Canadians Fooled Japs, Stole Rice, Cooked It Below Floors of Prison

By WILLIAM STEWART

Manila, Sept. 10 (CP). — First Canadians to reach Manila from prisoner-of-war camps in Japan appear to be in the best of health. But it is no credit to the Japs.

The first groups of prisoners, released from Sumidagawa Camp, northwest of Tokyo, reached here today and related how they had been able through theft and construction of illicit kitchen "stills" to provide themselves with more cooked food than was turned out by the authorized kitchens.

The men, who represented places in Canada all the way from the Pacific to the Atlantic coasts, were well-tanned, appeared sturdy and showed that they had been better fed than other prisoners of the Japs —something that puzzled the Japs right up until the day of Allied liberation.

Then, the lads boasted to the Japs how for weeks they had been stealing food and cooking more rice than the Japs allowed for the whole camp.

Lost 60 Pounds

At one time since their capture at Hong Kong, Dec. 25, 1941, Sgmn. George Grant of Vancouver dropped in weight to 125 pounds, Rfmn. Gerald Hachey of West Bathurst, N.B., to 94 pounds, and Sgt. Oswald Clark of Bury, Que., dropped about 60 pounds below his normal weight.

But last spring these and other prisoners were able to remedy the situation when they were moved to Sumidagawa and put to work unloading railway food cars. Some of the Canadians were able to obtain oversized shoes and the wearers became food smugglers.

While companions kept watch, the fellows with the big boots packed in as much as a pint of rice or soya beans with which they sometimes were forced to limp around all day before getting an opportunity to empty their boots at night.

On one occasion Grant was caught with stolen food in his possession and was slapped and punched and was made to stand at attention 24 hours. But the smuggling continued, with the Canadians ducking into toilets to munch raw rice and beans which they stole in addition to their bootfuls.

Ingenuity Needed

Cooking of the food required more ingenuity than theft of it. First wires, which had to remain hidden, were hooked up to the regular lighting system and eventually were carried down to improvised electric cookers.

Hachey said square holes were sawed in the floor, hidden by the prison cots, and a pit dug. In the pits the prisoners installed their "cookers," which were two tin cans, one inside the other on the "double-boiler" principle. The "raw" wires were inserted in the water and the current passing through the water "did the cooking."

In Sumidagawa camp about a dozen of the "brewers" were installed and they outdid the regular kitchens in production. The Japanese guards began to scratch their heads when they observed their prisoners putting on weight, apparently from the prison fare of rice and thin soup.

The prisoners estimated that during the period of their imprisonment at Hong Kong until January 1943, and thereafter in Yokohama and Tokyo camps, they received altogether no more than five pounds of meat. They received no Red Cross parcels after they left Hong Kong, and some said they hadn't received any mail since 1941.

These men helped form the first group of prisoners to arrive here from Japan. They were removed Jan. 19, 1943, from Samshuipo Prison — where other Canadians were released several days ago on the Chinese mainland across from Hong Kong—and arrived at Nagasaki Jan. 19, along with 1,200 other Canadian and British prisoners.

Ate Rice and Seaweed

On the way to Japan some of the prisoners were taken off the Japanese hospital ship at Kobe. The Canadians, who had been selected for draft to Japan by the test of whether they could cross a road without limping, made the trip in the hold under locked hatches.

On the ship were wounded servicemen captured at Singapore. The Canadians said the trip wasn't too bad because they were fed and they had been able to bring along remnants of Red Cross parcels they had received before leaving Samshuipo.

Their food consisted mainly of rice and seaweed, though they later learned that grasshoppers fried in soya oil tasted much better than it sounds.

From Nagasaki the group was taken to Yokohama by passenger train. They felt the Japs were attempting to make them fairly comfortable during the trip because of the previous loss of a prison ship and also because they wished to impress the Japanese people with their "humanity."

At Tsurumi Camp on the outskirts of Yokohama, the Canadians worked around the shipyard, turning out hulls badly needed by the Japs. The weather was cold, and there were no fires in the camps the first winter. Most prisoners slept in all their clothes, including greatcoats, and wrapped themselves in blankets.

They left camp for work at 7 o'clock in the morning and returned about 5:30 at night. Fifty minutes was allowed for lunch, and except for that period they worked constantly under the eyes of foremen and guards armed with sticks who sought any slackers.

Electric Feet

Many prisoners suffered from what they called "electric feet," a painful result of malnutrition, which forced many of the men to sit all night with their feet in water.

The news reaching them was what was contained in English-language newspapers, obtained from bribed guards. At one time the prisoners did business with the Japs with salt, which the Japs were unable to steal for the moral reason that all salt belonged to the Emperor.

About June, 1943, prison rations were reduced in what the Canadians believed was an experiment to determine just how little food on which a man could survive. A staple in the restricted diet was a carrot-top or potato-top soup. Not a speck of food was wasted.

When the starvation conditions became so bad and 125 men were too weak to work and finally collapsed from hunger, Capt. J. A. G. Reid of Winnipeg, a medical officer, wept at his inability to do anything to help the stricken men.

The Canadians left Tsurumi in March, when the Japanese fear of air raids was such that it could be seen on the faces of civilians evacuating the area, who took practically their homes on their backs.

The prisoners arrived at Sudimagawa just after the first fire raid in the area. Subsequent raids left fires burning all around the camp, but the Canadians escaped injury.

Their job of unloading railway cars meant the carrying to barges of sacks of beans weighing about 200 pounds, and sacks of rice weighing about 150 pounds. It required three men to hoist one sack to the back of the carrier.

One of the first things the prisoners noticed on arrival here was a healthy-looking Japanese working party which was treated leniently.

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