

HIROHATA DIVISIONAL CAMP

OSAKA POW CAMP NO. 12-B

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following information was supplied by AXPOW Thomas E. Gage, former Hirohata Camp prisoner of war.

LOCATION

The camp was located about two miles from the north coast of the Inland Sea on the island of Honshu, about 34 miles west by north of Kobe, five miles southeast of Himeji, practically in the town of Hirohata (34° 47' 15" N, 134° 39' 30" E) and close to the railroad passing through Hirohata to Osaka about 45 miles to the southeast. Himeji, a city of 62,000 people, contained one of the major Japanese army garrisons on Honshu.

PRISONER PERSONNEL

On Sept. 20, 1943, about 400 Army, Air Corps, Navy and Marine POWs captured in the Philippines left Manila on the small Japanese steamer NAGATO MARU. After a brief stop at Takao, Formosa, the hellship docked at Moji, Japan, on Oct. 5th and the POWs were immediately shipped by train to Hirohata, arriving on Oct. 6, 1943. The first POWs had opened Hirohata camp sometime in August of 1943. They were 80 Marines and sailors who had surrendered at Guam on Dec. 10, 1941. Prior to being transferred to Hirohata they had worked as stevedores on the docks at Osaka Camp No. 1 until they gave the guards so much trouble that they shipped them to Hirohata where they acquired the nickname "The 80 Eightballs". In addition the camp contained two Wake Island sailors and two naval aviators who had been shot down while flying off the aircraft carrier YORKTOWN. Two members of the Australian Air Force and a British naval medic captured at Hong Kong constituted the only non-American POWs interned at Hirohata camp, which at its peak contained a total of 488 POWs. Captain Sidney E. Seid of the Army Medical Corps was the only officer at Hirohata, but 1st Sgt. E.B. Ercanbrack, a Marine gunnery sergeant captured on Guam, was in effect the camp leader with Captain Seid rendering medical care in the 20 bed camp hospital and aid station. By the end of 1944 only about 300 POWs remained at Hirohata, the rest having been sent north to work in coal mines or to other camps.

JAPANESE GUARD PERSONNEL

Shortly after the camp was opened, Lt. Takenaka, the camp commandant, was transferred and he was

succeeded by Lt. Muto. A Corporal Fujita was deputy to the commander. Many of the guards within the camp were shell-shocked veterans of the earlier China campaign. Interpreters were Tahara and Uchinaka.

CAMP FACILITIES

The prison compound was approximately 200' x 400', or less than two acres in size. It was surrounded by a 12' high wooden fence topped by pointed bamboo staves and barbed wire. Housing consisted of two substantially constructed but uninsulated, barnlike wood buildings, each about 50' wide x 100' long. The roofs were of tile and the floors of wood. The buildings contained numerous glass windows and some skylights existed in the roof. For sleeping, upper and lower platforms were provided with straw mats. The lower platform was 16" above the floor. Tables and benches for eating were placed in the aisles. Cooking was done in a separate frame building about 20' x 40' in size, equipped with 13 cauldrons for cooking the inevitable rice and watery soup. Ten POWs were detailed as cooks. Food was drawn from the galley in buckets and carried to the barracks by mess men under the command of a non-com. Each barracks housed about 240 POWs. Barracks No. 1 was flanked on all sides by other smaller buildings, such as 25' x 50' latrines (2), a 20' x 30' wash rack and bathhouse, a shoe repair shop, a storage shed, the galley and the camp hospital. The Japanese maintained a headquarters within the camp compound.

WORK

Each morning — rain, snow or sunshine — about 400 POWs were marched from the camp to the Hirohata plant of the Japan Iron Works Co. (Nihon Seitetsu Kaisha) a few miles away. They were assigned various jobs including shoveling coal and firing furnaces, unloading coke, loading pig iron and unloading trains or ships or iron ore. Occasionally time was spent laying spur railroad tracks. Also working in the plant with the POWs were Korean civilians. Work hours were from 7:00 am to 5:00 pm. About thirty men were detailed to camp jobs and often as many as fifty men were in the sick bay with illnesses or injuries.

MEDICAL FACILITIES

Capt. Sidney E. Seid, USAMC, supervised and rendered all medical services, assisted by four navy

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corpsmen and one Japanese enlisted man. The steel mill detailed one civilian employee to supervise the issue of their medical supplies. When necessary, operations and serious dental cases were treated at the company hospital or at a hospital in Kobe. The most serious detriment to the convalescence of the sick was the attitude of the Japanese medical corpsman who often changed diagnoses, would refuse to issue medicine and would force POWs with high temperatures to work. At times he would beat or cause to be beaten the prisoners who answered sick call. Despite this, during the two years of the camp's existence, under Capt. Seid's diligent efforts, only eleven POWs died, many from pneumonia.

TREATMENT

The POWs at Hirohata camp were physically abused on a regular basis for little or no reason. They were forced to engage in heavy labor despite the fact that they received an almost protein-less starvation diet. Many of the POWs worked while they were sick or injured to avoid a cut in the already totally inadequate food supply. Medicines and medical supplies, although received from the Red Cross, were only provided to Dr. Seid on rare occasions. In spite of the sadistic treatment at Hirohata camp, the POW morale during the camp's two years of operation was said to be excellent.

MAIL

Some Japanese issued postcards were sent from

Hirohata a couple of times during its two year of existence. In the spring and summer of 1944, 100-word letters on Japanese stationery were allowed out, although not all of the POWs were given the opportunity to write home. Letters and telegrams from the U.S. arrived, were censored and distributed to many of the POWs in early 1944 and again in July 1944. As was the case with cards or envelopes emanating from other camps in the Osaka controlled group, no indication of the specific camp or location is given. Until the war ended and POWs were repatriated, no one was aware of which specific camp any of this mail was sent from.

LIBERATION

Hirohata POW Camp was liberated on Sept. 9, 1945. The POWs were evacuated by ship from Yokohama on Sept. 12, 1945, arriving at the 29th Replacement Depot at Cavite in the Philippines on Sept. 22, 1945.