# Few Cities Endured Pain Like Chongqing

#### **BY STUART LEAVENWORTH** © 2015, McClatchy Wash. Bureau

CHONGQING, China — When the air-raid alarms sounded, people hid in the shelters. They ran for the caves dug into the mountains. But there were never enough hiding places from the Japanese bombs, and not enough for Chen Guifang's parents.

On May 4, 1939, 7-year-old Chen was huddled inside a crowded cave in Chongqing — China's wartime capital in its southern interior — when bombs rained down outside. Shrapnel rocketed everywhere, wounding Chen and killing both of her parents.

Now 83, Chen wept as she recalled being alone at age 7 amid the smoldering embers of Chongqing. The wounds from the bombing are still visible on her face and arm.

"Colleagues of my parents buried them in a garden, next to the roadside," she said. "I was an orphan. I was crying every day calling for my parents and asking why the plane did not blow me up."

Four years before Pearl Harbor, three years before Nazi Germany's bombing of London, Japan's invasion of China in 1937 terrorized tens of millions of people. And no Chinese city was pounded as hard as Chongqing. From 1938 to 1941,

From 1938 to 1941, Japanese warplanes carried out more than 200 separate bombing raids on Chongqing (known in the West then as Chungking), killing nearly 12,000 people, most of them civilians. Thousands were killed on two horrendous days of bombing — May 3 and 4, 1939.

For decades, histories of World War II — written both inside and outside of China — gave short shrift to what Chongqing endured. But in recent years, that has changed. As Beijing commemorates the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II, the metropolis that some call "the city of heroes" is getting wider recognition.

In his 2013 best-selling book, "Forgotten Ally," Oxford historian Rana Mitter details how Chongqing and China led the resistance against Japan, pinning down Tokyo's forces for years, at the cost of 14 milliar Chinaca lives

lion Chinese lives. "The important thing about Chongqing is that this was the first of the big terror raids that became common in World War II," Mitter said in a recent telephone interview. While more lives were lost in London during the Nazi bombing that started in 1940, he said, Chongqing had to bear bombings with no real air defenses, such as the Royal Air Force that defended Britain. "For the people of Chongqing, it was terrifying," said Mitter. "Very few cities worldwide had before been bombed like that, for such a long period." For modern visitors to Chongqing, it is hard to imagine that this city at the mouth of the Yangtze and Jialing rivers was once a scene of devastation. Dotted by skyscrapers, Chongqing is an economic boom town. As of 2014, the municipality (which stretches into several suburban counties) had a population of 29 million. Prior to 1939, Chongqing was also bustling, but for different reasons. After Japan

invaded Shanghai and Nanjing — with soldiers executing

and raping thousands along the way — Chinese refugees streamed into inland cities. China's nationalist government, led by Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, relocated from Nanjing to Wuhan, a city on the Yangtze downstream from Chongqing. Outgunned by Japan, Chiang and his government then retreated to Chongqing, bringing thousands of refugees and soldiers with them.

Wang Xifu, now 80, made the journey with his parents. The family had owned a restaurant in Shanghai, but then fled during the 1937 invasion. With transportation disrupted, Wang said that his family walked for 20 days to the outskirts of Wuhan. They then waited for days before getting on a boat to Chongqing.

With savings they had brought from eastern China, the family started a Shanghaistyle restaurant in Chongqing, which soon became a success.

On May 3, 1939, people rushed out of the Wang family restaurant as Japanese planes started bombing the city center. Unable to find a bomb shelter, Wang's family ran to a nearby sawmill and hid between stacked boards. When the bombs came, they obliterated the sawmill, killing Wang's mother and father. He somehow survived.

Wang was just 4 at the time, and he didn't immediately realize what had happened. But the next day, family friends took him to a cave, where people were screaming in the dark as the bombs fell.

"I heard people yelling, "Where is my grandpa?"" Wang said. "'He is dead,' someone else yelled. It was then I realized my parents might be dead."

In his book, Mitter describes the crowds huddled into Chongqing's bomb shelters, sweltering during the summer months. Hours passed with people not knowing whether the planes had finished bombing for the day or were preparing to circle back.

Lu Xianbo, 80, lost his father because of a miscalculation. His father ran a successful construction company and had houses in the city and in the country. On May 4, 1939, Lu's father fled to a cave amid the second day of heavy bombing, but then became concerned about his city house being looted. When he decided to return home during a lull in the airstrikes, he was killed during a later bombing raid, said Lu, who heard the story from his uncle. As the war dragged on, air-raid warnings sometimes generated mass panic. In 1941 in Chongqing, scores of people were trampled to death during an air-raid stampede. More than 2,000 others reportedly suffocated in a tunnel during a three-hour-long bombing run on June 5 of that year. The apparent strategy of Japanese leaders was to

break the resolve of China's provisional capital and prompt a formal surrender. But like the bombings in London, the indiscriminate bombings may have had an opposite effect. As Time magazine correspondent Theodore White described during one of his dispatches from Chongqing, it was a "moment in time" when the Chinese were determined to defend their country at all costs.

To survive day to day, people in Chongqing resorted to desperate measures. Chen, an orphan, said she lived in a tent and collected leftover coal to sell. She eventually found a job in a textile factory, got married, and became a mother, grandmother and great-grandmother.

Wang, another orphan, also became homeless, at age 9. He earned money by scouring the city's sewer system for lost tools and coins. "One way I was able to eat was by offering to fan people in restaurants, in exchange for eating their leftovers," he said.

During the war, Chongqing's sacrifices did not go unnoticed. Newsreels brought home graphic footage of the bombing, helping to shape U.S. perspectives on Japan's brutal expansionism years before Pearl Harbor.

Yet after the war ended. Chongqing slipped off the international radar. Mao Zedong and his Communist Party defeated Chiang Kai-shek in China's civil war, forcing the generalissimo to retreat to Taiwan. Mao had little reason to celebrate the city where Chiang had based his fight against both the communists and the Japanese. And as Mitter notes, Mao did not want to hype China's war experience in those early years, since the People's Republic of China was trying to woo Japan and other countries for international recognition.

Over the last two decades, both China and Chongqing have become more open about this history. The city's Three Gorges Museum includes displays and dioramas of the Japanese bombing. Chongqing has restored Chiang Kai-shek's mountain retreat outside the city, with narratives that openly depict Chiang as a national leader of China's resistance.

The city has also sought to highlight the U.S.-China collaboration during the war. One of its tourist attractions is a museum honoring the "Flying Tigers," a group of mostly U.S. pilots paid by China to defend the country in 1941 and 1942. Nearby is the wartime home Zhou Shoulin paints patriotic works of art, ranging from depictions of Mao during the Long March to Chongqing's current grandeur.

But Žhou, 76, said one of his favorite paintings shows a U.S. soldier getting a light off the cigarette of a Chinese man. "It reflects the close relationship between the Chinese and American people," said Zhou, who said the painting was inspired by a famous WWI photograph shot in Yunnan province in 1944.

Chongqing's view of Japan is more complicated. Several residents interviewed said they bore no ill will toward the Japanese people. But they quickly added that Tokyo has yet to own up to atrocities committed by previous governments. More than 180 Chongqing

bombing survivors — including Lu Xianbo and Chen Guifang — have attempted to sue Japan in Japanese courts, seeking compensation and an apology. In February, a Tokyo District Court ruled against them, but the group has vowed



PHOTO: CARL MYDANS A photo of civilians who died in a mass panic during a Japanese air raid on Chongqing, China, in 1941.

to keep pursuing the case.

Mitter said these lawsuits are less about cash remuneration and more about getting official validation of what they suffered through. Some survivors agree. "We will persist to the end, until they face up to these crimes," said Lu, who retired from government service less than 20 years ago. "If we are not successful, it will be up to the next generation to continue this effort."



and headquarters of Gen. Joseph "Vinegar Joe" Stillwell, who served as Chiang's chief of staff and commanded Chinese forces. While the museum skirts the tense relationship between

Chiang and Stillwell, a plaque at its entrances notes how "the Chinese and American peoples fought shoulder to shoulder against the Japanese fascists." Warm feelings for American allice are not hard to find in

allies are not hard to find in Chongqing. At his home studio,

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