Meredith Hinchliffe reveals how Sir David Griffin came to write a children's fable in the grim surroundings of Changi prison camp.

Once upon a time there was a Chi Chak, a Monkey and a Frog, who all lived together in a little house deep in the middle of the jungle. The Chi Chak's name was Winston and he was very clever ... If a North Wind was blowing, Winston would first of all catch it in his trap; then he would tie the wind up in a banana leaf and carry it home for lunch. But if a South Wind was blowing they would eat it for dinner, because the South Wind tasted better.

From The Happiness Box
by David Griffin
Courtesy of Sir David Griffin

Lawyer, soldier, lecturer, amateur performer, poet, writer and Lord Mayor of Sydney, Sir David Griffin CBE was also a prisoner of war in Changi prison camp in Singapore. In 2002, Griffin compiled Changi Days: The Prisoner as Poet, a collection of poetry written by prisoners in the camp. In this anthology, he describes a gentler side to the Changi experience than the traditional brutal image. John Farquharson recorded an interview with Griffin for the National Library's Oral History and Folklore Collection in 2001.

The Australians' initial POW camps were not in Changi Gaol itself but in the nearby Selarang Barracks, formerly home bases to key British garrison units. The Australians really ran the barracks themselves, with a Japanese lieutenant keeping his eye on things. 'You couldn't do much, there was no escape; you couldn't go anywhere,' Sir David Griffin told John Farquharson. 'The Japanese were quite sensible not to waste [soldiers] looking after people who couldn't do anything anyway. What they really wanted us to do was to die as quickly as possible.'

In the early days at Selarang Barracks, a far-sighted Australian, Brigadier H.B. Taylor (in private life the government analyst in New South Wales), realised that, though food for the body would be in short supply, food for the mind would be shorter still and accordingly must be provided by the prisoners themselves.
 Brigadier Taylor, assisted by Captain Adrian Curlewis, assembled a small group of Australians to act as teachers and lecturers (several being ordered to establish a library) under the imposing title of 'The AIF Education Centre'. Captain Leslie Greener, a former staff member of the Sydney-based magazine Pix, affectionately known as 'The Dean' by his Changi staff, commanded the centre. Leaving their respective units, these men were given a small specially assigned room, the only Selarang building of the prison still standing. The library room is part of what is now the officers' mess of the 9th Singapore Division. A plaque acknowledging its former use was originally attached to the outside wall, and is now a special exhibit in a new room known as the Heritage Collection. 'Here we set up a library with books donated by the prisoners who had been asked to hand them in so that a library could be stocked, These were later augmented by books—many of them priceless—taken from the famous Raffles Library in Singapore.' The novice librarians slept on the floor beside their bookcases and came to know each other, trust each other and rely on each other, 'clinging together as do shipwrecked men seeking that extra buoyancy with which to remain afloat'. Of the eight, only two are alive today. 'I suggested we might have some sort of literary competition,' Sir David said. 'Together [with Leslie Greener] we worked on this thing and then it was open to everybody—Brits as well—and they put in short stories and other compositions. Russell Braddon was one of the winners, and Stan Arneil was another ... I have one of the certificates that we used to give them, designed by Fred Brightfield, the timpani player in the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, and it is in the book [Changi Days: The Prisoner as Poet], too.'

That led to the formation of the Literary Society and then as the first Christmas approached we heard, to our dismay, that there were a number of young children in Changi Gaol.' The prisoners could look down on Changi Gaol in the distance, 'and it was a pretty grim looking place even from where we were and we thought how ghastly it would be. And an unnamed Australian suggested the idea that the troops make toys for these children at Christmas time.' The Japanese captors agreed: 'They mostly didn't agree to anything, but they're very sentimental about children and they said yes, provided the toys that were made were displayed, and the Japanese General could look at them.' The toys were delivered to the library. 'And these marvellous toys came in, model cars, trains, dolls, a miniature theatre—we even had a working model of Sydney Harbour with cranes and boats, it was
fabulous! In armies people can do anything, anything at all, and I thought what about me doing something? Toymaking was quite beyond Griffin but he thought he could manage a book, so he wrote a children’s book, entitled *The Happiness Box.*

'I wrote the story, a bloke called Bruce Blakey typed it on one of the very few typewriters—held in the library—Leslie Greener did the illustrations and the bookbinding department of the library bound it, and the whole thing was done in 48 hours. I didn’t even know how the story was going to finish when I started writing it!' (The book bindery had been started as the few books in the library were wearing out and needed to be repaired.)

The toys were displayed and inspected by General Saito and his staff. They expressed astonishment at how the prisoners could possibly have made them.

However, the general went into an instant rage when he saw the book and ordered that it be destroyed, as no permission had been given for any written material to go to the children. 'Having the principal character called Winston would not have been a help,' Griffin laughed.

The characters are all animals, based on men they knew. Sir David said: ‘We knew who they were but they didn’t recognise themselves as animals. And they have a wind machine to collect their meals, because they have nothing to eat but wind, you see.

‘Major Phillip Head, a senior officer in the division, took the book, put it into his shirt and said he would have it destroyed, and that satisfied the Japanese general. And unbeknownst to me, instead of destroying it, it was put in a huge cordite container from the big guns in Singapore. The cordite was kept in stainless steel drums, in which they buried a tremendous number of army records. At the end of the war the little book was dug up with the other records and I got it back again! And when I came back to Sydney we hit upon the idea that it might be of interest so it was published by the Australasian Publishing Company, a subsidiary of Harraps. They couldn’t print many copies because there was no paper, you see, after the war. I think they did a run of about 5000, and it did very well really.'

And there is more to the original story.

At the end of the Second World War, Lord Mountbatten was leading a convoy of over 100 ships to invade Malaya. He visited Changi prison, after the Japanese there finally acknowledged that they had lost the war, and made a rousing speech. (For three weeks after the official declaration, the POWs were treated as though the war was still in full swing.) Several days later, Mountbatten and Lady Mountbatten visited the camp, asked the POWs about the things that they had been doing throughout their time there, and were told about the Christmas gifts for the children.

‘Alick Downer and I went back to our little library and were eventually introduced to Lord Mountbatten—called Supremo by the men who were close to him. He asked if one of us had written the children’s book and I said “Yes, I did”. He asked if I had it and I told him I did. He asked if he could see it, so I fetched the book, which I had only had back myself for two or three days. He said “My, this is very interesting. The king would be very interested in this. Would you have any objection if I took it back to

*Working Party Returning to Changi Camp*
Reproduced from *Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings* by V. Murray Griffin, Official War Artist (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1946)
Buckingham Palace?" Well I had a lot of objections! I'd never see it again! With very quick thinking, Sir David told Lord Mountbatten that he thought his wife, Jean, should see it first.

'About 12 years ago, I met Ian Ward who is an Australian and was the London Daily Telegraph's Far East correspondent in Singapore. He became a publisher and he and his wife—a reader for the publishing firm—were very excited when they saw The Happiness Box.'

The book was republished in 1991, with a print run of 20,000 and it continues to sell well. Sir David was invited to go to Singapore and promote it during the National Book Week. 'Do you know that over a million people go to it? I understand one of the other biggest ones in the world is in New York, where they get about 300,000!'

A new museum has been built at Changi, which is a tourist destination, and The Happiness Box is still sold there.

The story is as valid today as it was in 1942. Three jungle friends, Winston the 'chi chak' lizard, Martin the monkey and Wobbley the frog, discover the magical happiness box. They are unsure whether to open it or not, and seek advice from the three wisest animals in the jungle. Finally, they learn the secrets of happiness.

The original copy of The Happiness Box is in the collection of the State Library of New South Wales.

Meredith Hinchliffe is a freelance writer and arts advocate based in Canberra.

(right) Stan J. McAlistair
Changi Barrack Square, Selarang, Alip
Prisoners of War Camp, Singapore 1942
pencil and wash drawings: 20.3 x 24.2 cm
Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an6115206

(below) Stan J. McAlistair
Selarang POW Camp, 1942–1943 1944
pencil and crayon drawings: 19.9 x 26.2 cm
Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an6115200

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