

REPATRIATION OF PRISONERS OF WAR

The Geneva Convention made provision for the repatriation of all Prisoners of War, even during hostilities. It was only possible for the British and Germans to reach agreement over the seriously ill and disabled. For the majority of the 40,000 British servicemen who were taken prisoner in 1939 and 1940, the war was to be a very long and dispiriting experience. Negotiations, conducted through the Red Cross, over the repatriation of seriously wounded men, had begun in late 1940. They did not progress very far because there were far fewer German men in this category than British. It was only after substantial numbers of Germans were taken prisoner in the Desert campaign of 1942 that the talks resumed. The actual exchange of prisoners did not take place until October 1943:

Extract from *The Times*, 20th October 1943

HOMEWARD BOUND PRISONERS -A BUOYANT SPIRIT MEN WHO PUZZLED THEIR CAPTORS

From our Special Correspondent, GOTHENBURG, OCT. 1943

*Trains bearing prisoners from Germany for repatriation to Britain began arriving here from the Trelleborg ferry in the early hours of Monday, and the transfer to the Swedish steamship **Drottningholm** was made during darkness. Before dawn more than 1,200, most of them men from Great Britain, but also 20 Canadians, 20 Australians, a few Palestinians, and some from other parts of the British Empire, were on board.*



Meanwhile further trains with allied prisoners from Germany, France, and Holland were arriving, bringing besides the service men about 50 civilians, mostly aged or unfit men and women, and at least one infant, born in a camp 10 weeks ago. The civilians were mostly from Vittel camp, in the Vosges.

Apparently the actual departure of the ships depends on some signal that a similar exchange has reached the agreed stage also in Oran. This is expected to arrive in time for the German ships to sail at 8 a.m. on Thursday and the British ships at 10.30 a.m. to reach England during the week-end.

*Three hours spent among the 1,200 new passengers in the **Drottningholm** on Monday morning furnished a stimulating and indeed an inspiring experience. Most of them had been prisoners for well over three years; all had endured long and severe hardships; some were maimed and many more had less obvious injuries, yet all of them displayed a buoyant spirit.*

It became apparent, after one had talked with the men in different parts of the ship, that theirs was not merely the natural cheerfulness of men who were going home. These were men whose confident spirit had remained high and intact through the darkest period.

“THOUGHT US CRAZY”

“Jerry could not understand us,” said one man who had been selected for exchange under the abortive plan of two years ago. “When we were told the disappointing news that the exchange scheme had fallen through at the last moment a group of us struck up a tune, and in a few seconds all were singing lustily ‘Land of hope and glory.’ Our German attendants just threw up their hands. Clearly they thought we were crazy. They were unable to understand why we did not show any downheartedness.

The absence of self-pity among these men was one of the most striking features of their attitude. When they were asked what sort of general treatment they had experienced they usually answered, in varying terms: “Well, you see, I was fortunate.” Some, however, had grim incidents to relate, especially about the youngest members of Hitler’s armed forces, brutal fanatics with memories scarcely stretching back beyond the dawn of the Nazi period.

Some men had tiny replicas of the manacles used by the Germans which they had made in camp and had brought in matchboxes. None of those questioned by your Correspondent had been manacled. Fewer members of the fanatical S.S. youth are now on duty at the camps than formerly. They have been succeeded largely by more or less disabled guards, some indeed with artificial limbs”.

Here is evidence that at least one man from Lochbroom was repatriated under this system. **Murdoch Mackenzie** from Ullapool arrived on the Swedish ship *Drottningholm* at Leith.

Extract from the Aberdeen Weekly Journal of 28th October 1943.

“UP the 51st!”
Above the screaming of sirens and hooters and the cheering of shipyard workers came the shout from the decks of the tender bringing the first contingent of repatriated prisoners of war from the *Drottningholm* down the estuary of the Forth to the quayside at Leith.
These men of the old Highland Division, men of St Valery, were coming home again among the other repatriates, and pride in the old Division rose above the tumult of the amazing welcome which Scotland gave them.
And there was one thing that stood out about all the military repatriates—crippled or sick, pinched and wan-looking as many were. It was this. They returned as confident victors, not as broken captives. They were coming back with an assurance of victory that was uplifting.

eral to the Forces, who went out to the two ships, the *Drottningholm*

In the middle of one column of men I saw a Seaforth badge on the glengarry of a serious-faced little soldier. His eyes lit up when several people spoke to him. He was Pte. Murdoch Mackenzie, of Ullapool.