

Grenadier's Letter Lifts Hopes

Mother Now Thinks Son May be Living

A tattered three-year-old letter Monday kindled a flickering hope in the heart of a courageous Manitoba mother.

The letter was placed in the hands of Mrs. Margaret Payne, 34 Bank st., St. Vital, by Sgt. Bob Manchester, recently repatriated Hong Kong veteran and close friend of her son, Sgt. John Oliver Payne, officially reported to have died while in the hands of the Japanese.

It told how her son and three companions planned to make a break for freedom and Sgt. Manchester, 34 Morecambie lodge, yesterday filled in with background material.

The four Grenadiers crept out of North Point camp, in China, on the night of Aug. 20, 1942. Since then nothing was heard of any of them until Mrs. Payne was advised last March 9 by defense headquarters, Ottawa, that her son had died Aug. 20, 1942, while in a prisoner of war camp in Hong Kong.

"It can't be true," she protested to a Tribune reporter Monday. "That was the day John escaped from the prison camp in China—North Point camp—and this letter is dated the day before."

The three men who joined Sgt. Payne in his dash for freedom were Winnipeggers too: Pte. Percy Ellis, Pte. Johnny Adams and L-Cpl. John Berzenski.

Sgt. Manchester described plans for the break. The men had confided in him and urged him to join them. They had hoped to reach Chungking, 1,000 miles away.

"But I couldn't take the risk," Sgt. Manchester explained, "because I had a wife at home."

Mrs. Payne read in part her son's letter:

"I have decided, either fortunately or unfortunately as the case may be, to take a chance on getting through to Chungking. I've investigated as much as possible and feel sure we stand a jolly good chance of getting there. There are numerous reasons for this step, the chief being that the cholera season and the fly season are starting. Dysentery and beriberi are high in the camp, and anyway I'm ruddy sick of Japanese hospitality."

Mrs. Payne said her son was talented as well as resourceful. He could draw, paint, carve, sing and play several musical instruments, she recalled fondly.

"While at camp he carved things out of wood and sold them to the men in the camp. He made a cribbage set which he gave to Maj. Hook, who died in July.

"If my boy is dead," she went on, "I don't want any harm to come to his grave. But if he is still alive



SGT. JOHN O. PAYNE
... in freedom dash

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GRENADIER LETTER

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I want him to know that we are always hoping and planning that he will soon come home."

The repatriated Sgt. Manchester told of circumstances leading up to the break.

"As soon as we were taken prisoner John started making plans and blueprints of how he would get out of the prison camp. About midnight, Aug. 19, 1942, he was ready to go. There was a heavy rainstorm, almost a typhoon that night and it aided in the escape.

"Around the building the Japs had left ladders, and on two previous occasions John had been over the hospital walls. He had got in touch with Chinese missionaries and others. Men who worked in the cookhouse supplied enough food to last them 10 days.

"Before the boys slipped away armed only with .45 calibre revolvers, they shook hands with the few of the 300 prisoners who knew of their plans and John gave me a letter for his mother. 'Get that letter to my mother,' he instructed me. 'I'll meet you all in Winnipeg.'

"We told them we hoped they'd make it. From North Point camp they had to cross four miles of water to the mainland. Once they got there they would encounter Chinese guerrillas around Cantor and up to Chungking."