

From – “Naval memories 1878-1919”

By Captain E. Wessel Copenhagen 1926



BLANDT HJEMVENDENDE, FREMMEDE
KRIGSFANGER

Among the homeward bound, foreign prisoners of war

At the beginning of December 1918 the barracks-ship 'Fyen' was prepared as accommodation for foreign prisoners of war who were on their way home from German prison camps.

For the majority their stay on board lasted approximately 14 days, for some it was longer. The transport of the pows from Germany to Denmark was done by steamship or by railway according to where the camps were located. After their short stay in Denmark, the pows were transported to England and a new group came on board.



The barracks-ship, which was moored at the Navy docks, could accommodate 6-700 men in hammocks.

The first group of pows were English soldiers from different divisions and different arms. Two young officers, Captain M¹ of the 4th battalion Northumberland Fusiliers and Lt. D² of the Royal Irish Rifles, moved in on board to assist the ship's officers.

The pows' appearance on their arrival was proof of the hardships and privations they had experienced. Their clothes were old and torn and their boots were in a dreadful condition, on top of which, many of the soldiers were wounded and bandaged. It was therefore a somewhat pathetic vision to see all these men standing for inspection on the top deck. Here each man was given a number and berth with hammock-position, which were actually two hooks on an under-deck and a place at the dining-table.

After their registration had taken place the men, who were often dirty and verminous, were taken to a specially prepared establishment on land to have showers. Here their old clothes were discarded and replaced with new ones. Before the repatriation had begun the English had established well stocked clothing and provisions depots at Copenhagen's Free-harbour.



The baths at Free-harbour

Arriving back at the ship the soldiers looked completely different; clean and well-dressed young men took their place at the table and did justice to the Danish naval food.

The sick and injured saw the doctor, who with a staff of nurses took care of them and changed bandages and dressings. This was to be repeated every day. It was difficult for many of the injured men to get into the hammocks so they soon began to make sleeping arrangements on the deck, which made it very difficult for the others to move about.

However it was not long before everyone felt at home on board, and the pows needed for nothing. As a supplement to the naval food, extra rations of food and drink sent on board from the English depot were handed out. In the ship's hold, there were already hundreds of sacks of gift-parcels from England, and stored crates of tinned foods, tea, chocolate, tobacco, wine etc. The 'Fyen's crew of about 60 men, was not forgotten; and with great generosity the English officers handed rations and gifts to all the crew.

¹ Captain W.J. Maxfield 4th Northumberland Fusiliers, Dänholm camp, official repatriation date - 21.01.19

² 2/Lt T.K. Digby attached to 4th East Yorkshire Regiment, Dänholm camp, official repatriation date - 21.01.19

5

Af og Tilgangsliste
over
hjemvendende Krigsfanger,
indlogerede i Kaserneskipet „Fyen“.

Tilgang					Afgang				
Dato	Officerer	Underofficerer	Mønlige	Civile	Dato	Officerer	Underofficerer	Mønlige	Civile
Den 10 ^{de} Decbr. 1918	1	6	49						
Den 14 ^{de} Decbr. 1918	232	1	114						
Den 14 ^{de} Decbr. 1918	63	5	29		Den 16 ^{de} Decbr. 1918	277		17	
					Den 16 ^{de} Decbr. 1918			2	
	246	12	142			277		3	

I alt 1. 142. 30. 4. 8. 11.
 19 engelske Officerer
 12 Underofficerer
 189 Mønlige

Den 14/12
 *) Armehospitalet 1 engelsk Mønlige
 Kasernegardiet 3
 Fræmdehospitalet 5 Indsire

Kaserneskipet Fyren, den 16^{de} Decbr. 1918
E. W. Vill

As well as ordinary soldiers, many officers had a short stay on the 'Fyen'. One evening³ the ship unexpectedly billeted 250 officers who had arrived by steam-ship from Germany; and as there were only 20 cabins available, the rest had to use hammocks. This did not please the officers so the next day better quarters were found for them in the hotels in the city.

Gradually the soldiers got used to being on board and a daily routine was soon established. There was a good relationship between the ship's crew and the pows, and the Danish seamen heard with interest their stories from the war and prison-camps. The visitors too took notice of everything happening on the ship. The pows were sent ashore during the morning whilst the crew cleaned the ship. Here they could do their morning exercises and only after the water was swept off the decks were the doors opened to allow them back on board. Then they gathered on the top deck, where letters and parcels were handed out.

For shore-leave the pows were taken to Toldboden, by the ship's motorboat. It was in use for this purpose most of the day until late in the evening.

Discipline was well maintained except in one respect: smoking.

The English smoked all over the place and at all times, even in their hammocks; their reasoning being that they were free men now the war had ended. To prevent fire the ships fire-pumps were prepared every evening, and buckets and bowls of water placed on every deck. After shore-leave the fire-patrol was busy checking all decks, until all whom had been ashore were sleeping peacefully.

Christmas turned into a glorious celebration with church-service and Christmas-tree, and there was no lack of friendliness from the pows towards the Danish men and women who came on board to visit during the Christmas holiday.

³ 15th December. From the Dänholm camp.

The champion boxer

For the amusement of the pows a theatre was created on the top deck, and this Temple-of-art brought the men much pleasure. Shows of different kinds were performed at all times of the day, and the program was very varied: plays, concerts, variety-shows and sports displays. Amongst the English soldiers were singers and actors from England's finest stages. However it was the boxing matches that were especially popular and pulled in a full-house. The afore mentioned officer, Mr. M., who was an excellent boxer, often offered the soldiers the opportunity to challenge him in the ring; he was always victorious.

One evening, when a gigantic English corporal returned from shore-leave, and being under the influence of alcohol would not obey his superior's orders and behaved like a madman, Captain M. was called for.

The captain and the corporal were fellow warriors from the trenches on the western front, so the captain knew of the raging warrior's disposition and knew that it would end up wrecking the corporal's surroundings if he wasn't removed in time.

Captain M. requested permission to 'sort out' the corporal by a boxing-blow, which would be quite harmless if given correctly. Permission was given, and a moment later the corporal lay on the deck.

This little episode took place at 11 o'clock in the evening. The captain advised that the corporal should be left where he was; after a few hours he would be back on his feet again. The corporal was left alone with one of the men on guard duty ordered to keep an eye on the sleeping giant, who was breathing normally. At 2 o'clock the warrior awoke, got up after rubbing his eyes, and although he appeared to be a bit unclear about what had happened, he quickly got into his hammock, where he soon was dreaming of the night's events.

Japanese and Hindus

Later, as well as the many pows who had until now been English soldiers, some French arrived and after the New Year 170 Japanese and Hindus, who been held by the Germans following the capture of merchant-ships in the Indian Ocean.

As is well known the German cruisers 'Emden', 'Wolff' and 'Möwe' operated in the Asian seas and captured merchant-ships from non German-friendly nations. By this means they prevented supplies from reaching Europe whilst at the same time maintaining their own supplies of coal and provisions from their prizes.

After being taken to German harbours the Asian prisoners of war shared the fate of the allied soldiers in German prisoner-camps.

The Japanese and Hindus were billeted apart on the Fyen, segregated from the other pows, although the top-deck was open for all.

The Japanese⁴, who were nearly all seamen and merchants, showed they possessed a high degree of order and sense of cleanliness and were extremely sociable, but lacked in their quiet and calm behavior neither dignity nor independence. Their yellowish skin-colour, blue-black hair and slanting eyes with protruding eyebrows indicated the Mongolian race.



A distinct industry was a characteristic of these sons of the East, they were always busy. In using needle and thread they were true masters, with pencil and brush they produced artistic works, in their own native style. Their dexterity was amazing and was shown particularly, when they performed as hairdressers, in this noble art there were no better; and they could – which hardly anybody else could – cut their own hair as smooth and well as if it was done by the Mikado’s court barber himself.



“A cluster of our small yellow guests in Copenhagen”

⁴ 83 Japanese arrived 9 January. By ordinary ferry from Germany to Gedser and then by train to Copenhagen.

They did not lack a sense of humour either and were greatly amused by the English variety-acts, that were performed on the 'Fyen's stage. Discipline was exemplary, and their leader, whom they had chosen themselves, was blindly obeyed. The food served on board did not seem to appeal to the small Japanese, so the ship arranged to get hold of some rice, a foodstuff of their homeland, which they enjoyed with delight a couple of times a day.

The first secretary from the Japanese Legation visited on board a couple of times and remarked each time of his fellow-countrymen's pleasure at their stay on the Danish ship. It appears that the Japanese were not treated well in German prisoner-camps.

The Hindus, who had all been passengers on the captured ships, belonged to different races, whose conflicting traditions and notions was often evident in their mutual intercourse. They were a very disparate group as regards education, language and literacy, although they showed a common feeling of nationalism.

The majority of the Hindus gave the impression of belonging to the uncivilized tribes, but certain individuals stood out as being of a much higher social and cultural standing. Amongst others there was a professor who was employed at the university of Calcutta. All wore oriental clothing, which by now was in a pathetic state, but the Hindus refused the offer of clean soldier's uniforms, that the English were willing to give them. Those, who belonged to the Mohammedan faith, wore turbans.



All displayed an Eastern politeness, and gratitude shone from their eyes for each consideration that was shown them; just as the Japanese had they also appreciated rice, which they were allowed to cook themselves. Whether or not their cleanliness was adequate, I cannot say, but then of course they lacked the holy water of the Ganges river.

They did not mix with the other pows on deck but kept themselves apart and discussed their own interests; and only seldom met up when there was muster for shore-leave.

By the end of January the numbers of pows had reduced greatly; large contingents, among them the Japanese⁵ and the Hindus left on the transports for England. Onward transport to the Far East was to take place from Liverpool and was arranged by the English authorities.

When the 'Fyen's motorboat, loaded with pows and their luggage, started to move on its way to Free Harbour, where the steam-ship lay ready to take the homegoing pows on board and transport them to England, there were always heartfelt goodbyes between the men leaving and the 'Fyen's crew.

The large varied group of different nations and races that daily moved about the 'Fyen's deck, was now divided and on their way home, some to faraway regions of the planet.

The many tongues, which we could hear, made one think of the tower of Babel. And the sad truth was that the hopes which came with the ending of the war didn't last. On board the 'Fyen' we did not feel confusion: here everyone who spoke in a different 'tongue' was solely filled with the common joy that the terrible war was now ended.

As 'Fyen' lay with her big protective roof over the top deck, she looked like Noah's Ark. Many nationalities had for a short while rested here before, like migrating birds, flying off to each his own country.

At the beginning of February the last English soldiers shipped out, and the old frigate closed her gates and put away her flag after having provided accommodation for about 2500 former prisoners of war who were waiting to return to their home-countries.

Orlogsminder: Skildringer og Skitser fra danske Orlogstogter 1878-1919

Kaptajn Emil Wessel, 1926



Emil Frederik Bauditz Wessel

⁵ The Japanese left on 13th January on the Ajax arriving at Leith on the 16th. Photos and articles mentioning these exotic strangers appeared in a number of Danish newspapers and magazines.