

From The Times, October 20, 1943:

## **HOMEWARD BOUND PRISONERS**

### **A BUOYANT SPIRIT**

#### **MEN WHO PUZZLED THEIR CAPTORS**

**From our Special Correspondent**

**GOTHENBURG, OCT. 19**

Trains bearing prisoners from Germany for repatriation to Britain began arriving here from the Trelleborg ferry in the early hours of Monday, and the transfer to the Swedish steamship Drottningholm was made during darkness. Before dawn more than 1,200, most of them men from Great Britain, but also 20 Canadians, 20 Australians, a few Palestinians, and some from other parts of the British Empire, were on board.

About noon the German steamships Ruegen and Meteor brought a further 650 to the quays at Gothenburg just as the Drottningham was pulling out for Vinga to adjust her compasses, preparatory to sailing to Great Britain.

The British steamers Empress of Russia and Atlantis reached Gothenburg this afternoon with 835 German repatriates. Meanwhile further trains with allied prisoners from Germany, France, and Holland were arriving, bringing besides the service men about 50 civilians, mostly aged or unfit men and women, and at least one infant, born in a camp 10 weeks ago. The civilians were mostly from Vittel camp, in the Vosges.

Apparently the actual departure of the ships depends on some signal that a similar exchange has reached the agreed stage also in Oran. This is expected to arrive in time for the German ships to sail at 8 a.m. on Thursday and the British ships at 10.30 a.m. to reach England during the weekend.

### **SOLDIERS IN LAST WAR**

A remarkably large number of the men were wearing ribbons of the last war. One of these - **William Watts, of Belfast** - was captured at Boulogne in September, 1940, sent to **Lamsdorf VIII B** camp in Germany, where to his astonishment, he met his son, William, who had been captured at Calais in June. Many of the men referred to the devoted and courageous service of a **British medical officer, Captain Webster**, who untiringly served his fellow captives and fought for better medical treatment and camp conditions. He was constantly in conflict with the German officials, who eventually transferred him to a Russian camp, making him responsible for the entire medical arrangements there.

The abundant stories of attempts to escape include the exploits of one **John Dexter**, who, after several failures, was transferred to a disciplinary camp. The German in charge, half admiringly, offered to bet him anything that he would not get out of that camp. Dexter took the bet and within 24 hours disappeared, remaining at large over a week.

Three hours spent among the 1,200 new passengers in the Drottningholm on Monday morning furnished a stimulating and indeed an inspiring experience. Most of them had been prisoners for well over three years; all had endured long and severe hardships; some were maimed and many more had less obvious injuries, yet all of them displayed a buoyant spirit. It became apparent, after one had talked with the men in different parts of the ship, that theirs was not merely the natural cheerfulness of men who were going home. These were men whose confident spirit had remained high and intact through the darkest period.

**"THOUGHT US CRAZY"**

"Jerry could not understand us," said one man who had been selected for exchange under the abortive plan of two years ago. "When we were told the disappointing news that the exchange scheme had fallen through at the last moment a group of us struck up a tune, and in a few seconds all were singing lustily 'Land of hope and glory.' Our German attendants just threw up their hands. Clearly they thought we were crazy. They were unable to understand why we did not show any downheartedness." One airman whose foot was missing said quietly and cheerfully: "Never mind, Sir. It is only a very little bit of me gone."

The absence of self-pity among these men was one of the most striking features of their attitude. When they were asked what sort of general treatment they had experienced they usually answered, in varying terms: "Well, you see, I was fortunate." Some, however, had grim incidents to relate, especially about the youngest members of Hitler's armed forces, brutal fanatics with memories scarcely stretching back beyond the dawn of the Nazi period.

Some men had tiny replicas of the manacles used by the Germans which they had made in camp and had brought in matchboxes. None of those questioned by your Correspondent had been manacled. Fewer members of the fanatical S.S. youth are now on duty at the camps than formerly. They have been succeeded largely by more or less disabled guards, some indeed with artificial limbs.

### **LACK OF WATER**

**Stalag VIII B** is still among the worst of the camps; one of the hardships suffered lately by prisoners was the great scarcity of water. In reply to complaints the Germans who had been evacuated from areas raided by the allies, and that the water was not adequate for both purposes. Prisoners, even members of the R.A.M.C. and of other non-combatant services, were used for various forms of labour, including work in the coalmines and saltmines. Work in the saltmines was dreaded most. **Stalag VIII B** was now the most overcrowded camp, especially since the arrival there of thousands of prisoners from Africa and Italy. Some of the men said that the Swiss commission recently stated that the maximum capacity of this camp was 5,000, but a fortnight ago there were 16,000 prisoners in it.

All the men expressed unbounded gratitude to the Red Cross, and said that without its help they could scarcely have kept body and spirit together. Some stated that food parcels since the beginning of the year had reached the camps with great regularity. Soap and cigarettes were among the most useful items, as they could be easily and widely used for bartering. The men said that the German doctors worked well and conscientiously when prisoners reached their hands, but one airman who had crashed said that the first doctor who saw him declared that he would not treat him unless the patient gave his interrogators full information about the aerodrome from which he had flown and other details about the raid he was engaged in - such as the number of aircraft and the size of the crews. Eventually, however, he received proper surgical treatment.