

## UNWILLING SHIPWRIGHTS

# Winnipeggers Built "Targets for Allies"

By JAMES RENNIE

VICTORIA, Oct. 15— Building ships for the Japs was regarded by two young Winnipeggers as "just providing more targets for Allied fleets," but they think so little of their own construction skill that the Allied fleets probably weren't necessary. They're convinced the ships they worked on would sink by themselves.

Pte. R. T. Johnson, 788 Valeur road, and Pte. Robert Black, 229 Kilbride ave., were among new repatriated prisoners of war going through the medical corps conditioning centre near Victoria Sunday. They are back from nearly four years of imprisonment during which their forced labor as shipbuilders is a highlight to them.

"The only qualification we had was that we appeared a little more fit than the rest of the starved Canadians in Shamshuipo camp," said Pte. Johnson. Both men were prisoners there for some time after Hong Kong fell and were drafted for work in Japan in January, 1943.

Working alongside Jap shipbuilders, the pair handled riveting guns, electric drills and other equipment with no more training than a look at the tools and the example of their Jap fellow workers.

"We turned out some fine jobs," they laughed Sunday as they hurried through this camp's routine, eager to be eastbound for Winnipeg in a day or two. "One of our biggest worries was stolen tools. These had to be turned in each night as we went off shift and the Jap workers kept stealing them. They stole from one another and from us. We had to steal from them to keep out of trouble with the guards. The whole thing was a panic."

They had nicknames for the Japs working with them, such as Bucky, a guy who sported colossal buck

teeth, even for a Jap; and the Peppermint Kid, so named because of a weakness for cheap perfume with which he reeked at all times. Old Gus, who was described as looking "exactly like Mortimer Snerd," and The Rat and Snake-Eyes, both named for obvious reasons, the boys said.

By the time liberation troops ended this work, both these Winnipeggers were old hands on the job. Most of the Japs disappeared one at a time into the army and were replaced by other shipbuilders about 14 and 15 years old.

Both these men, by crafty re-stealing of tools and luck, escaped beatings administered to some Canadian prisoners. But typical of the spirit of all the men now that they're back in Canada again was the uproarious laughter which accompanied the relating of one beating to a fellow shipyard worker.

Even the victim, Pte. Nick Stepanchuk of Port Colborne, Ont., joined in the laughter when telling of the fists, clubs and boots which descended on him for allegedly cursing the Jap guards.

"When it was explained later that I wasn't cursing them, they were sorry and said so," Stepanchuk smiled philosophically. All three looked fit Sunday after a 22-day ocean crossing from Japan.

They spoke enthusiastically of the Allied raids on Yokohama but recalled that one incendiary raid made them work all night in their camp after a full day on the docks. Fearful that spreading flames would sweep the camp, Jap guards

forced the prisoners to work all night burying the rice dump, the only food supply, but the camp escaped undamaged.

Another Winnipegger preparing for his departure home Monday is Pte. Thomas H. Ford, 417 Maryland st. Liberation found him at the grim task of mining in iron mines in northern Japan. Along with the universal starvation diet, lack of medical attention and Jap brutality, which all repats recall, Ford had one special squawk.

He was compelled to wear the Jap split-toed shoes in the mines and he never wants to see these things again. These are the shoes with a special compartment for the big toe of each foot and they're not conducive to comfort for Canadian feet, he says.

He had one other experience, not shared by most of his fellows, he had eaten toasted grasshoppers to supplement the meager ration in the mines. Skewered on a wire, as the Japs did it, these were toasted over an open flame and eaten.

"Don't know how they'd go now, but they were darn good then," said the now robust Ford.