

## Sidelights on Life In Prison-Camp

"IF it hadn't been for the Red Cross parcels, we'd have all pegged out . . . letters are the greatest thing of all; I'm going to tell every one to write plenty of letters to the boys in prison camps over there . . . we waited and waited and waited . . . at last, one night, an Iti captain told us we were going home." These are the phrases that ring in the ears of one who has browsed round among the soldiers on a hospital ship for an hour or two after she had berthed in a New Zealand port. One man after another of those who have been repatriated from Italy (either incapacitated or protected personnel), tells the same story about parcels from Britain and letters from home.

**SERGEANT** Ray Fowke, a South Islander bound for home with one leg fewer than he had when he left, remembered eight long months in Italy when there were neither cigarettes nor letters nor parcels. "People might think it's no hardship to be without cigarettes, I suppose, and they might say 'Oh, he won't die without them,' but it's tough. The guards could make it worse, too. You know, they'd offer you the last half of a cigarette and you'd hold out your hand—I was in bed still, mind you—and then they'd drop it on the floor and stamp it out. But I was in a hospital down in the south, and I believe they're more broadminded up in the north."

Letters from home were things that this sergeant could only attempt to talk about. He started to say how a prisoner of war felt when he got a letter from home, and he simply had to stop, quite incapable of describing it.

"When I was captured, I had six letters on me, and I read those six letters over and over again for eight months, just to try and keep the feeling of being in touch with home. Even when I knew them off by heart I went on reading them."

### A Speech by Mussolini

Special occasions acquire such a significance for an incapacitated prisoner that he memorises the date and the hour of every one, and reels them off just as if he had always talked that way: "That was on the second; no the third; then between four and five the next afternoon we got to Derna hospital . . . it was filthy dirty; just like niggers they are . . . on Christmas Day we got a little extra—one small bread roll!"

In hospital at Bari, Sergeant Fowke heard a speech by Mussolini on the radio. All the staff and nurses listened "with long faces, and not one atom of enthusiasm," and yet at every pause in the speech there was thunderous applause—coming from the radio.

After eight months, letters and parcels began to come in regularly, and everybody put on weight. Out of hospital, and in a prison camp, life was freer, with internal organisation run by the prisoners, classes in commercial subjects and concerts.

At last, one evening during a concert, word came to the wounded that they were going home. With more dates, and

more precise hours, Sergeant Fowke narrated the story of his journey towards Bardi and the hospital ship. "Finally, we knew we were off Smyrna, and we saw two British ships go into the harbour ahead of us . . . the first thing, on board a British ship, was a big feed with buns and cakes—and beer! Then we knew who was winning the war!"

### Geography Forbidden

Private M. Watson, another South Islander, counted himself lucky to have been in Camp 52, near Genoa, which he said was better than Camp 57, described by Sergeant Fowke. A great deal depends on the Italian officer in charge, and at Camp 52 there were about 3000 prisoners with their own internal organisation providing excellent facilities for recreation.

"We had classes in various subjects, and eventually we got a complete matriculation course under way. I lectured in English myself; we weren't allowed to teach geography, though!"

"We had no trouble getting the people to do the job; after all, 3000 represents the male adult population of a good-sized town. But books held us up for a while, and before I left we were hoping to get some from an Education Board here. We were allowed to buy things out of camp funds; everyone gets a lire a day—that's about 3½d—and for 6000 lire we bought a piano, two days' pay all round. We got other instruments, and soon we had an orchestra run by a Tommy. He copied out all the choruses from *The Mikado* from memory and harmonised them, and at Christmas we had *The Messiah*. He had a piano score, and he made parts for the orchestra from that. We had to copy out the chorus parts into exercise books, and rule our own staves first. It took weeks, but we did chorus after chorus."

### "A Childish Crowd"

W.O.II. Woodham, of the Sixth Field Ambulance, talked of the "Ities" and their attitude.

"I think they honestly gave us what tucker they could, though it was mighty little," he said. "Each man had eight ounces a day, which included the ersatz bread, and rice or macaroni (on alternate days), boiled up with some vegetable. Our parcels saved us."

"But they're a childish crowd. Now just to show you—they take all knives off you so that you can't make trouble, but I was in charge of some of the sporting arrangements, and we applied for permission to fence, and bought a set of foils. Well, we couldn't have had much better in the way of a dagger than one of those fencing foils, and yet they were in our care. Hm, look at that. . . ."

The conversation was interrupted for a moment by something that had caught his eye; walking wounded and "repats" were filing down the stairs towards the gangway, with kits and bags. One had dropped something with a loud clatter.

"There's a chap dropped an Iti revolver. He got it back. No one saw. What was I saying? Oh, yes, the Ities. Well, we never felt they were getting us down really. It was easy to see we were getting them down."

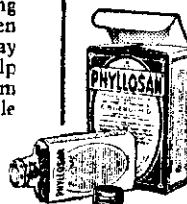
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