

Volume 2 Section 355

Prisoners of War

Repatriation and De-briefing

The Process

The process of repatriation began quite early in the war when men who were deemed too badly injured ever to fight again were repatriated through neutral Holland and Switzerland. At a later stage these two countries were used as staging posts and held prisoners who were interned for the duration. When the war ended these were among the first to return home. Others had to wait some considerable time before transport could be arranged to bring them home. On arrival they were given a form to complete to recall the circumstances of their capture and the treatment they had received. Many of these forms are preserved at the National Archives under reference WO 161. Officers' reports are sometimes filed with their personal papers under WO339.

Return of the Captives

An agreement negotiated through the Red Cross enabled seriously wounded prisoners to be exchanged. The first batch came home via Holland in December 1915 and it was not until July 1916 that the second batch returned via Switzerland. They brought back tales of appalling treatment: brutality, starvation and insanitary conditions. As a result of strong representations made through the Red Cross things did improve although tales continued to leak back of terrible treatment, especially in the first few weeks of captivity when they were in the hands of the German forces in the battle zones.

Part of the Armistice agreement called for prisoners to be repatriated. This was often a slow business and a number of captives still never made it home. Pte H Radbourne (12209) of the 8th Battalion died at Swindon 23/10/18 on his way home from Germany. He had been a prisoner for 3 years and 3 months (B&W 4/894)

Debriefing

In section 354 we include stories told by the men who returned from captivity plus information gleaned from their debriefing report where this survives. There were also a number of references to Royal Berkshire men in other prisoners' reports and these are noted below together with reports from men which are too short to warrant a complete subsection.

The debriefing was carried out in England and the officer who conducted the briefing had to provide an assessment of the reliability of the man questioned. He

used a proforma and dealt with each camp separately if the man had been in more than one camp. The Proforma read:-

CAMP ENQUIRY SHEET

- (1) Name, Rank, No and Regiment
- (2) Home Address
- (3) Name of Camps
- (4) Dates between which confined
- (5) No of prisoners
 - (a) Total (b) British
- (6) Names of Commandant(s) and second in command. Characters
- (7) Accommodation
 - (a) Lodging
 - (b) Heating
 - (c) Washing facilities
 - (d) Sanitary arrangements
 - (e) Hospital for sick
- (8) Food
 - (a) Supplied by Germans
 - (b) Canteens: good or bad: nature of
 - (c) Things to be purchased Prices - fair?
 - (d) From England or elsewhere: in what state did it arrive
- (9) Clothing

Any issued by G, what, how often
- (10) Exercise

Facilities for
Games allowed
- (11) Recreation

Indoors
Smoking - when, where; ever stopped? why?
- (12) Religious Services

Any held, by whom?
- (13) Employment

How prisoners employed
Any payment for work
Any attempt to force prisoners to make munitions - own knowledge or report
- (14) Discipline

Steps taken to inform prisoners of regulations
What acts considered offences

Punishments: nature, duration, Any ill effects of same.

(15) General Treatment

Any complaints of

Cruelty. Any actually seen

Heard of? Get names if possible

Any differences made between different nationalities.
If so in what way.

(16) Illnesses

Any epidemics?

Informant ever in camp hospital

When? What for? How treated?

(17) Postal Arrangements

Letters and parcels received? Regularly?

By whom opened? In presence of addressee or not?

Anything taken out of parcels?

Anything prohibited?

How often allowed to write letters? or only post-cards?

Any special complaint under this head?

(18) Visits of American Ambassador

How often?

Allowed to speak alone to prisoners or only in presence of German officers?

Any special preparations for?

What?

Any improvements after visits

(19) General Conditions

Any improvements in conditions during informant's stay

In what respect? When?

(20) Any other information not covered by above

(21) Opinion of Examiner as to intelligence and reliability of witness.