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WAR CABINET.

HUYTON CAMP.

REPORT BY LORD SNELL.

(Circulated by direction of the Prime Minister.)

I WAS appointed by the Prime Minister by letter, dated the 17th August, with the following terms of reference:—

To enquire into the conditions prevailing at Huyton Camp from the date of its opening until the date* of transfer to the Home Office; and generally as to the question of responsibility, and to report to the War Cabinet.

In conducting the enquiry I have had the assistance of Sir Grattan Bushe, Legal Adviser to the Dominions and Colonial Offices, and I have taken evidence orally, written or both, from the War Office, the Home Office and from a number of gentlemen who had either visited the camp or had been interned in it.

2. In order fully to understand the conditions under which this camp was set up it is important to give a short summary of the facts preceding its establishment. At the outbreak of war there was a certain number of camps earmarked to be used as aliens' camps and staffed by specially selected personnel. These camps provided for approximately 20,000 aliens. In January 1940, as 14 camps were not being used, and as at that time the policy of His Majesty's Government was not to intern aliens other than those placed in Category "A" and merchant seamen, the camps were handed over to the military authorities for other purposes, with one exception (Fontwell) which was condemned.

3. On the 11th May on the direction of the Home Secretary, a telegram was sent to Chief Constables, with the following instructions:—

"The Secretary of State hereby authorises and directs the temporary internment of Germans and Austrians belonging to the following category, viz., all males over the age of sixteen and under the age of sixty (excluding the invalid or infirm), who may be found in the following counties." (There followed a list of coastal counties from Nairn to Hampshire.)

Subsequently, the decision to intern was extended to further categories of Germans and Austrians, but those who were invalid or infirm were always excepted. The decision to intern aliens was reached on the 11th May; on the 17th May the first internees arrived at Huyton Camp, which had been prepared for their reception in the intervening days.

(* The camp was transferred to the Home Office on 5th August, 1940.

Accommodation.

4. The camp consisted primarily of a number of separate houses in a housing estate, known as Camp I, together with a subsidiary camp, known as Camp II, composed of tents set up on adjoining ground. The houses of Camp I, which were mostly of a type that would, under peace conditions, have been intended to take a single family, accommodated some twelve internees, with three or four sleeping in each room. The houses were fitted with running water in the bathroom, were neat and clean, and had small gardens.

5. In Camp II each tent held four internees. The ground was covered with ground sheets. In wet weather the paths between the tents became filled with mud, much of which found its way into the tents. The sanitary arrangements were unsatisfactory. This camp, which was never suitable for the purpose, was struck in the latter part of July. Messing for the two camps took place at first in marquees in Camp I, to which the internees in Camp II proceeded for their meals; later, messing was in hutments by relays.

Furniture.

6. At the beginning no furniture could be provided in the houses. Out of some 4,000 internees, there were beds for approximately 340. The remainder were all provided with straw-filled palliasses, and at least three blankets; it was usually not difficult to obtain one or two additional blankets if required. Requisitions were made at an early date for further beds, and for benches, tables and other simple articles of furniture, but, as there was a general lack of these articles throughout the Western Command, additional supplies were for a long time very limited. Cleaning materials, including brooms, were scarce and towels were not issued, nor at the beginning could they be obtained. In the early days there was a great shortage of toilet paper. Each internee was supplied with one 2-oz. cake of soap each week for all purposes. Owing to a shortage of coal, hot water could only be provided in sufficient quantities to allow each internee one bath a month, but in July hot showers were also arranged. All other washing, both personal and domestic, had to be performed in cold water. It was fortunate that the period in question was at the height of the hottest and driest summer for two decades.

Medical.

7. In spite of the instructions to Chief Constables to except the invalid and infirm, a large number of the internees on arrival proved to be suffering from more or less serious complaints, including diabetes, heart trouble, various gastric afflictions, paralysis and blindness. There were even some mental cases and cripples. Enquiries have been made into a large number of cases, and the replies so far received are to the effect that, when arrested, the internees made no complaint of their illnesses or, as in the case of several diabetics, stated that, as long as they received their doses of insulin, they would be all right. Nevertheless, whilst I appreciate the difficulties under which the police had to carry out the very considerable additional work of these arrests, I am satisfied that, if more care had been taken in interrogating internees, so many invalids would not have been arrested. It may be estimated roughly that on an average 40 per cent. of the internees were over 50 years of age, and a good many over 60, and that one-third of the whole were unfit in one way or another. Three houses in Camp I had been set apart as a hospital, and every effort was made to place those most urgently in need of medical attention in this hospital and to allot, with the co-operation of the internees, the remaining beds to the old and infirm. Owing to the small number of beds available, it was found impossible to allot beds to all who needed them, and bedridden persons had to be left on mattresses in the crowded rooms with such attention as they could receive from their fellow-internees. There was only one medical officer attached to the camp, although subsequently a number of internees with medical degrees, including British degrees, helped him in his work. There was a serious shortage of all medical supplies, in particular of insulin, and the hospital was also short of medical instruments, such as stethoscopes, enemas and bed-pans.

A dentist visited the camp about once a week, but was unable in the time to carry out all the work needed.

Food.

8. The standard rations applicable to internees of this class were supplied to the camp but on some days these rations did not appear to go round as well as on others. Moreover, owing to the unexpected arrival of additional batches of internees, there were occasionally considerable temporary shortages. Cooking was carried out by certain of the internees themselves, who were not used to cooking for numbers. The variety of the food appears to have been extremely limited and the quality of the cooking was not high. The subsequent arrival of three Army Cook Sergeant-Majors improved these conditions. Whilst the food was unattractive to the fit, it was unsuitable for the invalid and the infirm. A separate kitchen was instituted for diet cases, but it appears that some days might elapse before a person entitled to such diet was able to obtain the necessary authorisation.

At the request of the Chief Rabbi, arrangements were made for the supply of "kosher" food.

Post.

9. One of the most serious causes of distress amongst the internees was the postal delay. On an average a letter took a fortnight to deliver, although on occasions the delay was considerably longer. The cause of delay was with the Postal and Telegraph Censorship authorities at Liverpool and not with the camp. Subsequently arrangements were made for censorship to be carried out by the camp authorities and the delay was greatly reduced. Each internee was allowed to send two letters of twenty-four lines each week but at one period there was a shortage of official paper on which these letters should be sent. One of the internees affirmed, however, in his testimony that in such circumstances the internees were allowed to use other paper.

Organisation.

10. All the evidence is unanimous that the Commandants and their staff were friendly to the internees and did their best within their limited resources to make their lot tolerable. I wish to pay a special tribute to the work of Colonel Slatter whose energy did so much to alleviate and improve the conditions. There was, however, serious understaffing, and this not only affected the actual running of the camp but, owing to the constant arrivals and departures, the personal documents of the individual internees were allowed to get into confusion and it was therefore often difficult for an internee to obtain for some days the money to which he was entitled. The internees suggested that they might themselves help to sort these records and the offer was after some delay accepted.

For liaison purposes, each house was allotted a house father, each street a street father, and the camp itself a camp father.

Welfare.

11. In the early stages no newspapers, books or wireless were allowed. This complete isolation, coupled as it was with the postal delays, had a very bad effect upon the morale of the internees, and was, I think, both unwise and unnecessary. The restrictions were subsequently lifted and internees were informed of official announcements and subsequently allowed to receive English newspapers. Later wireless musical programmes, under the control of the Commandant, were allowed and new books or second-hand books received from the Y.M.C.A. were sent to the camp. The organisation of social activities was, however, greatly hindered in the early days because of the constant arrival and departure of large numbers of internees, often amounting to several hundreds in a day.

CONCLUSION.

12. The camp was equipped in five days, and apart from temporary shortages fulfilled the standards originally laid down by the War Office for internees of this class. Generally the standards would be comparable with those for camps for prisoners of war, except that military discipline was somewhat relaxed.

13. The War Office did not expect to receive any invalids, and the deficiencies of medical stores and furniture which were the cause of much of their suffering were general throughout the Western Command. The police were instructed not to arrest the invalid or infirm; as the majority of infirm internees when arrested made no complaint of their illnesses, the police assumed that they were healthy. I am satisfied, however, that, with more care, the police might have avoided arresting a number of invalids.

14. With the exception of the quality and quantity of food, the living conditions in the camp were not dissimilar from those of soldiers in the Army. Such deficiencies as appeared arose partly out of the shortness of time available for establishing the camp, but remained owing to serious shortages in the Western Command, and were shared by our own soldiers. It must also be borne in mind that the period in question corresponded with the evacuation of the B.E.F. from Dunkirk, and with an intake of recruits more than double the usual monthly average, so that Army resources were suddenly confronted with demands which the War Office could not have foreseen. While, however, the standard of the camp was comparable with that of army camps, conditions which are tolerable to young and healthy soldiers may well be insupportable to elderly internees (who formed the large majority) even when healthy. In deciding in advance upon the standards for these camps, the War Office should have been able to foresee the presence of a large number of elderly people and should have provided greater corresponding amenities. Even when this was appreciated, the Army machine appears to have been unable to adjust itself quickly to changed circumstances. The Commandants and Staffs themselves were sympathetic to the hardships of the internees and attempted to alleviate them. Partly owing to understaffing and partly, in the earlier stages, to a lack of sufficiently enterprising personnel, and of any continuity of command in the Camp (Colonel Slatter, who took over in July, was the fourth Commandant since the Camp opened), work that might have been done even with the materials available was not done.

15. Whilst it is difficult to obtain evidence upon the psychology of the internees, it seems probable that many of them were lacking in a capacity to adapt themselves to changed conditions, and were too ready to adopt a despondent attitude. This condition is readily understandable. They were mostly persons who were well disposed to this country. They felt keenly that they were being treated not as friends but as enemy aliens. They had been taken at the shortest notice from their homes and families. The lack of prompt facilities for correspondence with their families and of, at times, news of the progress of the war caused much mental hardship, and later, when lists were posted of those who were to be sent abroad, the distress was undoubtedly acute and widespread.

16. I desire to express my thanks to Sir Grattan Bushe, for his valuable help and counsel, both in the present enquiry and in that relating to the *Arandora Star*. I have also received valued help from Mr. G. Kimber of the Dominions Office, who, at short notice, acted as my Secretary during the later phases of this enquiry. I am also specially indebted to the late Mr. W. R. Freethy, of the Treasury, who until the time of his tragic death on the 17th October acted as my Secretary. The circumstances of his death unavoidably delayed the completion of this Report.

(Signed.) SNELL.

November 25, 1940.