

LIFE'S REPORTS

LETTER FROM MORMUGAO

by SHELLEY SMITH MYDANS

Carl and Shelley Mydans, LIFE's first and most brilliant photographer-reporter team, are among the 1,500 U. S. and British nationals being repatriated from Japanese internment camps on the *Gripsholm*, which is due to arrive in New York Dec. 2. Immediately on boarding the exchange ship at Mormugao, Goa, off the west coast of India, on Oct. 19, Shelley Mydans wrote this letter to LIFE's Executive Editor Wilson Hicks. It brought to their fellow workers on LIFE the first detailed news of the Mydanses since the fall of the Philippines. Between the lines of this personal letter the reader can find grim details of 22 months at prison camps of Santo Tomás, Manila, and in Jap-occupied Shanghai.

On board the *Gripsholm*

Dear Wilson:

Carl is out making pictures again. I saw him take a camera in his hands for the first time in nearly two years and watched his eyes light up. His fingers curled around it automatically and he started right off on the job. I've been chasing him through the crowds of repatriates on this ship trying to jot down his captions and now we're both all of a sweat and laughing. It's old times again.

I hadn't realized how much we'd changed in these 22 months till I looked at Carl's face again today. He's back again to what he was before. That strained look that all of us in internment camps acquire and that we don't really notice in each other at the time seems to have vanished. The whole weary period has sunk down in our memories and our minds have closed over it. It's an effort now to remember the camps and the people we left behind there—it hurts too much.

This has been a day of overwhelming emotion. Return to home and freedom means more even than any of us had anticipated. It's something we've been picturing to ourselves and to each other ever since the Japanese took us over.

This morning on the *Teia Maru*, obeying instructions as usual, we packed our hand baggage and sat on our bunks—Carl in the hold with 250 men and I in the "hen coop" on deck where 240 women slept—and waited for the exchange. At 8 o'clock the men from the hold began to file out down the forward gangplank and along the wharf toward the *Gripsholm* which was tied up alongside us.

The Indian sun was bright on the procession and, strung out as they were, we on deck seemed to get a good look at our husbands and friends for the first time since we were crowded into camps together. They looked terrible: they'd all taken their belts in so much that their pants looped around their waists; their shirts were all

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BEFORE MANILA'S FALL, MRS. MYDANS ATTENDED MASS WITH FILIPINO SOLDIERS

faded and raggedy; half of them had no socks, and the Chinese straw hats that had gotten by in camp suddenly showed up for what they were. Even the bags and bundles they carried looked worn, and a few men still clung to the buckets and coils of old rope they had found indispensable in internment. Some of the old fellows had trouble carrying even their little overnight cases. We all laughed at them, but in most cases it was just to cover up. They looked terrible.

I suppose we women looked the same or worse. American women are sometimes rather pitiful in situations like this in their efforts to look smart. It keeps up our morale to spruce up even though in our hearts we know the results are ludicrous.



As our turn came we filed down from the deck, through the hold and out the gangplank. We all tried to comply with our committee's suggestion that we make our part of the exchange "orderly, leisurely and dignified," so we walked slowly in single line toward our ship.

The ships were tied up with the bow of the *Teia Maru* behind the stern of the *Gripsholm* so that as we walked from the forward gangway of our ship to the aft of the *Gripsholm*, the Japanese repatriates filed in a line far outside of us toward the after gangplank of the *Teia*. Compared to us they seemed healthy and well-dressed—all in American clothes. There were more Americans dressed in Oriental clothes in this exchange than there were Japanese. But it wasn't from choice that we wore Chinese hats and slippers, Filipino clogs or dresses made from Japanese cotton kimonos.

The exchange was very orderly and quick. By 9:30 all 1,500 of us except the 17 stretcher cases were on board the *Gripsholm*. Despite our anticipations, none of us was quite prepared for the emotion that suddenly choked us as we stepped onto the deck. In one overwhelming moment we were free and on home territory, and among people who liked and wanted us. The Swedish crew helped us aboard and served us ice water in new paper cups.

The American Red Cross gave each of us chocolate bars and American cigarets.

Every one of us had a two-year hunger to appease and as the stewards set four long tables on the decks with *smörgåsbord*, crowds of men and women, trying to hide the yearning in their eyes with grins and jokes, grouped around and cheered each new dish that was brought out.

The tables, when fully set, epitomized the dreams of all internees in East Asia. We are all pastmasters at describing food; it has been one of our chief topics of conversation all these months. But none of us could have dreamed up a better meal than the first that was served us here. We had white bread, butter, cheese, vegetable salads, fruit salads, cold meats, olives, pickles, tomato juice, orange juice, iced tea—all luxuries we hadn't seen for months.

We are an easily managed people by now and if there's a line anywhere an internee will get into it, so we automatically fell into file by the tables. Most of us—even the children—helped ourselves sparingly and ate but little as we had been warned by the doctors not to overdo it. Our shrunken stomachs are easily satisfied, as are our hearts. They were both filled to discomfort—by a little bit of food and the feeling that we were welcome.

We've been able to see some of the newspapermen who came to cover the exchange so we've formed a bit of a picture of the world as it is today and of the comings and goings of all our friends. It's good to feel we will soon be part of it again; and best to feel that we are working again—right now.

All best regards,
Shelley



MYDANSES IN GOA ON WAY HOME