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PRISONERS' WAR

Three men eat noon chow in their prison barracks. But this is not regular prison fare; they are eating rations dropped by B-29s.

By Sgt. BILL LINDAU
YANK Staff Correspondent

YOKOHAMA—Marine Cpl. Bernie Pitts of Dallas and his friend, Pfc. Nyndal B. Preslar, of San Angelo, Tex., were in a PW camp near the town of Maribara, on the western side of the Jap island of Honshu, when the war ended. They had been taken by the Japs on Corregidor.

It wasn't until August 21 that the two marines and the other PWs knew that the war had ended in a victory for our side. "The Jap commandant got us assembled," said Pitts, "and he announced, '*Senso shumi.*' That means, 'The war is over.' Then he walked away from us and went back to his office. The guards put away their arms after that, and the gates were left open. We were told we could have all the rice we wanted."

Pitts says he "yelled like hell," and a couple of others did too, but that considering everything, the camp was pretty quiet. It wasn't until later that they learned that one of the Americans had got hold of a Jap newspaper on August 16 in which was printed the Emperor's message to his people about the surrender. Pitts says the Yank who got the news first was afraid to tell anyone about it because he thought everyone would riot and that the Japs might retaliate.

Most people in the camp, said Pitts, were too numb to move or do anything to celebrate the victory. "We'd waited a hell of a long time for this," he said. "A lot of the prisoners had been too beaten down. They didn't have any spirit left. They just sat and stared without any expression. They're still in camp."

These were the eleven nationalities represented at the Honshu prison camp. From left to rigt, the men are: American, Spanish, Irish, Indian, Dutch, English, Australian, Greek, Egyptian, Filipino and Chinese.

The Japs opened up and became quite generous and showed the prisoners unfamiliar kindnesses. They gave each man a bottle of beer. The rations of rice, soy beans and turnips were increased to such an extent that the prisoners gorged themselves, for the first time in years, and many became sick. American medics among the prisoners advised the Japs to cut the food ration down because the prisoners were not accustomed to such quantities of food. "And," said Pitts, "there was said to be an order out from some general or other that any Jap guard who mistreated any Allied prisoner would be shot."

Until then the PWs were in rags. Half the 200 men in the camp were barefoot. No one had socks. The Nips broke open clothing that should have been issued long before their Government called it quits.

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The papers showed pictures of American planes dropping stuff over PW camps.

"We worked two days making signs for the planes to follow. Then we set them up and waited. We waited three days, and they never came. I heard later the planes dropped the stuff at Osaka, but the PWs over there got it, and there wasn't enough to send to us."

Pitts and Preslar went into town—their first night outside a prison camp since their capture.

"The Jap military were sulky as hell. But the civilians seemed happy the whole thing was over. They stared at us and some of them were downright friendly," Preslar said.

THE HONSHU AMERICANS

"I heard from some Aussies that came into the camp from Osaka that MacArthur had landed in Tokyo. So Pitts and I decided to get the hell over there.

"We went to the railroad station about 7 o'clock the evening of the 30th and caught a train. The cars were jammed with civilians, so we had to hang on the outside. We got between two cars and hung on the hand rails all night.

"We pulled into Tokyo station, and got off. We didn't see any sign of an American.

"We walked down to the waterfront. We were standing in a burned-out lot there, looking over the bay when this Jap MP walked over to us. He was polite and friendly, and he asked us what we were doing there. He didn't speak much English, just enough to make himself understood. Pitts told him, with motions, that we wanted to see Americans.

"The MP went off, and came back with an interpreter. He wrote something on a piece of paper, and gave it to the interpreter.

"About that time, a B-29 came over. It was a big sonuvabitch. It dropped some parachutes, with crates. One of the crates broke off and headed straight for us. We ducked out of the way, and it smashed the ground a few feet away. It had all the stuff we'd dreamed about. Cigarettes and candy—and cans of peaches. The MP told us not to take too much, because it was for other Allied prisoners, too.

"The interpreter got us in a Ford, and we went off. He drove us down the road until we came to a roadblock. There were a couple of American soldiers there. The interpreter got out and told them about us. Then he bowed to everybody and drove back toward Tokyo.

"The GIs were from the 11th Airborne Division. They were paratroopers and the biggest guys I've ever seen. All these guys are big."

The paratroopers guarding the road into Tokyo got the two marines a jeep after a spirited discussion of the relative merits of the Army and Marines. The jeep driver let them out at the entrance of the New Grand Hotel.

They went upstairs, feeling self-conscious, and walked into the lobby.

"No one paid attention to us," said Pitts, "though we must have stuck out like sore thumbs. There was more brass than I've ever seen anywhere—everything from colonels on up. We got a glimpse of MacArthur, too. We'd been on the Rock with him, but this was the first time we'd ever actually seen him.

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Senso Shumi

"Finally, a buck sergeant came over to us. He looked worried and confused. I guess maybe it was because he was the only enlisted man in the lobby. He asked us if he could help, so we told him who we were and where we had come from.

"He steered us over to the big dining room and started to take us in. But there was too much rank in there, so we told him we didn't have time for anything fancy. He tried to talk us into the place, but finally told us to go downstairs to the 188th Parachute Infantry CP, and showed us the way."

That's where the two marines had their first opportunity to find out what had happened to the world they had been hidden away from and to ask questions about how the war had been won. The equipment of the paratroopers amazed them. They couldn't take their eyes off the carbines with folding stocks that they thought at first were a new kind of tommy gun. And the soldiers asked questions too.

"No one will believe us," said Preslar. "I can hardly believe some of the things that happened to us now that it's all over. If no one believes us, I won't blame them." He began the story.

After the surrender on Corregidor, the survivors were loaded into barges and taken to Manila. Preslar and Pitts were both in the hospital when the Japs came to accept the surrender. Pitts was hit in the leg by a piece of shrapnel from a shell that wounded or killed 42 men. Preslar had been shot in the hand accidentally. They were both weak and sick when they were thrown into Bilibid Prison.

"Next day," said Pitts, "they loaded us into a train for Cabanatuan.

"THEY stuffed us in worse than cattle. It was hotter than hell, and there wasn't any water. There were a hundred men to a box car. About 35 would have been fairly comfortable in them.

"We walked the last 20 kilometers to Cabanatuan. I heard about the Death March from Bataan, and I guess I never would have made it. I barely made the march to Cabanatuan.

"We started off with a canteen of water, but that didn't last long. None of us were strong, after the time on Corregidor. We were half starved, and the Nips hadn't helped much. Just some rice a couple of times a day since we'd surrendered.

"The Nips beat hell out of anybody who lagged, and they set a stiff pace. A man would fall out, and they'd beat him with clubs and kick him to his feet. If he didn't get up, they'd set a small white flag by him, and go off. I guess that meant he was dead. I never heard what happened to anyone they left by the side of the road.

"We were at Cabanatuan for five weeks. During the first two weeks, there wasn't any medical setup at all. Dysentery broke out. Everybody had it, I guess. Everybody but us. We were just lucky. It was pretty bad there, but we didn't know how bad it would get later, in other places.

"They were feeding us just about enough to keep us alive, I think, and we were always hungry. We went out into the jungles every day, cutting lumber. I guess those trips into the jungle kept us going. We worked like hell, but we managed to pick up a little more to eat."

Preslar nodded.

"I'm a coconut fan, and I have been ever since Cabanatuan," he said.

"They kept us going that time, and we were able to take a lot more than the others who didn't get anything more than what the Nips gave them. There were bananas out there, too. We used to sneak em, green, off the trees, and hide them till they got ripe.

Before leaving the Fusiki camp, the freed prisoners decided it needed some overdue decorating and did it with toilet paper.

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Senso Shumi

"That's when the Nips said they'd shoot anybody they caught sneaking fruit back into camp. They did catch six guys and they were shot. But after that, they gave up. It got to be a joke, them telling us they'd shoot us if we were caught.

"But the way it is with the Japs is this: Anything you do is okay as long as you don't get caught at it. Getting caught is the crime, to them."

On June 24, 1942, the two marines, with 300 other American prisoners, mostly Army men, were loaded on freight cars for the trip to Palawan.

"We worked on an air strip there. We worked on it all the time we were there, 10 hours a day for over two years," Preslar said.

"Sometimes we worked longer, after dark. It was just a relay strip between Luzon and Borneo, and I never saw more than six patrol bombers there at any one time.

"The Nips didn't have much fuel for them. Sometimes, they'd just sit there for two or three days at a time and never go out. Occasionally a ship would pull in and unload gas and oil. But not very often.

"We got a day off a week at first, then a day off every two weeks for a while. Finally, we got a day off when and if the Nips felt like giving us one.

"The first week we were there, six men escaped. I don't know what ever happened to them. All together, about 27 men escaped from camp, and made it into the jungle.

"The Nips were pretty lenient until the first bunch escaped. Then they cracked down. They split us into squads of 10 men each. They told us that if any man tried to escape, the other nine men in the squad would be shot. We didn't have any escapes from our bunch after that."

Living was miserable at Palawan, like all other Jap prison camps. Only one third of the men had blankets. They lived and worked in rags.

Two of the POWs were beaten to death. They were on a detail which was unloading a ship. They and four others stole three cans of beef. The Nips missed the beef, and they lined us all up. The commandant demanded that the guys who stole the stuff step out. No one moved. Then they started smacking hell out of us. We had to stand at attention while three guards passed down the line and beat each man with clubs. Another Jap, a first sergeant and former Nip baseball star whom we called The Bull, had a whip. He passed behind the guys with the clubs and cut us with that whip. It lasted two hours. Finally, one of the guys who had helped steal the beef admitted that he had done it. He tried to take the whole blame.

"But the other five wouldn't let him do it. They all stepped out. We were forced to watch what happened to them. They were tied to a coconut tree, facing the trunk.

"The guards had clubs bigger than a baseball bat. They beat those guys across the back, and across the kidneys. When a man would pass out, they'd throw water on him until he came to. Then they'd beat him again.

"They kept this up for about 20 minutes. When they quit, two of the men were dead. The other four were sent back to Manila to the dungeons at Fort Santiago. One man came back. We never heard what happened to the other three."

The camp commandant would sometimes hide a carton of cigarettes in the jungle we were clearing. Then he'd say it would belong to the company whose men found it first. We never knew exactly where it was, of course, so we'd cut jungle grass fast as we could, hoping to get to it before anyone else did.

"At Christmas time, there was a prize. The 10 best workers got a towel and two packs of Jap cigarettes each."

In August 1944, the marines were shipped out of Palawan with approximately 200 other prisoners for shipment to Manila and Formosa.

There were more than 200 American officers and enlisted men left at the camp in Palawan when the marines sailed to Manila for the trip to Formosa.

In Manila harbor they were loaded on a freighter. It was a hot morning in August. There were 1500 prisoners in the two holds of the ship.

"Each hold," said Preslar, "would have been big enough for 400 men to sit down in. There were about 750 in each, jammed together. We were standing up.

"There was one toilet bucket for all the men in the hold. Most of the men had dysentery. So you can figure out for yourself what that place was like at the end of the first day.

"This was the first time we had an idea of

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how close American forces were. I saw Nips on deck wearing life belts, looking nervous. They'd never worn life belts before.

"We got two meals a day. A little bit of raw rice—*lugao*, they call it—and about an inch of soup in a mess cup once a day.

"The heat was terrific, and the hatch covers were kept battened down all day. It hurt to breathe. There were only two long cracks in the hatch cover, and the only air we got was from them. But the crowding was worst of all. I tied myself to a bulkhead. You know how they used to put people in the stocks in New England back in the old days, for punishment? I got up there and got myself into that position. It was a hell of a lot better than being down there, with everyone else. It's the only way I got any sleep. I'd hang there like that, and every now and then I'd pass out and get some sleep.

"Every morning a Nip would stick his head down the hatch and tell us to shake the man next to us. If he didn't move, he'd probably be dead, and they'd haul him to deck and dump him over the side. That made a little more room for the rest of us. The poor guys were killing each other just for more space. It was the damndest thing I ever saw. A half dozen guys were killed by their buddies that way. One guy would strangle another one, and they'd haul him up on deck. It was like slow motion. Everybody was so weak they could hardly raise a hand. And one guy would put his hands around a guy's neck and choke him. The victim would die quick. Maybe he would have died anyway in a little while, naturally.

"I saw a soldier stand there and watch another guy strangle his brother. He didn't do a thing. He just stood there and stared, while his brother was murdered.

"There were 40 ships in the convoy when we started. We were on an old ship without any cargo. I guess that's why we weren't sunk. The convoy was attacked by subs three times. More than 20 of the ships were sunk.

"The subs forced us to put into Hong Kong, and I saw my first American air raid there. The hatches were battened down as usual, but I saw the planes come over. There were four-motored jobs on top and two-motored on the bottom. It looked good. We all had given up hope of living, and we hoped that we'd get hit. We didn't, though. We heard the bombs exploding and knew they were doing some damage. The Nips covered the cracks, and I couldn't see anything. But I could hear them.

"We just sat in that harbor for about 10 days, and then we put out to sea again in another convoy for Formosa. It was a three-day trip, and we were attacked again. Out of the 40 ships that had been with the original convoy, only five reached Formosa. We were in the Toroko camp in November. The weather was cold, and the natives said it was an unusual winter. They always say that, wherever we go. Back in the States, they say the same damn thing. By the time we had gotten to Hong Kong, we'd been dehydrated. I'd stopped sweating. About 150 men died on that trip in our hold."

At the Toroko camp, the marines found a new kind of commanding officer. Each prisoner was issued four heavy blankets and they slept on mats of rice straw. They got three meals a day and pork at least once a week. Preslar did farm work, so he ate well, and Pitts worked in a sugar mill.

"The Nip commandant didn't allow the guards to beat anybody," said Pitts.

"I couldn't get used to it. But instead of beatings he'd send us to the guardhouse naked, and we'd have to stay there for five days. The weather was a little above freezing, which was lucky for the guys who made the guardhouse. I'll take a beating any time. You'd get the cold treatment for things like taking sugar from the mill back to camp or taking vegetables from the farm.

"But I think we actually gained weight at that camp, and I hated to leave it.

"We left Formosa on January 20. You guys were in Luzon then, but we didn't know it. All we ever got were rumors, and we had no way of tracing anything down. The closest thing to real news we got was on Honshu last March. A couple of Aussies who were taken from a Hong Kong camp told us that the Americans and British were racing the Russians for Berlin. That meant the war in Europe was nearly over, and that the war over here was going to get everybody's full attention, and maybe we'd be loose in a couple of years or so. Anyway, it was a big boost to morale, and we needed plenty of boosting. We'd just gotten down into the hold when the Navy dive bombers came over. There were a lot of transports in the harbor, and there were

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plenty of Jap destroyers around, covering the ships.

"A Grumman dove down. It looked as though it were right on top of us. I don't know whether he was diving for us or not. He dove right through that flak ceiling, released his bomb and shot up, clipping about a foot off a mast. We thought that the forward end of the ship was hit when the explosion came. It was that close. I was knocked flat. But it missed by about five feet."

The first stop for the prison transport was Moji on Kyushu Island. It was a POE for Jap troops, and the port area was crowded with them. Each had full field equipment, and long pieces of bamboo had been tied on each rifle and carbine. An interpreter explained that this was to prevent the weapons from going to the bottom in case of a sinking. The date was February 7, and it was cold.

"We went ashore half frozen," Pitts said.

"Preslar and I had each a jacket and a pair of wool pants. I didn't have any shoes, and Preslar's were practically useless, the soles worn half through.

"There was snow on the ground and on the mountain slopes, and it looked like a blizzard was coming up. It was about 8 A.M.

"Half the prisoners had no shoes. No one had any socks. We had some British soldiers with us who had been captured in Hong Kong and picked up when we came through from the Philippines to Formosa. They had had overcoats, once. Good, heavy overcoats. They were standing there, shivering and half naked now. They said the Japs had taken their overcoats. Because it would have been bad on the morale of the Nips to see the enemy so well dressed, the Japs had explained.

"On the Honshu side, we climbed on passenger trains. It surprised hell out of us. Real passenger trains. Not box cars. Most of the guys got seats, and the rest slept on the floor. There was plenty of room to lay down. And at that stage of the game, we were satisfied with a place to lay."

The two marines were sent to Camp Wakanahama near Osaka. The name sounds like a New England summer camp for American boys, and, compared with some of the other places for Allied PWs, it apparently was. There were 200 prisoners in the camp, mostly Americans, with a sprinkling of British, Aussies and Chinese. The prisoners were divided into details, with 40 men to a detail. One worked shoveling coal, another loaded scrap at a steel mill, others unloaded railroad cars or were stevedores at the docks.

The men who handled food cargoes managed to get enough to eat, but the prisoners working the steel mills had rough going, living off what was issued.

"The Jap commander's idea of curing malnutrition was to give a man an extra inch of watery soup for breakfast, or a spoonful of beans," Preslar said, "And when the poor guy still wouldn't show any improvement, the Nip would blow his top. He'd slap hell out of the guy and scream:

" 'I feed you plenty extra soup and beans three days, and still you no good!' "

THE marines saw their first B-29 raid in March. The guards packed all the prisoners into the barracks, closed the shutters and promised immediate execution to anyone who was caught watching the planes through the shutter cracks or making anything resembling happy noises. The raid wrecked half of Kobe and Osaka. It burned everything immediately around the prison camp.

"It burned to within 50 yards all around the fence of the camp," Preslar declared, "but only one building in the camp was destroyed. There were no casualties, though."

Next day, the prisoners were transferred to Maribara in the foothills of the mountains. The camp ran parallel with a railroad and is situated in agricultural country.

"The commander found out I was a bugler, somehow, and put me to work," said Pitts. "I blew nothing but Jap calls, but I learned them fast, and I had a pretty easy time until we finally left and came here."

Then in August came the news of the peace offer. It was a week late, but Preslar said one week more or less didn't make much difference after all the time they had waited. When the prisoners arrived at their first camp in Honshu, the Jap commander had an interview with each one in turn. There was an interpreter in the office.

One set of questions was asked of each prisoner:

Who do you think will win the war?

Each gave the same answer: "The United

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States."

"Why?"

Again they gave the same answer: "The United States production will be too much for you."

"We never had the slightest doubt that the United States would win in time," Preslar said, "not even in the worst time in the Philippines and after the surrender of Corregidor.

"I guess we all, at one time or another, thought that we wouldn't live through it, individually.

"But we knew the United States would win."

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