

Authority NND 740063

By EA NARA Date 09/22/11

383.7 - Camp Crystal City 9/2

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C O P Y

February 22nd, 1943

Report on traveling conditions of group of
German citizens from Costa Rica.

After having left San Jose on January 18th, 1943, the above group embarked on January 19th at Puntarenas on the armed troop transport vessel M. S. "Puebla". Prior to their embarkation the luggage was examined on the pier but before its examination was completed, people were ordered aboard ship and told to either open the remaining pieces of luggage or to leave the keys behind. Although this order was complied with by most people, the trunks and boxes were in many cases forced open and the locks destroyed beyond repair. One trunk and one box fell into the water, and although they were recovered, the owners were given no opportunity to air and dry the contents with the result that these are now practically ruined.

On board the men were separated from their families and quartered in three small rooms in the bows of the vessel. These rooms were approximately 2 x 6 m and housed from 18 to 24 men each, each man thus having only between 1 and 2 square meters at his disposal. During the first 4 days they were not permitted access to any of their luggage, not even the smallest pieces of hand luggage being allowed inside their quarters.

Women and children were put into cabins.

The ship remained at Puntarenas for 6 days. A stay in a tropical port aboard ship is far from pleasant under normal conditions. In this particular instance, however, great hardship was caused by the fact that portholes had to be closed during the night, while all other ventilation was lacking. After 4 days some relief was given during the day time by the removal of the air- and light-tight iron screenings from the portholes, but during the greater part of the actual voyage conditions in both men's quarters and cabins continued to be abominable at night as the blackout demanded closing of the portholes and the ventilation remained out of order. In consequence everybody, and especially sick and pregnant women and the children afflicted with whooping cough suffered greatly. Frequently, women were deprived of their stay on deck in the fresh air under the pretext that they had not kept their cabins tidy enough.

The men were served only two meals per day. No chairs or tables were provided and lack of space forced the men to take their meals in the lavatory and shower rooms or such other places where they could squat down.

Women and children received three meals which they took in the Dining Saloon, where they were waited upon by some of the men. The food was adequate in quantity, but frequently made unpalatable through heavy spicing, and little fresh fruit was served, although there seemed to be available in abundance for crew members. Quite intolerable was the regulation limiting the time for each meal to 25 min. including time for serving. This time-limit had to be strictly observed and at the blow of a whistle, everybody had to leave the saloon regardless of whether a person had finished eating or not. It is obvious that mothers having to feed two or more small children

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had never sufficient time to eat themselves. In any case it is preposterous to make small children - many of whom were sick - eat in such a regimented manner which may be suitable for conscripts, but which in this case must be rejected as an arbitrary chicanery. Drinking water was of a very poor quality, especially during the last three days of the voyage.

Women were forced to sweep the deck in front of negro members of the ship's personnel who seemed to take a particular delight in littering up the place first and then watch white women clean up. The reason for this arrangement is not quite clear as subsequently the deck was scrubbed regularly by Japanese.

There was also a good deal of unwarranted bullying. Some of the officers and guards did not seem to realize that women haggard with small children and unfamiliar with the language could not be expected to follow orders with the alacrity of soldiers. The mental attitude of some of the officers is best illustrated by the following remark made by one of them before witnesses: "It would be best to throw them all (the men) overboard and to chuck the women and children in after them".

A serious complaint is that nobody was permitted to see the doctor with whom one could deal only through the intermediary of the nurses. Hospitalized patients, however, were given the best possible care, once they were in the infirmary.

Upon completion of the voyage 2 men and 2 women were selected at random and asked to sign a statement to the effect that they were no complaints regarding the treatment. This they did, intimidated as they were, but as they signed without the knowledge or approval of the other members, and as they were under the impression that this was a regular procedure which would be demanded of all, their statement cannot be considered as representative of the group. In fact, one of the women is English by birth and both were married to men who are or were naturalized Costa Ricans. Their signatures cannot be regarded as binding for the group.

In conclusion it must be stated that the treatment was very fair after the Immigration Authorities had taken over at San Pedro.

SIGNED: Bernhard Buesken
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