

Grenadiers Lived By Outwitting Japanese Guards

By GORDON ROOT (Tribune Far East Correspondent)

MANILLA, Sept. 11—Pte. Riley Prieston, of Swan River, Man., was typical Canadian when he went to Hong Kong in 1941 with the Winnipeg Grenadiers. Today he is nearly four years older and events of those four years have remoulded his outlook but he is still a typical Canadian. In the military repatriation centre here Pte. Prieston is forgetting about the horrors of a Japanese prison camp and is learning to live and sleep and eat as he used to in Manitoba. He is thinking not of the past but of the future, of his plans when he arrives back in Canada and gets his discharge from the army.

In spite of the treatment meted out by his enemy task-masters, he looks extremely fit. He talks quite rationally about his life as a prisoner of war, but has a bitter hatred of the Japanese which will not fade throughout his lifetime.



PTE. E. TOEWS

It paid to learn Japanese quickly



CPL. VICTOR CARTER

He made for the jam cookies . . .



PTE. GEORGE BELCOURT

Wonders how soon he'll be home

Pte. Prieston is one of 50 Canadian soldiers who reached Manila from a Tokyo prison camp Sunday, the first able-bodied veterans of Hong Kong to arrive. With them they brought the story of an existence that was entirely dependent on their ability to outwit their guards. They learned to smuggle additional food into their camp. They learned to speak Japanese and they learned that the enemy's coolie class was an excellent source of news and important information.

The released prisoners, members of the Winnipeg Grenadiers and the Royal Rifles of Canada, admitted they had been lucky and they feared that other men of the units who had been sent north to work in the mines had not been so fortunate.

The break came, explained Sgt. Oswald Clark, of the Royal Rifles, whose home is in Bury, Que., last April when the 450 Canadians who were working in a steel mill near Yokohama, were split up and sent to new tasks. Four hundred unfortunate ones went to the mines and the remaining 50 were moved into Tokyo to work on the waterfront.

"We were unloading barges of rice and beans," Clark said, "and we found we could smuggle some into camp in our shoes although they searched us every time we went in and out. Some of the fellows fixed up a hot plate which we kept hidden in the wall and each night we cooked ourselves an extra ration. It was the one thing that really kept us going."

"Pte. E. Toews, of 816 Fleet ave., Winnipeg, whose wife and three sons are now living on Vancouver Island, said the boys had picked up the Japanese language very quickly."

"When we were first captured the guards would give us orders in their own language and then beat us because we didn't obey them. We sure learned what they meant in a hurry."

They exploded the myth of
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Japanese stoicism, recalling that in the latter days of the campaign, guards in the camp plainly showed their fear of air attacks.

The atomic bomb, said L.-Cpl. Malcolm Gillis, of Matapedia, Que., did nothing to still their troubled minds. It got so bad the guards would drop their rifles and run when they heard the alarm.

First news of the new weapon was given to the prisoners by the Japanese themselves, who admitted the two towns had been wiped out. A day later a B-29 pilot shot down over Tokyo and taken to the camp added the details of the bomb.

The men kept pretty well in touch with events in the outside world by getting copies of an English-language paper published in Japan. But it was difficult to separate the news from the propaganda, they admitted, after asking about the riot among Canadian troops at Aldershot.

The Japanese paper had reported 30,000 were involved in the affair. From the start of their imprisonment, said Rfn. Philip Lawlis, of Grand Cascapedia, Que., they had lived in hopes that relief would come within a few months.

"If we had known it was going to be more than three years, I don't think we would have been able to stand up to it."

During their stay in Hong Kong there were several air raids on the town, he said, which were wonderful morale boosters, and he agreed that the last days in Tokyo were absolutely perfect.

"We used to drive through the town each morning to work, and almost every day there'd be another section that had been wiped out during the night."

Life in the camp at Manila is a change so great that most of the repatriated Canadians can scarcely comprehend it. Cots with clean white sheets have replaced the wood floor in a hut infested with bed bugs, and the diet of rice has been forgotten as they scan a menu as varied as any in a Canadian restaurant.

American officials are making every effort to give the rescued men anything they desire. The only limit is a word of caution from the medical authorities that too much rich food might be harmful until they become accustomed to it. Clean new clothing has replaced the tattered garments they wore at the prison camp.

In the cook house at the camp I found Cpl. Victor Carter, 854 Valour Road, Winnipeg, munching on a jam cookie and swallowing large gulps of hot coffee. He asked would it be possible to get news from his wife and son at home.

Pte. George Belcourt, of St. Eutace, Man., was wondering how soon they would be leaving for Canada. He, too, has a wife and son waiting for him.