.

There was little mixing allowed, even of prisoners in neighboring huts. Guards would escort any prisoners outside their huts. Work details were required to haul water, to pick up bundles of wood and the days food from a central storage point, and to grind the grain. During these details the prisoners were able to exchange information, especially while getting water from the well about 100 yards away. Frequently the water detail would have to stand in the frigid cold while the guards chipped the ice from the well to get at the water. The minimal clothing they had made this a very unhealthy activity. No fires were allowed during daylight hours. The guards were concerned smoke would attract the attention of US aircraft. The water detail would have to wait until late evening to thaw out and dry their clothing.

Some sources list 203 military and three civilian deaths at Hanjang-ni, others list 222 as a total. Medical care was almost non-existent. Certain houses were designated as hospitals. For the civilians this was a ruined hut. The room used for patients had only a sack for a door and no heat. The condition of the huts meant no fires could be built so food had to be prepared elsewhere. By the time it got to those in the hospital it was always cold. Temperatures dropped as low as 40 below at night. Patients slept on the floor on a straw mat, covered by another. The walls would be covered with frost. Almost all those sent to these "hospitals" died there. The prisoners constantly tried to hide any signs of illness from the guards so they would not be sent to the hospital. Many of the military POWs died when flu hit them. Already weakened by months of marching across Korea, their starvation diet, the severe cold, and constant diarrhea, too many prisoners had no reserve left when hit by the flu. After November the ground was too frozen to bury the dead.

Most of the military POWs had not had a bath or change of clothing since they were captured. Dysentery was common. Repeatedly having to leave their shelter and step into the frigid night further weakened individuals. Permission had to be granted by the guards before they could leave the hut to use the latrine. Failure to do so often led to being forced to stand in the cold or kneel in the snow with no shirt. At times water was then poured on them. Beatings with rifle butts were common for the slightest of reasons.

Millet continued to be the standard diet at Hanjang-ni. The average was 600 grams per person per day. Meat was included in the meal only a few times and in minuscule amounts. Fish was included only twice. Starting January 1951 one of the meals each day was usually rice. Soya beans were included when available. As time progressed the prisoners became better at cooking their food, especially learning how to cook the millet so it did not cause diarrhea. A major problem for both heating and cooking was the use of green wood. The local villagers were ordered to supply the prisoners with firewood. They naturally kept what they had gathered prior to the winter months and cut new wood for the prisoners. This green wood made starting and maintaining fires difficult. At least one military POW was beaten so badly he died. He had torn a board from the fence outside a Korean home to help start a fire. The guards would usually become irate when they found POWs removing wood from structures for any reason. Prisoners were told they must not damage property. The guards had no problem throwing the people out of their homes, but it was important to their ideology that home be returned undamaged to its owner.

In January 1951 beriberi appeared among the civilian prisoners. The Koreans supplied soybeans to add to the meals and told the cooks how to prepare them. That solved the beriberi problem. Since the military POWs ate the same or less than the civilians it can be assumed beriberi hit them also.

When an individual died their clothes were removed to be used by the living. Early in 1951 a standard Chinese winter uniform was issued to each POW. At some point they were allowed to steam their clothing and disinfectant was used on the huts, either because of lice or feces, or both.

For a while the military POWs had political lectures about twice a week. In January the Tiger was replaced and gradually beatings by the guards became less common. In early February the diplomats and journalists in the civilian group were removed from Hanjang-ni.

An-dong

On or about 27 March 1951 the group was moved back down through Chunggang-ni to the third camp at An-dong. This time all the sick were moved in ox-carts. At first the entire group was housed in a large stone structure of ten or twelve rooms, thought by the POWs to have been a hospital, and nearby buildings, all part of a fenced-in compound. The area measured about eight hundred by four hundred feet and was surrounded by a five foot high barbed wire fence. In some sources this is also referred to as a former police compound.

Prior to this point the civilian and military POWs were not allowed much contact with each other, usually only when on work details. Now they were all in the same compound and mixed more freely. Political lectures continued, but after a while the civilian prisoners were told they would not have to attend. In early May the male civilians were moved out of the compound to a house about a hundred yards away (one source says a quarter mile). The guards felt there was too much intermingling of the civilian and military POWs. After this move the only contact was again on work details such as wood gathering or at the weekly food distribution point. One of the civilian group escaped a while later and was gone three days before recapture.

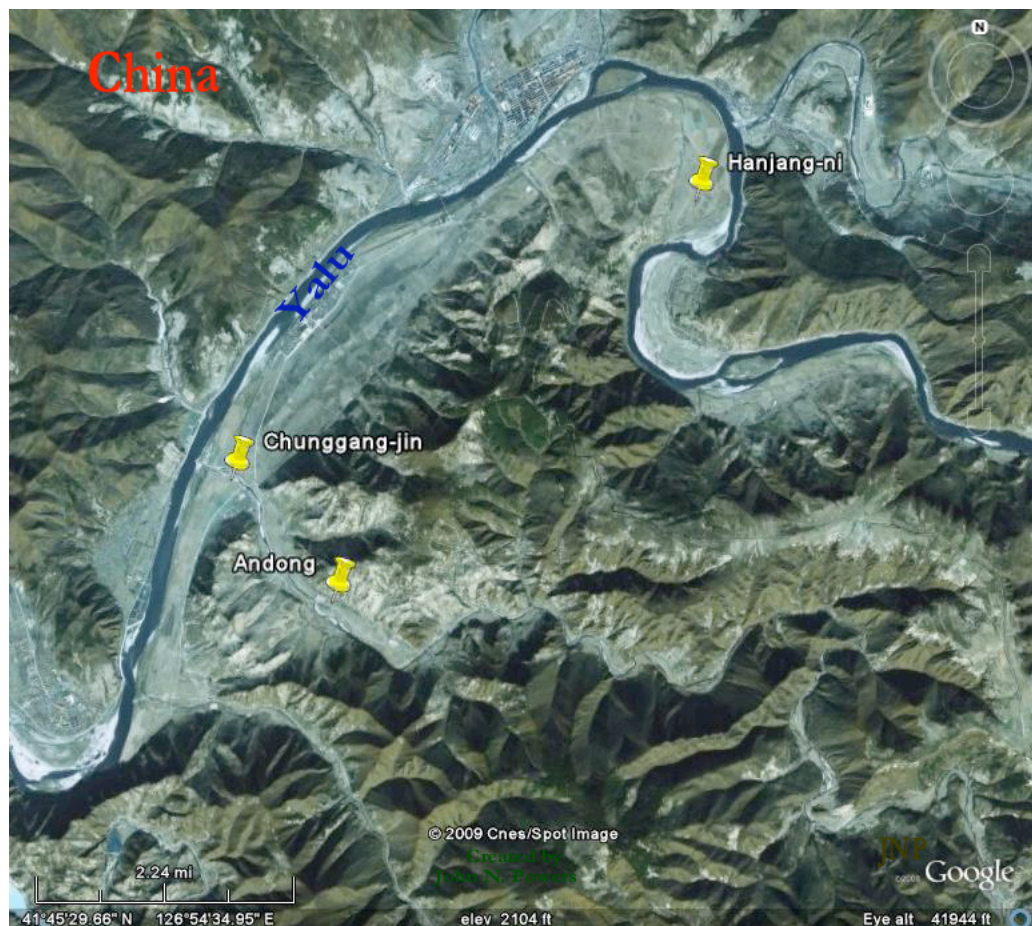
The weather improved and vegetables started appearing at meals. The normal meal of millet changed to kaoling, or sorghum. A day's nutrition was still 600 grams but now of equal parts rice and millet. Daily activities included the standards of cutting and hauling wood and water and collecting the daily rations from the storehouse. Cooking meant first washing and grinding the grain. Wood cutting details had the opportunity to pick wild berries, mushrooms, and wild greens. The daily wood gathering details would consist of two to three hundred POWs, civilians included, going down the road and into the hills to find firewood. Ox-carts would be taken along to carry the day's result. The civilians set up school sessions for the ten children in their group. Once the civilians were put into the hut outside the compound they were allowed more freedom of movement. They would wander into the hills gathering wild plants to add to their daily meals. It was at An-dong the prisoners were finally able to bathe, using the stream. New clothing was issued in the summer, including shoes.

Although conditions and treatment improved from the winter months the dying continued. There were sixty nine military deaths at An-dong and at least one civilian death.

The civilians left An-dong by truck on 9 October 1951 and were returned to Man-po. In August of 1952 they were sent to Ujang and March of 1953 to Pyongyang. The military POWs were marched to the Yalu on 10 October 1951 and sent down the river on barges. The officers were sent to Camp 2 and the enlisted to Camp 3. On arrival at Camp 2 the officers were described as “...scraggy and dirt-grimed, clad in rags, and some of them had skin diseases...”

Sixty-five percent of the 845 who began the Tiger Death March died while prisoners, almost all of that number dieing at the Apex camps. The dates and the number of deaths used here may not be one hundred percent accurate. Different sources use different numbers. Some sources give a figure of 87 civilians beginning the March, others 59 civilians. Some sources say 206 died at Hajang-ni, others say 222. Some sources say 60 died at An-dong, others say 69.

One source says it was the military POWs who were moved from the compound to the house at An-dong. That is incorrect. One house would not have held the military POWs as they numbered over three hundred at that time. Another source says the civilians were moved across the Yalu to a house in Manchuria. That is also incorrect. They were not on the Yalu. There was a small stream that ran through the village of An-dong. The civilians waded across it as they moved from the compound to the house. In their debriefs after the war many of the military POWs seemed to refer to any stream or river as the Yalu.



The Google photo of An-dong today shows little change from 1951. The compound where the military POWs were held is easily visible. When the civilians were removed from the compound they waded the stream just to the south and moved to a Korean home another hundred yards or so beyond.



The military POWs seem to have numbered 700 as they began the Tiger Death March. Sixty five of them had died prior to that time. Fifty nine civilians joined the group a few days before the March. For some time they had been held in the same areas and moved on the same route but kept apart. On the Tiger Death March ninety nine died. Twenty four died at Chunggang-ni, two hundred twenty two died at Hajang, and sixty at An-dong. Ten more died within a few months of leaving An-dong.

Compiled by John N. Powers

This article is an attempt to describe location and description of all the main POW camps in North Korea. This is the Apex camps part of the article.

I am a Vietnam veteran (USAF Intelligence Operations), taught school for 31 years, most of that time teaching American history, my wife's father was a POW in China and Japan in WW II. Three pilots from one of the units we supported in Vietnam were shot down and captured while I was there. All of this seems to be the reason I do this research and writing. As the historian for the North China Marines I put all their information on a website www.northchinamarines.com