

## FEATURE

# Curiosity Saved Eddie Fung

His memoir tells how a Chinatown kid survived as a Japanese POW.

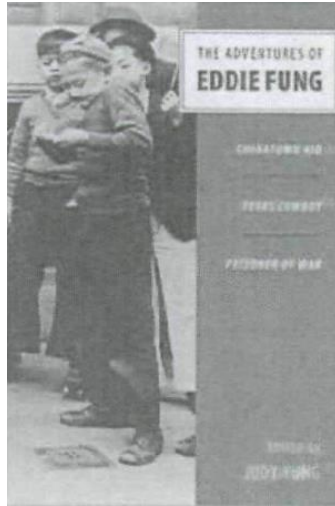
By Bridget Kinsella

**E**ddie Fung, an 85-year-old World War II veteran known as the only Chinese-American held captive in a Japanese POW camp, attributes his ability to survive anything to a small stature that renders him physically non-threatening. But you only have to spend five minutes with the guy to know that the word "small" could never be used to describe this man, his life, his presence or his philosophy.

Evidence of that accumulates in his memoir, edited by Judy Yung, called *The Adventures of Eddie Fung: Chinatown Kid, Texas Cowboy, Prisoner of War* (University of Washington Press, \$22.50).

Fung, '53, has been on a quest for "new experiences" his whole life. "Like marrying Judy, for one thing," he says, gesturing toward the co-author he married on April Fools' Day 2003 in their townhouse at the University of California-Santa Cruz, where Yung is professor emerita of American studies.

Although Fung loved his family, he liked adventure more. At 16, he blindfolded himself and played pin-the-tail-on-the-cowpoke-town with a Texas map. He decided to seek his future as a cowboy in Midland. Never mind that he was 5 foot 3 and weighed south of 120 pounds, or that Midland was more of an oil town. Fung made his mark as the runt cowboy not to be underestimated. He'd make the same impression



*The Adventures of Eddie Fung: Chinatown Kid, Texas Cowboy, Prisoner of War*  
Edited by Judy Yung  
University of Washington Press,  
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in his National Guard unit when he signed up in 1940. Fung's battalion shipped out of Pearl Harbor six days before the Japanese attack. Diverted to Java, the battalion became part of a battle that ended when the Dutch command surrendered the island on March 8, 1942.

A multinational group of thousands was taken prisoner by the Japanese. The men were shipped north to be used as slave labor in building the Burma-Siam Railway, a 262-mile supply line from Rangoon to Bangkok through jungle. The notorious project, made famous by the film *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, was completed in a record 16 months at the cost of 12,500 POW lives and thousands more civilian Javanese, Malays, Indians, Thais and Burmese.

As an ethnic Chinese "guest" of the Japanese, Fung worried about how he would be treated. "I had heard about the Rape of Nanking," says Fung, referring to the Japanese massacre in China's military capital in 1937.

During his 31/2 years as a prisoner, Fung found his treatment was inconsistent: Japanese captors treated him as they treated every other American, or they treated him as a curiosity, or they considered him someone they could beat without warning. Fung became a scrounger-stealing and trading whatever he could, but mostly food. Told that the kitchen was mined to

## OF TRUE MINDS:

*Yung was collecting oral histories when she met Fung. He told her he was attracted to her but aware of the 24-year difference in their ages – a proposition she didn't catch until she listened to the tape later. The two married in 2003.*

*Gabriela Hasbun*

thwart thieves, he watched more closely to see where the Japanese entered. Then he realized he could untie vines that held the kitchen's bamboo walls together and sneak in that way. He heisted a 100-pound sack of sugar when he barely weighed that much. Later, in another camp, he made off with 24 bottles of quinine-repacking the empty crate and putting it at the bottom of a stack.

Fung's appreciation for his heritage brought him together with the woman who would become his third wife. Yung met Fung while she was collecting oral histories of Chinese-Americans. He was 80 and she 56 when she started recording his life story. When he made his romantic overture, she nearly missed it.

During a recorded interview, Yung asked how he dealt with post-traumatic stress disorder. He said he did it "head on" like any other problem, "like I want to come on to you, but I am aware of the differences in our ages." Yung says she didn't realize what he meant until she transcribed the tape.



**Eddie Fung has the distinction of being the only Chinese American soldier to be captured by the Japanese during World War II.**

**He was then put to work building the Burma-Siam railroad through 262 miles of tropical jungle, a feat made more famous by the film, *The Bridge over the River Kwai*.**

The couple had a heart-to-heart talk until, as the Chinese expression goes, their "intestines were straight," says Fung, adding that the adage sounds better in Cantonese. "He said, 'At our age, you do what is best for you,'" Yung says.

The book they wrote together starts with Eddie's Chinatown childhood. After the war, Fung attended junior college, got married and enrolled at Stanford on the GI Bill. His wife, a very sheltered young woman, suffered a mental breakdown-for which Fung blamed himself-and, as self-punishment, he refused to apply for his diploma even though he had earned the academic credits to graduate. "I don't understand that," Yung says, "but Eddie has a strong sense of right and wrong."

It's something Fung says he has had all of his life, but which really took root when he was a POW. It is one of the traits Lois, his second wife for 44 years, liked about him. Every year since 1964, until Lois died in 1999, the couple attended a reunion of the Lost Battalion in Texas. Now

Yung attends the annual reunions with him.

The two adjusted readily to married life. "He's such an easy person to live with," Yung says. Fung says the military is good training for husbands. Fung, who long ago retired from Lawrence Livermore Laboratory, where he worked on research projects on high-melting-point metals, became Yung's unofficial teaching assistant because he wanted to learn about her specialty, Asian-American studies.

He quickly bonded with the students, who were impressed with his role in living history. But Fung remains less impressed with himself than inspired by life. As his book concludes, "One lesson I've learned well is that every moment that you're alive, you'd better take advantage of the fact and enjoy it."

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