

PRISONERS OF JAPAN

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The new Zealanders who fell into the hands of the Japanese were mercifully few. From the armed forces were the survivors of warships sunk in battle in East Indies waters, airmen attached to a [Royal Air Force](#) unit in [Java](#), the crews of planes, [Air Force](#) or [Fleet Air Arm](#), shot down over [Burma](#) or over [Japan](#) itself. Among the Army prisoners of war were some New Zealanders serving in the Australian forces who were captured when [Singapore](#) fell, as well as others, in civil life public servants or engineers in [Malaya](#), who were enrolled in the Malayan Defence Force. A miscellaneous group of professions supplied the New Zealand internees in Japanese hands: missionaries and teachers in [China](#) or [Japan](#), officials in [Malaya](#) or [Sarawak](#), engineers and technicians employed in [Thailand](#) or on the [China](#) coast.

The places of imprisonment or internment were as varied as the localities and the circumstances in which these people became captives. The conditions of internment were on the whole better than those endured by service prisoners of war. For the latter a broad policy of brutality appears to have been imposed from above. For civilian and service personnel alike the will of local commanders seems to have been the dominating factor, and some surprisingly humane conditions (surprising when set beside the general conduct of the Japanese) were offered to small groups in favoured localities. It is, however, possible to generalise and say that all, prisoners of war or internees, were badly fed by Japanese standards, atrociously by European.

The rights and obligations of prisoners of war in relation to the detaining power are defined in the Geneva Convention. A writer who examined this Convention critically has pointed out that it is a weakness, from the point of view of European troops, that the detaining power is obliged to give its prisoners only the same standard of diet as its own Base troops enjoy. As a Japanese can live on less food, on a smaller total of calories though not, of course, on a less well-balanced 'spread' of vitamins, than a European, the latter on a diet that satisfies the former must suffer from malnutrition. It is true that the Japanese in any case paid only lip service to the Geneva Convention; they declared their adherence to it after their entry into the war and violated its letter and its spirit in every detail in almost every prison camp. But even if their attempts to conform to the Convention had been sincere, prisoners and internees in their hands must have suffered severely. Some part of the blame for the slow starvation of their prisoners must be attributed to the differences in racial standards, though nearly everywhere it was due far more directly to a cynical disregard of every humane consideration and an active desire first to humiliate and then to destroy their victims. Prisoners of war paid with their blood and their lives for the national sense of inferiority of the divinely-descended children of Nippon.

The Incalculable Japanese

In their entry into the war the Japanese provided themselves with every modern weapon, used the latest tactics, and imitated, often with overwhelming success, the western nations in every mechanical and industrial device to increase their striking power and chance of victory. But they themselves were less Europeanised than their ships, planes, weapons and uniforms suggested. How little they had advanced towards civilisation (a condition they understood mainly on the material side) was shown most clearly in their abominable treatment of their prisoners.

The Japanese themselves did not 'allow' their troops to become prisoners of the enemy. It was their duty to die rather than face the world in which they had suffered defeat. Japanese soldiers who fell into the hands of the Chinese, for instance, were considered officially to be dead: their relatives were paid compensation and their glorious death was reported at the Shinto shrines. Never, *never* could these living dead return to their homes to outrage both their sorrowing relatives and their ancestors by contradicting so satisfying a legend.

The Japanese in some degree extended this attitude to those sailors, soldiers, and airmen of the Allies who fell into their hands. (This did not, however, prevent them in some camps attempting to victimise New Zealanders as a reprisal for the shooting of Japanese prisoners at [Featherston](#) in February 1943; this discrimination broke down in practice because the general treatment of all prisoners was in any case already a terrible victimisation.) Men who should have been dead could have no rights. But the Japanese declared their adherence to the Geneva Convention, which they had not previously ratified and could not therefore have been blamed for not observing. Thus, for the sake of wishing to appear before the world as humane, to appear as though they were capable of behaving by the standards of the European nations, the Japanese greatly increased their war guilt. It would seem, however, that the Japanese were in any case incapable of understanding the humanitarian spirit which lies behind this international agreement.

The Japanese themselves in their own services and even to some extent in civil life practise the active brutality of which prisoners of war were so often the victims. Himself struck by his superiors, the non-commissioned officer passes on the blows to the private on any occasion of displeasure; the humble private slaps or clubs the civilian or, when he is within reach, the prisoner of war.

Among their former prisoners the consensus of opinion seems to be that the Japanese were brutal rather than sadistic and largely unaware of their own brutality, which might find its target in an animal as readily as in a helpless prisoner. (That so much of their motives must be left to conjecture is some indication of the bewilderment of anyone who attempts to elucidate the contradictions of the Japanese character.) Undoubtedly they were arrogant in victory and obsessed with a desire to avenge on individuals the galling pretensions to superiority of the white races over the coloured. This led to calculated humiliations being heaped on their prisoners. An intelligent observer,* who was their prisoner for three and a half years in [Malaya](#) and [Thailand](#), considered the main characteristic of the Japanese to be a frightening lack of balance, 'which means that they can swing from murder to laughter in a couple of seconds, and this makes them always unpredictable and impossible to trust in any way'. They have a marked tendency to

hysteria. Before attacking prisoners [page 5](#) who had offended them, they used to work themselves up into a berserk condition until virtually they did not know what they were doing. Prisoners of war found a very few who were uniformly considerate, fair, honest, and humane. Their national tradition placed no value on these virtues even within the circle of their own families.

It is impossible not to feel deep indignation at the treatment of their prisoners by the Japanese. But, while pitying the prisoners, one may also pity the Japanese. One ex-prisoner, when asked why the Japanese had beaten up so many prisoners of war for trivial offences or for what were not really offences at all, replied, 'Because they were unhappy'. Many times the Japanese committed atrocities which were directly opposed to their own interests. The building of the [Burma-Thailand](#) railway with prisoner-of-war labour is a case in point: it was obviously in the interest of the Japanese war effort to keep this labour force in a condition of health and vigour, yet the callous denial of essential drugs to the sick or of adequate food to any of the workers resulted in the labour force dwindling away through every type of tropical disease being added to malnutrition.



from the Japanese propaganda paper
Freedom

from the Japanese propaganda paper *Freedom*

* [John Coast](#), *Railroad of Death* (Commodore Press), p. 243.

After Capture

The hours following capture are always the most anxious for a prisoner of war. He has no guarantee that his surrender will be accepted. Even such large-scale capitulations as those of the forces defending [Singapore](#) and [Hong Kong](#) had an element of uncertainty, for it was widely believed that the Japanese ‘took no prisoners’.*

The prisoners taken by the Japanese Navy were generally (but not always) well treated while in its hands. This was true of the coast-watchers captured in the northern Gilberts and of the crew of the *Hauraki*, captured in the [Indian Ocean](#) in July 1942. But it was not true of the passengers (some of them servicemen) and the crew of the *Behar*, another merchant ship sunk by a squadron of Japanese cruisers in March 1944 in the [Indian Ocean](#). The shelling of the ship went on while the boats were being launched. An officer shouting through a megaphone directed the lifeboats to row to one of the cruisers, and as each survivor climbed up a rope ladder on board he was stripped of any valuables and of much of his clothing, beaten and kicked, then tied up and left for many hours in a position of great discomfort. The rest of the voyage, too, was made under terrible conditions.

The Japanese did not interrogate all their prisoners. When they did they often used violence at the interview, and before and after it, to enforce their demands for accurate information. An [Air Force](#) officer shot down over [Burma](#) in 1944 was subjected to questioning accompanied by various methods of ‘persuasion’. He had been advised to tell the enemy nothing, but ‘Japs have no limit to their brutality, so this was bad advice’; he felt that he should have been instructed to tell some sort of prepared story. ([Fleet Air Arm](#) pilots shot down over [Japan](#) in 1945 gave, as they had been advised, long, rambling statements with much inaccurate and misleading detail.) This airman held out for a fortnight before giving his squadron number (it was due to move in a fortnight), earning some left-handed admiration from some of his tormentors for his steadfastness.

A few Japanese officers took in good part a complete refusal to give more than name, rank, and number. But, that the use of violence to induce a prisoner to ‘talk’ was part of a general policy is shown by the establishment in [Japan](#) itself at [Ofuna](#), near Yokohama, of a naval interrogation centre, known as ‘Torture Farm’. Here the prisoners, appallingly fed even by Japanese standards, had to engage in exhausting physical exercise, do everything at the double, and suffer mass and individual beatings at the hands of Japanese of above the average height and physique, to demoralise them before their interrogation by teams of intelligence experts. However, most prisoners of the Japanese found it easy to give some answer which would satisfy their questioners without betraying vital information.

Captivity usually began with a long march on foot carrying all baggage. Prisoners captured in small groups often had their valuables taken from them; others surrendering in larger units were better able to retain them. Although they did not realise it at the time, the clothes they carried with them into captivity were likely to have to last them the three or more years of their imprisonment. Prudence in selecting kit to take into prison camp paid heavy dividends.



into bondage —from *White Coolie*, by Ronald Hastain, the sketch by Ronald Searle

The first quarters allotted to newly captured prisoners of war were usually the worst of their captivity. To some extent this was due to the exigencies of war, and in part to the unpreparedness of the Japanese to accept the surrender of large numbers of prisoners. It frequently happened that men were given no food at all during the first two or three days of captivity.

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* In 1904 the Japanese took prisoner large numbers of Russians.

Singapore

The changi peninsula was used by the Japanese as a concentration area for the British forces captured at the surrender of [Singapore](#). This peninsula of Singapore Island was eminently suitable for the purpose—if the prevention of escapes is the criterion for the siting of a prison camp. Barbed wire across the small portion not already cut off by swamps and river secured the landward side; for the rest there was the sea.

Although a New Zealand doctor witnessed the slaughter of patients and medical staff in a military hospital soon after the surrender, in general the Japanese behaved with restraint, judging them by the standard of the sack of Nanking. The prisoners had their own organisation within the area, and the appearances of the Japanese were comparatively rare. Some Indian guards who had gone over to the Japanese behaved vindictively; but there were other Indians of unshakeable

loyalty who made great sacrifices for their European fellow-prisoners and others who paid with their lives for their refusal to collaborate. The quarters were fairly good and the food poor. The curious mentality of the Japanese was seen in their treatment of hungry men caught pillaging. A party who had been beaten for stealing sugar at the docks was surprised to see the Japanese send the sugar to the prisoners' cookhouse. Some Australians who had succeeded in selling some petrol illicitly to Singapore Chinese were punished by several days' exposure to the sun in a confined space; but they kept the money.*

The guards, when they appeared, demanded an exaggerated respect. The first prisoner to see them shouted a warning, then all within sight, whatever their rank and whatever the rank of the Japanese, stood rigidly to attention, saluting or, if without a hat, bowing to the soldier of Nippon when he approached. Failure to stand properly to attention or the omission of any detail from this ceremony would bring down on the head of the offender (and literally on the head) a severe beating. The victim would be lucky if this were given only with the fists. A Japanese once explained to a prisoner that for a guard to slap his face was 'like a mother lovingly correcting her child'. The broken jaws or broken eardrums commonly resulting from these encounters cannot, however, be attributed to the intensity of the guards' affection.

The 'Changi Square' incident, as it is called, occurred in September 1942, when orders from [Tokyo](#) reached all corners of the Japanese Greater Asia Co-prosperity Sphere that all prisoners of war, who were regarded as having been incorporated in the Japanese forces, should sign a pledge not to escape and to obey all orders. This was universally resisted and almost as universally signed under varying degrees of compulsion. In Changi the 'persuasion' to sign took this form: all the Allied troops, some 17,000-odd, were concentrated in one barrack square (Selerang Barracks), an area of about ten acres. Under indescribable conditions the men held out for three days, many of them already suffering from dysentery and other diseases; then the senior officer, on the advice of the doctors (the Japanese had threatened to cram in the hospital patients as well), ordered the men to sign and himself recorded that the signatures had been given only under heavy duress.

Towards the end of 1942 the fittest men were drafted away from Changi to work on the [Burma-Thailand](#) railway. Changi, largely depopulated, remained by comparison only one of the better camps. Later, its prisoners were concentrated in Changi jail, which until then had been the place of internment of the British civilians in [Malaya](#).

* John Coast, *Railroad of Death*, pp. 29–30.

The Netherlands East Indies

When the allied forces in [Java](#) capitulated on 8 March 1942, several hundred members of the [Royal Air Force](#), including some New Zealanders, as well as fugitives from Singapore belonging to all three services (some of whom had evaded the Japanese blockade in all sorts of crazy small craft), found themselves unable to leave the island. One party of [Air Force](#) men made their way to the south coast and began building a boat to take them to [Australia](#), but after six weeks the local Javanese police made them surrender to the Japanese. Others also reached the south coast and found it impossible to escape. Another Air Force party at [Tjilatjap](#), a south-coast port, made

valiant efforts to get away. The Dutch refused to allow them to take over a corvette which was abandoned by its crew but fully fuelled and provisioned—instead it was sunk to block the entrance to a harbour which the Japanese never attempted to use—so in an aged launch, towing two lifeboats, sixty-two men began their journey. After a few miles the launch broke down and one of the lifeboats was damaged in being beached. About a dozen men put to sea again in the remaining boat.* The others remained hidden for six and a half weeks. Then the natives, though sympathetic, unlike most Javanese, urged them to surrender, and as their food supply was in any case nearly exhausted, they walked some miles to do so. They were received by the Japanese with the usual face-slapping as a suitable rebuke for causing trouble.

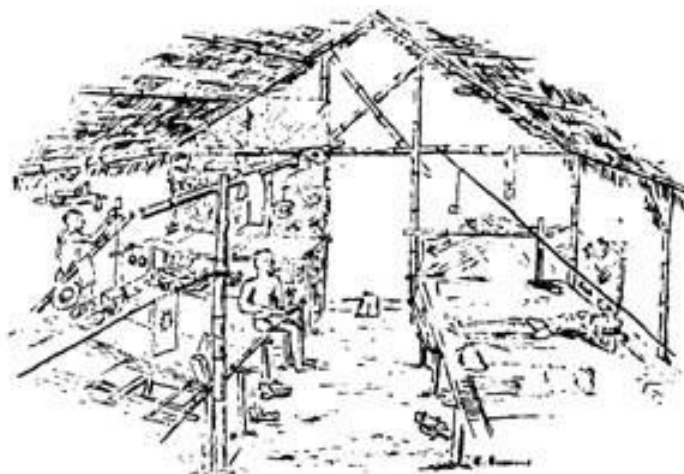
Those men who were unlucky enough to be captured at the western end of [Java](#) had an unenviable sojourn in a cinema, together with survivors of [HMAS Perth](#) and *USS Houston*, and their next lodging in [Serang](#) jail was little better. Soon they were concentrated in ‘Bicycle Camp’, [Batavia](#), a former Dutch barracks. Most Allied prisoners of war in [Java](#) passed through this camp, and many also through the inland [Bandoeng](#) camp. In both the prisoners’ own organisation was good. In Bandoeng, a school,** a library, concerts, and plays helped to make life less unendurable. Later, assemblies of more than three persons were forbidden. Food was poor, but at first it was possible to buy from outside, and the Dutch, while they had funds, made an allowance to British prisoners. There were occasionally pleasant surprises: a new Japanese adjutant was annoyed to find that the prisoners were being cheated of their proper allowance of meat; this was a ‘disgrace to the Japanese Army’ and he had it put right for a few weeks. Rarely were the Japanese so sensitive in these matters. Many prisoners were afterwards taken from [Java](#) to work on the [Burma-Thailand](#) railway or in [Japan](#) itself.

A number of men, a majority from, the Navy, were captured in [Sumatra](#). Some reached there from [Singapore](#) and found it as difficult to go farther as others had found it to leave [Java](#). Some were survivors from ships sunk in Banka Strait, where both Japanese air and surface units maintained a blockade. Conditions of imprisonment in [Sumatra](#)—the main camp was near [Palembang](#)—were very bad. Food was poor, even when supplemented by judicious thefts from Japanese stores, and the opportunities for local purchase were limited. A fund was established from a pool of valuables and spare clothing, and most of whatever could be bought, under black-market conditions, was reserved for the hospital. Medical facilities were virtually non-existent, though a doctor with a [page 10](#) knowledge of botany made some use of herbal remedies. Of 1200 in the camp it is estimated that four hundred died. The hospital, with its stench from tropical ulcers and dysentery cases, was bad enough to impress the Japanese, who burned it just before the surrender. In the [Sumatra](#) dry season even water was scarce.

Subsidiary camps throughout the [Netherlands East Indies](#) were among the worst in Japanese-held territories. At a camp in the Ambon Group the Korean interpreter (Koreans often made themselves more insufferable than the Japanese, until a few weeks before the surrender when they suddenly became wondrous sweet) shouted into a hospital full of desperately ill prisoners, ‘Why don’t you hurry up and die?’ This camp was notorious for its ‘blitzes on the sick’. In turning out for working parties men who could scarcely stand, the Japanese would blandly assure them that the ‘spirit’ would cure them, and perhaps for that reason supplied no drugs. It is not altogether surprising that only 25 per cent of a draft of 2000 prisoners taken from [Java](#) to Haruku

Island survived life on the island and the terrible two months' voyage to traverse a distance which in peacetime took four days.

Near Makassar, on [Celebes](#), were other bad camps where at least fourteen New Zealanders, including survivors of HMS [Exeter](#), were imprisoned. Again the sick were among the principal victims. Men whom the doctors sent to hospital had first to parade before the Japanese in charge of discipline 'who was liable to send you to work or make you run around the compound until you collapsed'. In hospital it was a case of 'either get better or die'. In this camp, in the middle of 1945, there were several mass beatings of scores of prisoners (in one case of 300) for one man's offence: the offence for which 300 men were punished was that of bringing into camp food picked up while out on a working party. In many prisoner-of-war camps the Japanese became generally more, rather than less, brutal with the gradual realisation of their defeat. One New Zealander mentioned that trading (among prisoners and to some extent, illicitly, with guards in articles made by the prisoners) was 'the spice of existence and kept men from going mad'. Another naval rating remarked that they were constantly in danger of beatings 'as we tried to outwit the Japs on the supreme matter of food'. No private fires were allowed in Makassar, but the prisoners did their cooking in holes dug under the boards of their beds. One of these men celebrated peace by going out of the camp and chasing and killing a goat. As in most of the outposts of the Co-prosperity Sphere the 'supreme matter of food' obsessed everybody.



'ACCOMMODATION FOUND'

—from *British Battalion (Sumatra) Diary*, a sketch by E. Burgoyne on the Burma-Thailand Railway

'accommodation found'

—from *British Battalion (Sumatra) Diary*, a sketch by E. Burgoyne on the [Burma](#)-Thailand Railway

* This party reached [Australia](#) after forty-four days at sea.

** The subjects taught included architecture, law, accountancy, and 'about fifteen different languages and dialects, including Russian in three stages and Arabic, as well as the usual modern foreign languages and the Eastern ones'.

Hong Kong

By the standards of Japanese prison camps those at [Hong Kong](#) were relatively humane and well run. In Shumshuipo camp there was a good library, and the prisoners held classes (until mid-1942, when they were forbidden), produced plays and concerts. Sports gear and instruments for a band were sent into this camp, the former bought with money sent by His Holiness the Pope. But malnutrition was common. Food sent in by the [Red Cross](#) helped to keep up a minimum standard of health, and in one camp a garden of 3 ½ acres was cultivated. A shortage of wood for fuel was a constant annoyance. This was one of the few areas outside [Japan](#) itself where any clothing was issued to prisoners. In the [Netherlands East Indies](#), [Malaya](#), [Burma](#), and [Thailand](#), men who would otherwise have been completely naked were given loin-cloths (nicknamed ‘Jap-happies’); few had more than a tattered shirt and a pair of shorts or a loin-cloth at the capitulation.

Even in these relatively good camps the guards gave frequent exhibitions of brutality, arrogance, and bad temper, keeping prisoners in a perpetual state of tension. The prisoners suffered, here as elsewhere, from the universal habit of Japanese officers of backing up any action of a Japanese private. Each guard could make his own camp rules, and did, so that there was no end to the petty annoyances and interferences prisoners had to endure.

The Japanese had the habit in many of their camps of distributing English-language newspapers containing their own versions of the progress of the war. The *Hong Kong News* gave a fairly accurate account of events in [Europe](#) but a wholly biased and even childishly fantastic story of the [Pacific](#) war. Like others in [Malaya](#) and in [Thailand](#), the [Hong Kong](#) prisoners had their own secret radios and knew the real news. This was a service which a few men rendered to their comrades at very great personal risk. Lieutenant H. C. Dixon, RNZNVR,^{*} a radio engineer in civil life, in North Point and Shumshuipo camps constructed several receiving sets under great difficulties. Once valves were smuggled in wrapped up in the bandages round a prisoner who had been operated on, outside the camp, for appendicitis. The set itself was kept hidden under the ovens in the kitchen and later in a specially built space under a flower-bed, where it was subsequently discovered by the Japanese.

A secret radio was a highly dangerous possession. The senior officers in Shumshuipo, who had instigated the building of this set, had been extremely careful in feeding out news bulletins to the camp. Few were in the secret. But the necessity for drying out the radio after it had been taken from its damp hiding place under the flower-bed made its existence known to other prisoners, one of whom must have been indiscreet. One day the Japanese military police cleared the camp and then went straight to the flower-bed. The radio was not there, but some hours later the Japanese found it on the stove where it had been placed to dry. Lieutenant Dixon and other officers were taken away for a ruthless interrogation which lasted a month. Fortunately they had a story prepared with enough of the truth in it to satisfy the Japanese and reduce the circle of their victims. Dixon was inevitably among these. Another New Zealander, who escaped to [China](#) in July 1944, [page 22](#) reported that he expected that Dixon would have been executed, but, surviving the maltreatment of the Japanese police, who had been especially alarmed because this set could have been used for transmitting, he received a sentence of fifteen years’ imprisonment and was released from [Canton](#) jail at the capitulation.

* Lt H. C. Dixon, MBE, RNZNVR; radio engineer; [Wellington](#); born [Wellington](#), 24 Apr 1908; taken prisoner at Hong Kong, 25 Dec 1941; released Aug 1945.

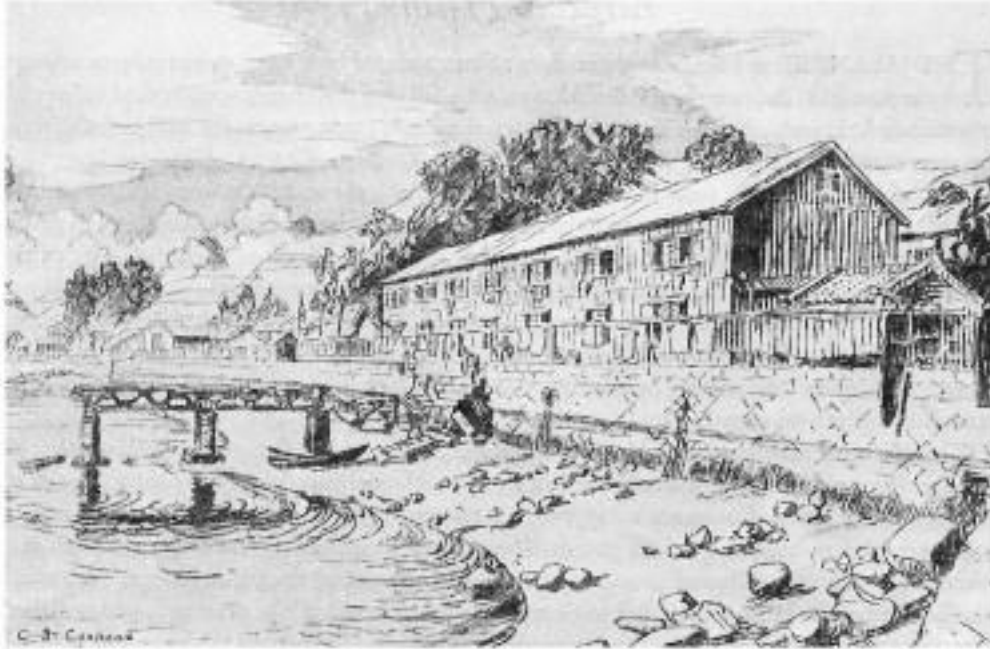
The Islands of Japan

Prisoners of war taken to the Japanese home islands were no better treated, except in some minor ways, than those who remained in the newly-conquered Co-prosperity Sphere. The voyage itself was the most terrible ordeal. A prisoner who was moved from [Java](#) to [Japan](#) (by [Singapore](#), Saigon, and [Formosa](#)) late in 1942 recorded that one man in three died on the way, the living being too weak to remove the corpses and using them as pillows in the ghastly congestion of a hold only four feet high. All who survived went into hospital in [Japan](#). The risk of being torpedoed grew as the war proceeded. The *Lisbon Maru*, torpedoed in October 1942 on a voyage from [Hong Kong](#) to [Japan](#), was carrying about 1800 prisoners. She went down by the stern and the 200 men in the after hold had no chance of escape; the 1600 in the forward holds got out into the water where the Japanese machine-gunned them; eventually 930 were picked up.

The camps in [Japan](#) were widely distributed and were usually attached to some industry: a ship-building yard, a steel-works, a coal mine, or the wharves of a large port. Some were on Hokkaido, the northern island of [Japan](#), where the winter climate is rigorous and the summer prolific of mosquitoes. Most of the prisoners going to [Japan](#) had been given uniforms of a rough, sacklike material, but it was inadequate to keep out the cold in a region whose inhabitants wore fur in winter. The prisoners were set to work shovelling coal, working in factories, digging on the hillsides, or carpentering. Early in 1944 an English-speaking Japanese commandant, a Colonel Emoto, stopped beatings and increased rations, but next year, with his departure and the Japanese reverses, there was a new wave of ill-treatment.

A dockside work camp at Yokohama consisted of a large goods shed fitted with wooden platforms on which several hundred prisoners of all ages and nationalities slept; these quarters were infested with rats, lice, and fleas. [Zentsuji](#) camp, in the southern part of [Japan](#), was one of the few designed to accommodate prisoners of war, but it was cramped and insanitary, though at first conditions in it were comparatively good. Some of the prisoners were sent to the Kamishi steel-works, about 200 miles north of [Tokyo](#). This was twice shelled by the United States Fleet, and the prisoners, quartered between the sea and the factory building, suffered many casualties. Others elsewhere had bombs dropped near them in Allied raids. At the capitulation the Japanese faithfully observed its conditions, putting out 20-foot squares on the roofs of the prison barracks to guide American aircraft coming in to drop supplies for immediate use. To the delight of the prisoners, one of these mercy parcels dropped at Kamishi broke the thigh of a Japanese in the prison office.

The prisoners found Japanese civilians generally friendly and their gentleness and good manners a sharp contrast to the habits of the prison guards. They were glad to trade if prisoners had anything to barter in exchange for their own increasingly meagre supplies of food. At considerable risk [page 23](#)



INNOSHIMA PW CAMP ON THE INLAND SEA OF JAPAN
from a painting by G. S. Coxhead

INNOSHIMA PW CAMP ON THE INLAND SEA OF JAPAN
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some men were able to get out of their camps at night to forage, but it was hopeless to attempt escape. Propaganda in the English newspapers printed in [Japan](#) was known to over-reach itself: for instance, it was asserted that ‘the New Zealanders were so short of meat they were eating rabbits’. The food shortage in [Japan](#) weighed on the civil population just as heavily as on the prisoners and gave everyone a fair idea of the trend of the war.

Representatives of the [Red Cross](#) and of the protecting neutral power visited many prison and internment camps in [Japan](#), as well as in [China](#) and [Malaya](#). Although these visitors were never allowed to speak to the prisoners and comedies of plenty were sometimes played for their benefit (well-stocked canteens were set up for the few hours of their visit and emptied immediately afterwards), they were able to send supplies into the camps. Rather more [Red Cross](#) parcels were distributed in [Japan](#) than elsewhere,* though the guards pilfered them mercilessly, saying that everything belonging to prisoners of war was legally the property of the Japanese government.

* Although a prisoner of war in [Japan](#) itself might receive three or four parcels during the whole of his captivity, a prisoner in Indonesia, [Malaya](#), or [China](#) was lucky if he received more than one in three years. The Red Cross packed and forwarded enough parcels to permit the same distribution as in European prison camps—one to each prisoner every week.

Aircrew Prisoners

The Japanese, so insouciant themselves of international law, were quite ready to attempt to impose it on their enemies. Allied aircrew who fell into their hands were treated as 'special' prisoners or 'criminals', because they were supposed to have made war on the civil population of the areas they had attacked.

Aircraft operating from [India](#) in the [Burma](#) theatre from 1944 could not always pass unscathed through the enemy's flak: his light anti-aircraft fire was particularly efficient. Alighting in paddy fields to avoid the jungle, pilots rarely crash-landed without the death or injury of some of the crew, but injuries did not earn them any specially considerate treatment from their captors. It was usually some days before they reached a regular prison, after going through the usual cycle of being handed over by Burmese villagers (sometimes friendly, but in terror of the Japanese), interrogation, and a long journey by punt or ox-waggon which might involve exposure to violence at the hands of pro-Japanese Indians.

These 'special' prisoners were miserably lodged in [Rangoon](#) jail, five men in each 9ft by 15ft cell, sleeping on concrete with a minimum of clothing (the only accessions were the garments of dead comrades), allowed out once a day with a wash once a week, fed a meagre amount of rice and water, and maltreated by their guards. The wounded received no attention, although one prisoner was eventually allowed to undertake the duties of amateur doctor. A prisoner who asked whether his capture had been notified to Geneva was told: 'It will not be necessary, you will die.' However, after some months the Japanese lodged the aircrew 'criminals' with the other Allied prisoners in the adjoining compound. The improvement in sanitation alone, as well as in morale, did much, in spite of the attacks of the guards, to make the sombre Japanese prophecy untrue: untrue, that is, for about half their victims. A prisoner in [Rangoon](#) remarked that moral attitudes were important; the man who exercised, even walking up and down the tiny cells, was not affected by malnutrition to the same extent as others.

Some Fleet Air Arm aircrew were shot down over [Japan](#) itself in the last few weeks of the war. These men, too, were 'special' prisoners. They were beaten up, but not with the specialist skill of prison guards, by the local population, then interrogated and lodged in civil jails. One New Zealander was led out before a firing squad, but it was a mock execution. In jail, clad only in an undergarment, these prisoners had to submit to conditions as hard as any in [Japan](#). These men owed their lives to the capitulation following so closely upon their capture.

Another late prisoner of war was a fighter-pilot shot down over an outlying island of New [Britain](#) in June 1945. He broke his leg in the crash and was brought in to [Rabaul](#) tied to a stretcher. There he was confined in an unlighted cave 15ft long by 3ft wide and 5ft high entered by a barred door about 2ft high and 1ft 6ins wide. He was brought out of this cell only to undergo interrogation. No violence was used against him, but he received no attention for his injury and set his leg roughly himself. He kept up his spirits by singing and helped to pass the time by fraternising with a toad in the cave. After more than two months in darkness the Japanese brought him out and told him of the capitulation. He then found that there were eight other Allied prisoners of war there, some in worse condition than himself.

Civilian Internees

The civilian internees were on the whole better treated by the Japanese than the service prisoners of war. If anything, they received less food, but they also experienced much less direct brutality. They had better facilities than the prisoners of war for recreation and education (schools were organised where children were interned), and they were generally made to work only on duties about their own camps.

The civilians interned in [Malaya](#) were gradually concentrated in Changi Peninsula, first in Changi prison, the civil jail built to accommodate 600 native prisoners but made to receive 3000 or more internees, and later in Sime Road barracks, in both with separate sections for men and women. In these camps conditions were more rigorous than in most other internment centres, and after October 1943 approximated closely to those experienced by prisoners of war. The camp was governed internally by a 'very complex and democratic organisation', which succeeded in checking if not in altogether eliminating rackets, which were, of course, connected with extra food. Discipline, including bowing to the Japanese, was not so much severe as 'humiliating' with 'too much indiscriminate bashing'. Punishments for men internees included 'beatings, kneeling in the sun for long periods, and other subtle methods'. At first, courses of study were organised on a very full scale; a library of 7000 books was collected, and concerts, plays, and other community activities helped to make the time pass.

On 10 October 1943, known to the Changi internees as the 'double tenth', the scene changed abruptly. The military police descended on Changi, searched the building, and left carrying off fifty men and three secret radios they had found. The Japanese suspected that the internees were sending out radio signals and attributed to these a successful Allied attack on a Japanese convoy. How the internees were to collect the information they were supposed to have sent out was apparently not given any consideration. Not all of the fifty interrogated returned, and most of those who did had been badly injured. Everyone endured a cut in rations, and all forms of study and recreation were abolished except for a weekly concert.

Conditions of internment were severe also at [Kuching](#), in [Sarawak](#); here the food was poor and a man might receive a beating for smiling through the wire without permission at his wife and child. In China, both at [Shanghai](#) and [Hong Kong](#), conditions were less harsh. In Hong Kong, apart from the inevitable matter of food, the internees were not badly treated, and the Japanese even gave up attempts to teach them to bow. 'Generally speaking, our passive refusal to take the Japanese seriously proved to be an excellent technique,' one reported. These internees successfully combated the usual manufacture of propaganda: 'flashlights were taken of an open-air concert but the audience spoilt them by making V signs just before each flash.' Parcels from friends outside could be brought into the camps in [China](#) once a month. At Bangkok, in [Thailand](#), in a camp which the Japanese inspected but did not control, the conditions of internment were relatively mild although the area was intolerably confined.

Many of the internees in [China](#) or [Japan](#) were missionaries. The Japanese appear to have treated them with something approaching respect: this does not apply to their attitude to the chaplains captured with military formations. Many missionaries were not imprisoned until months [page 26](#) after [Japan](#) had entered the war. Japanese respect for old age showed itself in their treatment of a

small group of nuns and Protestant missionaries interned together in [Japan](#) itself. They were allowed out to go shopping and for walks under guard; they received kindnesses from their guards and exchanged language lessons with them. A missionary who ran an orphanage in Hong Kong was allowed to remain in charge of it without being interned at all. She was given access to the orphanage funds in a bank seized by the enemy, had a pass to move about, and was not molested even when soldiers were quartered in part of the building; instead, the Japanese, who are supposed to cherish children as well as to respect age, sent some of their own food to the orphans. Except for the increasing food shortage she could hardly have been better treated. A priest in the [Philippines](#), although not interned until 1944, found that the 2000 internees at [Los Banos](#) camp were being fed starvation rations although the American paratroops who liberated them found nearby stores stuffed with rice. The guards at this camp shot it out with the liberating troops while the internees lay flat on the ground in their own quarters; none of them was hurt, but 165 Japanese guards were killed for one casualty among the attackers. This is one of the few instances of direct vengeance descending on Japanese guards.

A New Zealander interned with the Dutch in [Java](#) found compensation for his loss of liberty in the books available and in the excellent concerts organised. Discipline was intermittently severe, hundreds of men being lined up on occasion and made to beat each other, a form of collective punishment more usually reserved for prisoners of war. Collective punishments of a less brutal character were frequently inflicted on internees, in a few instances for escapes. In spite of the acute shortage of food the Japanese frowned on personal efforts to supplement rations, and nearly everywhere they made trading 'over the wall' an offence. But even comparatively harsh punishments might fail in their effect. At Wei-hsien in [China](#) in 1943, 'one man was caught getting eggs in over the wall and he was imprisoned in a cowshed for a fortnight. He was a Trappist monk and he rather enjoyed his solitary confinement.'

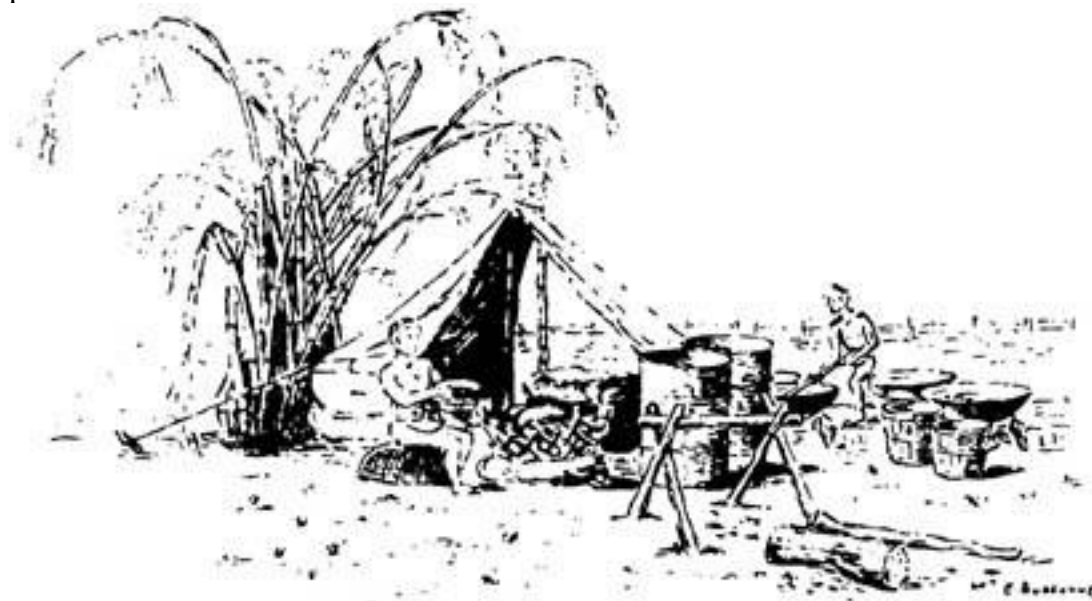
Food and Health

The life of a prisoner of war, whether in the [Far East](#), [Italy](#), or [Germany](#), centred around food. Universally throughout the Japanese prisoner-of-war or internment camps food progressively deteriorated both in quantity and quality as the war went on. Some of the blame for this may be laid at the door of the war situation: Japanese supplies ([Japan](#) itself consumes more rice than it grows) were disrupted by the successful attacks of Allied submarines and bombers on Japanese shipping. In a small internment camp in [Japan](#) an elderly nun, otherwise well treated, remarked that the internees, though short of food, were better fed than the mass of the Japanese people. On the other hand, in almost every camp plenty of food could be produced during the few weeks following the capitulation when the Japanese were desperately trying to redeem themselves, and at this time, too, [Red Cross](#) parcels, some of which had been so long in store that their contents had gone mouldy, were issued. Few Japanese prisoners of war had more than two parcels issued to them during more than three years, and then often they received only a [page 27](#) fractional share of a parcel. Many camps, however, benefited by [Red Cross](#) purchases in bulk. The guards extensively plundered [Red Cross](#) supplies, both of food and medicines.

The staple diet was rice and vegetables. The rice would be served with traces of sugar, with pickles or vegetables (often only sweet-potato tops or some pale variety of melon), and occasionally with shreds of meat or of fish. Vegetable soup was also commonly served. In some

areas, including [Japan](#), the rice might have barley or other grain mixed with it.* Quantities were almost invariably short, the shortages roughly corresponding to the laziness or black-market opportunities of the Japanese quartermasters. Even when the quantity was nearly enough to give men the illusion of fullness, the deficiency in vitamins began to make itself felt after six months. Although many men caught such tropical diseases as malaria, dengue, or dysentery, the chief disease, immeasurably increasing the deadliness of all the others, was slow starvation. It was malnutrition which killed most of the victims of the Japanese, and to a large extent it was calculated malnutrition. The food bought by the prisoners with their own funds, or gifts to them, were taken into account by the Japanese. It was apparently their policy to keep their captives below normal—something below their own low standard, that is—so that they would be less likely to give trouble, and, moreover, might disembarass their captors of their presence altogether.

Men fully realised the nature of this life-and-death struggle. They lost no chance of supplementing their diet, and soon learned to steal from the enemy whenever opportunity offered. It paid to eat pilfered food on the spot. While their comrades kept watch, men were known to cram themselves hastily with as much as they could swallow of even raw rice and dried fish. Valuables, such as watches and fountain-pens, were sold to the Japanese, to the civil population, or to other prisoners who had money. Some, in their desperate need, signed cheques at fantastic rates of exchange to get money from fellow-internees or prisoners of war: it would be interesting to know whether those who exacted these cheques have held their fellow-victims to their bargain. They might well take as their example the Thai merchant who allowed prisoners of war after the capitulation to redeem the possessions they had sold to him for exactly what he had paid for



BRITISH BATTALION KITCHEN, THAILAND

—a sketch by E. Burgoyne

british battalion kitchen, thailand —a sketch by E. Burgoyne

[page 28](#) them. A man who sold his fellow-prisoners food stolen from the Japanese was regarded as a ‘benevolent racketeer’; most rackets were anything but benevolent.

Prisoners of war were paid, supposedly, at the same rates as corresponding ranks in the Japanese forces. Officers received what would have been substantial amounts but for the Japanese habit of 'banking' a part on their behalf and deducting a sum to cover the cost of their 'keep'. After contributing half or more of the balance to funds for the sick and for other ranks, an officer did not command more than the equivalent of £1 a month. Other ranks who worked were paid on a scale that gave them about 15s a month. At first in nearly all camps there were canteen supplies—usually local fruit and vegetables—and the Japanese took a percentage of the canteen profits. In the last year inflation in all the countries controlled by [Japan](#) made money of very little value.

In Hong Kong, in 1943 and 1944, the daily ration was 500 grammes of rice and beans, but in 1945 it had dropped to 350 grammes. Rations everywhere declined in about the same ratio as at [Hong Kong](#). Dogs, rats, lizards, and snakes were all eaten. In 1945, in the Sime Road civil internment camp at [Singapore](#), a snail farm was instituted. Prisoners of war and internees realised the protective value of certain foods. At Hong Kong soya beans, eggs, and synthetic vitamin B1 were bought in small quantities, the usual preference to the sick being given in the distribution. There, too, men ate green swamp weed or garlic, when they could get it, not for nourishment but to check skin diseases.

It is true that some had needs even sharper than food. Some men at times bartered their rations for cigarettes, a form of trading aptly described as 'polite cannibalism'.

The doctors did magnificent work among the prisoners and internees. Rarely were they given any substantial assistance by the enemy: on the other hand, there were numerous cases of deliberate obstruction. Some of the doctors performed amputations and other operations with razor blades, with meat saws, with a piece of sharpened hoop-iron. In Burma the ingenuity of a Dutch chemist supplied a local anaesthetic concocted from jungle plants. In many camps a little copper sulphate, used in the treatment of tropical ulcers, was the sole medicament supplied, even though other drugs had been provided by the [Red Cross](#). One of the most bitter revelations of the capitulation was the large stock of drugs held in store by the Japanese which would have saved the lives of many prisoners. The only occasions when the Japanese showed any solicitude for the health of their prisoners was when epidemics were threatening. Once a man was sick, his chances of survival were further reduced because of the smaller rations given to those who did not work. Also, it was difficult to get men who were ill to touch rice.

The civilians interned in [Singapore](#) had a diet of about 2000 calories a day to begin with, since during the first two years about 25 per cent more food was available in addition to the Japanese rations. But there were fluctuations and more than one period of crisis. In 1945 the diet had sunk by May to 1500 calories, and it was impossible to work the same hours daily. The death rate was low for the conditions: 18 in 100 during the whole time of internment. This was attributed to the fact that so many of the men working in [Malaya](#) had passed stiff medical tests before taking up their appointments. Moreover, in a camp community health measures could be enforced. The shortage of medicines (the Japanese did supply a proportion of the drugs asked for) was offset by the knowledge and skill of the 100 doctors in the camp, many of them specialists. And the circumstances of their internment eliminated two causes of illness—over-eating and over-drinking.

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The effects of malnutrition were widespread. Men with legs swollen from the effects of beriberi or with hideous tropical ulcers, which often resulted in amputation or death, were common sights in all camps. And ‘once a man was a victim of beriberi work held no pleasure to drag one foot after another was an effort’. It was a common thing for prisoners and internees to sink in weight from 12 stone to 8 stone, or less. In internment camps only a few of the children, for whom the grown-ups made great sacrifices, were not noticeably affected.

Many prisoners noticed two common effects of malnutrition—dimmed eyesight and unreliable memory. Long after release many still feel physical effects, particularly a tendency to tire easily. Others have confessed to nervous symptoms resulting from their captivity—hatred of crowds, exaggerated shyness, extreme sensibility (to the point of weeping at the cinema).

* In Japan itself the proportion of rice to its substitutes (millet, barley, maize, and soya bean) in the prisoners’ diet was often very low.

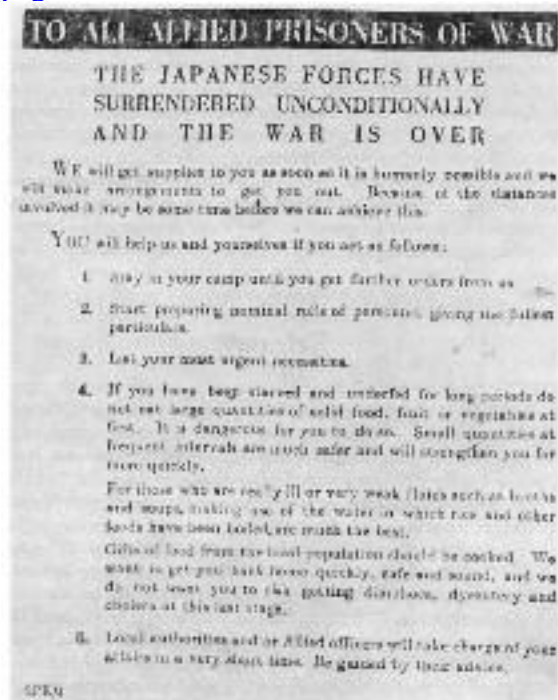
Release

In most of the Japanese-controlled areas there was a time-lag between the capitulation and the rescue of prisoners in their hands. In many areas prisoners knew from their secret radios or from the admissions of their guards exactly when the war had ended; a week or more might pass before the Japanese could bring themselves to make a formal announcement. In many camps this interval was used to flood the camp with food, medicines, and hoarded [Red Cross](#) parcels, and in most the Japanese intention of fattening up prisoners and internees before they were released was childishy obvious. It was impossible to remedy years of malnutrition in a fortnight, especially as starved men and women could not immediately adjust their digestions to a fuller diet.

In Japan itself Allied aircraft soon identified the camps and began dropping food, cigarettes, medicines, and clothing, as well as radios by which the prisoners could themselves make known their condition and their wants. Early in September men were being taken on board [United States](#) hospital ships, where they were ‘processed’* before being flown out to [Manila](#). New Zealanders mostly went by sea from here to [Australia](#) on their way home.

The RAPWI (Repatriation of Allied Prisoners of War and Internees) organisation, functioning under Lord Mountbatten’s command, was in action soon after [Japan](#)’s capitulation, though the delay in arranging the surrender of the [Singapore](#) area entailed a wait that was peculiarly trying to most prisoners. First, leaflets were dropped from the air addressed to the Japanese. Then some helpers ‘dropped in’ by parachute. Once the initial contact had been made, supplies, medicines, and medical staff were brought in and the camps entirely taken over. Men were evacuated as rapidly as was humanly possible: by air, mostly, if they were fit enough. The prisoners and internees in [China](#) were liberated by the British Fleet, and many did the first lap of their homeward journey in carriers emptied of their aircraft for the purpose. The Rangoon prisoners had been freed earlier in 1945 when the Japanese had retreated from the town. The Sarawak and [Celebes](#) prisoners and internees were liberated by Australian troops.

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Allied pamphlet dropped in Thailand, 1945

Allied pamphlet dropped in [Thailand](#), 1945

The work of the RAPWI organisation won praise. New Zealanders in [Malaya](#) and [Java](#) had a further advantage in the speed given to their homeward journey by the RNZAF Prisoner of War Evacuation Flight which arrived in [Singapore](#) on 12 September. This small unit ferried released prisoners from [Singapore](#) to [Auckland](#).

The capitulation took most prisoners and internees by surprise. They had known that the war had been going badly for [Japan](#), but they had feared that the Japanese would fight on as they had so often declared they would. Some believed that the Japanese would kill their prisoners at the end. So many heartening rumours had proved groundless in the past that liberation was a mental jolt to most prisoners. The emotion was almost unbearable. The transition from misery to happiness had been too abrupt.

* 'Processing' was the comprehensive term for attending to the immediate needs of liberated prisoners of war: it included disinfestation, medical and dental examinations, giving particulars of all the circumstances of captivity, the issue of new clothing and kit, and of free cable forms to communicate with relatives.

The Gain and the Loss

It is difficult to write with moderation of the Japanese treatment of their prisoners. Comprehensive schedules have been drawn up of the many ways in which particular articles of the Geneva Convention were deliberately and cynically violated. The crimes are being dealt with by the proper authorities, and justice will be done where the perpetrators can be identified—no easy matter. No mention has yet been made of the cruelty inflicted on the relatives of prisoners of war and internees by the failure of the Japanese to notify the [Red Cross](#) of the capture or internment of thousands of persons, or by such actions as the burning of prisoners' mail. Some next-of-kin had their first notification that their sons or husbands were in Japanese hands when they received from them, possibly two years after capture, one of the rare cards that the enemy allowed to be sent. Most men sent three or four cards a year, less than half of which reached the addressees. Another device of the Japanese for plaguing their prisoners was to refrain from delivering letters until many months after their arrival. Most letters were never delivered: this is hardly surprising as the Japanese kept no records of the prisoners and internees in their hands.

It may be thought that the continued castigation of the Japanese in this survey, which relates primarily the experience of New Zealanders, is based on prejudice and exaggeration. On the contrary, the worst atrocities have been left unrelated, and it must be understood that types of maltreatment instanced as having happened in a particular camp or area were practically always common to all camps. However clearly we may diagnose the maladies that have twisted the Japanese spirit, it is no longer possible by explaining to excuse them. No doubt in some ways the Japanese might have been worse. They generally allowed prisoners the restricted exercise of their religion. They did not specially persecute women, though the circumstances of internment inevitably bore more heavily on them than on men. Some Japanese, the most brutal among them, could reveal strange flashes of kindness and generosity.

Former prisoners of war and internees show surprisingly little vindictiveness towards the Japanese. Their feeling is rather one of contempt, and few condescend to outright hatred; some reserve that feeling for fellow-prisoners who acted selfishly or who took advantage of the general misery to gain some personal advantage. An ex-prisoner, however, looking back, noticed signs of hysteria and felt that trivial incidents had sometimes been allowed to take on an exaggerated importance in the unnatural and harsh conditions of imprisonment. One man has lost his 'comfortable belief in the general decency of the human race': he remarks that many who find it easy to be brave on a full stomach become different persons with an empty one. Yet another ex-prisoner noted that 'men from whom one would expect nothing did things of kindness and bravery which astonished one'. Men showed a stern, unyielding pride in taking without flinching the beatings inflicted on them.

It was the solidarity and comradeship, more intense even than while serving in the forces before capture, which sustained most men in captivity. One ex-prisoner robustly stated that he would not have missed the experience for anything. Another gained 'an education that many books or any university in the world could not have taught me'. Another felt that nothing in the future could be worse than his time in Japanese hands. A naval surgeon said roundly that 'my three and a half years with men of high morale under grim conditions have made me quite unable to [page 32](#) endure any form of grousing and complaints'. This is a constant theme with former prisoners

and internees: they are impatient with the pettiness, self-seeking, and querulousness of people at home, and some explicitly regret the unselfishness and common sacrifice of prison life, a sharp contrast to the 'dog eat dog' spirit of ordinary society. Many men entirely revised their attitude to life and learned in bitter earnest the true meaning of the theme of the prisoner-chaplain's sermon, 'The Wisdom of Adversity'. It is unlikely that much of the heroism of these men and women will ever be recorded in detail, much less rewarded officially. But its reaffirmation of the strength of the moral fibre of ordinary people deserves to be paid the highest honour.



ALLIED AIR DROP OF SUPPLIES
—from *White Coolie*, by Ronald Hastain, the sketch by Ronald Searle

allied air drop of supplies

—from *White Coolie*, by Ronald Hastain, the sketch by Ronald Searle

Acknowledgments

The sources consulted in the preparation of this account include books written by former prisoners of war, as well as eye-witness accounts and interviews recorded by the author of the official prisoner-of-war volume (*Wynne Mason*).

The sketches and paintings are by the artists as credited in relevant captions. The photographs come from many collections, which are stated when they are known:

Cover, (top) S. Polkinghorn, (bottom) D. Cook Wilkie

[page 5](#), S. Polkinghorn

[page 14](#) (top left) G. G. Chennells

[page 14](#) (*top right*) and [page 15](#) (*top*) A. H. Harding

[page 14](#) (*bottom*), [page 16](#) (*centre*), [page 17 Australian War Memorial](#)

[page 19](#) (*bottom*) S. C. Parker

[page 20](#) (*top*) RNZAF Official, Dorothy Cranstone

[page 20](#) (*bottom*) US Navy Official

[page 30](#) Father G. Bourke

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