

Prisoners Of War Wrote Recipes To Wile Away Time In Jap Prison

AN BENITO — How did Americans spend the time they were in these prisoner-of-war camps, in areas where the usual harsh custom of using war prisoners for slave labor was impractical? How did they pass the time that stretched interminably into months and years when they were compelled to bow and scrape to Nip captors whose constant desire seemed to be death from starvation for every American? Mrs. Frank Earl Cowart quickly found the answer to the question asked. Everyone would like to put to rest the bit of gear he inspected back to the States following his release from a remote camp on the island of Honshu.

Major Cowart and most of his 338 fellow officers at Rokus Roshi, high in the mountains wrote recipes. Little notebooks overflowing with recipes, written neatly in pencil with the most meticulous detail, bear touching witness to the hours men spent in the torturing pastime of remembering the steps in preparation of foods their starving bodies craved.

Nearly every man kept a recipe book and each knew ingredients and methods of preparing several dishes, Cowart said. He explained how overpowering hunger kept the men's minds almost constantly on food and that they would spend hours talking about some particular dish. Each man would copy the recipe for a dish that sounded especially attractive.

Cowart must have yearned particularly for the Mexican foods popular in the Valley section where he spent nearly all his life, for several pages are filled with directions for preparing nearly every type of Mexican dish. Some of the best recipes were furnished by a man who had been a cook at Cowart's camp.

Red Cross Supplies Helped

Once in a great while Red Cross packages containing food would be delivered to the prisoners. At this time the scant portions of Japanese food would be withheld. But while the Red Cross food lasted and for a short time thereafter, the recipe books would disappear. Cowart said, and the men apparently would forget them. But when extreme hunger took hold again, out would come the books and the men would compare, relative merits of remembered dishes and painstakingly copy recipes for the one that sounded particularly heavenly.

The major's Canadian wife is eager to try many of the recipes; they sound so tempting. Not only did he write recipes as two much worn booklets rather pathetically reveal. He made out grocery lists. Pages and pages are covered with names of food items all classified as are the recipes. For example, one lengthy list is headed "staples."

Mrs. Cowart says she's going to use it when she starts housekeeping again—that if she buys all the items named, she can't possibly overcook anything she'll require. However, she will need a truck at least to transport her purchases home.

The Cowarts aren't sure just yet where this return to keeping house will take place. They have just ended a visit in San Benito with relatives of the major's after Mrs. Cowart, the former Mary Patricia Faulkner, and their 3½-year-old daughter, Damaris Ann, met him in San Antonio recently. They will spend a vacation in Oshawa, Canada, Mrs. Cowart's home, before he is assigned a permanent station with the Air Force.

Cowart had another little book—a secret diary in which he recorded deaths of some of his fellow prisoners and events connected with their last days. For quite a time he managed to keep it from the vigilance of his captors during the fre-

quent shake-downs, but eventually it was seized.

Some of the other men managed to keep similar records hidden, Cowart said, and since their return to the States, these have been invaluable in furnishing to their families information concerning men who died in prison camps.

The San Benito man said they were told Allied prisoners were receiving the same fare given Japanese soldiers. He thinks it is probable the camp managers were apportioned sufficient food to maintain the prisoners, but the quantity they received was so little that many died of actual starvation.

Hope Trial Judges Are Tough

When they start prosecuting the Japanese responsible for starving the prisoners and especially for diverting the Red Cross packages from them, that's when Cowart hopes those holding trials of war criminals really get tough. He has the notion that the Japs who stood the cold blood are up and shot them in the prison are up and superior beings compared to the beasts who forced slow death by starvation.

One of the little notebooks containing recipes has notations supporting Cowart's dwindling weight at regular intervals. Well, he six feet tall, his normal weight about 175 pounds. At a prisoner he thinned to 118 pounds.

After the prisoners' food charge of the camp, they found lots of foods, a part of which at last must have been intended for Japs.

A Japanese guard gave them the first inkling that victory for the Allies was near when he told them that fighting had ceased. Immediately the prisoners sent a committee to the Japanese camp commander to tell them they had reason to believe that the war was over. The Nip would neither affirm nor deny the report, arrogantly saying they would be told what it was useful for them to know.

Another huddle with the same guard and he produced a local newspaper that said in effect: that the Japanese had stated their willingness to accept the terms of the Potsdam conference. Then the senior officer, at the urging of the other prisoners, requested permission to go to headquarters at Osaka. There he learned hostilities had ceased, that he was in charge of all Allied prisoners, and that Japanese in that area were responsible for him.

Immediately the U. S. flag was raised and all arms taken from the Japs. The Rokus Roshi camp was not known to the U. S. War Department and was not located until Sept. 2 when a B-29 dropped food and clothing. A recovery team, traveling by rail and motor, reached there Sept. 8, and they were evacuated Sept. 9, reaching Yokohama Sept. 16. They left the following day to arrive at Manila Sept. 20 on the STRITISS Goodhue. They sailed Sept. 25 from Manila arriving at Seattle at 10 A. M. a week in the home. Cowart went to San Antonio, was accompanied to San Benito by his wife and daughter. They were guests of his former captors, Major D. Cowart.

began Career In Canada

The beginning of Cowart's career was in Canada where he went in July 1940 as one of a group of 40 commercial pilots recruited from the United States to serve a nucleus for the then embryonic Royal Canadian Air Force. He was classed as a staff pilot.

After his transfer to the US Air Force Nov. 6, 1942, he was attached to the Third Ferrying Group at Romulus, Mich., participating in domestic ferry work. Principal chore was delivering planes to the

The ship usually flew four instead of the regular five members because there was an early shortage of navigators. Orders were to leave within an hour after landing, unless plane repairs had to be made or other difficulty prevented take-off.

Cowart recalls he was forced to make only one overnight stop. He spent Christmas Eve 1943 in Kamein which had been bombed that afternoon.

Exactly two days later he parachuted into enemy territory and in a matter of hours was yanked before a Japanese execution squad. His ship was caught in bad weather and the two radio direction finders they were using for navigating went out. Cowart had pulled south to get out of the storm, aware that he was over enemy territory. "They were shooting at us with ack-ack," he said, "and soon we knew we were losing gas." They figured the right tank had been punctured. To make matters worse they had mechanical difficulties and what gas oline remained in the left tank drained through the right.

Only 20 Minutes of Gas

There should have been enough gas for four more hours of flying; because of the leakage the plane had only 20 minutes of gas. He was unable to make good contact with any Chinese or India base," Cowart said. "I did make contact just before we had to bail out. I told them we had to abandon ship and told them to take a hell of a beating. I was giving them an idea of how hot where we were although I didn't know within any certainty. The last Allied voice I heard for more than 20 minutes was the radio operator's 'Sorry as Hell, but good luck to you.' That was on the morning of Dec. 27, 1943. I had left base in India on the night of Dec. 26."

All members of Cowart's crew landed without injury. They were picked up almost immediately by Chinese who turned them over to the omnipresent Japanese. The Japs San Benito kept his freedom for nearly eight hours. It was about noon when he was captured.

His most hair-raising experience as a prisoner was then enacted. With another prisoner, he was placed in a compound he described as a "sort of patio" with a crude shelter overhead and surrounding walls so blood-splattered that the airman didn't need the information volunteered that they were at the spot where executions were carried out. They were told the Nips were executing all captured enemy airmen.

Although he realized he was in extreme danger of losing his life, Cowart said that at the time he could not believe the Japanese were so contemptuous of the laws of modern warfare as to murder war prisoners with no sort of preliminary investigation or questioning. The execution squad was on hand and when the Nip officer in charge was handed some sort of document, the execution was interrupted and the two airmen were delivered to a different prison, one that was operated by the Japanese Air Force, where other prisoners were held. Had the messenger arrived 30 seconds later, the two men were told their lives would have been snuffed out.

"I didn't get really scared until I was taken to the execution site. I really would believe at the time they were going to execute me under circumstances." Since his rescue circumstances, "I had a very strong notion of how lucky he had been. He spent the next ten or 11 days in Canton. It was a fact that at the time seemed incredibly small and silly. We thought it all was bagged, although we did get enough to eat." Cowart recalls that he had a very good experience in Canton. He was

crete and the water had seeped through and frozen so they were coated solidly with ice. The Nips had taken out shoes and coats. We had no blankets. We had to keep moving to keep from freezing. The flyers were placed one to a cell at first. Later two were bunked together and they were allowed a blanket. A spoonful of rice each morning was their only food.

All Put In One Cell

They were taken by train from Nanking to Shanghai. In Shanghai they were placed in one cell with about 15 Chinese civilian prisoners who were covered with lice. "And when we left we were alive with lice, too," the war prisoner said.

They were flown to Tokyo from Shanghai Jan. 17, 1944, and endured the next 30 days in "questioning camp." Of that month Cowart said simply, "we were subjected to every kind of physical torture known." His next prison address was the now famous Camp Omori where Tojo and other Jap war criminals are being held. In August of last year they were sent to Zentsuji, a highly-publicized camp in Nip propaganda. There were no beatings at Zentsuji, it is true, Cowart agreed, but the prisoners starved.

His last traveling as a prisoner was to Osaka on the island of Honshu and thence to the mountain hideout where a circling B-29 gave them their first direct contact with the United States and home a month after V-J Day August 8, 1945.

he was supposed to have made a radio broadcast from Tokyo. While a prisoner he had been told he would be privileged to send home a message of not more than 75 words. He included the names of fellow crewmen who were safe and they followed the same method in the hope that if only one message should get through, families of all would be informed. Recordings of the purported broadcast were sent to his wife and to his mother, Mrs. Scott Cowart, now residing at Kerrville and Cowart presumes it was the message he wrote.

From January until August, two other Valley youths, Robert Marindale, Brownville, and Ted Cressner, Westaco, were prisoners in the camp with Cowart.

Cowart was quite calm, even matter of fact, about answering questions regarding his prisoner-of-war experiences, aside from his vehement denunciation of Nips responsible for starving Allied prisoners. Usually he answered questions put by fellow townsmen curious about the way prisoners of war were treated by saying merely that it was "tough." But, scattering over the pages of recipes his wife says she is going to have printed are one time memoranda listing the months, weeks, days, and even hours that elapsed since he became a prisoner. One page bears the following paragraph copied from James Hill's "Knight Without Armor" which Cowart read while in concentration camp: "No man has really eaten until he has felt the lice nibbling at him, or has lived until he has felt death."

Said Cowart, "No truer words I've ever been spoken."