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JAPANESE TREATMENT OF PRISONERS

What treatment can Allied personnel expect when forced by the exigencies of war to surrender to the Japanese?

As fighting moves toward the larger land masses where small groups of men more easily may be cut off, and as air and sea forces operate close to the Japanese homeland, this question is of increasing interest and importance.

No answer can be given which will cover all cases. Allied prisoners freed in Burma had received satisfactory treatment. Many of those retaken in the Philippines were near death from starvation. Conditions vary according to the place of internment, the commanding officer of the camp, the food situation, the medical situation, and the number of prisoners. In general, prisoners taken in places isolated from the home islands are at the mercy of local commanders and, unfortunately, can expect little in the way of considerate treatment. Those captured in Japan, or in areas where they may be returned to Japan, if they maintain the proper attitude, will probably receive generally satisfactory treatment.

From reports of protecting powers, captured documents, and POW interrogations, there is evidence of better living conditions and more adequate food allowances for prisoners in the home islands. According to POWs, Japanese newspapers have contained letters from civilians complaining of the extra allotment of meat for prisoners of war. But the Japanese record of ruthless treatment is too long and too well substantiated to admit of any sure trust or optimism. Atrocities in the Philippines, New Guinea and elsewhere are a grim reminder of this.

There is definite evidence, however, that a prisoner who keeps his wits about him stands the best chance of fair treatment and eventual liberty. The prisoner should remember, first of all, that he is of value to the enemy. Captured documents show that the Japanese have a highly developed technique for the interrogation of Allied personnel. Although their methods fall short of those of the Germans in subtlety and thoroughness, the Japanese have achieved some success in obtaining information of a military character from prisoners of war.

The enemy is anxious to capture Allied personnel, and has set up a standard procedure for handling flyers forced down over Japan. This is indicated in the interrogation of a Japanese second lieutenant who was captured by U.S. forces on Iwo Jima 16 April 1945. The prisoner stated that an ordered method for handling captured Allied airmen has been widely published throughout Japan. In cities, captors are instructed to hold their prisoners in protective custody and notify the police. In rural districts, the prisoners are to be taken to the nearest authority or police station. Prisoners are to be protected from insults and rough treatment.

The Japanese officer stated that he had heard of only one case in which a U.S. airman had been shot. This occurred when a pilot who had allegedly strafed school children crash landed and was captured.

Another prisoner stated, in his opinion, men shot down in Japanese territory should not be armed. If armed, he advised throwing the weapon away before being surrounded by Japanese. He said that those coming to take him would undoubtedly

be armed with anything they could find, including bamboo spears.

Unfortunately, Allied personnel captured in the forward areas cannot expect the well-planned and relatively considerate treatment reportedly afforded prisoners in Japan. Living conditions are much worse, and treatment is at the discretion of local commanders, who are inclined to be arbitrary. Initial interrogation is usually conducted by a non-commissioned officer. In areas that have not been completely isolated from the homeland, a prisoner who is believed to be of value or whose conduct has been especially pleasing to his captors may be sent back to Japan. There is evidence that a number of flyers who were shot down over Iwo Jima and Okinawa immediately preceding our invasions of those islands were transported to Japan. A prisoner's chances of reasonable treatment in the forward areas depend chiefly on good luck and making a favorable impression on the Japanese.

In rear areas, the interrogation is usually conducted by a trained staff in quiet and private surroundings. An effort is made to avoid distracting influences. The interrogator holds the dominant position but is advised to avoid a display of arrogance. Procedure varies with circumstances, but may progress from simple questions concerning name and rank to questions concerning our air forces, troop dispositions and troop movements.

The interrogator often assumes a gentle and friendly attitude in order to break down the reserve of the prisoner. Tobacco or candy may be offered. Sometimes the interrogator will eat a meal with the prisoner. A pleasant conversation may cover such topics as mutual hatred of war, family life, ambitions or other subjects designed to win the confidence of the prisoner. Reference may be made to anti-war sentiments, enjoyable pre-war days, strikes in the U.S., battle losses, rationing at home, etc.

Captured documents indicate that trained Japanese interrogators, particularly in the homeland, consider torture a clumsy method of obtaining information, to be used only as a last resort. When it is employed, there is usually a change of interrogators. A prisoner may be threatened with death, torture, starving or confinement in an effort to make him talk. There is evidence, however, that in some instances, a polite but firm refusal to answer questions has won Japanese respect and warded off mistreatment.

The interrogator often parades the knowledge which he already possesses, intimating that he has much more. He attempts to lead the prisoner to believe that disclosure of information will make no significant difference. An attempt will be made to dispel any fear of retribution by the prisoner's government, and assurance is given that all statements will be held in strictest confidence.

Captured interrogation reports show clearly that an understanding of fundamental Japanese psychology can be extremely useful to a prisoner in resisting interrogation and securing the best possible treatment at the hands of the enemy. A POW has a great advantage if he understands from the start the general attitude which the Japanese hold toward all men who are captured in battle. According to their view, no man of integrity would allow himself to be taken alive. Their system decrees that death is infinitely more desirable than capture. Consequently, the Japanese look upon all captives with a great contempt they often fail to conceal.

There are, however, many positive things which a prisoner of war may do to protect himself and the knowledge which he may have in his possession. All of these revolve about the idea of making a favorable impression on the Japanese.

Although the Japanese perhaps are not aware of it, they possess collectively a great inferiority complex which stems partly from the inescapable superiority of U.S. training, equipment and general fighting power. They envy the great and productive nation which stands behind the U.S. soldier. Consequently, they are sometimes surprisingly receptive to praise and flattery from a prisoner of war. Captives who mention to the interrogator the admirable qualities of the Japanese soldier, the excellent performance of Japanese equipment or who compliment the interrogator upon his fluent English are likely to make a favorable impression. A diary captured in New Guinea reveals the amazing success which one POW achieved with this approach. Shot down by an enemy fighter, he parachuted from his plane but was immediately picked up by the Japanese. As soon as he was captured, he asked to see the pilot who had shot him down. Brought before the flyer, he warmly congratulated him upon the best job of combat flying that he had ever seen. This so elated his captors that they held a banquet in his honor during which he sat at the right hand of the camp commander! Three days later he was sent to a POW camp in Japan.

The Japanese pride themselves on their ability to mask their emotions and this leads them to respect the same ability in other people. Display of emotion, no matter how strongly felt, is considered a weakness. There is adequate evidence to show that the Japanese, particularly in the forward areas, sometimes try deliberately to provoke open anger or fear in their prisoners. Their methods include slapping, spitting in the prisoner's face, long exposure to the sun, and long periods of standing at attention. If he controls himself during this treatment, he has shown merit in Japanese eyes and is likely to fare better than other prisoners who do not. Those who break down or "lose face" are not considered worthy of respect. They may be singled out for special punishment and rough treatment.

The Japanese, like the Germans, take great pride in their own military discipline and they expect the same qualities in other military men. They are quick to show contempt for a prisoner who is slovenly in military bearing. Strict observance of military courtesy toward the Japanese may lead to more lenient treatment. Saluting of all officers is especially advisable.

American humor does not appeal to the Japanese. If the prisoner makes an attempt at sarcasm or witticisms, the interrogation officer or guard may feel that the prisoner is looking down on him or laughing at him. He will take his loss of "face" out on the prisoner. Japanese trophies (watch straps made from Japanese airplane metal, photographs, etc.) are likely to arouse resentment and provoke rough treatment.

Many Japanese soldiers speak and understand English. Guards are often on the alert to pick up stray bits of conversation between prisoners that may be useful to interrogation officers. Stool pigeons (German and White Russian) are sometimes planted in prison camps to engage unsuspecting prisoners in conversations that may reveal useful information.

Prisoners of war do well to avoid any mention of the Emperor. The Japanese consider his name holy and almost any reference to him, however respectful or

complimentary in the eyes of the westerner, is likely to be considered profane.

Treatment of prisoners by the Japanese has shown signs of improvement in recent months. Food allowance, though meager, is generally adequate. This is due in part no doubt to the trend of the Pacific war and to the wide publicity which has been given in the U.S. to early Japanese atrocities against prisoners.

Although treatment has improved, it still leaves much to be desired. Capture is, at best, an uncertain fate to be avoided whenever humanly possible. The enemy is desperate and fanatic. He cannot be trusted.

ROLE OF LCIs IN CAPTURING CIVILIANS

Rescuing enemy civilians or surrendering soldiers in enemy coastal waters is a difficult and risky problem, especially for small ships. Considerable ingenuity was displayed in this task by several LCIs patrolling the southern, enemy-held tip of Okinawa in June.

Okinawan civilians, frantic from prolonged shelling, lined the beaches. Although few boats were available, small numbers of civilians, either swimming or in canoes, managed to reach the patrolling craft daily for a period of about a week. Although the menace of suicide boats and swimmers carrying mines had been partly eliminated early in the campaign, identification of swimmers still presented a serious difficulty. The degree of danger to the ship and its mission had to be judged separately in the case of each rescue.

The following procedure was found useful by the LCI (G) 567. Unidentified powered boats were not allowed to approach the craft under any conditions. In the case of swimmers or canoes, searchlights and machine guns covered those approaching. Using Japanese phrases previously obtained from interpreters in the region, officers of the LCI instructed civilians to strip, abandon their boats, and swim to the ship. A cargo net was rigged in such a position that it could be covered by automatic weapons. As each Okinawan boarded the ship, both of his hands were seized by crew members, and they made certain that he carried no weapons or grenades. Once aboard, civilians were bathed, fed and interned in the ship's brig pending transfer to a POW receiving ship, where they were investigated and turned over to Military Government.



Rescued Okinawans aboard LCI 567.

With the aid of fragmentary Japanese, signs and pictures, LCI officers were able in all cases to reassure the civilians, find out where they came from and whether there were any more, and convey orders necessary for their preliminary processing.