

JAP PRISONERS ON LAST LAP OF HOMEWARD JOURNEY

By PETER INGLIS
[By The Associated Press]

SEATTLE, Oct. 6—Nearly 400 Canadian soldiers dressed in a ragged assortment of borrowed United States uniforms, this morning boarded the C.P.R. steamer Princess Alice, bound for Victoria and Gordon Head rest camp on the last brief stage of a journey home half way around the world.

The men of the Winnipeg Grenadiers, the Royal Rifles and ancillary units who fought at Hong Kong, then spent nearly four years of agony in prison camps there and in Japan, were met at the dockside by British Red Cross women with steaming coffee and food as they stepped from the train that for nearly two days had been their home—and more than home.

Chiefly the lumbering 19-car special had been their re-introduction to North American life, and it has served that end well.

When they entrained at Oakland on Wednesday, these men were still ill at ease with their fellows, very conscious of the differences that four years of starvation and isolation and brutality had made in them. They worried a lot, that first night, about how they would react to life at home.

There was one who said frankly: "You see, we've seen so much death and brutality that we're calloused to it. I know, myself, I'm afraid that some day I'll see somebody knocked down by a car and I'll just stand there and laugh. We taught ourselves to laugh at violent death. It was the only way we could bear it."

But the train did its work well. It did its part through the gaiety of the porters making down the sleeper berths and partly through the friendly consideration of the colored waiters, and partly through the Red Cross man with his cigarettes and fruit, and a lot through the unobtrusive way the two Canadian nursing sisters and the medical officer in the hospital car kept an eye on everybody's welfare. But most of all it worked through the scene rolling back past its windows; the simple, snug houses, the unscarred fields, the cars on the roads paralleling the tracks; the kids playing in back yards, the neon signs on the beer-joints of passing towns.

The few towns where the train stopped did their part of the job, too, without even knowing that this was anything more than one of the thousands of ordinary troop-packed trains that roll up and down the Pacific coast.

In the first of these towns, the repatriates stood around very quietly on the platform. In the second they began to exchange banter with the people around them, and a few slipped over to nearby stores to buy coke.

The third town was Eugene, Oregon, and there something close to a miracle happened—although the train conducting officer, who was very annoyed about the whole business, certainly will not recognize it as one.

Nearly everybody on the train set off up town to return loaded down with what they politely referred to as "bottled vitamins" in case lots.

When the train rolled out of Eugene, somebody started singing "Roll Out the Barrel" (these men have heard no new tunes for four years) others started chanting in Japanese. They started talking about many of the things they have kept locked inside themselves before—their wives, their parents, what they want to do when they are home. They were not unruly. There were no windows broken, certainly there were some upset stomachs and aching heads, but by and large a few cases of beer in conjunction with friendly treatment and a pleasant evening countryside, had done a job that would have taken a small army of psychiatrists many months to achieve.

Leaving Oakland one man had remarked: "I used to be a souvenir collector but I didn't bring anything back from Japan—I've got enough souvenirs locked up here in my head."

Now he had lost some of his souvenirs.

Another was no longer saying: "What got me was not the physical suffering but the degradation—downright degradation of the way we lived."

So this train ride has achieved a lot—but it has not been able to remove the physical scars the Japanese left these men.

The scars do not show very clearly, and people at home may not notice them.

Nearly everybody on this train carries a picture of himself taken by the Japanese for identification purposes while he was a prisoner. Some carry pictures of their friends who are not coming home. They will tumb through the pictures of emaciated men with staring eyes and cheeks puffy from beri-beri and explain "this is Bill, he died of starvation" or "this was Jack. He was beaten to death."

Almost all of the survivors have

regained 40 or 50 pounds and are back near their pre-Hong Kong weights, but there is still a trace of the bloat of beri-beri in their faces, almost all have slightly impaired eyesight, most of them have a glassy overcast to their eyes, nearly all carry, hidden under their clothes, the scaly patches which malnutrition has left on the skin.

All of them say their memories suffered badly during the starvation years. For most the power of recollection has returned, but there are some like the man who said: "When we were in Honolulu on the way home I decided to write some letters home. Then I found that I could not for the life of me remember the surname of my aunt and uncle in Vancouver with whom I lived for years. And it wasn't until later, when I got a letter from home, that I remembered I had a brother who was close to me. I had not written to him. I had completely forgotten he existed."