

My Father, Alan Burley, was in a Prisoner of War Camp in Poland – Stalag XX1. He was repatriated from the camp as he was so ill and these were the thoughts that he wrote on his return to the UK.

Swedish American Line

s.s. Drottningholm

20th October 1943

A miracle has happened. I am not sure whether I am alive or dead because I am most certainly in Paradise. The Angels all speak Swedish. They are true Angels though the wings are invisible and many of us have unashamedly burst into tears, after three and a half years of torture under the ignorant and swinish Germans, of being hungry and bored to death, to living like human beings again! We arrived in Sweden by train ferry, on Monday night, were welcomed by the Swedish Red Cross and Army, in fact by everybody there. We came across Sweden by train, about 900 of us with meals every two hours provided from a Red Cross cook wagon attached to the train – and so we arrived at Gothenburg at 6am on Monday morning, the train went straight on to the quay and you may be able to visualise the excitement. A Red Cross ship was lying alongside with our lads on board, then we noticed the Swastika on it. We were puzzled until we were told that she was to take the Germans back home and that three boats were coming in for us – one Swedish and one British.

We became more and more impatient as we had expected our boats to be ready for us and we walked up and down wondering why they were overdue. At last a whisper ran through the crowd 'She is coming'. How they knew we did not question, but all eyes were glued on the ship-building yards trying to penetrate the steel hulls of the ships moored there.

A plume of smoke was seen moving behind the others, a whisper 'it must be her' then a mast appeared and at the peak, a white flag with..... yes! It is! A Red Cross! A shout 'It's her', then, dead silence. The two tugs appear around the bend and towering above them and all the other ships, a white funnel with a Red Cross. A white prow comes into sight and slowly, oh so slowly, as the channel is intricate and narrow, the whole bulk of the 17,000-ton British Hospital ship comes into view, dead silence still. With the water churned to foam the tugs pull her around and she is pointing straight at us. Being so interested in the ship, only now do we notice the Blue Ensign at the stern mast. Oh God, Shall I ever forget that moment. It was the same with all of us. A slight sigh ripples through and again silence, a silence that can be felt and many were the cheeks that were wet. She draws slowly nearer and we can see Germans lining the decks.

A British Red Cross nurse appears on the top deck then another and still more, then one waves, another clasps her hands together and waves them over her head. The spell is broken, an uneven cheer breaks from our throats and then burst after burst of full-throated cheers even though the lumps in our throats are nearly choking us. Now we can see faces, Germans, British sailors, Nurses and Lascars. One of our crowd shouts 'Where the hell have you been, three and a half years to get here. Why don't you get out and push!'. There follows a general interchange of wisecracks intermingled with staccato cheers. She draws into the dock side and a shower of newspapers, magazines and cigarettes come over. Daily Mail, Mirror, Picture Post, Sketch, London Illustrated, all of them, but we cannot settle to anything. She is moored and we speak to people in the portholes 'What's the price of beer

in Blighty?' So, it goes on for several hours, then we board the train and move to another dock where lies the Swedish Trans-Atlantic liner and a Canadian Pacific liner with the Union Jack on the side instead of the Red Cross.

We are welcomed aboard the Swedish boat, the most beautiful and spotless ship I have ever seen. Sleep is the first consideration as I have had about 4 hours sleep in the last 4 days.

In the morning, the bugle blows for breakfast. We go to the first class dining room and sit down in absolute luxury to porridge with CREAM and SUGAR, then grilled sausages and potatoes with coffee.

Afterwards we make a journey of discovery around the boat. The whole population nearly of this large city is lining the street, roofs, in fact everywhere. A band begins to play on the dock and the Crown Prince and Princess of Sweden come on board. They go all over the boat and the Princess speaks to me wishing me a good voyage, hoping that I shall find all my loved ones in good health. Newspapers come on board absolutely full of pictures, reports and cartoons of all this.

The Prince and Princess leave amidst tremendous cheers from our lads, to go over the next boat.

New clothes are sent on board from the British ship. The radiogram in the library is working overtime giving us news of home. Stores come on board and so to dinner. Soup, then Good Heavens!! It can't be, but..... It is CHICKEN. The steward places two legs, a wing and a large portion of breast on my plate and asks if I would like more!

Letters must be written as they are to be carried by special plane. We wonder if Paradise can be half so wonderful.